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# **Homonormativity, Queer Capital and the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival**

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## **Declaration**

I, Heshen Xie, confirm that the information presented in this thesis is the result of my own work, except where due to reference is made. This thesis has not been previously accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted for any other degree at another university.

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## **Abstract**

As the first and longest-running queer film festival in East Asia, the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGFF) was established in 1989. Since 2000, the HKLGFF has gradually commercialised, transforming into a self-sustained, market-driven queer film festival. Examining the operation of the HKLGFF offers insights into the queer film festivals that have undergone commercialisation around the world. Meanwhile, the examination of HKLGFF can reveal how small-scale queer film festivals interact with other (queer) film festivals regionally and globally. Focusing on the festival's operations from 2016 to 2020, I argue that under the neoliberal trend in the global queer film festival circuit, by privileging middle-class gay identity and commercial interests, the HKLGFF reproduces homonormativity, which characterises the consumption-oriented queer culture in Hong Kong. The thesis adopts a combined methodology, including semi-structured interviews, content analysis and secondary data analysis. The thesis contextualises the HKLGFF in terms of the historical development of the festival itself, in terms of the relationship with the global queer film festival circuit, and in terms of the territory of Hong Kong. This thesis also investigates how the festival operation reproduces homonormativity through its programming and its targeting of and affordances for audiences. Overall, this thesis expands the concept of homonormativity and interrogates it to all aspects of festival organisation and provides a framework to explore the specificity of a queer film festival through an analysis of the dual relationship between the festival and its local context as well as the global queer film festival circuit. This thesis also extends the discussion of the film festival circuit by mapping the broader picture of the global landscape of queer film festivals as well as investigating how the global queer film festival circuit influences the operation of small-scale queer film festivals in the Global South.

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## **Abbreviations**

<b>APQFFA</b>	Asia Pacific Queer Film Festival Alliance
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>CEPA</b>	Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement
<b>FIAPF</b>	Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films
<b>HKAC</b>	Hong Kong Arts Centre
<b>HKADC</b>	Hong Kong Arts Development Council
<b>HKIFF</b>	Hong Kong International Film Festival
<b>HKLGFF</b>	Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival
<b>HKSAR</b>	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
<b>IDAHO</b>	International Day Against Homophobia
<b>LCSD</b>	Leisure and Cultural Services Department
<b>LGBTQ</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
<b>MQFF</b>	Melbourne Queer Film Festival
<b>SARS</b>	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
<b>TIFF</b>	Toronto International Film Festival
<b>WKCDA</b>	West Kowloon Cultural District Authority

## Table of Content

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
Abbreviations .....	4
Introduction.....	7
Queer theory .....	11
Queer film festivals.....	15
Pink capital .....	22
Homonormativity .....	25
Methodology .....	29
Thesis structure .....	34
Chapter One Hong Kong Queer Culture .....	38
Hong Kong: 1842-2020 .....	39
Neoliberalism, consumerism and sexual citizenships in Hong Kong .....	48
When being gay was a crime in colonial Hong Kong .....	56
The death of MacLennan, the fear of handover, and <i>tongzhi</i> .....	63
The rise of the pink market: <i>memba</i> and consumerism.....	70
New stage of Hong Kong queer culture since the mid-2000s .....	74
Conclusion .....	86
Chapter Two Western-Centrism and the Global Queer Film Festival Circuit .....	87
From a single film festival to the film festival circuit.....	89
The hierarchy of the global queer film festival circuit.....	100
Programming process and strategies of the HKLGFF .....	113
Western-centrism and homonormativity.....	127
Conclusion .....	131
Chapter Three The Commercialisation of the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival ...	134
Commercialisation of queer film festivals .....	135
The HKLGFF in the HKAC period: 1989-1999 .....	141
New stakeholders of the HKLGFF: Fortissimo Films and Edko Films Ltd. ....	148
Adjusting festival management: screening venues, programming and commercial sponsorship .....	157
Conclusion .....	170
Chapter Four Festival Audiences and Class Distinction .....	172

Introducing the perspective of class.....	173
Festival inclusion and exclusion: queer communities and access .....	180
Economic exclusion: costly entry fees.....	187
Linguistic exclusion: language barrier .....	196
Screening locations and class .....	207
The dominance of the gay audience .....	214
Gendered class distinction and the homonormative lifestyle.....	221
Conclusion .....	226
Conclusion .....	228
Bibliography.....	235



## Introduction

In 2019, when Hong Kong was in the midst of large-scale social turmoil, the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGFF) celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Over 100 attendees from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, along with heterosexual allies, came to the Opening Gala on 7<sup>th</sup> September at Elements (a cinema) despite the police-civilian conflict that could have erupted at any time. In January 1989, Edward Lam, a queer director and activist, established the first queer-themed film festival in Hong Kong, with great support from the Hong Kong Arts Centre. However, due to various issues (such as lack of funding), Lam left the HKLGFF, and the festival faced suspension in 1999. HKLGFF experienced a rebirth in the new millennium when the festival began a gradual commercial transformation. As members of the festival team have changed over the years, the programming style and strategies have also adjusted, and the scale and funding pattern of the festival have altered as well. In terms of the thirty-year development of the HKLGFF, Joe Lam, the current festival director, observes that “I also feel like we’re more established. We’re trying to do something different every year. Back then we were smaller, and more underground.”<sup>1</sup> The HKLGFF has lasted over thirty years in a city with a relatively conservative attitude towards queer communities and queer rights. The numbers of attendees have gradually increased and the HKLGFF’s regional and even global influences have also been enhanced.

This research is built on a case study of the HKLGFF. As the oldest and the longest-running queer themed film festival in Asia, the HKLGFF is one of the world’s most iconic queer

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<sup>1</sup> Xie Xiao, “Queer Cinema Comes of Age in Hong Kong,” *Cinemq*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2019, <https://www.cinemq.com/single-post/2019/09/19/hong-kong-lesbian-gay-film-festival-at-30> (accessed 6<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

film festivals.<sup>2</sup> Its success and longevity mean that there are abundant materials (news reports and scholarships, for instance) available online for researchers to access. This thesis also considers the HKLGFF as a successful example of commercialised queer film festivals, since the festival has transformed into a self-sustaining operation, and it has continued to grow. Thus, examining the operation of the HKLGFF can offer important insights into queer film festivals that have undergone commercialised transformation around the world. In addition, in a practical sense, analysing the HKLGFF is possible since I am comparatively familiar with the Hong Kong context, thus, there are no cultural or linguistic conflicts in my position as researcher. Meanwhile, for someone who loves attending film screenings, researching the HKLGFF is also a way of satisfying my own personal interest in the subject.

Over the past 30 years, HKLGFF has not existed and operated alone; rather, it has had close associations with (queer) film festivals around the world. This project asks: What is the relationship between HKLGFF and global film festival networking? How does this relationship influence the operation of HKLGFF? Through an analysis of the operation of the festival, this thesis argues that under the neoliberal trend in the global queer film festival circuit, by privileging middle-class gay identity and commercial interests, the HKLGFF reproduces homonormativity, which characterises the consumption-oriented queer culture in Hong Kong. In other words, this research aims to explore how homonormativity is reproduced by the HKLGFF with the increasing involvement of pink capital in the context of the global queer film festival circuit. In this project, 'queer' can be simply understood as an umbrella term for all non-heteronormative sexualities. This project relates homonormativity to ideologies advocating gender, class, racial, and cultural norms that replicate heterosexuality in queer life.

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<sup>2</sup> Ka-Wei Pang 彭家維, "Tamen de Gushi: Xianggang Tongzhiyingzhan Yanjiu" 她們的故事:香港同志迎戰研究 [Herstories: The Research of Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival], (Master's Thesis, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), 36.

This thesis understands 'pink capital' as the money and profits that can potentially be gained by catering to queer customers. All these terms will be further illustrated in the following sections. Queer film festivals not only fulfil political and social agendas, but they also normalise middle-class gay lifestyles and the Western interpretation of queer identity and issues. In particular, at a time when pink capital permeates queer culture and organisations around the world, commercialised queer film festivals intensify the impacts of homonormativity. The HKLGFF also reflects and engages with Hong Kong queer culture, which is strongly homonormative. While these propositions do not apply to every queer-themed film festival, it bears great relevance to many commercially oriented and small-scale queer film festivals in Asia.

Regarding the scholarly contributions of this project, to extend the discussion of the film festival circuit in the context of queer film festivals, this project provides a concept of the global queer film festival circuit. This concept is mainly developed from Skadi Loist's<sup>3</sup> and Antoine Damiens'<sup>4</sup> work on the queer film festival circuit, seeking to map the broader picture of the global landscape of queer film festivals and to especially include the small-scale queer film festivals in the Global South. The concept also identifies the hegemony of major film festivals in the West to non-Western small-scale queer film festivals, attempting to challenge the Western-centrism in the circuit. In general, this project can be regarded as an example for illustrating how the Western-oriented global queer film festival circuit penetratively influences the operation of a single small-scale queer film festival in various aspects.

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<sup>3</sup> Skadi Loist, "Crossover Dreams: Global Circulation of Queer Film on the Film Festival Circuits," *Diogenes* 62, no. 1 (2015): 62.

<sup>4</sup> Antoine Damiens, "The Queer Film Ecosystem: Symbolic Economy, Festivals, and Queer Cinema's Legs," *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 1 (2018): 10 and 13.

Furthermore, this project expands the concept of homonormativity and interrogates it through all aspects of festival organising. This project builds upon Stuart Richards's discussion of homonormativity, which explores how the programming of queer film festivals negotiates the construction of homonormativity.<sup>5</sup> However, this thesis suggests that homonormativity is not only constructed in and by festival programmes, but that many aspects of queer film festival operation can lead to the reproduction of homonormativity. This project explores the mechanism through which different aspects of the festival operation specifically shape various social norms. In addition to the understanding of participating in queer film festivals as a political act and cultural activity, or a part of the global film industry, the project addresses participation in queer film festivals as a form of consumption. This thesis concentrates on the examination of the relationship between queer capital, consumption and homonormativity in the context of queer film festivals.

In addition, this thesis provides a framework to identify and explore the specialities of each queer film festival. Existing scholarship largely focuses on major queer film festivals in the West. Nevertheless, rediscovering small-scale queer film festivals and addressing the uniqueness of each festival has become increasingly important in queer film festival studies. For instance, Antoine Damiens tends to cover "forgotten, minor LGBT film festivals."<sup>6</sup> More significantly, this thesis attempts to enrich queer film festival research, which presently privileges Western cases and models, by focusing on a small-scale queer film festival in Asia. Comparative study is a common method adopted in queer film festival studies for identifying specialities.<sup>7</sup> However, instead of comparing specific cases, this thesis offers an alternative

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<sup>5</sup> Stuart James Richards, *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 152.

<sup>6</sup> Antoine Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Binnie and Christian Klesse, "Comparative Queer Methodologies and Queer Film Festival Research," *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 1 (2018): 58-59.

approach, through investigating the relationship between a specific queer film festival and its local context and analysing the interactions between this specific queer film festival and the global queer film festival circuit. According to Jonathan Petrychyn,

Paying attention to such local particularities, and grounding our analysis in the local context and conditions of the film festivals under analysis, helps stabilize some of the messy ontological questions about what a film festival is and redirects our research energies toward the performative question of what film festivals do and how they work.<sup>8</sup>

This project is concerned with an analysis of the local context, researching the interactions between the festival and the local context. For context, the following four sections provide an explanation of a series of key terms used throughout this thesis: queer theory, queer film festivals, pink capital, and homonormativity.

### **Queer theory**

Homosexuality generally refers to the sexual attraction or sexual acts between people of the same gender or sex. Homosexual desires and same-sex intimacies have existed throughout human history. However, as Nikki Sullivan highlights, in the context of postcolonialism, the concept of homosexuality is “discursively constructed.”<sup>9</sup> On one hand, same-sex sexual behaviours had been gradually considered to be criminal acts in Western legal systems in the 19th century. For instance, until the end of the 19th century, sodomy was considered to be a sin against nature in Britain.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Karl Westphal’s work, published in 1869, can be seen as the “beginnings of the medicalization of homosexuality.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Petrychyn, “Networks of Feelings: Affective Economies of Queer and Feminist Film Festivals on the Canadian Prairies” (PhD Thesis, York University, 2019), 49.

<sup>9</sup> Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, 2-3

<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, 10.

Michel Foucault identifies that medical discourse took over religious discourse to discuss homosexuality from the mid-19th century, claiming “the homosexual was now a species.”<sup>12</sup> That is to say, homosexuality has been constructed in legal and medical discourses. In the meantime, mainstream society’s discriminatory and biased understanding of sexual minorities was formed and deepened. The rights of homosexual communities have been exploited by heterosexual society. During the time when homosexual desires and intimacies were criminalised and pathologized, numerous doctors, scholars and activists saw homosexual people as part of the social justice system and openly supporting the rights of homosexual communities, which led to the homophile movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Stonewall riots, which took place in New York in June 1969, have been regarded as a turning point for modern LGBT movements in the West. According to Annamarie Jagose, the Stonewall riots work “in a symbolic register as a convenient if somewhat spurious marker of an important cultural shift away from assimilationist policies and quietist tactics a significant if mythological date for the origin of the gay liberation movement.”<sup>13</sup> Large-scale protests for gay rights began to take place and numerous organisations advocating for gay and lesbian politics were set up. The influence of modern gay and lesbian movements has spread globally. As one of the outcomes of liberation movements, the identity terms of gay and lesbian have also been discursively constructed.

The rebirth of the term ‘queer’ was motivated by the restrictions of gay and lesbian movements. ‘Queer’ was originally used to refer to things that were strange, weird, abnormal or sick, and evolved into a colloquial rebuke of homosexuality.<sup>14</sup> According to Hannah McCann

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures* (London: Red Globe Press, 2020), 2.

and Whitney Monaghan, the term 'queer' was positively reclaimed by LGBT communities in the 1980s as an umbrella term to "designate resistant and non-normative sexuality, seemingly unburdened from the separatist strains that had emerged around gay and lesbian identities."<sup>15</sup> As Heather Love claims, the reason for using queer is to "evoke a long history of insult and abuse."<sup>16</sup> The term 'queer theory' was proposed by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990.<sup>17</sup> According to Jay Stewart,

Queer theory and politics necessarily celebrate transgression in the form of visible difference from norms. These 'Norms' are then exposed to be norms, not natures or inevitabilities. Gender and sexual identities are seen, in much of this work, to be demonstrably defiant definitions and configurations.<sup>18</sup>

Queer theory can be used to investigate and defy the ways in which scholars, activists and artists continue a lens of gender and sexuality-based binaries with the goal of resisting hierarchies and social inequalities. Additionally, queer theory moves beyond the focus on homosexuality and keeps expanding and questioning the concept of identity.

Queer theory, ideally, is used to resist normativity. However, it may cause the construction of "a relatively closed-off universal queer subject."<sup>19</sup> In other words, new kinds of norms are likely to be formed. According to Sullivan, "Queer Theory and/or activism has been accused of being, among other things, male-centred, anti-feminist, and race-blind."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Yvette Taylor criticises the dominance of a middle-class gay perspective in queer

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>17</sup> David Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2-4 (2003): 339.

<sup>18</sup> Jay Stewart, "Academic Theory," in *Critical and Applied Approaches in Sexuality, Gender and Identity: Behavioral Science and Psychology*, edited by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 62.

<sup>19</sup> McCann and Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, 179.

<sup>20</sup> Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, 48.

studies, suggesting drawing attention to class inequality in queer communities (focusing on working-class lesbians in particular).<sup>21</sup> Hence, McCann and Monaghan argue that through an intersectional lens, “queer theory could move beyond sexuality to also address questions of nationality, gender, race and class.”<sup>22</sup> Adopting the concept of intersectionality in queer studies is more likely to challenge middle-class gay oriented and single-axis queer studies. This project concerns other axes, such as class and gender.

Queer film studies can also be seen as a kind of intersection of queer studies and other fields. Regarding the development of queer cinema, it was usually associated with avant-garde and underground films in the early stage, before gradually reaching mainstream audiences in the 21st century.<sup>23</sup> The appearance of New Queer Cinema was a turning point. Coined by Ruby Rich, New Queer Cinema was an academic term to describe a new trend of queer-themed independent filmmaking in the early 1990s, as these films “were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image.”<sup>24</sup> New Queer Cinema “moves away from issues of LGBTIQ visibility to reflect queer theory’s focus on queer politics and the construction of sex, gender and sexuality.”<sup>25</sup> More importantly, New Queer Cinema signalled the rise of queer films in the Western film festival landscape. The significance of New Queer Cinema to the development of queer film festivals will be explored in Chapter Two. Queer films and queer film festivals share an extremely close and mutually beneficial relationship. Traditionally, queer film festivals work as both exhibition

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<sup>21</sup> Yvette Taylor, “Queer, but Classless?,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, edited by Noreen Giffney and Michael O’Rourke (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 199-200.

<sup>22</sup> McCann and Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, 185.

<sup>23</sup> JoAnne Juett and David Jones, “Introduction,” in *Coming Out in the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by JoAnne Juett and David Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), xi.

<sup>24</sup> Ruby Rich, “New Queer Cinema” in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, edited by Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 15.

<sup>25</sup> McCann and Monaghan, *Queer Theory Now*, 189.



and circulation sites for queer films. In addition, screening queer films is the most important way for the festival to communicate or connect with audiences. Similarly, queer films are used as the medium to convey messages and ideas. In this project, research on queer films and queer film festivals echoes some of the main debates in queer studies.

### **Queer film festivals**

Drawing global attention, international film festivals together can attract millions of audience members each year, becoming a vital part of the global film industry. Shortly after the birth of cinema, a few one-off events exhibiting films had already begun to appear. According to Marijke de Valck, the first film festival took place in Monaco in 1898; shortly after, similar events appeared in several big cities in Europe.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, between the 1920s and the 1930s, there were numerous cinephile-oriented film screening events, which can also be seen as prototypes of early film festivals. “In the 1920s alternative screening institutions mushroomed across Europe; film societies and cine-clubs proliferated, especially in major West European cities,” according to Malte Hagener’s description of film-screening-related activities.<sup>27</sup> The first Venice International Film Festival (Venice) took place in 1932, indicating the birth of the contemporary film festival model.<sup>28</sup> Venice is also the oldest film festival still running today.

Film festivals can generally be regarded as a kind of cultural activity which showcase a series of films in a certain period and a certain space. Similarly, Loist considers film festivals to be “alternative exhibition sites – alternative to regular cinemas and permanent art houses

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<sup>26</sup> Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 47.

<sup>27</sup> Malte Hagener, “Institutions of Film Culture: Festivals and Archives as Network Nodes,” in *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Europe, 1919-1945*, edited by Malte Hagener (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 248.

<sup>28</sup> De Valck, *Film Festivals*, 23.

– and are typically conceived of as medium-length events taking place over the course of a couple of days.”<sup>29</sup> Regarding the historical development of film festivals, Cindy Wong identifies the diversification of film festivals in terms of type, time and space when the phenomenon of film festivals spread around the globe from the 1980s.<sup>30</sup> Attending a film festival has gradually become a popular cultural activity for people globally.

Queer film festivals, as a type of themed film festival, were born in the late 1970s, when festivals began to diversify. Richards underlines a general definition of queer film festivals, referring to “a series of film screenings that primarily focus on queer themes.”<sup>31</sup> In 1977, the very first queer-themed film festival, the Gay Film Festival of Super-8 Films (now known as the Frameline Film Festival), took place in San Francisco. According to Loist, the festival was organised by a group of filmmakers and activists, and “it was held in a community centre with projection onto white bed sheets.”<sup>32</sup> Loist also considers the Gay Film Festival of Super-8 Films as “a prototype for LGBT/Q film festivals that followed,” as it “performed a social cinematic space where queer artists making films put on a public and inclusive (rather than private and exclusive) show and thus opened up a counterpublic sphere.”<sup>33</sup> This kind of identity-based activity spread to some major cities in the United States in the early 1980s, such as Chicago (in 1981) and Los Angeles (1982).<sup>34</sup> Loist and Ger Zielinski reveal that the initial goal of these early queer-themed film festivals was to “advocate by way of showing

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<sup>29</sup> Skadi Loist, “Queer Film Culture: Performative Aspects of LGBT/Q Film Festivals” (PhD Thesis, University of Hamburg, 2014), 58.

<sup>30</sup> Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 51-52.

<sup>31</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Loist, “Queer Film Culture,” 113.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

films and the bringing together of a community.”<sup>35</sup> The early founding history indicates the social-political nature of queer film festivals.

As a sub-type of film festivals, queer film festivals retain the essential characteristics of film festivals in general. According to Richards, “the primary purpose of these festivals is to provide a space for the exhibition of films that would otherwise struggle to secure a large audience.”<sup>36</sup> Queer film festivals serve as the alternative exhibition and distribution space for the circulation of queer films, particularly for the queer films that employ radical cinematic forms or progressive queer politics. More significantly, the role of ‘gatekeeper’ that film festivals usually play refers not just to their selections according to film quality but also to the queer politics that the films explore. Queer film festivals play a significant role in shaping and developing queer communities. As Richards notes, “the queer film festival has a mission statement in serving the queer community and promoting social empowerment while still remaining financially viable.”<sup>37</sup> Overall, queer film festivals cater to both queer films and communities to facilitate their development.

Queer film festivals first emerged in the West. The first queer film festival outside the United States, the Ljubljana LGBT Film Festival, first took place in Slovenia’s capital in 1984 and has become the oldest queer film festival in Europe. Soon after, queer film festivals began to appear in major European cities, including London (1986), Copenhagen (1986), Milan (1986) and Paris (1989). At the same time, numerous queer film festivals popped up in different North American cities. Loist characterises the political nature of queer film festivals before the 1990s, stating that, “all these festivals were indebted to gay liberation politics and

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<sup>35</sup> Skadi Loist and Ger Zielinski, “On the Development of Queer Film Festivals and Their Media Activism,” *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festival and Activism*, edited by Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St Andrews: St Andrews Film2012), 52.

<sup>36</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

primarily concerned with providing representation to their communities.”<sup>38</sup> Richards also highlights how queer film festivals developed from informal queer screenings to non-profit organisations.<sup>39</sup> Queer film festivals gradually spread from the West to other parts of the world from the 1990s. Globally, the scale and influence of queer film festivals have been increasing, and the 2010s witnessed the formation of regional and global networking among queer film festivals.<sup>40</sup> For instance, with the increasing numbers of queer film festivals in Asia, the Asia Pacific Queer Film Festival Alliance (APQFFA) was established in 2016 to contribute to the further development of queer film festivals in the region. APQFFA is an alliance of regional queer film festivals, with the initiative to promote the circulation of queer images and support emerging queer filmmakers in Asian-Pacific areas. After more than 40 years, queer film festivals are no longer just informal events organised by a few grassroots queer activists; instead, they have become a major part of the queer movement and the global queer film industry. Attending queer film festivals has become a popular and profitable activity.

With the development of queer film festivals, the labels for queer-themed film festivals have greatly varied. In general, ‘lesbian and gay,’ ‘LGBT’ and ‘queer’ are the three most used labels for such festivals. According to Loist and Zielinski, the name changes of queer-themed film festivals reveal the development of queer politics and culture in real life.<sup>41</sup> For consistency, this thesis uses the term ‘queer film festival’ to refer to LGBTQ-themed film festivals generally. On one hand, ‘queer film festival’ is commonly used in academia when generally referring to queer-themed film festivals, and it is comparatively concise. On the

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<sup>38</sup> Loist, “Queer Film Culture,” 115.

<sup>39</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Loist, “Queer Film Culture,” 143.

<sup>41</sup> Loist and Zielinski, “On the Development of Queer Film Festivals,” 51.

other hand, using 'queer film festival' allows consistency with other uses of 'queer' in this project, such as queer theories, queer films and queer communities. 'Queer' can be simply understood as an umbrella term to describe non-heterosexual identities and politics. In terms of specific queer film festivals, I use their own names, such as the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGF), Frameline Film Festival (Frameline), and the BFI Flare London LGBTQ+ Film Festival (Flare).

Queer film festivals have gradually sought to raise pink capital since the 1990s under the global trend of neoliberalism. Loist notes that the decline of public funding in America forced festivals to develop alternative strategies to find resources.<sup>42</sup> Faced with a lack of funding, other sources were also considered by queer film festivals, such as individual donations, private foundation grants, commercial sponsorships, and box office revenue. In response to neoliberalism, numerous queer film festivals around the world have become commercialised to ensure festival sustainability. Meanwhile, niche markets have become significant to the survival of queer film festivals. For commercialised queer film festivals in particular, the close connection with pink capital has reshaped the relationship between arts, commerce and activism. This thesis thus investigates the consequences of the increasing pervasiveness of pink capital in queer film festivals.

Since queer film festivals do not exist in isolation, in order to investigate the operation of queer film festivals more thoroughly, this thesis aims to introduce the concept of the film festival circuit. The film festival circuit can be simply understood as the pathway through which films circulate among film festivals. As mentioned above, queer film festivals have mainly worked as tools to contribute to LGBT movements in their earliest incarnations.

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<sup>42</sup> Loist, "Queer Film Culture," 119-120.

Nevertheless, with the increasing involvement of queer capital in queer filmmaking and queer film festivals, the connection of all the global queer film festivals has been greatly enhanced, and they have gradually formed a sub-circuit of the international film festival circuit. It is worth noting that the queer film festival circuit is not simply attached to the international film festival circuit but is integrated within the main circuit. Hence, the study of the queer film festival circuit, and in particular, the impact of the circuit on individual queer film festivals, cannot avoid investigation of the wider international film festival circuit. Further discussion of the queer film festival circuit and the international film festival circuit will be elaborated in depth in Chapter Two.

Film festivals have developed over more than a century, though in-depth research about film festivals only began in the 1980s. Built on the foundation of film festival studies, queer film festival studies represents a newly emerging academic field in film studies. Joshua Gamson's paper, which examines how queer film festivals negotiate the formation of collective identities, was one of the most important academic works in the early stages of queer film festival studies. Regarding "the organizational mediation of collective identity," Gamson observes that collective identities can be reproduced through queer film festivals and that the formation of identities is an "ongoing political" process "in which multiple, overlapping identities inevitably conflict."<sup>43</sup> More and more scholars have devoted themselves to queer film festival studies since the 2000s. According to Damiens, "most of the festival studies scholarship on LGBTQ film festivals is in the form of unpublished dissertations," but they "built upon festival studies' foundational concepts and helped define new methodological and theoretical approaches."<sup>44</sup> For instance, mapping the history of queer

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<sup>43</sup> Joshua Gamson, "The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York," *Sociological Forum*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1996): 235-236.

<sup>44</sup> Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals*, 22.

film festivals through an economic perspective, Regan Rhyne argues that queer film festivals “have articulated their politics, artistic practice, and the discourse of community within (and against) the parameters defined by the demands of organizational sustainability.”<sup>45</sup> Theorising how queer film festivals interact with identity and community politics in the context of North America, Zielinski points out “the importance of the lesbian and gay film festival as a cultural institution dedicated to an idea of community, situated in lived, urban space.”<sup>46</sup> Exploring the relationship between queer film festivals and queer film culture, Loist argues that “LGBT/Q film festivals play an integral part in the definition and dissemination of LGBT/Q images and identities in a global network.”<sup>47</sup> Although all these academic works are rooted in the Western context, they have formed the theoretical foundation of queer film festival studies.

As of 2020, at least two monographs have concentrated on queer film festivals. The first, by Stuart Richards, appeared in 2016, and defines queer film festivals as social enterprises, exploring their relationships with creative industries and queer communities.<sup>48</sup> Focusing on three cases on different continents – the Frameline, the Melbourne Queer Film Festival (MQFF) and the HKLGFF – Richards investigates how capital impacts the practices of these queer film festivals and how they balance commercial pursuits and social empowerment. Damiens’ monograph, published in 2020, addresses among other subjects the “disciplinary assumptions” of existing (queer) film festival scholarship. Damiens redefines the role of queer film festivals, further arguing that “festivals produce knowledge through a

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<sup>45</sup> Regan Rhyne, *Pink Dollars: Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals and the Economy of Visibility* (PhD Thesis, New York University, 2007), 2-3.

<sup>46</sup> Zielinski, “Furtive, Steady Glances,” 1-5.

<sup>47</sup> Loist, “Queer Film Culture,” 15.

<sup>48</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 1-2 and 31-32.

sedimentation of discourses and representations.”<sup>49</sup> These two monographs comprehensively scrutinise interdisciplinary scholarships and methodologies and commonly discussed topics, such as the concept of the queer film festival circuit (Damien), and the discussion of the relationship between homonormativity and festival programming (Richards).

### **Pink capital**

Capitalism and queer identity and culture have been intertwined for over a century. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, some major cities in the West offered gays or lesbians specific places for consumption and gathering, such as bathhouses, bars and cafés. According to Peter Drucker, with the rise of the Second Industrial Revolution and the increase in wages, various gay or lesbian-specific consumption spaces emerged in major European cities including London, Paris and Berlin.<sup>50</sup> These underground but emerging gay and lesbian consumption spaces and cultures laid the foundation for the further development of the gay and lesbian movement in Europe. In terms of the context of the United States before the 1970s, John D’Emilio argues that since the increase of capital and the proliferation of employment, the traditional heteronormative family pattern was gradually loosened and altered, and the collective gay lifestyle gradually appeared; thus capitalism has formed the context that allowed some people to “organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex.”<sup>51</sup> He also notes that “these new forms of gay identity and patterns of group life also reflected the differentiation of people according to gender, race, and class that is so pervasive in capitalist societies.”<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, queer movements

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<sup>49</sup> Damien, *LGBTQ Film Festivals*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 111-112.

<sup>51</sup> John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Sharon Thompson and Christine Stansell (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 102-104.

<sup>52</sup> D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” 105.



focused on mainstream visibility of queer communities.<sup>53</sup> In the meantime, with the high growth of the commodity economy in the 1980s and 1990s, advertising and mass media started to target middle-class queer people.<sup>54</sup> The purchasing power of queer communities has gradually drawn the attention of mainstream businesses.

The term pink capital – so-called pink dollars or pink money – has gained popularity. Generally speaking, pink capital describes the collective consumption or purchasing capacity of queer communities. In this project, pink capital refers to some commercial (and social) enterprises' economic and financial considerations and gains by catering to the needs and demands of the queer market as their target customers. In addition, I use the term pink capital flexibly – it can be interpreted in three aspects. First, pink capital can refer to the investments, resources and financial interests of queer film festivals. Second, it can be understood as the business opportunities brought by queer film festivals and the global markets for queer films as well. Third, the term is used to describe the consumption and purchasing power of queer communities.

Pink capital also plays an important role in the practices of queer film festivals. As previously discussed, faced with the global force of neoliberalism, the involvement of pink capital has become increasingly significant in queer film festivals since the 1990s. Similarly, Ruby Rich notes that the interplay between pink capital, queer film production and identity politics significantly influenced the operation of queer film festivals in the 1990s.<sup>55</sup> In particular, Ragan Rhyne pays attention to the mainstream commercial success of New Queer

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<sup>53</sup> Alan Sears, "Queer Anti-capitalism: What's Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation?" *Science & Society* 69, no. 1 (2005): 96.

<sup>54</sup> Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, "The Gay Marketing Moment," in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*, edited by Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (London: Routledge, 1997), 3-4.

<sup>55</sup> B. Ruby Rich, "Vision Quest," *Village Voice*, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2002, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2002/03/19/vision-quest/> (accessed 8<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

Cinema, arguing that it reshaped the relationship between queer film festivals and the market, “and these relationships were constantly and explicitly negotiated by filmmakers, the gay press, activists, and the commercial film industry.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, New Queer Cinema was a “catalyst for the integration of gay and lesbian consumer identity with middle-class value of philanthropy.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, as Rhyne observes, with the increasingly close connection to pink capital, queer film festivals have developed from “small community-based organizations” to “multi-million-dollar, multinational events that bring in tens of thousands of people each year.”<sup>58</sup> Pink capital has allowed queer film festivals to not only survive the neoliberal wave, but to flourish as part of it.

However, the involvement of pink capital in queer film festivals raises controversy among scholars and programmers. According to Rhyne, “gay and lesbian film festivals became a key site of debate about visibility politics, community diversity, and access to capital,” as academics and activists “question the political viability of commercial visibility.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed argue that through long-term gay marketing strategies, “free-spending, double income gay households” become the representatives of all the queer communities in the market.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, queer people like those of colour become invisible in the mainstream market. In the case of queer film festivals, the festivals target the queer people who can afford the tickets, products and services promoted by the festivals’ commercial sponsors. The rest of the communities who are economically

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<sup>56</sup> Ragan Rhyne, “Queer Capital, Queer Culture: Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in the 1990s,” in *International Film Festivals: Contemporary Cultures and History Beyond Venice and Cannes*, edited by Tricia Jenkins (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018), 166.

<sup>57</sup> Rhyne, “Queer Capital,” 171.

<sup>58</sup> Ragan Rhyne, “The Global Economy of Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 618.

<sup>59</sup> Rhyne, “Queer Capital,” 156.

<sup>60</sup> Gluckman and Reed, “The Gay Marketing Moment,” 4.

underprivileged have been neglected by such festivals. Therefore, this project investigates pink capital's significance for the HKLGFF and its influences on the festival's operation.

### **Homonormativity**

Since homonormativity derives from the concept of normativity, this section firstly explores the relationship between social norms and queer sexuality. Normativity is a significant concept in queer studies. A norm literally means something has become typical or standard.

Regarding the relationship between queerness and norms, David Halperin argues that,

As the very word implies, "queer" does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.<sup>61</sup>

Halperin's claim indicates that queer is supposed to dismantle the privilege of inherently imbalanced power relations. Furthermore, according to Judith Butler, who draws on a Foucauldian perspective, norms operate "within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization."<sup>62</sup> She further suggests that "norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalising principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce."<sup>63</sup> Butler explicitly points out the negative impacts of norms, suggesting that since norms are embedded in daily practices, people cannot easily notice their existence; nevertheless, they continue suffering from the influence caused by these norms. Similarly, norms are also embedded in or produced by queer film festivals. Thus, this project raises the significance of challenging norms in queer film festival studies.

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<sup>61</sup> David M Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1995), 62.

<sup>62</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

As an expression of social, gender and sexual norms, homonormativity is developed from heteronormativity. Simply speaking, heteronormativity refers to “heterosexuality as the norm – in culture, in society, in politics.”<sup>64</sup> According to Michael Warner, heterosexual ideas control society because,

Heterosexual culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist.<sup>65</sup>

In this formulation, all social relations and ways of thinking are heteronormative. When a behaviour does not conform to heteronormative norms, it is marginalised. Warner addresses the permeation of heteronormativity through daily practices of queer people.<sup>66</sup> The heteronormative perspective covers the conformity of biological sex, gender identity and gender roles. Thus, non-heterosexual communities are greatly oppressed in heteronormative society. Samuel Chambers argues that heteronormativity “reproduces the closet” for people, further constructing homophobia.<sup>67</sup> The concern of heteronormativity is not just about the control of heterosexual people, it also refers to the oppression of sexual minorities in order to maintain the stability of mainstream society.

Homonormativity takes critical discourse on normalised queer life further on the basis of heteronormativity. Simply speaking, homonormativity replicates heteronormativity, implying heteronormative ideas and values among queer people and culture. Halperin argues that when queer people are deprived of a common, collective presence, the tone of queer

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<sup>64</sup> Samuel A Chambers, “Telepistemology of the Closet; or the Queer Politics of ‘Six Feet Under,’” *The Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 1 (2003): 26.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Warner, “Introduction,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, edited by Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), xxi.

<sup>66</sup> Warner, “Introduction,” xiii.

<sup>67</sup> Chambers, “Telepistemology of the Closet,” 25.

politics is no longer resistance to heteronormative oppression, but assimilation, which is the drive to be socially accepted and integrated into society at large.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, Lisa Duggan interpretes homonormativity as,

a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.<sup>69</sup>

Duggan's definition identifies homonormativity's strong relation to consumerism and neoliberalism. Homonormativity greatly intensifies the economic inequalities of queer communities. Scholars and activists adopt the term homonormativity to respond critically to assimilationist and neoliberal trends in queer movements and culture. With the increasing involvement of pink capital, queer movements emphasise specific agendas strongly related to neoliberalism and marginalise other queer issues and inequalities. Catherine Connell criticises queer movements, stating that they shift to embrace "the neoliberal values of consumption, individualism, and privatization" rather than distancing themselves from those values.<sup>70</sup> In a similar way, queer film festivals routinely fall under the influence of neoliberalism and consumerism.

Homonormativity as a phenomenon can also be witnessed in Asia and scholars also pay attention to the analysis of homonormativity in the Chinese context. Yau Ching addresses the "context-specificity of normativity" and suggests that normativity is "manifested and

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<sup>68</sup> David M. Halperin, *How to be Gay* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 441.

<sup>69</sup> Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

<sup>70</sup> Catherine Connell, *School's Out: Gay and Lesbian Teachers in the Classroom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 135.

negotiated differently at different historical moments, fine-tuned according to the different power structures of each context and making different meanings.”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, through the analysis of Singapore and Hong Kong, Helen Leung and Audrey Yue reveals that Asian gay cities do not completely resist Western modernity (such as, homonormativity).<sup>72</sup> Local queer culture also engages with homonormativity. For instance, they discover that as a Singapore-based queer event, Pink Dot advocates “homonormative ideas of family values and family inclusion.”<sup>73</sup> Regarding Hong Kong queer culture, Travis Kong identifies queer commerce and homonormativity as the key forces.<sup>74</sup> In general, although homonormativity is a global trend, the analysis of homonormativity cannot ignore the significance of local contexts. Thus, this project reviews the specific historical, political and economic context of Hong Kong.

Homonormativity is a commonly mentioned term in queer film festival studies when criticising programmes. However, Richards closely examines how queer film festivals’ programmes construct homonormativity. He proposes the concept of homonormative queer cinema, stating that norms are constructed by the medium of films.<sup>75</sup> He further points out three characteristics of homonormative representation in queer film festival programmes: depoliticization and consumerism, domesticity, and hierarchies of sexual identity.<sup>76</sup> These three characteristics are mainly inspired by Duggan’s understanding of homonormativity, addressing the influence of neoliberalism on queer representations.

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<sup>71</sup> Yau Ching, “Dreaming of Normal While Sleeping with Impossible: Introduction,” in *As Normal As Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong*, edited by Yau Ching (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>72</sup> Audrey Yue and Helen Hok-Sze Leung, “Notes Towards the Queer Asian City: Singapore and Hong Kong,” *Urban Studies* 54, no. 3 (2017): 761.

<sup>73</sup> Yue and Leung, “Notes Towards the Queer Asian City,” 755.

<sup>74</sup> Travis Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 9-10 and 46.

<sup>75</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 152.

<sup>76</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 156-157.

Homonormative festival programming prioritises specific types of representations and themes, reproducing various kinds of norms about gay lifestyles. Through an in-depth comparative study between Frameline's and MQFF's programmes, Richards finds that homonormative feature-length films dominated both queer film festivals, imposing "a naturalization of white, gender-appropriate, sexually conservative identities."<sup>77</sup> However, Richards notes that queer film festivals also attempt to programme anti-homonormative films, such as queer films utilising alternative cinematic forms, or featuring radically queer representations.<sup>78</sup> In other words, diversification regarding sexual identity, queer bodies or queer aesthetics and film forms can challenge homonormative programmes. Homonormativity is not only constructed through daily practices of queer people as formal or implicit queer organisations, such as queer film festivals, institutionalise homonormativity. In this thesis, the understanding of homonormativity is interpreted and explored in two ways: in how the HKLGFF normalises the way queer people live; and how queer communities interpret queer identity and issues.

## **Methodology**

The complexity of film festivals can demand the combination of multiple research methods. Diane Burgess argues that a "film festival comprises an exhibition space; an event; and an institution with links to civil society, cinema culture, the film industry, and to other festivals."<sup>79</sup> The multifaceted nature of film festivals allows for a variety of approaches to the research. Thus, Burgess suggests that a "synthetic approach to festivals [is] a reflection of ontological uncertainty, resulting in an etic approach that is, at best, piecemeal."<sup>80</sup> Inspired by Burgess,

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<sup>77</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 206-207.

<sup>78</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 175-200.

<sup>79</sup> Diane Burgess and Brendan Kredell, "Positionality and Film Festival Research: A Conversation," in *Film Festivals*, 161.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Petrychyn names this combination of various methods the piecemeal methodology and applied it to his own project.<sup>81</sup> There are numerous kinds of methods that can be adopted in film festival studies, and according to Loist these “range from participant observation and (auto)ethnography to qualitative methods such as textual and discourse analysis, and interviewing in media industries research, to quantitative data gathering and statistical analysis in management.”<sup>82</sup> Although this project mainly focuses on one queer film festival, the complexity of my research leads to the need for a combination of various methods. This project covers various topics, including funding patterns, historical development, audiences, programming and promotional strategies, and space, among other aspects. Therefore, this project also adopts the piecemeal methodology – it uses multiple methods to collect and analyse materials, including semi-structured interviews, content analysis and secondary data analysis.

I attended the HKLGFF to conduct my participant observation for six days in September 2018. During the visit, I also conducted semi-structured interviews. According to Melissa DeJonckheere and Lisa Vaughn, a semi-structured interview “typically consists of a dialogue between researcher and participant, guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions, probes and comments.”<sup>83</sup> Interviews are one of the most commonly used methods for film festival studies, since the research generally needs the insights of stakeholders (festival programmers and audience, for instance) regardless of the subject matter or the research question, since most aspects of the operation of film festivals

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<sup>81</sup> Petrychyn, “Networks of Feelings,” 48-50.

<sup>82</sup> Skadi Loist, “Introduction,” in *Film Festivals*, 119.

<sup>83</sup> Melissa DeJonckheere and Lisa M. Vaughn, “Semistructured Interviewing in Primary Care Research: A Balance of Relationship and Rigour,” *Family Medicine and Community Health* 7, no. 2 (2019): 1.



involve human interaction. Before the trip to Hong Kong, I contacted two of the HKLGFF's festival team members, Joe Lam, the festival director, and Sophia Shek.

I interviewed Lam in Cantonese for approximately one hour on 15<sup>th</sup> September, at Café Habitu, Central. Lam has been the festival director of the HKLGFF for around a decade, while his first encounter with the festival occurred long before that. Since Lam is the publisher of *Dim Sum Magazine*,<sup>84</sup> he was invited by the former festival director to be a consultant and support the festival by seeking commercial sponsorships in the early 2000s. Lam is in charge of most of the work of festival organising, including fundraising, programming, promotion, the design of the festival catalogue and official website, event organising, running festival social accounts and much more. I conducted a two-hour interview in English with Shek on 21<sup>st</sup> September at Eaton Food Court, Yau Ma Tei. Born and raised in Scotland, Shek began her involvement with the HKLGFF in the late 2000s, when she settled in Hong Kong, but she has only worked as a festival programmer since 2015. Shek oversees English writing for festival materials and is also a Hong Kong based film producer. After interviewing Lam and Shek, I had been hoping to speak to other people who worked for the HKLGFF, when the Chinese Independent Film Archive offered an opportunity to interview Liu. As a PhD student at the Institute of Transtextual and Transcultural Studies in France, Liu became involved in the HKLGFF in 2016. She is responsible for the programming of lesbian and transgender short films and translation (English or French to Chinese). I conducted a one-hour interview in Cantonese with Liu over Zoom on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

In addition to the interviews with the festival team, I also conducted interviews with audience members. This proved challenging thanks to the reticence of the Hong Kong

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<sup>84</sup> Launching its first issue in 2002, *Dim Sum* was the first free gay lifestyle magazine in Hong Kong. It is now one of the longest-running LGBT media platforms in Hong Kong. The magazine moved from print to online publication in January 2016.

audience or my lack of experience in interviewing. As a result, most of the time, I could only have brief, off-the-record informal talks with audience members. Only two attendees, K and G, gave me consent to be interviewed with the condition of anonymity. Both men in their thirties, they self-identified as Chinese gay men. The interviews with K and G primarily concerned how they felt during the festival and how they chose what films to watch.

Content analysis is another of the methods used in this research. In addition to the dominant role of ethnographical methods in film festival studies, according to Loist, “a slow move in film festival studies toward quantitative data analysis should be mentioned.”<sup>85</sup> Steve Stemler defines content analysis as “a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding.”<sup>86</sup> In film studies, Gholamreza Mohammadimehr and Mohammadbagher Sepehri suggest that content analysis serves as “a method through which every communicative product can be examined in terms of its content.”<sup>87</sup> In film festival studies, communicative products is understood to include festival programmes and promotional materials.

This project adopted content analysis to scrutinise festival programmes and promotional materials from the HKLGFF in the late 2010s. On the one hand, this method was largely used to examine the festival programmes from the past five years (i.e. the 2016-2020 festivals). The main reason for choosing this period was that I could only access materials from this period: I obtained the printed festival catalogues of the HKLGFF 2018 and 2019 along with the pdf versions of the catalogues from the HKLGFF 2016, 2017 and 2020. I categorised the

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<sup>85</sup> Loist, “Introduction,” in *Film Festivals*, 120.

<sup>86</sup> Steve Stemler, “An Overview of Content Analysis,” *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation* 7, no. 1 (2000), 1.

<sup>87</sup> Gholamreza Mohammadimehr, and Mohammadbagher Sepehri, “The Factors of Iranian Cinema’s Global Success at Festivals: Content Analysis of Prize-Awarded Movies at Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Locarno Festivals,” *Cross-Cultural Communication* 12, no. 1 (2016): 18.

content of the programmes using several criteria: origin of the film, the spoken language of the film and subtitling, cinematic representations (types of main characters), and circulating path of the film (which film festivals had shown the film previously). Content analysis was also adopted to explore the promotional materials of the HKLGFF, such as the official website, social media (official Facebook and Instagram pages) and festival catalogues during the period from 2018 to 2020, to investigate the HKLGFF's marketing strategies and its targeted audience.

The final method used in this research was secondary data analysis. This is a method to analyse the data "that was collected by someone else for another primary purpose," providing "a viable option for researchers who may have limited time and resources."<sup>88</sup> The data collected by others in the past cannot be used straightforwardly, since the research questions or data collection purposes vary greatly in different cases and could sometimes represent an enormous volume of data.<sup>89</sup> Hence, I have reorganised and selected the specific data which could be useful for my research questions and subject. In general, this secondary data significantly contributed to the further discussion as well as the revaluation of some of my primary data.

The data collected by existing scholarship can be greatly useful. Pang's and Richards' work offered data and materials that the previously illustrated methods could not provide. Pang's master's thesis was the first academic study of the HKLGFF, collecting various kinds of data and materials from 1989 to 2007, such as festival catalogues and programmes. Aiming to explore the historical development of the HKLGFF, Chapter Three mainly relies on Pang's database since accessing these primary sources before the early 2010s proved challenging. In addition, incorporating women's perspectives, Pang interviewed the HKLGFF contributors

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<sup>88</sup> Melissa P Johnston, "Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come," *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* 3, no. 3 (2017): 619.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas P Vartanian, *Secondary Data Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15-17.

Denise Tang, Yau Ching, Vicci Ho and Anson Mak. Moreover, in his first monograph, Richards conducted interviews with Joe Lam and Gary Mak (festival co-organiser from the early 2000s to 2018) in 2014. Mak has been an influential member of the festival who has witnessed and participated in the development of the HKLGFF for nearly two decades; Richards' interview with Mak thus proved useful to my research as well. In addition to academic work, several interviews with Joe Lam that have been published online in both English and Chinese in the recent decade were also considered in the analysis.

This thesis demonstrates a diversity of methodological approaches to study film festivals. I weave these three methods together flexibly and synthetically in most chapters. Generally, this research relies mainly on interviews and content analysis with the supplement of secondary data. However, using diverse methods can cause the risk of blurring the focus of the project. Meanwhile, due to the length of the thesis, not all the research findings could be used. Notably, broader social and political issues have intervened in this subject and into the festival itself. For instance, the 2019 social and political turmoil in Hong Kong prevented me from attending that year's festival. Economic, social and political crises can hinder not only the operation of film festivals but also ethnographic research surrounding them.<sup>90</sup> Throughout the research process, social-political conflicts and public health emergencies have required equal attention as that paid to ethical and moral issues.

### **Thesis structure**

Chapter One teases apart the 180-year-long history of Hong Kong as well as the historical development of Hong Kong queer culture, arguing that neoliberalism and consumerism, as the two main dominant forces, have shaped homonormative culture in Hong Kong, closely

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<sup>90</sup> Toby Lee, "Being There, Taking Place: Ethnography at the Film Festival," in *Film Festivals*, 123-125.

echoing the economic and political changes of Hong Kong society. Investigating how queer culture and identity have been formed and developed in Hong Kong chronologically from the 1840s to the 2020s, this chapter identifies the main characteristics of Hong Kong queer culture, which are consumption-based, hierarchal and conservative. This chapter recognises that the formation of the consumption-based queer culture and identity shares a similar approach to the development of the identity of Hong Kong citizens whereby political movements have been oppressed and political demands cannot be fulfilled. It also addresses the dynamics of Hong Kong's queer culture and identity, constantly echoing the societal development of the city.

Mapping the broader picture of the international landscapes of queer film festivals for the project, Chapter Two examines the relationship between the HKLGFF and other queer film festivals by proposing the concept of a global queer film festival circuit consisting of first- and second-tier queer film festivals. This chapter considers the HKLGFF as a queer film festival situated in a subordinate position in the circuit. Aiming to emphasise the unbalanced relationship between queer film festivals on a global scale, this article argues that due to commercial considerations and the lack of festival resources, the HKLGFF's programming, dominated by the choices of top-tier film festivals, reproduces Western-centrism. Through the analysis of the HKLGFF's programming process, criteria and marketing strategies, it also demonstrates how top-tier film festivals influence the programming of second-tier queer film festivals by dominating the global market for queer films. Moreover, this chapter illustrates understandings of Western-centrism and further addresses the negative impacts fuelled by Western-centrism.

Narrowing the focus to the festival per se, Chapter Three concentrates on the thirty-year history of the HKLGFF and then investigates the commercial transformation of the

festival from the perspective of the changing main stakeholders, from Hong Kong Arts Centre to the corporation of Fortissimo Films and Edko Ltd., in the discourse of the commercialisation of non-profit organisations. This chapter argues that to comply with the neoliberalised Hong Kong cultural politics and the increasingly market-driven landscape of queer cinema, the HKLGFF has survived and further developed through commercialisation. It highlights that the essence of queer film festivals as non-profit organisations remains the same, even though such festivals have undergone commercialisation. In addition, the chapter explores the significance of the neoliberal context, which refers to the neoliberalisation of the cultural environment of Hong Kong and the global queer film industry and the market. More importantly, it demonstrates why the incorporation of commercial logic became necessary for the HKLGFF under the global wave of neoliberalism, through the examination of neoliberalism's contribution to the HKLGFF's commercial transformation.

Chapter Four focuses on the audiences of the HKLGFF. Introducing a class perspective to queer film festivals to analyse the relationship between festival operations and the formation of an audience base, this chapter investigates how the HKLGFF has shaped the base of middle-class gay audiences from economic, linguistic and gendered perspectives. It argues that the HKLGFF prioritises a middle-class gay audience due to commercial considerations, advocating a homonormative lifestyle. The analysis involves several aspects of festival operation: ticket pricing, subtitling, the use of language and the location of screening venues. This chapter identifies that the HKLGFF economically and linguistically excludes people who lack economic advantages and English proficiency. Chapter Four also addresses the relationship between strategies of selecting screening locations and Hong Kong urban spaces; in particular, it investigates how space plays an important role in intensifying class distinction. More importantly, this chapter recognises and then challenges the homonormative lifestyle.

In general, although this research does not cover all aspects of the HKLGFF, it can still be understood as an attempt to respond to the current situation of the festival. This project has been stimulating and challenging to research, and I hope readers find it illuminating in its consideration of the HKLGFF specifically, as well as in its attention to queer consumption, homonormativity and film culture more broadly. Having introduced the broad aims and outline of this thesis, which takes place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the next chapter turns back the clock to Hong Kong in the 1840s, to explore the historical context of the research.

## **Chapter One**

### **Hong Kong Queer Culture**

Growing up in Shenzhen, a Mainland China city bordering Hong Kong, I always found Hong Kong to be an international metropolis with free movement of persons, goods, money, culture and ideologies. Numerous topics that are forbidden or taboo in Mainland China can be truly freely discussed or practiced in Hong Kong. For queer people in the southern part of Mainland China, Hong Kong can be regarded as a place where they can reveal their sexual identity relatively freely. However, in 2019, Hong Kong's government enforced the legislation and implementation of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019. The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement broke out on a large scale in June of that year. Then, in consideration of the unstable political situation in Hong Kong, in the summer of 2020, the central government of the People's Republic of China imposed the Hong Kong National Security Law on Hong Kong. This activity raised the following question: how does the recent rapidly changing political environment of Hong Kong affect the freedom of queer communities?

As the whole of this thesis primarily concerns how Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGFF) is organised, the exploration of Hong Kong and its queer culture lays the theoretical foundation and reveals the bigger picture in which the research is located. In order to investigate Hong Kong queer culture and its relationship with economic and political perspectives of Hong Kong society, Chapter One addresses two research questions: what are the characteristics of Hong Kong queer culture, and how has it formed? This chapter suggests



that neoliberalism and consumerism, as the two main dominant forces, have shaped homonormative culture in Hong Kong, closely echoing the economic and political changes of Hong Kong society. To be more specific, the characteristics of Hong Kong queer culture are consumption-based, hierarchal and conservative. Teasing apart the history of Hong Kong from 1842 to 2020, the first section investigates how Hong Kong has been formed and developed from political and economic perspectives, highlighting the significance of neoliberalism. The next section addresses the characteristics of Hong Kong queer culture with the discussion of neoliberalism and consumerism in the specific context of the city. Then, turning the focus to the formation of queer culture in Hong Kong, the following four sections chronologically explore how Hong Kong queer culture has been formed and developed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Hong Kong: 1842-2020**

Based on the Treaty of Nanking, signed by the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty in 1842 after the first Anglo-Chinese War (1840-1842), the Qing Dynasty agreed to cede Hong Kong Island to Britain. The 99-year lease of the New Territories in the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory in 1898 was the last geographical expansion of the British Empire's rules in Hong Kong. The territory of colonial Hong Kong was settled. The agreement of this lease also set a deadline for the British colonial rule of Hong Kong, as this was an opportunity for the future Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government to negotiate sovereignty with the British government.

The geographical advantage of Hong Kong, connecting mainland China and Southeast Asia and having a natural deep-water port (Victoria Harbour), was conducive to the establishment of an economy centred on commercial trade. After the British colonists occupied Hong Kong, they transformed the city to a free port, building it as an important

transit port between East Asia and Southeast Asia. Stephen Chiu and Tai-lok Lui address the significance of the “interregional and transnational networks of economic activity” in Hong Kong before the British colonisation, claiming that “the pre-existing intra-Asian trading networks played a crucial role in facilitating Hong Kong’s economic development after 1841.”

<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong’s tax rate remained extremely low in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, significantly contributing to the development of Hong Kong’s commercial trade. Financial services were gradually built in Hong Kong for shipping and trade business, laying the foundation for the city to become an international financial centre in the future. As a result, a commerce-friendly atmosphere has existed in Hong Kong since the early British colonisation.

Hong Kong economy has rapidly developed after the Second World War. Affected by the Korean War (1950-1953), Hong Kong failed to rely on the entrepot as the economic pillar for a certain period.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, Mainland China entered a period of political chaos that lasted decades. Many entrepreneurs and refugees fled to Hong Kong from Mainland China, providing both capital and cheap labour force, laying the necessary foundations for the establishment and development of Hong Kong’s light industries.<sup>3</sup> The textile, clothing and plastic industries were vigorously developing in the 1950s and 1960s, and Hong Kong completed the transition from an entrepot to a light industrial city. However, in the 1970s, due to the oil crisis in the West, the demand for Hong Kong’s manufacturing products shrank.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the land and labour costs required for industrial production in Hong Kong rose.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Hong Kong’s economy commenced its second transformation in the early 1980s,

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Chiu and Tai-Lok Lui, *Hong Kong: Becoming a Chinese Global City* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2009), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong: 1841-1997* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 157-158.

<sup>3</sup> Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, 163-164

<sup>4</sup> Simon Shen and Wan-yee Chang 沈旭暉、曾婉儀, “Shiyou Weiji Xia De Xianggang” 石油危機下的香港 [Hong Kong Under the Oil Crisis] *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, February 18, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, 175.

gradually becoming driven by the service industry, with the financial industry and real estate at its core. Hong Kong's economy developed vigorously in the 1980s, thus establishing its status as an international trade and financial centre was gradually established.

The economic policies proposed by the colonial government played an important role in the economic success of Hong Kong after the 1960s. The two Financial Secretaries from the 1960s to the early 1980s were vital figures who put forward and practiced the principle of "small government, big market." Sir John Cowperthwaite worked as the Financial Secretary of the Hong Kong colonial government from 1961 to 1971, implementing laissez-faire economic policies during his tenure. He advocated maintaining a low tax policy and reducing governmental intervention to the free market, which set the keynote for the future economic policies of Hong Kong's colonial government. According to Milton Friedman, Cowperthwaite succeeded in converting "Hong Kong from one of the poorest countries in the world to one of the richest" by letting the market function fully.<sup>6</sup> This was also the first time the government clearly advocated free-market-driven policies. Furthermore, the economic philosophy of Sir Murray MacLehose's government (1971-1982) was embodied in the "active non-interventionism" proposed by MacLehose's Financial Secretary, Sir Charles Haddon-Cave. "Positive non-interventionism" inherited the "laissez-faire" policy, but these two concepts do not mean that government does not intervene in economic activities. According to Steve Tsang, the main similarity between "positive non-interventionism" and "laissez-faire" policies is that they both follow the principle of prudent financial management and advocate reducing the size of the government as much as possible, which allows the market to adjust itself and

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<sup>6</sup> Alex Singleton, "Dedication to Sir John Cowperthwaite" in *Economic Freedom of the World 2006 Annual Report* (Canada: The Fraser Institute, 2006), v.

avoid government intervention in the economic market.<sup>7</sup> The colonial government's "positive non-interventionism" policies greatly stimulated the vitality of the free market.

However, the negligence of social well-being led by the "positive non-interventionism" policies cannot be ignored. Jamie Peck, Rachel Bok and Jun Zhang summarise the characteristics of "positive non-interventionism," referring to tax restraint, business-friendly regulation, tariff-free trade and opposition to public subsidies.<sup>8</sup> The first three characteristics contributed to the formation of a free-market-oriented economic pattern and the safeguarding of the interests of capitalists in Hong Kong, while "opposition to the public subsidies" seriously hampered the development of citizens' livelihoods. Peck, Bok and Zhang state that Cowperthwaite denied "necessary reforms" and mounted "dogged opposition to investments in public education, mass transit, social welfare and public housing."<sup>9</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, the living conditions of most Hong Kong citizens were impoverished.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the fire of Shek Kip Mei shantytown took place on Christmas 1953, leaving over 50,000 residents homeless. Moreover, the situation in Hong Kong in the 1960s was unstable, as large-scale disturbances and riots happened on several occasions. In particular, the 1967 Hong Kong riots had a profound impact on Hong Kong society. It was a massive violent riot against the British Hong Kong government supported and led by the CCP in the context of the Cultural Revolution in Mainland China. After the riots, the colonial government publicly reflected on its failure to address certain social discontents and attempted to introduce major social reforms.

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<sup>7</sup> Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, 171.

<sup>8</sup> Jamie Peck, Rachel Bok, and Jun Zhang, "Hong Kong: A Model on the Rocks?" *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2020): 5.

<sup>9</sup> Peck, Bok and Zhang, "Hong Kong," 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Forrest, Adrienne La Grange and Ngai-ming Yip, "Hong Kong as a Global City? Social Distance and Spatial Differentiation," *Urban Studies* 41, no. 1 (2004): 220.

Therefore, in order to maintain Hong Kong's colonial rule, the government began to adjust its policies in the early 1970s. Although "positive non-interventionism" and "laissez-faire" address "the opposition to public subsidies," Tsang argues that they both advocate the idea that governments should provide assistance in some aspects of social well-being that the free market fails to take into consideration.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Murray MacLehose's (governor of colonial Hong Kong from 1971 to 1982) government greatly developed social well-being to improve living standards, including the development of public transportation, mass public housing construction and nine-year compulsory education. At the same time, the government implemented political reforms to allow more Hong Kong citizens who were Chinese to participate in politics. With the development of the economy and social well-being, Anthony Fung notes that the identity of Hong Kong citizens ("Hong Kong people") has been gradually formed since the 1970s in the "fast-growing capitalist economy".<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Tsang observes that "the rapid improvement in living standards and conditions and the changing attitudes of both society and government further led to the rise of a vibrant local popular culture."<sup>13</sup> Tsang further claims that the Cantonese-speaking mass media played a crucial role in the formation of the identity of Hong Kong people during the 1970s. In particular, Tsang emphasises that the first generation of "Hong Kongers" refers to the citizens who were "born and bred in Hong Kong since 1950" without "the first-hand experience of the PRC."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Fung argues that "the rise of Hong Kong identity can be seen as a process of dissociation from the social and political life of the mainland," signifying "the distinctive history, lifestyle and convention of

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<sup>11</sup> Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, 171.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Fung, "Postcolonial Hong Kong identity: Hybridising the Local and the National," *Social Identities* 10, no. 3 (2004): 401.

<sup>13</sup> Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, 192.

<sup>14</sup> Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, 181.

the community” between Hong Kong and Mainland China.<sup>15</sup> The identity of Hong Kong people is not fixed. With subsequent changes in Hong Kong’s political landscape, the identity of Hong Kong people has also continued to develop.

In the early 1980s, the British government negotiated with the CCP government over the sovereignty of Hong Kong. However, Hong Kong people were not part of the negotiation process and their voices were not valued.<sup>16</sup> As the result of the negotiations, the British government made a compromise, which was to fully cede the sovereignty and control rights of Hong Kong to the CCP government after 1997. On 1<sup>st</sup> July 1997, Baron Patten of Barnes, the last Governor of Hong Kong, left with the Union flag and the Hong Kong flag, marking the end of the British colonial rule in Hong Kong. Hong Kong’s sovereignty was transferred to the PRC government. Adhering to the Basic Law,<sup>17</sup> Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of China (HKSAR) through “One Country, Two Systems.” In other words, post-1997 Hong Kong maintained the existing judicial system, the financial and trade system, and the rights and freedoms that Hong Kong citizens already possessed, and essentially sustained Hong Kong’s administrative and legislative system.

Between the handover and the 2010s, Hong Kong’s economy faced multiple crises, including the Asian financial crisis (1997-1998), the bursting of the real estate bubble (1998-2003), the decline of technology stocks (2000), and the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak (2003). Hong Kong’s economy was in recession, greatly influencing middle-

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<sup>15</sup> Fung, “Postcolonial Hong Kong identity,” 401-402.

<sup>16</sup> A poll in 1982 showed that more than 80 per cent of citizens preferred to continue British colonial rule. Source: Jacky Lim 林鴻達, “Sanshiernian Qian Yixiang Meiyou Chujie De Mindiao” 32 年前一項沒有「出街」的民調 [A Poll that Did not ‘Got Out’ 32 Years Ago] *Apple Daily* 蘋果日報, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2014, <https://hk.appledaily.com/local/20140211/OVYFQXDKPQIU52XRM5JJFA57I/> (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020).

<sup>17</sup> The Basic Law is the constitutional document of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. With effect from 1<sup>st</sup> July 1997, it affirmed the composition, powers and duties of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government and its relationship with the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China (State Council).

class families. In terms of the causes of Hong Kong's economic issues after 1997, according to Wilson Wong and Sabrina Luk, "the roots of its economic problems were present well before the handover, including the gigantic bubble in the property market and the hollowing out of the industrial base, all laid down the seeds for the economic hardship experienced by the HKSAR."<sup>18</sup> These critical economic issues were mainly the result of the Hong Kong colonial government's positively non-interventionist economic policies. After the handover, Hong Kong's SAR government tried to adjust the economic policies of "positive non-interventionism", implementing a number of policies that directly interfered with the market.

The real estate industry created huge wealth in Hong Kong, but at the same time, it has also led to an increasing gap between rich and poor. As Wong and Luk claim, one of the characteristics of Hong Kong's economic system is the "businessmen ruling Hong Kong" model, which "has hindered the transformation of the economy through increasing and intensifying the 'rent seeking' activities."<sup>19</sup> They specifically point out the "big property developers" as the primary "businessmen" ruling Hong Kong.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Alice Poon puts forward the concept of "地產霸權,"<sup>21</sup> which literally means "property developers hegemony." According to Poon, these gigantic property developers, such as CK Asset Holdings Limited, Sun Hung Kai Properties Limited, and New World Development Company Limited, control all aspects of Hong Kong, including public transportation, media, energy, health care, and retail.<sup>22</sup> The government uses administrative measures to control land auctions at high prices and

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson Wong and Sabrina Luk, "Economic Policy," in *Contemporary Hong Kong Politics: Governance in the Post-1997 Era*, edited by Lam Wai-man, Percy Luen-tim Lui, Wilson Wong and Ian Holliday (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 193.

<sup>19</sup> Wong and Luk, "Economic Policy," 194.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Alice Poon's book *Land and the Ruling Class in Hong Kong* was translated in Chinese with the title "地產霸權" and was published in 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Alice Poon, *Land and the Ruling Class in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Enrich Professional Publishing, 2010), 20-21.

maintain property prices at high levels. For example, the government controls the supply of public housing in order to increase the demand for private housing. Po-keung Hui argues that Hong Kong's neoliberal economic model supports and maintains the current economic system, which is monopolised by several gigantic property developers.<sup>23</sup> The government's positive non-interventionist policies allowed these large financial groups to occupy the market, which actually damaged Hong Kong's free market. The extremely high housing prices stimulate the increase in consumption levels. The rents paid by merchants are finally passed on to consumers. The free market in Hong Kong is maintained by high consumption and sacrifice of living space.

Since the handover, the connection between Hong Kong and Mainland China has become closer. In particular, Hong Kong and Mainland China have aimed to strengthen cooperation on an economic level. Facing Hong Kong's political and economic difficulties, the CCP government and the HKSAR government signed the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2003 and in the same year started the Individual Visit Scheme, allowing tourists from Mainland China to visit Hong Kong and Macau on an individual basis. These methods boosted Hong Kong's economic development in the mid- and late 2000s and also greatly strengthened the relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China. The negative impacts of these policies on Hong Kong's economy and society gradually became apparent in the 2010s, leading to an increase of industrial hollow and excessive economic dependence on Mainland China. However, Hong Kong's SAR government still regards economic freedom as the most advantageous point for Hong Kong to sustain its competitiveness in Asia. The Beijing government rules Hong Kong from the economic

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<sup>23</sup> Alice Poon 潘慧嫻, "*Dichan Baquan*" 地產霸權 [*Land and the Ruling Class in Hong Kong*] (Hong Kong: Enrich Professional Publishing, 2010), 167-168.



perspective, increasing the dependence of Hong Kong on Mainland China, even though both governments stress a high degree of autonomy of Hong Kong.

With the increasing connections between Hong Kong and Mainland China, the tension between them has gradually intensified. In 2003, at the direction of the Chinese Communist government, the Hong Kong SAR government tried to enact Article 23 of the Basic Law.<sup>24</sup> However, this approach was strongly opposed by Hong Kong citizens and local businesspersons, and more than half a million citizens protested on 1<sup>st</sup> July that year. This was the first large-scale demonstration of Hong Kong citizens after 1997, also regarded as the first political awakening moment of Hong Kong citizens after the handover. Since then, organising a protest on 1<sup>st</sup> July has become a political tradition. There were several political events and social turmoil incidents that led to protests in the 2010s, such as the movement against moral and national education (2012), the Umbrella Movement (2014), Mong Kok Fishball Revolution (2016) and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement (since 2019). The conflict between Hong Kong citizens and the HKSAR government and the CCP can hardly be resolved.

Moreover, in the 2010s, the CCP's penetration and control of Hong Kong became even more obvious. The attitude and strategy of the CCP government to Hong Kong's protests has changed, becoming increasingly aggressive. Voices in both local and Western media and academia have suggested that Hong Kong's freedom has been destroyed by Beijing.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Article 23 is a legal provision in the Basic Law of Hong Kong that stipulates that Hong Kong shall enact laws on its own to protect the national security of the People's Republic of China. The intention is that the law prohibits any behaviour that harms the country's national sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and national security.

<sup>25</sup> Some examples (opinions) from different political spectrum and countries: Simon Shen, "China's Strategy for Hollowing out Hong Kong," *The Diplomat*, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/chinas-strategy-for-hollowing-out-hong-kong/> (accessed 28<sup>th</sup> August 2020); Iain Duncan Smith, "Hong Kong's Plight is a Tiananmen Square Moment for the Free World," *The Telegraph*, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2020/07/01/hong-kongs-plight-tiananmen-square-moment-free-world/> (accessed 28<sup>th</sup> August 2020); Jen Kirby, "China's New National Security Law and What It Means for Hong Kong's Future, Explained," *Vox*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/7/2/21309902/china-national-security-law-hong-kong-protests-us-sanctions> (accessed 28<sup>th</sup> August 2020).

Specifically, the freedom of Hong Kong, especially the freedom of speech and publication, and the freedom of demonstrations, have been suppressed by the CCP and the Hong Kong SAR government. Since the power of the Hong Kong police has become supervised and controlled, the safety of citizens' lives and property cannot even be guaranteed. Meanwhile, Hong Kong's judicial independence has been completely destroyed, as law has become the tool to threaten and control people by the government.<sup>26</sup> Under increasing threat from Mainland China and widespread social turmoil, foreign capital has been gradually withdrawn from the Hong Kong market. Overall, facing greatly increasing pressure from Mainland China, Hong Kong is losing its freedom, including the economic freedom of which Hong Kong was once so proud. Currently, Hong Kong as a neoliberal metropolis is dealing with the most critical issues internally and externally that it has faced since the Second World War.

### **Neoliberalism, consumerism and sexual citizenships in Hong Kong**

The previous section demonstrates that free trade and the market economy have been the cores of the development of Hong Kong's economy since British colonisation. This philosophy of "big market, small government" has been maintained by the new government since the handover, and Hong Kong has become a neoliberal metropolis since the 1970s. Although the extent and the means by which the Hong Kong government intervenes in the economy and social well-being have changed, with neoliberalism being the mainstream force in Hong Kong in the last half century. Due to the unique geopolitical landscapes of Hong Kong, the interpretation of neoliberalism in the Hong Kong context needs to be addressed. Before the analysis of the relationship between Hong Kong queer culture and identity and neoliberalism, this section begins with a general discussion of the concept of neoliberalism.

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen Vines, "Hong Kong's Judicial Independence Performs a Vanishing Trick: Now You See It, Now You Don't," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2019, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/11/24/hong-kongs-judicial-independence-performs-vanishing-trick-now-see-now-dont/> (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2020).

Broadly speaking, neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and private property rights, free markets and free trade.”<sup>27</sup> Regarding the actual practices of neoliberalism, according to Natalie Goldstein, it “advocates the greatest degree of unrestricted free trade and open markets and the free flow of capital, while insisting on the most minimal government spending, regulation, taxation, and interference in the economy.”<sup>28</sup> These two interpretations of neoliberalism address the relationship between personal freedom, markets and states. Government minimises control over economic and commercial activities, while individual freedom can be achieved in the free market. Nevertheless, neoliberalism is more complex than just being a political economic philosophy. As Aihwa Ong states, “neoliberalism seems to mean many different things depending on one’s vantage point.”<sup>29</sup> According to Tejaswini Ganti, there are four angles to interpret neoliberalism, including “a set of economic reform policies,” “a perspective development model,” “an ideology,” and “a mode of governance.”<sup>30</sup> The political economic policies advocating free market and laissez-faire approaches can seek to adjust the relationship between the individual, the market and the state, from the perspective of ideology. Thus, the way to understand and analyse this concept is multi-dimensional: neoliberalism refers to a constellation of political economic policies and ideologies that emphasise individual freedom and free markets and oppose government manipulation of the economy.

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<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Natalie Goldstein, *Globalization and Free Trade* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 30.

<sup>29</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Tejaswini Ganti, “Neoliberalism,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 91.

Neoliberalism, which emerged in the 1970s, has gradually become a worldwide trend through the globalisation of economics and politics. According to Wendy Larner, “neoliberalism was understood to refer to the process of opening up national economies to global actors such as multinational corporations and to global institutions such as the IMF and World Bank.”<sup>31</sup> This neoliberalisation of the economic dimension was led by the West because they needed to expand the free market. Alison Stenning, Adrian Smith and Katie Willis note that “the distinctions between the local and the global seem to disappear.”<sup>32</sup> They also suggest that, to “rethink dominant discourses of neoliberalism and to consider the possible ways in which researching neoliberalism ‘from the margins’ enables us to place peripheral spaces at the heart of contemporary theorizations, questioning the dominance of ‘the West’.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Jon Binnie argues for “recognition of the contingent, contradictory and spatial politics of neoliberalism.”<sup>34</sup> Hence, when analysing neoliberalism it is necessary to take into account the uniqueness of each city or country, in particular, in the Global South.

In the context of Hong Kong, neoliberalism works as a model of governance that controls Hong Kong citizens. At the same time, an ideology that insists on the worship of market freedom and economic interests has also formed. Hong Kong people’s political rights have been oppressed and ways of fighting for democracy have also been prevented by British colonial rule. In the 1970s, in order to better govern Hong Kong, the colonial government adopted neoliberal policies to boost the economy.<sup>35</sup> Economic development was the

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<sup>31</sup> Wendy Larner, “Guest Editorial: Neoliberalism?” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21 (2003): 509.

<sup>32</sup> Alison Stenning, Adrian Smith and Katie Willis, “Conclusion: Neoliberalization, social justice and resistance,” in *Social Justice and Neoliberalism: Global Perspectives*, edited by Alison Stenning, Adrian Smith and Katie Willis (London: Zed Books, 2008), 237.

<sup>33</sup> Stenning, Smith and Willis, “Conclusion,” 231.

<sup>34</sup> Jon Binnie, “Neoliberalism, Class, Gender and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Politics in Poland,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 27, no. 2 (2014): 246.

<sup>35</sup> Wing-sang Law 羅永生, “*Zhimin Jiaguo Wai*” 殖民家國外 [*Beyond Colonial Family-State*] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2014), 39-40.

compensation for the colonial government's suppression of political rights. In order to interpret Hong Kong neoliberalism, Law proposes the critical term "imaginary liberalism," claiming that liberalism in Hong Kong is based on the imagined Hong Kong middle class community.<sup>36</sup> This imagination is constructed by the miracles of the Hong Kong economy, which is a variation of neoliberalism.<sup>37</sup> The formation of Hong Kong identity is based on the cognition of this economic success.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, according to Ackbar Abbas, "the citizens' belief that they might have a hand in shaping their own history, is replaced by speculation on the property or stock markets, or by an obsession with fashion or consumerism."<sup>39</sup> In other words, the identity and sense of belonging of Hong Kong people have been intertwined with commodities and material desires. In addition, the core values of Hong Kong society, such as freedom, democracy, justice and rule of law, have been shaped in the ideological system of neoliberalism.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the colonial government influenced the lives and minds of Hong Kong citizens through the market.

Even after the handover, the new Hong Kong government rules its people in a similar way. With "One Country, Two Systems," this kind of indirect rule was also adopted by the CCP between 1997 and the mid-2010s, while the "CCP's attitudes towards politics play a significant part in deciding the political development of the post-handover Hong Kong."<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, both the governments of Hong Kong and Mainland China advocate an

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Wing-sang Law 羅永生, "Gangshi Ziyou Zhuyi Gaoji" 港式自由主義告急 [The Hong Kong Neoliberalism is in Danger] in *"Yangguang Shiwu Zhoukan" 陽光時務周刊* issue 37, [Sun Affairs], (3<sup>rd</sup> January 2013), 92.

<sup>41</sup> Wai-man Lam, Percy Luen-tim Lui, Ian Holliday and Wilson Wong, "Conclusion: Looking to the Future," in *Contemporary Hong Kong Government and Politics: Governance in the Post-1997 Era*, edited by Wai-man Lam, Percy Luen-tim Lui, Ian Holliday and Wilson Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 289.

“economy-first ideology.”<sup>42</sup> The slogan “馬照跑舞照跳”<sup>43</sup> (which literally means “horse races go on and night clubs stay open”) addresses the CCP’s commitment to the Hong Kong people, in relation to consumption and entertainment. At the same time, the Hong Kong people’s focus on materiality and goods is what the CCP aims for, so that Hong Kong people can ignore the lack of political rights. Long before the handover, Mainland China was the main stakeholder of Hong Kong. The CCP government attempted to avoid further democratisation from time to time in the 1980s and the 1990s. Especially after the handover, the Beijing government intentionally restricted the reform of democratisation in Hong Kong. At the same time, the maintenance of Hong Kong’s financial and business environment is even more crucial to the CCP. The neoliberal economic system of Hong Kong significantly matters to Mainland China. Cassidy Lan identifies the HKSAR Government’s inheritance of the colonial administration, and further argues that the “One Country, Two Systems” framework that Hong Kong has implemented since the handover can maintain its established development advantages and also respond to the global wave of neoliberalism since the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, most foreign investments come from Hong Kong to the mainland, and Hong Kong is the major offshore centre for RMB loans, bonds and transactions. The “One Country, Two Systems” approach was the solution for the CCP to maintain the neoliberal economic system after the handover.

Although this chapter addresses the freedoms of Hong Kong, the freedoms, per se, are greatly limited in Hong Kong. According to Law, imaginary liberalism can also be

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> This slogan originated in Hong Kong in the 1980s and is associated with the smooth transition of the sovereignty of Hong Kong from the British to Mainland China.

<sup>44</sup> Cassidy I-chih Lan 藍逸之, “Xinziyouzhuyi Xia De Xianggang Zhili: Kongjian, Chidu Yu Celue” 新自由主義下的香港治理：空間、尺度與策略 [Governing Neoliberal Hong Kong: Space, Scale, and Strategy] (Taiwan: Chengchi University Press, 2014), 2-3.

understood as imagined freedom.<sup>45</sup> The freedom that Hong Kong citizens possess is mostly consumption-related, as Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff claim: “freedom is reduced to choice: choice of commodities, of lifeways, and, most of all, of identities.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, as Abbas claims, “‘freedom’ could be made synonymous with the ‘free market’.”<sup>47</sup> Faced with the unchangeable political situation, consumption seems to be the alternative way for Hong Kong people to construct their identity and sense of belonging. Another important concept, which reflects the combination of neoliberalism and consumerism, is consumer sovereignty. As Vincent Manzerolle and Sandra Smeltzer advocate, “consumer sovereignty is a central principle of neoliberal and free market policies.”<sup>48</sup> Neoliberalism slowly exploits the rights of citizens until only the rights of consumers are left in order to rebuild the relationship between individuals, society and the state. Neoliberalism transforms all social relations into transactions. In the Hong Kong context, due to the oppression of political rights, the intention of neoliberalism can be achieved, transforming Hong Kong citizens into complete consumers in this society. The interaction between individual and society is thus mainly based on consumption. In particular, Hong Kong identity and the sense of belonging of Hong Kong are constructed through consumption. Neoliberal-style consumption has characterised Hong Kong citizens until the late 2010s, when the CCP started to control Hong Kong more aggressively.

Under the global trend of neoliberalism, consumption is also important to the formation of queer identity and culture in Hong Kong, although this phenomenon is not

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<sup>45</sup> Law, *Beyond Colonial Family-State*, 131-132.

<sup>46</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Criminal Justice, Cultural Justice: The Limits of Liberalism and the Pragmatics of Difference in the New South Africa,” *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 2 (2004): 190.

<sup>47</sup> Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Vincent Manzerolle and Sandra Smeltzer, “Consumer Databases, Neoliberalism, and the Commercial Mediation of Identity: A Medium Theory Analysis,” *Surveillance & Society* 8, no. 3 (2011): 323.

unique to. In researching the relationship between sexual identity and politics and neoliberalism in Poland, Binnie argues that neoliberalism serves as a method for empowering local queer communities, as through consumption they transform their identity to “self-disciplined model consumer citizens.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the role of consumption cannot be ignored. As Julio Cesar Lemes de Castro states, “in the neoliberal context, the consumers are regarded as the producers of their own satisfaction.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, citizens can “redefine their identities” by consumption.<sup>51</sup> People can make up for their lack of political or legal rights by turning into consumers in terms of their status.

As previously demonstrated, Hong Kong citizens construct their identity and belonging through consumption; faced with the similar situation where the movements of queer rights have been greatly suppressed, queer people in Hong Kong can also develop their identities and culture through the alternative means of consumption. According to Travis Kong, consumption plays a significant role in shaping Hong Kong’s queer identity and communities, claiming that,

the apparently successful ‘territorialization’ of queer spaces and pink economy has helped nurture a notion of queer cultural citizenship which has successfully shifted the traditional image of ‘citizen-pervert’ to that of ‘good consumer citizen’ and has provided a significant and positive cultural sense of belonging

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<sup>49</sup> Binnie, “Neoliberalism, Class, Gender,” 244.

<sup>50</sup> Julio Cesar Lemes de Castro, “The Consumer as Agent in Neoliberalism,” *Matrizes, São Paulo* (SP) 9, no. 2 (2015): 238.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



for *tongzhi*<sup>52</sup> for identity formation, cultural and sexual exchange, and networking.<sup>53</sup>

Queer people construct sexual and social identities through consuming activities, as queer consumption provides the chance for them to express their sexual identity and desire. More significantly, the image of good consumer citizens can increase their visibility in society. Their capacity to consume has successfully drawn the attention of business sectors, leading these businesses to realise the enormous potential economic benefits of queer communities. In other words, consumption significantly contributes to the economic visibility of queer communities. However, class distinctions have been long-established and deeply rooted in Hong Kong communities, at the cost of marginalising those queer people who fail to be good consumer citizens.

As this chapter emphasises the consumption-oriented, hierarchal and conservative queer culture in Hong Kong, it is the uniqueness of Hong Kong's neoliberal consumption that shapes its queer culture. Hong Kong queer culture is expressed through consumption. As with the situation of general political rights, the movements fighting for queer rights have been severely suppressed in Hong Kong. Hong Kong queer communities, similarly, have adopted consumption as the mechanism to form queer identity and a sense of community belonging. Hong Kong queer people attempt to turn themselves into "good consumer citizens,"<sup>54</sup> an image that portrays them as good consumer queer citizens contributing to the economy is easier for the public to accept. Queer consumption becomes a means to navigate the difficult situation of queer politics in Hong Kong. Furthermore, numerous kinds of hierarchies exist in

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<sup>52</sup> *Tongzhi* is a sexual identity term that appeared from the 1990s. It will be fully discussed in the fourth section of this chapter.

<sup>53</sup> Travis Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 75.

<sup>54</sup> Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 75.

Hong Kong queer culture, concerning the perspectives of class, gender, age, race and geography. All these hierarchies are interconnected since they are constituted under the logic of neoliberalism. The more resources or privileges (economic capital, in particular) queer people possess, the higher the position they occupy within queer communities. In other words, these hierarchies are constructed and further maintained through queer consumption. In general, consumption is the core method for interpreting Hong Kong queer culture due to the suppression of queer politics at various levels.

### **When being gay was a crime in colonial Hong Kong**

Sex between men was not seen as a criminal act in Hong Kong until the early British colonisation in the mid-1900s. The criminalisation of buggery in the UK dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Enze Han and Joseph O'Mahoney observe that "one particularly dark legacy left by British colonial history is that British colonialism might have been especially detrimental towards LGBT rights in colonial societies."<sup>55</sup> As a part of crown colony, English Law was introduced to Hong Kong when Britain took over Hong Kong, and thus sex between men was considered as a crime with the death penalty as the highest sentence in 1842.

Britain abolished the death penalty for the crime of sodomy and proposed the Offences Against the Person Act, which included the offense of buggery with the penalty of ten-year imprisonment, in 1861. Hong Kong's colonial government adopted the Offences Against the Person Act in 1865. The crime of sodomy was reserved for defamation between men. In 1901, the Legislative Council of colonial Hong Kong passed a draft that included Article 11 of the British "Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885", stating that "serious indecency"

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<sup>55</sup> Enze Han and Joseph O'Mahoney, *British Colonialism and the Criminalization of Homosexuality: Queens, Crime and Empire* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 3.

including any sexual conduct between men (not limited to anal sex) was illegal.<sup>56</sup> Sex between women was not regulated by law. In Britain, the 1967 Sexual Offences Act decriminalised consensual and private sexual behaviours between men; however, Hong Kong's colonial government did not enact a similar measure.

Despite the punishment of male same-sex acts, the number of cases of convicted buggery each year remained rare in colonial Hong Kong. According to Henry J. Lethbridge, no "convicted sodomite" was ever sentenced to death in Hong Kong.<sup>57</sup> Lethbridge also observes that, although some years had multiple cases, the average yearly number of buggery convictions only totalled one or two, and no one was charged with sodomy from 1914 to 1941 (apart from one case in 1923).<sup>58</sup> However, this further provoked the stigmatisation of male homosexuals as sexual minorities in Hong Kong society. More importantly, the regulation deterred Hong Kong queer communities from publicly expressing their personal sexual identities. In general, the criminalisation of the male same-sex act and the conservative and backward attitude of the Hong Kong colonial government towards the decriminalisation were examples of the brutal British colonial rule in Hong Kong.

Male same-sex acts were criminalised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Hong Kong, while ideas regarding sexual identity, such as "homosexuality" and "gay," only appeared and became the two main identity terms used by local sexual minorities in the 1970s and 1980s. There was a lack of "medical or scientific term comparable to homosexuality" in the ancient Chinese

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<sup>56</sup> Les Corner 女角平權協作組, "1865-1960Nian, Tongxinglian Xingshijia" 1865-1960 年 同性戀刑事化 [1865-1960 The Criminalisation of Homosexuality]. <https://lgbtpedia.hk/1865/05/10/1865-1960-同性戀刑事化/> (accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2020).

<sup>57</sup> Henry J. Lethbridge, "The Quare Fellow: Homosexuality and the Law in Hong Kong," *Hong Kong LJ* 6 (1976): 306.

<sup>58</sup> Lethbridge, "The Quare Fellow", 306-309.

culture.<sup>59</sup> However, the concept of and stories about same-sex intimacy or homosocial desire<sup>60</sup> were documented, such as “*duanxiu*,” literally meaning cut sleeve.<sup>61</sup> Homosexuality as a concept designating sexual identity was introduced to the Chinese context in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Tongxinglian* is the Chinese translation of homosexuality (*tungsinglyun*, in Cantonese), which defines sexual identity based on sexual preference. To be more specific, “homosexual” is translated to *tongxinglian de/tungsinlyun dik* or *tongxinglian zhe/tungsinglyun je*. According to Chou Wah-shan’s survey of homosexuality and media from 1967-1997, the term homosexuality (*tungsinglyun*) has been used in Hong Kong since the 1970s.<sup>62</sup> As homosexuality was first used in a pathological and juristical context, this term sometimes has negative connotations. Therefore, Chou also claims that it is uncomfortable for indigenous gay men to call themselves *tungsinglyun je*.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the term *tungsinglyun je* still brought the idea of sexual identity to Chinese sexual minorities in Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s.

In addition to the usage of “homosexual”, “gay” was the most common term used in daily life. Due to the strong influence of British culture, the English word “gay” has been more widely used as a synonym for homosexual. *Gei lo* is the Cantonese translation of gay; “*gei*” literally meaning foundation, which is pronounced exactly the same as “gay” in English, and “*lo*” meaning man from underprivileged class. However, *gei* can sometimes also be used in

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<sup>59</sup> Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (California: University of California Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>60</sup> Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24-25.

<sup>61</sup> “Cut sleeve” is a tale about homosexuality in ancient China, alluding to the same-sex relationship between Emperor Ai of the Han Dynasty and his courtier Dong Xian.

<sup>62</sup> Wah-shan Chou, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2000), 79.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

the context of female homosexuals. For instance, “*gei po*” is used to describe lesbians, with *po* meaning women.

*Gei lo* is a derogatory and discriminatory term, which reflects the homophobia of the general public. However, Petula Ho and Adolf Tsang argue that,

‘Gay’ is generally regarded by gay people themselves as a more positive identity, a self-imposed celebratory label, while the word ‘homosexual’ is considered a medical term and a sterile and old-fashioned label. The word ‘gay’ also signifies a self-concept, style, politicisation and various models of life with reference to the models provided by Western countries.<sup>64</sup>

Before other identity terms appeared and became popular, the term *gei* was more easily accepted and used by Chinese queer communities than the term homosexual (*tungsinglyun je*). Hong and Tsang particularly mention the Western ideology that the term gay invokes, which was a significant factor that attracted Chinese queer people due to the British colonisation. In addition, according to Chou, gay is also “a category of (middle) class, (white) race, (young) age, (well) educated, English (language) and (male) gender.”<sup>65</sup> Andrew Wong further claims that “even now, the gay image in Hong Kong is about being modern, trendy, and above all, Westernised and English-speaking.”<sup>66</sup> Under the British colonial rule, the terms homosexual and gay were introduced to Hong Kong. The terms imposed the Christian-style stigmatisation of homosexuality from the colonial government. In particular, the introduction and Cantonese translation of gay can be regarded as the hybrid of British colonisation and

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<sup>64</sup> Petula Sik Ying Ho and Adolf Ka Tat Tsang, *Sex and Desire in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 114.

<sup>65</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 59.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew D Wong, “The Trouble with *Tongzhi*: The Politics of Labelling Among Gay and Lesbian Hongkongers,” *Pragmatics* 18, no. 2 (2008): 285.

Hong Kong local culture. These two terms also reflect the hegemony of Western culture in colonial Hong Kong.

Most of the members of Hong Kong's gay communities were working-class Chinese in colonial Hong Kong before the 1980s. They lived and socialised in a more secretive way than gay Westerners. Kong's *Oral History of Older Gay Men in Hong Kong* documents the life of post-WW2-born (late 1940s and 1950s) indigenous Chinese gay men (most from the lower class). According to Kong, most of his interviewees were unfamiliar with the concept of homosexuality when they were young.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Chou also claims that local queer communities did not know the identity terms, such as *tungsinglyun je* and *gei*, until they read them in newspapers in the early 1980s.<sup>68</sup> Although local queer people did not know how to name same-sex desire, this homosexual desire still existed, and they developed ways to express it.

The attitude of Chinese male homosexuals to same-sex desire was cautious as they needed to cover up their desire in front of their family. Kong argues that the family environment and the values formed by British colonial policy and Confucianism were a primary concern.<sup>69</sup> For one thing, family members squeezed into small living spaces, resulting in the near-total absence of private space at home. As mentioned above, the post-war population of Hong Kong has greatly surged, whereas, the ruling philosophy of the Hong Kong colonial government is based on "big market and small government", and citizens' demands for housing could not be alleviated. Therefore, many lower-class people were forced to live in extremely crowded public housing. The lack of private space was not conducive to Chinese gay men's expressions of their sexual identity and or to satisfying their gay desires. Hong

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<sup>67</sup> Kong, *Oral History*, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 76.

<sup>69</sup> Kong, *Oral History*, 25-27.

Kong's housing issue for queer communities still exists. In addition, the crowded family environment and depressive family atmosphere were likely to force Chinese gay men to go to public spaces, away from their families, to seek sexual partners. As Kong argues, in the 1960s and 1970s, public toilets served as one of the main places for cruising.<sup>70</sup> The boundary between public space and private space became blurred. Furthermore, some certain public toilets served as social spaces where Chinese gay men could get to know others and build a small community.

For another thing, even though Hong Kong was colonised by the British for more than a century, Confucianism was still deeply rooted in the Chinese society. Parents encouraged their children to get married and raise the next generation; and more significantly, sex was a taboo subject in the Chinese family, whereby parents seldom talked about sex with their children. Hence, as Denise Tang states, "the family as a domestic space and a living site exemplifies traditional notions of nuclear family structures, inter-generational expectations and heteronormative values."<sup>71</sup> Chinese homosexual desires in Hong Kong were suppressed by the pressure of the Confucian heteronormative family environment. In this situation, Chinese male homosexuals dealt with their same-sex desire mostly in private, which was to live within the heteronormative model at that time. According to Kong, most of his interviewees chose to marry a woman and to have children to form a traditional family, and only some of them remained single.<sup>72</sup> Whether they were married or single, they would not mention homosexuality to their family members.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Denise Tse-Shang Tang, *Conditional Spaces: Hong Kong Lesbian Desires and Everyday Life* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 26.

<sup>72</sup> Kong, *Oral History*, 27-28.

In both colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong, the discussion of female same-sex desires has been relatively neglected in comparison to gay male sexual desires. The mass media in colonial Hong Kong paid much less attention to lesbian topics. In addition, research focusing on Hong Kong lesbians before the 1980s is comparatively rare. According to Chou, there were no specific identity terms for female homosexuals in the 1960s and 1970s; the term “TB” (tomboy) was only popularised in the 1980s.<sup>73</sup> According to research regarding Hong Kong lesbianism published in 1983, lesbianism was more likely to be regarded as a personal affair in Hong Kong, as even in the early 1980s there were no social or leisure places for Chinese lesbians.<sup>74</sup> Chou claims that single-sex schools were the places where Chinese lesbians explored their homosexual desires for the first time.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Chinese female homosexuals suffered the pressures of traditional Confucian families in the 1960s and 1970s. In general, regarding the life of sexual minorities in colonial Hong Kong, their homosexuality was suppressed by Chinese heteronormative society and colonial rule; sexual identity was difficult to build and express.

Although the Hong Kong colonial government did not decriminalise male same-sex relations until 1990, as a colony of the British Empire in the Far East, Hong Kong became a paradise for British gay men in colonial times. British gay men could express their sexual identity more freely in Hong Kong, far from family and friends. Furthermore, they were even able to use the advantages of colonists to attract Chinese young men to satisfy their personal sexual desires. According to Chou, “modern colonialism operates as institutionalised hierarchies of specific knowledge and power relations between the colonisers and the

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<sup>73</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 214.

<sup>74</sup> Lieh-Mak Fei, K. M. O'Hoy, and Siu Lun Luk, “Lesbianism in the Chinese of Hong Kong,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 12, no. 1 (1983): 27.

<sup>75</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 217.



colonised through the social construction of desire and subjectivity, which permeate everyday practices.”<sup>76</sup> Colonialism greatly affected the life of sexual minorities (Chinese-Caucasian relationships, in particular) in Hong Kong. During the 1970s and 1980s, as Chou claims, inter-racial relationships in Hong Kong usually involved two stereotypes of gay men: potato queens (Chinese gay men who prefer Caucasian males) and rice queens (Caucasian gay men who prefer Chinese males).<sup>77</sup> This inter-racial relationship was normally represented by a relatively mature and masculine Caucasian gay man and a comparatively slim, young, feminine Chinese gay man. In this sense, Chinese male bodies were fetishized, which indicates the unequal power relations between the two races. Hierarchies in terms of race, class and age were constructed within the inter-racial gay relationship. Caucasian gay men were the dominant role in this kind of relationship, from both a sexual relation perspective and an economic perspective. According to Chou, many of his Chinese gay interviewees claimed that their relationships with Caucasians sometimes involved financial implications.<sup>78</sup> Although Caucasians only made up a tiny part of Hong Kong’s population, they controlled the majority of social resources in colonial Hong Kong. The relationships with Caucasians could contribute to social mobility for Chinese citizens, as they could receive more economic, social or cultural capital. Furthermore, Lethbridge criticises the apoliticism of Hong Kong-based European gay men, claiming that “the typical Hong Kong homosexual of European ancestry is more likely to be found playing bridge with male friends than participating in any homosexual liberation movement.”<sup>79</sup> Hong Kong was a place for Caucasian gay men’s cruising and entertainment.

### **The death of MacLennan, the fear of handover, and *tongzhi***

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<sup>76</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 177.

<sup>77</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 178.

<sup>78</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 182-183.

<sup>79</sup> Lethbridge, “The Square Fellow,” 321.

Male same-sex relations have been criminalised for more than a century in Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong colonial government was reluctant to follow the British government to proceed with decriminalisation. However, the 1980 death of John MacLennan pressured legislative and administrative institutions to begin decriminalising male same-sex acts. In 1978, Scottish Inspector John MacLennan, who worked in the Royal Hong Kong Police Force (Yuen Long Police Division), brought to his police dormitory a young Chinese man who stayed overnight. His colleagues reported him to the top-level police officers. On 14<sup>th</sup> January 1980, the Special Investigation Unit<sup>80</sup> suddenly arrested MacLennan and charged him with eight serious crimes, including gross indecency with men. However, MacLennan was found dead in his dormitory the following morning, with five bullet wounds to the torso.

The MacLennan incident exposed the dark side of British colonial rule in Hong Kong, including corruption and the unregulated power of the police and bureaucracy. Nigel Collett explores the gay cruising landscape of colonial Hong Kong, revealing that it was common for Western gay men to find Chinese male prostitutes and even children.<sup>81</sup> According to Collett, the investigation of MacLennan's death was greatly and obviously influenced by the police and the government, aiming to minimise the negative influence caused by this case.<sup>82</sup> The MacLennan incident revealed the structural effects of colonial society, referring to how fragile freedom and equality can be easily suppressed by the power of colonialist officials.

As the beginning of the decriminalisation process in Hong Kong, the MacLennan incident forced Hong Kong's colonial government to re-examine regulations involving male

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<sup>80</sup> Faced with pressure from the Independent Commission Against Corruption, a special Investigation Unit was established by Royal Hong Kong Police in the late 1970s for investigating people in the police force, administrative and judicial authorities who were involved in male same-sex relations.

<sup>81</sup> Nigel Collett, *A Death in Hong Kong: The MacLennan Case of 1980 and the Suppression of a Scandal* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press), 45-49.

<sup>82</sup> Collett, *A Death in Hong Kong*, 282-300.

same-sex relations. Five months after the incident, the Department of Justice requested the Law Reform Commission to conduct research on the decriminalisation of homosexuality. In 1983, the Commission issued a report, recommending the decriminalisation of consensual acts between men aged 21 and over. However, this proposal was strongly opposed by Hong Kong's Christian communities.<sup>83</sup> Eventually, the Legislative Council passed the decriminalisation of private male homosexual conduct in July 1990.

The successful implementation of decriminalisation in 1990 was largely influenced by the fear and anxiety of Hong Kong citizens regarding the handover, especially in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. According to Ho and Tsang, the Legislative Council "suggested that homosexuality should be decriminalised to make the law compatible with the proposed Bill of Rights, which was forcing people to re-examine the need for privacy and civil rights."<sup>84</sup> In other words, the decriminalisation can also be understood as a political project to show the superiority of British-Hong Kong colonial rule over that of the regime in Mainland China. The success of the decriminalisation was the result of various political considerations of the British colonialists.

Whatever the motivation, the decriminalisation of same-sex practices between consensual adults in private was significant to Hong Kong queer culture and movements. Kong, Lau and Li see this ten-year process (1980-1990) of decriminalisation as the first wave of Hong Kong queer movements.<sup>85</sup> Kong further claims that the MacLennan Incident had a similar symbolic significance as the Stonewall riots did to American queer movements.<sup>86</sup> The early

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<sup>83</sup> Kong, *Oral History*, 31-32.

<sup>84</sup> Ho and Tsang, *Sex and desire*, 110.

<sup>85</sup> Travis SK Kong, Sky HL Lau, and Eva CY Li, "The Fourth Wave? A Critical Reflection on the Tongzhi Movement in Hong Kong," in *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality in East Asia*, edited by Mark McLelland and Vera Mackie (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 190.

<sup>86</sup> Kong, *Oral History*, 30.

stage of Hong Kong's queer movements lacked the voices and engagement of local queer communities. Due to the regulations and social environment that was hostile to sexual minorities, few sexual minorities came out to fight for their own rights.<sup>87</sup> The process of decriminalisation was mainly driven by the colonial government and some social activists. Nevertheless, the incident provoked local queer communities' awareness of the importance of fighting for rights and enhancing their own voices.

Homosexuality gradually became a hot topic in the media after the MacLennan incident. According to Nu Tong Xue She,<sup>88</sup> in the short four-year period following the MacLennan incident in 1979 to the Law Reform Commission's report in 1983, homosexuality was featured in mainstream media for the first time, but the representations of homosexuals were greatly negative.<sup>89</sup> In addition, sexual orientation as the framework and language for the division of human beings started to take root in Hong Kong.<sup>90</sup> Mainstream media, such as newspapers and TV, played a complex role in shaping Hong Kong queer culture. On one hand, mainstream media constructed a certain kind of stereotype (negative) of homosexual communities, which was deeply rooted in society. On the other hand, individual queer people could understand and develop their identity through the mass media.

In addition to news coverage, there were some queer cultural activities in Hong Kong, such as queer film screenings, in the 1980s when same-sex relations were still criminalised. Transnationalism played a significant role in shaping the environment of organising these queer-themed screenings in Hong Kong. As Kong states, "a transnational network of lesbian

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<sup>87</sup> Kong, Lau and Li, "The Fourth Wave?" 192.

<sup>88</sup> Founded in September 2005 女同學社 is an advocacy group in Hong Kong, which is organised and supported by a group of *tongzhi* communities.

<sup>89</sup> "Xianggang Tongzhi Yundong" 香港同志運動 [Hong Kong Tongzhi Movement], 女同學社 Nu Tong Xue She, <http://leslovestudy.com/liberal-studies/concept03.shtml> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

and gay men led to the emergence of informal gay subcultures.”<sup>91</sup> Many artists, such as Danny Yung, Mai Ke and their peers, used to live abroad for a long time. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, they returned to Hong Kong and nurtured the queer culture with their experience as participants in Western cultural and political movements. In 1982, Danny Yung founded Zuni Icosahedron<sup>92</sup> with several artists, a Hong Kong-based experimental theatre company and a non-profit charitable cultural organisation.

Moreover, in terms of transnational cultural flows, Zuni Icosahedron brought queer films and the radical understanding of queerness from the West to Hong Kong. In the mid- and late 1980s, Zuni Icosahedron constantly screened the films of queer Western directors, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Pier Paolo Pasolini.<sup>93</sup> In addition, Zuni Icosahedron had queer-themed programmes, such as “Cinema and Homosexualities” (in January 1985), “Channel for Minority” (August 1985), “Gay Film Festival” (July and August 1987) and “Gay Lives” (October and November 1987).<sup>94</sup> Zuni Icosahedron has introduced inclusive, avant-garde and critical perspectives to rethink both Hong Kong society and Hong Kong queer communities through the medium of the arts.

In addition to the screenings held by Zuni Icosahedron, there were other queer-themed screenings in Hong Kong in the 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, for instance, the Hong Kong International Film Festival occasionally screened queer films; queer-themed

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<sup>91</sup> Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 62.

<sup>92</sup> Zuni Icosahedron is a Hong Kong-based international experimental theatre company that adopts art and culture as a means of political intervention. The organisation is now one of nine major professional performing arts companies in Hong Kong and has been venue partner with the Hong Kong Cultural Centre since 2009. More information: “About Us,” *Zuni*, [http://www.zuni.org.hk/new/zuni/web/default.php?cmd=about&locale=en\\_US#](http://www.zuni.org.hk/new/zuni/web/default.php?cmd=about&locale=en_US#) (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>93</sup> Ka-Wei Pang 彭家維, “Tamen de Gushi: Xianggang Tongzhiyingzhan Yanjiu” 她們的故事:香港同志迎戰研究 [Herstories: The Research of Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival], (Master’s Thesis, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), 38.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

screenings were also held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.<sup>95</sup> Most of the queer films screened in Hong Kong during this period were Western gay films, targeting middle-class gay men who were interested in art and cultural events. Economic and cultural barriers prevented many Chinese queer community members from participating in these screenings in the 1980s. Although these events laid the foundation for the cultivation of queer culture, they also constructed the economic and cultural distinction among queer communities, enhancing the hierarchy in terms of class.

In the late 1980s, when news coverage used *tung-sing-lyun je* or *gei lo* to label sexual minorities, a new identity term for Hong Kong sexual minorities, *tongzhi* (*tung-ji*, in Cantonese), appeared. In the Mainland Chinese context, *tongzhi* meant comrades, an ordinary designation in the Maoist era. Mai Ke claims that he was the first to use *tongzhi* to label homosexuals in Los Angeles in the 1970s, and he also used *tongzhi* in some Hong Kong cultural magazines, such as City Entertainment Magazine and City Magazine, in the 1980s.<sup>96</sup> However, at this time, *tongzhi* was not popular; therefore, Mai Ke himself admits that with Edward Lam's effort, *tongzhi* became an iconic term.<sup>97</sup> In 1989, Lam decided to use *tongzhi* to name the first queer film festival in Hong Kong in Chinese as “香港同志電影季” (*Xianggang Tongzhi Dianying Ji*), literally translated as “Hong Kong *Tongzhi* Film Season.” Ho and Tsang suggest that Lam was the first to promote the term *tongzhi* to the public in Hong Kong.<sup>98</sup> Lam later translated “New Queer Cinema” to “新同志電影” (*Xin Tongzhi Dianying*) at

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<sup>95</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 25.

<sup>96</sup> Mai Ke 邁克, “Huchui Buru Danda,” 互吹不如單打 [*Single-Minded, Double-Entendre*] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press), 224-227.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ho and Tsang, *Sex and Desire*, 117.

the Golden Horse Film Festival in 1992, introducing the concept to Taiwan and then to Mainland China.

With the influence of Western queer movements, there was a new interpretation of *tongzhi* in the 1990s. Ta-Wei Chi clarifies the difference of the usage of *tongzhi* between Edward Lam's and Mai Ke's, arguing that Mai Ke's *tongzhi* only refers to homosexuals (*tongxinglian*) because the concept of queer was not popularised in the 1970s, while the aim of Lam's *tongzhi* was to respond to the U.S.' New Queer Cinema movement.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Chou highlights that "*tong*" in Lam's *tongzhi* does not just refer to *tongxinglian*, but includes all the sexual preferences marginalised by heteronormativity; meanwhile, *tongzhi* "achieves a political contribution similar to queer politics."<sup>100</sup> The emergence of *tongzhi* provided a more inclusive sexual identity for Hong Kong sexual minorities after the decriminalisation in the 1990s. As Day Wong claims, *tongzhi* "opened up the possibility for sexual minorities, whether male or female, to embrace a positive identity."<sup>101</sup> *Tongzhi* is widely accepted by queer communities in Hong Kong for its "positive cultural references, gender neutrality, and desexualisation of the stigma of homosexuality."<sup>102</sup> According to Andrew Wong, for the Hong Kong queer activists in the 1990s and early 2000s, *tongzhi* "embodies their view on same-sex desire, a crucial component of which is the belief that to combat discrimination against lesbians and gay men, same-sex desire needs to be introduced into public consciousness."<sup>103</sup> Moreover, this term was greatly influenced by the unique political situation of Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s. The particularity of *tongzhi* in the Hong Kong context reflects the

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<sup>99</sup> Ta-wei Chi 紀大偉, "Fanyi de Gonggong: Aizi, Tongzhi, Ku'er," 翻譯的公共: 愛滋, 同志, 酷兒 [Translation/Public: AIDS, "Tongzhi," and "Ku'er"] 臺灣文學學報 *Bulletin of Taiwanese Literature* 26 (2015): 92-93.

<sup>100</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 2-3.

<sup>101</sup> Wong, "Hybridization and the Emergence of 'Gay'," 156.

<sup>102</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 2.

<sup>103</sup> Wong, "The Trouble with Tongzhi," 299.

general phenomenon of Hong Kong citizens' resentment and concern about the handover and the Communist Party of China.

### **The rise of the pink market: *memba* and consumerism**

The space for building queer communities appeared before decriminalisation. As discussed previously, local queer people must escape from family spaces and seek out safer places for socialising and cruising in public, since the family space is extremely narrow. The demand of queer communities for space other than public toilets to socialise in has always existed. In 1986, an important queer organisation, the Ten Percent Club, was founded, becoming the social space for queer people in the late 1980s, while all its activities, such as gatherings and tea dances, took place largely underground, since homosexuality was still a crime.<sup>104</sup> The Ten Percent Club played an important role in queer community building and, as Kong claims, "an informal gay subculture was thus formed."<sup>105</sup> The decriminalisation of homosexuality also sparked the appearance of queer groups and organisations, such as Horizons (founded in 1991) and Queer Sisters (founded in 1995), in Hong Kong. According to Kong, "these early *tongzhi* organisations were mainly self-help, service-oriented and community-based in nature."<sup>106</sup> Before 2000, these queer groups seldom pursued radical campaigns for queer rights or fought for more public exposure of queer communities – most adopted non-confrontational queer politics.<sup>107</sup> The main aim of these groups and organisations was to provide a relatively safe space for gathering and entertaining, which contributed to the formation and development of queer communities.

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<sup>104</sup> Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 52 and 63.

<sup>105</sup> Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 63.

<sup>106</sup> Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 52.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



Meanwhile, queer consumption gained popularity after 1990. The queer consumption scenes of Hong Kong have always been gay dominated. Based on prices, there are two types of queer consumption activities. As Kong claims, greatly influenced by “Western-modern style of consumption culture of drinking dancing and clubbing,” gay bars and clubs were the first kind of queer consumption and space that flourished in Hong Kong in the early 1990s.<sup>108</sup> For instance, Propaganda (also known as PP) was the very first gay club in Hong Kong, founded in 1991. Going to bars and clubbing were basic leisure or recreation activities, providing the chance for meeting other queer people. Further consumption activities relate to buying clothes, facial treatments, going to gyms and traveling, which involve much more money than buying a drink. One needs disposable income to go to clubs. Therefore, the distinction of class among queer communities can be manifested through these consumption activities.

*Memba* is one of the most common identity terms exclusively used by Chinese gay communities in daily life. *Memba* is “a combination of English and Chinese, a typical example of what we call ‘Chiglish’,” and it is “a Cantonese derivative of the English term ‘member’.”<sup>109</sup> As Howard Chiang claims, *memba*, “implying a sense of exclusiveness”, “reflect(s) the passion of Hong Kong gay men for economic consumption and cultural representation.”<sup>110</sup> *Memba*, indeed, are considered to be “good consumer citizens”, who are generally “male-dominated, class-distinctive, camp-phobic, youth-oriented, Western-style and cosmopolitan,” in Kong’s words.<sup>111</sup> *Memba* showcases middle-classness. The usage of this term strengthens the stereotypical representation of queer people as good middle-class consumers. Nevertheless, according to Chiang, *memba* as a new type of Hong Kong queer identity, “loosened

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<sup>108</sup> Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 79.

<sup>109</sup> Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 14.

<sup>110</sup> Howard Chiang, “Queering China: A New Synthesis,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 366.

<sup>111</sup> Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 92.

homosexuality from its pathological, deviant, and criminalised social status and brought it closer to a cosmopolitan archetype of cultural respectability and decency” in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>112</sup> Since the 1990s, the pink market has gradually appeared and expanded in Hong Kong; while the relationship between consumption-based queer identity and queer consumption and commercial spaces has become mutually promoting.

Queer commercial spaces in Hong Kong are usually gay-specific: gay bars, clubs, saunas and gyms. Kong observes that spatial and classed hierarchies exist in queer consumption spaces.<sup>113</sup> These hierarchies also reflect the unbalanced development of Hong Kong’s urban spaces. Middle-class gay men are more likely to gather in the queer commercial spaces in Central and Wai Chai, which – with their high-end shopping malls, offices and luxury hotels – have been at the heart of Hong Kong’s consumer economy. Meanwhile, as many Western people live in the Central area, Central is also the most prominent space for Western queer communities in Hong Kong. As Helen Leung claims, Central and Wan Chai are “complex, colorful and hybrid spaces,” since these areas experience “a daily makeover, as the white-collar suit-clad set during the day gives way to the young, the transient, and the queer at night.”<sup>114</sup> The iconic location of this kind of queer commercial space within Central is Lan Kwai Fong, comprising a middle-to-high-end consumption area for drinking and clubbing, popular among middle-class people and expatriates. Numerous middle-class oriented gay bars and clubs are run in Lan Kwai Fong. Since a large portion of the costumers are expatriates, English is frequently used in these gay bars and clubs. The dominance of English reflects the cosmopolitan social background of Hong Kong. At the same time, it results in some social

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<sup>112</sup> Chiang, “Queering China,” 366-367.

<sup>113</sup> Kong, *Oral History*, 39-40.

<sup>114</sup> Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 17-18.

exclusion since queer people who lack English proficiency face difficulty fitting into this environment. Kowloon and Yau Ma Tei are the areas for the working-class gay communities, as the rents in these areas are comparatively lower than in the Central.

Lesbian-oriented queer consumption spaces also exist in Hong Kong's pink market. Like gay spaces, lesbian consumption spaces generally include lesbian bars, cafes and specialty stores. Nevertheless, lesbian-oriented commercial spaces are far less developed in Hong Kong than gay consumption spaces. Gay bars have existed since the early 1990s; however, even in the early 2000s, there were not many places for lesbians to socialise and build communities.<sup>115</sup> According to Denise Tang, due to the lack of visibility of lesbian consumption spaces, gay bars are regarded as an "entry point," with lesbians finding "gay bars as a possible venue to meet gays and lesbians for the first time in their lives."<sup>116</sup> Lesbian cafes were the kind of lesbian consumption spaces that appeared earlier, playing a significant role in shaping Hong Kong lesbian culture and community in the early and mid-2000s. Other kinds of lesbian consumption spaces have gradually appeared. Tang defines lesbian commercial spaces as "temporary sites of resistance for Hong Kong lesbians to validate their identities, form social networks and question their political subjectivities."<sup>117</sup> Lesbian commercial spaces are less visible and accessible than equivalent gay spaces. According to Tang, these spaces are normally located in "seedy area[s]" and find it hard to maintain profitability because of high rents and unstable revenue.<sup>118</sup> These gendered and spatial hierarchies exist in the queer communities since Hong Kong lesbians' capacity to consume is

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<sup>115</sup> Benita Chick, "Hong Kong's Lesbian Spaces and the Stories Behind Them," *NuVoices*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2018, <https://nuvoices.com/2018/09/13/hong-kongs-lesbian-spaces-and-the-stories-behind-them/> (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>116</sup> Tang, *Conditional Spaces*, 56.

<sup>117</sup> Tang, *Conditional Spaces*, 41.

<sup>118</sup> Tang, *Conditional Spaces*, 51.

relatively limited comparing to gay men's level of consumption. Regarding the pay gap between gays and lesbians, research has discovered that lesbians earn less than both gay and heterosexual men, suggesting that "gender discrimination has a greater impact on lesbians' wages than sexual orientation discrimination."<sup>119</sup> The gender pay gap exemplifies the hierarchy between men and women. A survey in 2018 showed that "women in Hong Kong in their 30s earned 11 per cent less on average than their male counterparts," and the pay gap widens with age.<sup>120</sup> The systematic economic inequality exploits women. Furthermore, neoliberalism strengthens this patriarchal system as neoliberal governments intentionally pay less attention to gender and socioeconomic inequality.<sup>121</sup> In addition, Leung indicates that compared to gay cruising, "women's cruising has remained either virtually undocumented [...] or mired in controversy over its range and meanings."<sup>122</sup> She further states that lesbian desires are "extremely difficult" to satisfy in the urban spaces of Hong Kong.<sup>123</sup> The exploration of Hong Kong lesbian consumption and cruising spaces reflects hierarchies of gender and space.

### **New stage of Hong Kong queer culture since the mid-2000s**

Since the 2000s, the fight for queer equal rights in Hong Kong has achieved several breakthroughs in challenging discriminatory laws. There are numerous court cases regarding queer rights, such as *Leung TC William Roy v Secretary for Justice*<sup>124</sup> in 2004 and *Secretary for*

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<sup>119</sup> M.V. Lee Badgett, Holning Lau, Brad Sears and Deborah Ho, "Bias in the Workplace: Consistent Evidence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination," *UCLA: The Williams Institute* (2007): 12-13.

<sup>120</sup> Enoch Yiu, "Pay Gap: Hong Kong Women Earn More Than Men Before 20 but Only Half When They Turn 60," *South China Morning Post*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/business/companies/article/2149404/pay-gap-hong-kong-women-earn-more-men-20-only-half-when-they-turn> (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>121</sup> Kendra Coulter, "Women, poverty policy, and the production of neoliberal politics in Ontario, Canada," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 30, no. 1 (2009): 24.

<sup>122</sup> Leung, *Undercurrents*, 16.

<sup>123</sup> Leung, *Undercurrents*, 35.

<sup>124</sup> The case ultimately equalised the legal age of sexual intercourse for gay men in Hong Kong to that of lesbians and heterosexuals (from 21 to 16).

*Justice v Yau Yuk Lung Zigo and Another*<sup>125</sup> in 2006. However, the shortcomings of fighting in the judicial system cannot be ignored. For instance, the economic costs are extremely high, and the procedures are complicated, so not every queer people can afford this option.<sup>126</sup> In addition, judges have often turned social issues into complex legal debates.<sup>127</sup> Due to the persistence of some queer activist groups and the queer people who have the courage to fight legal battles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, queer rights have been partially protected in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, Hong Kong queer movements in general have a long way to progress.

Since the 2010s, there have been some pro-democracy activists or politicians in Hong Kong political landscape who openly support equal rights for queer communities. Raymond Chi-chuen Chan was the first openly gay legislator in Greater China, coming out publicly when he was elected as a member of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong in 2012. He supports the amendment of the laws against discrimination on sexual orientation and gender identity, fighting for the equal rights of sexual minorities in Hong Kong. In addition, Tsz Kit Sham who actively participated in the Occupy Central Movement in 2014 and the No-China-Extradition protests in 2019, are the convenor of Hong Kong Civil Human Rights Front<sup>128</sup> and the executive director of Rainbow Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, some queer organisations actively participate in Hong Kong's political and social movements. They express their political stance and even take some confrontational actions. According to Kong Hoi-Leung Lau, the queer organisations or groups tend to further

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<sup>125</sup> The case greatly encouraged queer communities to fight for their rights through judicial review, to freely express their sexual identity and to be free from discrimination.

<sup>126</sup> Kam, Cho and Lai, "Hong Kong LGBTQI Movement After 2000," 120.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Founded in 2002, Hong Kong Civil Human Rights Front is an organization that concentrates on the issues related to Hong Kong politics and livelihoods.

advocate the values of democracy, freedom and justice.<sup>129</sup> For instance, during the No-China-Extradition protests in 2019, Action Q<sup>130</sup> posted abundant articles and comments that supported this protest on their official Facebook account. Action Q has also organised protest marches and encouraged their members to support these actions. Furthermore, for expressing their political stance, HKLGFF supported this protest and responded to the call for a strike on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2019 (Figure 1.1). Moreover, as Figure 1.2 shows, the festival catalogue uses two symbols: a yellow umbrella and a yellow safety helmet. The use of the yellow colour and these two symbols indicates the subtle supports by the festival of the political movement. The engagement of queer organisations and activists in the development of Hong Kong democracy demonstrates that the open and democratic political landscape can contribute to the fight for queer equal rights.

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<sup>129</sup> Travis Kong and Hoi-Leung Lau 江紹祺 劉凱亮, "Danqiu Zhongsheng Pingdeng, Bingfei Gaoren Yideng," 但求“眾生平等”並非“高人一等” [Seeking Equality But Not Privilege], in “Wocheng Woxing: Xianggang Xingbie Richang,” 我城我性：香港性 / 別日常 [My Sexuality My City: Daily Sex and Gender in Hong Kong] edited by Lucetta Kam, Joseph Cho and Francisca Lai (Hong Kong: EDGE Book, 2017), 9.

<sup>130</sup> Established in 2014, Action Q is a *tongzhi* affirmative group, which aims to promote a *tongzhi*-friendly environment on campus. For more information: “ActionQHK,” <https://www.facebook.com/ActionQHK/> (accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2020).



New identity terms like *HeHe* and *SheShe* also reflect the close relationship between queer communities and Hong Kong political movements in the 2010s. *HeHe* and *SheShe* appeared and became popular in Hong Kong through the influence of the Internet: *HeHe* originated in late 2013 on HKGolden Forum, a popular Internet platform for Hong Kong netizens.<sup>131</sup> In the beginning, *HeHe* was often used to joke about two male friends who were very close on the forum, and then, *SheShe* started to be used for women. During the Occupy Central Movement in 2014, the bromance between Lester Shum and Alex Chow, student leaders of this movement, inspired Hong Kong netizens to use *HeHe* to depict Shum and Chow's relationship on online forums and social media.<sup>132</sup> According to Hei-chung Lui, the shaping and dissemination of their *HeHe* relationship could enable Hong Kong citizens who were not familiar with gay culture to understand local queer communities.<sup>133</sup> After the movement, *HeHe* and *SheShe* became more commonly used by Chinese mass media (entertainment sections, in particular) in Hong Kong to refer to queer communities and the relations of homosociality between straight people.

More significantly, Hong Kong queer communities, particularly the younger generation (under 30), have gradually adopted *HeHe* and *SheShe* to identify themselves. From 2016, the HKLGFF also started to use these terms, suggesting their acceptance and popularity within local queer communities. To attract younger generation in universities, the festival has named the HKLGFF Campus Tour as "HeHeSheSheOUT@U", since *HeHe* and *Sheshe* formed

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<sup>131</sup> HKGolden Forum was an Internet forum for topics related to computers in the early 2000s but it has become one of the most popular online platforms for various kinds of topics. It is also a platform for satirical works about social issues. Official website: *HKGolden*, <https://forum.hkgolden.com/channel/BW> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>132</sup> Hei-chung Lui 呂晞頌, "'Funv' Yu Shehui Yundong: Yi 'Alexter' Weili," 「腐女」與社會運動 — 以 Alexter 為例 [Yaoi Fandom and Social Movement: the Case of Alexter], *Standnews 立場新聞*, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2015, <https://www.thestandnews.com/culture/腐女-與社會運動-以-alexter-為例/> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.



on the Internet, and were also created by and spread among younger generation. In particular, these new identity terms are popular in online queer culture. For example, there is a gay-themed web series called “He and HeHe” (meaning “me and my gay roommate”) on YouTube. It is self-made by an openly gay Hong Kong YouTuber. Up to 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020, the accumulated click rates of 31 episodes exceeded 1.7 million.<sup>134</sup> Nevertheless, *HeHe* and *SheShe* lack inclusiveness, as the terms fail to represent the wide spectrum of sexual and gender identities, neglecting other sexual minorities, such as transgender and bisexual people.

Large-scale outdoor queer events did not appear in Hong Kong until the mid-2000s. Currently, there are three annual events. The first parade was the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO)–Hong Kong Parade in 2005. The International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia is set on 17<sup>th</sup> May and aims to draw the world's attention to the fear of homosexuality, transgender and bisexuality, and physical and mental violence and injustice due to sexual orientation and identity. Only a few hundred attendees joined the first parade, but this activity mattered symbolically, as it indicated the possibility of organising mass queer-themed events in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Pride Parade was founded in December 2008, with its main goal of “achiev[ing] a just and safe environment for LGBT people in Hong Kong,” as parades can be “the best public education for fostering an inclusive society.”<sup>135</sup> Another large-scale queer public event, Pink Dot Hong Kong, began to be organised in Hong Kong in 2014, following Pink Dot’s origin in Singapore. Pink Dot SG is an annual outdoor event in Singapore, aiming to

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<sup>134</sup> The YouTube website of *He and HeHe*, *Fourseasonproduction*, <https://www.youtube.com/c/fourseasonproduction/playlists> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>135</sup> The official Facebook account of Hong Kong Pride Parade: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/hkpride/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/hkpride/about/?ref=page_internal) (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

support LGBT communities and advocate the idea of “freedom to love.”<sup>136</sup> The organisers of Pink Dot SG call on participants to wear pink in order to support sexual diversity. Pink Dot has gradually become an international event. Numerous queer organisations and individuals around the world have been inspired to organise their own Pink Dot activities.

All three events have their own operational strategies, specialties and aims. IDAHO–Hong Kong Parade and Hong Kong Pride Parade have a specific theme every year to clearly express their demands for the pursuit of equality, the right to gay marriage and the elimination of discrimination. The themes of Pink Dot Hong Kong are usually relatively general, addressing the ideas of love and diversity. Unlike the other two parades, Pink Dot Hong Kong is more like an outdoor gathering or carnival in a fixed place, as the organiser of Pink Dot Hong Kong invites different singers to perform every year.

The number of participants in these large-scale events has greatly increased over the years. During the late 2000s, the participants of these two parades ranged from hundreds to about 2,000. With the promotion of the parades these years, the number of participants has increased to nearly 10,000 in the 2010s, and sometimes even exceeding 12,000. As Pink Dot Hong Kong invites pop singers and bands to perform, its number of participants has always been comparatively higher. The event reached its peak in 2018, with more than 30,000 participants. By contrast, compared to the size of similar events held in regional areas, such as Taiwan and Thailand, the participants in Hong Kong are still relatively low. The exponential rise in attendance indicates that many queer people support this strategy, and they are willing to reveal their sexual identity in public. These outdoor queer events also attract queer communities from Mainland China. According to Verdy Leung’s observation of Hong Kong

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<sup>136</sup> For more information, see: “About Pink Dot SG,” *PinkDot SG*, <https://pinkdot.sg/about-pink-dot-sg/> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

pride parades, as the environment in Hong Kong is comparatively more queer-friendly than in Mainland China, numerous queer organisations or groups from different parts of Mainland China travel to Hong Kong and participate in the parades there, claiming that the queer people in Mainland China can “go south” to reveal their own sexual identity freely.<sup>137</sup> Large-scale outdoor events can increase the visibility of queer communities as a whole and challenge the perceived heteronormativity of urban spaces.

There have been increasing numbers of celebrities endorsing these queer outdoor events. Following the decriminalisation of male same-sex relations, queer communities gradually increased their own visibility in the 1990s, although Hong Kong society still showed a bias against them. During this era, Leslie Cheung, an iconic singer and actor in Hong Kong, bravely stood up and revealed his sexual identity and introduced his same-sex partner to the public in the late 1990s. Encouraged by Cheung’s braveness, more public figures came out in the entertainment industry in the 2000s. For instance, Chet Lam, a Hong Kong folk singer, came out in 2003, and Susanna Kwan, a celebrated 1970s and 1980s pop singer, did so in 2008 – the HKLGFF granted her its Prism Award for her courage in the same year.

More importantly, Anthony Wong Yiu-ming and Denise Ho Wan-see, two well-known pop singers in Hong Kong, are representative figures of queer celebrities who came out to the public in 2012. They have discussed queer issues and identity through their music for years. The significance of their coming out is “not a matter of personal disclosure but a symbol of public transgression to challenge the social morality and justice of our society.”<sup>138</sup> They actively address LGBTQ issues and take part in queer movements in person, such as organising

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<sup>137</sup> Verdy Leung 梁偉怡, “Wode Erzi Shi Tongzhi, Nimen Keyi Heta Zuo Pengyou Ma? Ji Xianggang Tongzhi Youxing,” 我的兒子是同志, 你們可以和他做朋友嗎? 記香港同志遊行 [My Son Is Gay, Could You Be His Friends: Hong Kong Pride Parade] in *My Sexuality My City: Daily Sex and Gender in Hong Kong*, 112.

<sup>138</sup> Kong, Lau and Li, “The Fourth Wave?” 199.

protests regarding the fight for queer rights. Moreover, in 2013, openly-out celebrities, including Gigi Chao, Anthony Wong, Denise Ho and Brian Leung, established BigLove Alliance, a non-profit organisation aiming to “promote the equality of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals and queers and their liberation from all forms of discrimination.”<sup>139</sup> BigLove Alliance is also one of the organisers of Pink Dot Hong Kong. Influenced by the successful examples of Wong and Ho, more and more celebrities in different fields, including singers (Ellen Loo in 2016), actors (Vinci Wong in 2013), designers (William Tang in 2017), writers (Nicholas Wong in 2017) and radio hosts (Alton Yu in 2018), have chosen to reveal their sexual identities to the public. The fame of celebrities can attract media and public attention to queer politics.

In addition, an increasing number of public figures who choose to come out can change the attitude of queer communities in terms of coming out strategies. The concept of “coming out of the closet” first appeared during the gay liberation of the 1970s.<sup>140</sup> It has gradually become the dominant identity strategy in the West. The homophobic social atmosphere in Hong Kong, the lack of legal protection, traditional Confucian family values, and extremely high rents are not conducive to queer people in Hong Kong being able to frankly reveal their sexual identity with their family members or colleagues. Coming out was not the most common way for Hong Kong queer communities to deal with personal sexual identity and family and social relations, especially before the mid-2010s. Chou addresses the predicament of a coming out strategy in the Chinese context, thus he advocates an alternative strategy: coming home, meaning that queer people can bring their partner into their own

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<sup>139</sup> For more information: “About Biglove” *Biglove*, <http://biglovealliance.org/about-biglove/> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>140</sup> Whitney Strub, “Gay Liberation (1963-1980)” in *The Routledge History of Queer America*, edited by Don Romesburg (New York: Routledge, 2018), 85.

family without explicitly revealing their relationship and sexual identity.<sup>141</sup> He suggests adopting a coming home strategy in Hong Kong to replace a coming out strategy, as the former can “reclaim *tongzhi* voices not by denying family-cultural identity but by integrating *tongzhi* into family and cultural context.”<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, with the increasing visibility of queer communities and the persistence of the anti-stigmatisation movement over the years, the acceptance of the LGBT+ community in Hong Kong society has increased. More and more queer people in Hong Kong have come out or are considering coming out. More significantly, these publicly out celebrities can contribute to the increasing social acceptance of queer communities, which also promotes a coming out strategy to individual queer people.

Although Hong Kong queer politics has developed slowly and the rights of local queer communities do not enjoy adequate protections, the pink market in Hong Kong has expanded and diversified. As more queer people reveal their sexual identity, businesses have begun to recognise this fast-expanding customer group. The popularisation of the coming out strategy in Hong Kong encourages businesses to identify the demands of queer communities; thus, businesses can provide certain services or products. Since the number of attendees in Hong Kong gay parades continues to increase, more and more commercial sponsors have started supporting the parades.<sup>143</sup> Queer-oriented services or companies have gradually begun to appear in various sectors, from healthcare and insurance to marriage and registration agencies, from baking to event planning and travel agencies.

However, some traditional queer consumption spaces have vanished in this expanding pink market. Many gay and lesbian clubs that were popular in the 1990s and 2000s have gradually disappeared in the 2010s. Instead, online dating applications such as Grindr and

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<sup>141</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 258-259.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Leung, “My Son Is Gay,” 111.

Tinder provide the ability to socialise; such dating and sexual hook-up apps break the limits of fixed physical queer spaces. The sites and methods for dating have become more diverse as well. For those traditional gay or lesbian clubs, revenue have fallen, but rents have remained high.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, numerous gay or lesbian bars and clubs went bankrupt in the 2010s. For instance, Hong Kong's pioneering gay nightclub Propaganda closed in February 2016. The real estate hegemony caused by the Hong Kong SAR government's neoliberal policies is a huge threat to Hong Kong's queer space, making the existence of these queer consumption spaces more fragile and unstable. In addition to high rents, the slowly developing queer rights are actually hindering the further development of Hong Kong's pink market. Some businessmen in queer-oriented business believe that the increasing protection of queer rights, such as passing same-sex marriage laws, can greatly promote their businesses.<sup>145</sup> The future of Hong Kong's pink market remains uncertain, while the government's protection and the social acceptance of queer communities are key to the further development of the market.

The hierarchy regarding class among Hong Kong queer communities is a severe issue in the expanding and diversifying pink market. As discussed above, Hong Kong queer identity is based on consumption, and local queer communities have increased their visibility through consumption behaviours. In neoliberal Hong Kong, queer communities are regarded as consumers, both individuals and the wider community seem to have the freedom to construct

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<sup>144</sup> Simon Liu, "Bendi Laopai Gay Bar Jiangjieye, Zheshe 25nianlai Tongzhiquan Bianhua," 本地老牌 gay bar 將結業 折射 25 年來同志圈變化 [The Local Iconic Gay Bar Is Closing, Reflecting the Changes of Gay Lives Over 25 years], *StandNews 立場新聞*, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2016, [https://www.thestandnews.com/lgbtq/本地老牌 gay-bar 將結業-折射 25 年來同志圈變化/](https://www.thestandnews.com/lgbtq/本地老牌-gay-bar-將結業-折射-25-年來同志圈變化/) (accessed 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

<sup>145</sup> Jik-Ming Ting 丁奕銘, "MiaoZhun Tongzhi Shangji, Fenhong Jingji Jianjian Maoqi," 瞄準同志商機 粉紅經濟漸漸冒起 [Aiming at Tongzhi Business, the Pink Economy is Gradually Emerging], *The Young Financial Post*, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2017, <http://fj.jour.hkbu.edu.hk/2017/02/07/瞄準同志商機-粉紅經濟漸漸冒起/> (accessed 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

their own identity and belonging. As John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff observe, personal characteristics or lifestyles are “measured increasingly by the capacity to transact and consume.”<sup>146</sup> Consumption-oriented queer culture can thus re-marginalise queer people who lack economic resources. Those queer people without resources lose opportunities for visibility in the consumption environments where queer culture is active in Hong Kong. Furthermore, the consumption-based visibility of queer communities has shaped a certain representation of queer communities and people, who are middle-class, well-educated and good-looking. In other words, homonormativity is constructed. With the development of the pink market, the class distinctions within Hong Kong queer communities intensifies.

Furthermore, the influence of the pink market on Hong Kong queer movements also privileges homonormativity. These newly emerged queer-oriented businesses have become the great power supporting queer movements as they can provide plenty of sponsorship for queer events or organisations. However, commercial sponsors sometimes take too much control in organising these events. According to Margot Weiss, “LGBT politics is formulated around the desires of the consuming citizen,” thus the mainstream LGBT movements that welcome multinational corporations’ sponsorships ignore “the needs of LGBT/queer people and working-class people who make the rainbow paraphernalia and work in low-wage service or retail jobs and street economies in gay neighbourhoods.”<sup>147</sup> In order to maintain the values the pink market supports, the aims of these movements have been adjusted to be much more modest, especially dropping campaigns against economic inequality. Thus, anti-decriminalisation and same-sex marriage are the main themes of Hong Kong gay parades.

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<sup>146</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 306.

<sup>147</sup> Margot Weiss, “Queer Politics in Neoliberal Times (1970-2010s),” in *The Routledge History of Queer America*, edited by Don Romesburg (New York: Routledge, 2018), 111-112.

Other major issues, such as queer poverty and racism, have not been addressed at these events. Under the neoliberal governance, these queer people are already in a disadvantaged situation, their voices and demands go unnoticed in queer movements, which has the effect of re-marginalising them. The pink market plays a significant role in promoting the visibility of queer communities and stimulating queer movements, but, at the same time, it considerably strengthens the economic inequality within Hong Kong queer communities, constructing the class hierarchy.

## **Conclusion**

Examining the queer history of Hong Kong from the 1840s to 2020, this chapter has demonstrated that Hong Kong queer culture has gradually become consumption-oriented, hierarchal and conservative across the decades, reflecting the significant social impacts of neoliberalism and consumerism in Hong Kong overall. Based on Kong's and Binnie's discussions of the relationships between sexual identity and neoliberal consumption, this chapter has highlighted the core role of consumption played in shaping Hong Kong queer identity and culture due to the unique political economic context of Hong Kong. Furthermore, it has highlighted that the queer identity and culture in Hong Kong are dynamically formed, echoing the societal development of the city. In other words, as the political and economic environment in Hong Kong has changed, queer identity and culture has also undergone adjustments. While this chapter has focused on the political and economic dimensions of neoliberalism, neoliberalism has also had profound impacts on Hong Kong's cultural development. The next chapter examines neoliberalism's influence on arts and cultural institutions, exploring the historical development of the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.



## Chapter Two

### Western-Centrism and the Global Queer Film Festival Circuit

When clicking on the official website of the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGF) and scanning its programme page (shown in Figure 2.1), visitors might recognise some popular films. *A Fantastic Woman* (2017), *120 Beats per Minute* (2017), and *Freak Show* (2017) were critically acclaimed films with much global media exposure in 2017, with *A Fantastic Woman* being awarded the Best Foreign Language Film at the 90<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards. Figure 2.1 shows that audiences are also likely to notice that the introductions of the selected feature-length films generally start with the names of other film festivals. This strategy tells audiences at which film festival the film has been previously programmed and what kinds of awards the film has won before providing the film's synopsis.

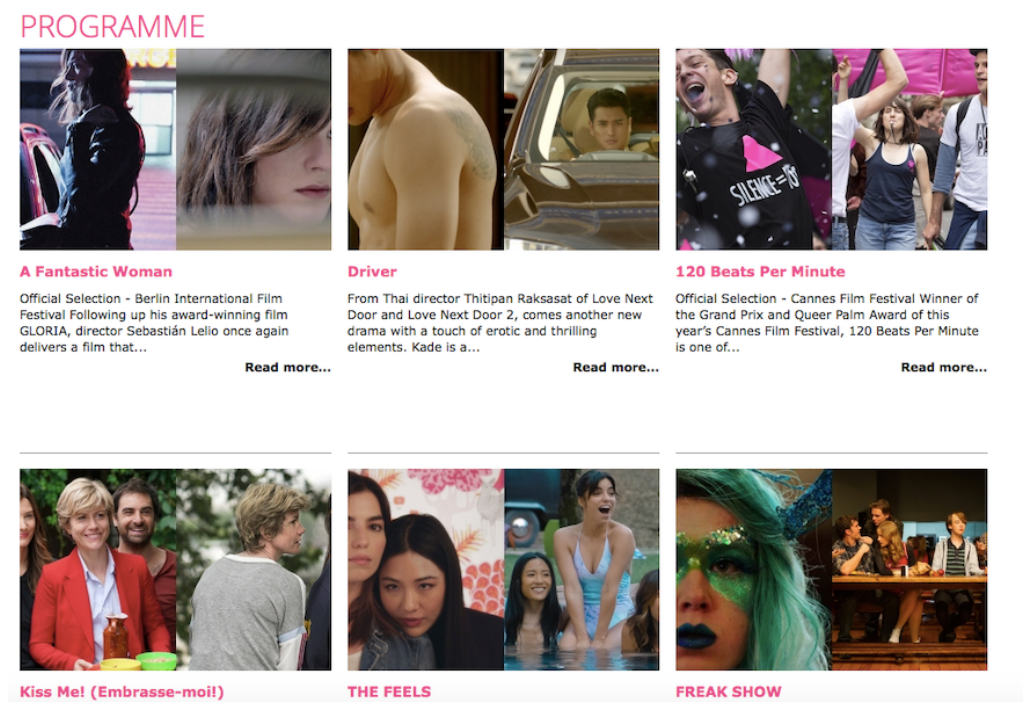


Figure 2.1 The HKLGFF 2017's Official Website Programming Page

Some film festivals' names are repeatedly mentioned on the programme page, including the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale), the Cannes Film Festival (Cannes), the Frameline Film Festival (Frameline) and the Outfest Los Angeles LGBTQ Film Festival (Outfest). In the HKLGFF 2018 programme, for example, among 28 selected feature-length queer films, 10 had been previously programmed by the Outfest. The other frequently mentioned film festivals include the Frameline (three mentions) and the Berlinale (two mentions). Do the HKLGFF programmers prefer to select films that have been previously featured at well-known Western film festivals? Given these discursive connections, this chapter raises two fundamental questions: how does the HKLGFF construct its programme; and what is the relationship between the HKLGFF and other film festivals around the world?

Aiming to explore the Western-centric queer film festival system, this chapter utilises the concept of the global queer film festival circuit, based on Skadi Loist's and Antoine Damiens' work, to emphasise the unbalanced relationship among queer film festivals on a global scale. The global queer film festival circuit is constituted by top-tier film festivals and second-tier queer film festivals, with the HKLGFF situated in a comparatively subordinate and passive position. This chapter argues that due to commercial considerations and the lack of festival resources, the HKLGFF's programming is dominated by the choices of top-tier film festivals and thus reproduces a Western-centric approach. Although this chapter and even the whole project situate in queer film festival studies, they are both, from geographical aspect, regarded as the study of film festivals in Hong Kong or Asia. The contribution of the research about Hong Kong or Asian film festivals to this thesis cannot be simply ignored, since all these scholarships have provided a broader and also multifaceted picture of understanding how HKLGFF operates from local, regional and global perspectives.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. It starts by introducing the concept of the film festival circuit by unpacking related scholarship and surveying the relevant history of film festivals. It then unpacks the understanding of the global queer film festival circuit, clarifying how the hierarchy is constructed within the circuit and what the tiers look like. The second section demonstrates how top-tier film festivals become market dominators in the global queer film festival circuit. Shifting the focus to the HKLGFF, this section also illustrates why the HKLGFF can be considered a second-tier queer film festival in this circuit. Focusing on festival programming, the third section examines the programming style and strategies of HKLGFF to explore how the top-tier film festivals influence the actual practices of the HKLGFF. It also reviews scholarship regarding (queer) festival programming. This chapter ends with the interpretation of Western-centrism in the context of the global queer film festival circuit as well as discussion about the impacts of Western-centrism on second-tier queer film festivals, such as the HKLGFF.

### **From a single film festival to the film festival circuit**

The first Venice International Film Festival (Venice) took place in 1932, which is usually seen as the initiation of the modern film festival. The Second World War impeded the development of film festivals, but shortly after, several important film festivals, such as the Cannes, were founded in Europe. The proliferation of film festivals in the 1940s greatly intensified the competition among European film festivals. In particular, the Cannes and the Venice worried about the potential threat (by weakening their cultural prestige, for example) from the newcomer Berlinale.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the Paris-based *Fédération Internationale des Associations*

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<sup>1</sup> Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 54.

*de Producteurs de Films*, or in International Federation of Film Producers Associations<sup>2</sup> (FIAPF) took decisive action in 1951, implementing an accreditation system specifically for the classification of film festivals that initially granted Venice and Cannes the highest status of film festivals around the world. Venice and Cannes were allowed to “form an international jury for their prestigious awards” in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this kind of monopoly in film festival awards did not last long. Berlinale was granted the same status as Cannes and Venice in 1956, and subsequently other film festivals, such as Moscow International Film Festival in 1959, were included in the FIAPF-based film festival accredited system.

With the increasing numbers of film festivals during the 1970s and 1980s, the FIAPF’s accreditation system has gradually expanded. To reflect the boom in film festivals all over the world in the 1990s, the system has been adjusted. Around 40 to 50 film festivals globally have received FIAPF accreditation during the last decade. There are now four separate categories in this system: Competitive Feature Film Festivals; Competitive Specialised Feature Film Festivals; Non-Competitive Feature Film Festivals; and Documentary and Short Film Festivals. As the official website shows, 45 film festivals received accreditation in 2020, including 15 film festivals in Competitive Feature Film Festivals, 22 in Competitive Specialised Feature Film Festivals, three in Non-Competitive Feature Film Festivals, and five in Documentary and Short Film Festivals.<sup>4</sup> The categorisation is based on the distinctive characteristics of the festivals.

Competitive Feature Film Festivals are also known as “A-list” film festivals. Berlinale, Cannes and Venice (also called the “Big Three”), represent the “A-list” film festivals. Most of

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<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1933, the FIAPF is now an international organisation composed of 34 producer organisations from 27 countries which aims to “represent the economic, legal and regulatory interests which film and TV production.” The FIAPF is also a regulator of film festivals globally. For more information, see *FIAPF*, <http://www.fiapf.org> (accessed 25<sup>th</sup> January 2021).

<sup>3</sup> De Valck, *Film Festivals*, 54.

<sup>4</sup> For more information: “45 International Film Festivals Signed FIAPF’s Mutual Trust Contract and Received Accreditation in 2020,” *FIAPF*, <http://www.fiapf.org/intfilmfestivals.asp> (accessed 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021).

the film festivals accredited by FIAPF in the 1950s are also considered “A-list” film festivals. Competitive Specialised Feature Film Festivals (so called “B-list”) refer to film festivals that organise competitions in specialised forms or genres. For instance, as a member of “B-list” film festivals, Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival holds the competition for horror, thriller and science fiction films all over the world. Both “A-list” and “B-list” festivals organise film competitions, as they are able to form an international jury to grant prestigious awards. Moreover, the designation of “A-list” film festivals does not mean they surpass “B-list” film festivals as the designation of “A-list” and “B-list” refer to the difference between the categories. In contrast to “A-list” and “B-list” film festivals, Non-Competitive Feature Film Festivals (like Toronto International Film Festival) refers to festivals that only showcase films instead of forming a jury and hosting competitions. The last category includes festivals that just programme documentaries or/and short films, such as International Short Film Festival Oberhausen. Although the influence of each category greatly varies, there is no ranking between every category.

The FIAPF regulates film festivals worldwide through calendar and location scheduling. Each FIAPF accredited film festival occupies a certain time slot to organise the event in order to avoid overlaps in schedule with other festivals with similar interests. The scheduling is vital because “when a festival took place and how these dates position the festival in relation to other events on the festival calendar is of decisive importance for a festival’s success, ranking and profile.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the FIAPF’s regulations aim to avoid “festivals from following one another too rapidly.”<sup>6</sup> Other non-accredited film festivals also consider the FIAPF’s calendar to avoid overlapping with well-known film festivals. Also, in terms of location, a single city can only

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<sup>5</sup> De Valck, *Film Festivals*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

have one film festival accredited by the FIAPF, while a single country can only have one “A-list” film festival. This regulation on location was likely put in place to prevent competition between film festivals in the same city or country. Due to limited festival resources (such as films, filmmakers, critics, media and funding), FIAPF’s regulations attempt to avoid excessive competition between festivals. Thus, the festival map and calendar have a global shape.

Despite its attempt to create balance, the FIAPF accredited film festival system also raises some criticism from film industry insiders and scholars. For instance, according to Steven Gaydos and Derek Elley, some festival directors indicate that the FIAPF’s regulations fail to manage some conflicts between festivals, while “one of FIAPF’s most important tasks is to police and resolve disputes among film festivals.”<sup>7</sup> Some criticism concerns the high costs of maintaining a festival’s status, as accredited festivals pay for expensive hotels and travel for the FIAPF officials.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Liz Shackleton notes the irrationality of the FIAPF’s categorisation, claiming “the classification has raised eyebrows because it places smaller and less established events such as Shanghai in the same league as Cannes and Venice, among the 12 festivals in the first category.”<sup>9</sup> Confronted with fast-developing film festivals around the world, the adjustment of regulations becomes increasingly vital for the FIAPF. Despite criticism, the FIAPF’s accreditation system still plays a significant role in the formation and development of the global network of film festivals. In other words, the idea of the film festival circuit has gradually formed.

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Gaydos and Derek Elley, “Battle Behind the Scenes: Duelling Fests Cast Doubt on Org’s Relevance,” *Variety*, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2003, <https://variety.com/2003/scene/markets-festivals/battle-behind-the-scenes-1117891416/> (accessed 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Liz Shackleton, “FIAPF Defends Film Festival Accreditation System,” *Screen Daily*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2007, <https://www.screendaily.com/fiapf-defends-film-festival-accreditation-system/4033493.article> (accessed 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021).

The term “film festival circuit” appeared after the establishment of the FIAPF. The general understanding of “circuit” refers to how some elements flow in a specific and closed route. Abé Markus Nornes observes that reference to a “circuit” in the film festival context began in 1959.<sup>10</sup> This term implied “a kind of free circulation, an open system of film prints moving effortlessly around the earth. They alight at one node or another for projection and enjoyment, before returning on their circuitous path home.”<sup>11</sup> Nornes’ description highlights the flow of films, which is key to understanding the concept of the film festival circuit. The film festival circuit only came into existence as a result of FIAPF’s regulation of film festivals.

FIAPF’s regulations, especially through categorisation and accreditation, significantly influence the global flow of films and consequently the formation of circuits. As Skadi Loist claims, “as soon as FIAPF started to regulate the festivals and create the “A-list” festivals, the idea of a circuit became visible.”<sup>12</sup> Filmmakers and film distributors choose what film festivals to attend and in what order on the basis of the festival calendar and map shaped by FIAPF. Similarly, according to Julian Stringer, the FIAPF “ranks individual events on the international film festival circuit, distributes rare resources, controls prestige, and consolidates the sense of an interlinked global festival network.”<sup>13</sup> Stringer addresses the role that the FIAPF plays in the expansion of the film festival circuit from a geopolitical perspective, referring to how film festivals outside Europe can be focused and considered by global filmmakers and film distributors.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Shanghai International Film Festival and Busan International Film

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<sup>10</sup> Abé Markus Nornes, “Yamagata-Asia-Europe: The International Film Festival Short Circuit,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema*, edited by Daisuke Miyao (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 258.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Skadi Loist, “The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation,” in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, edited by Marike de Vaick, Brendan Kredell and Skadi Loist (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 54.

<sup>13</sup> Julien Stringer, “Film Festivals in Asia: Note on History, Geography, and Power from a Distance,” in *Film Festivals*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Stringer, “Film Festivals in Asia,” 41-42.

Festival are accredited by FIAPF as “A-list” and “B-list” film festivals respectively, bringing East Asia into the global film festival circuit. This geopolitical expansion deconstructs the Eurocentrism in the circuit by increasing the visibility of other continents. As the number of film festivals worldwide increases and they collaborate more with each other, the term film festival circuit becomes more widely discussed by both film-industry insiders and scholars.

Scholars differ in their definitions and interpretations of the film festival circuit and greatly contribute to the understanding of this term. Thomas Elsaesser’s work laid the foundation for analysing film festival networks (or the film festival circuit). As previously discussed, Elsaesser’s definition accentuates the significance of the film festival circuit to the development of film business and culture, as the film festival circuit engages in almost every aspect of international film industry. Elsaesser further illustrates how the networking of film festivals has been shaped, claiming that,

Film festivals thus make up a network with nodes and nerve endings, there is capillary action and osmosis between the various layers of the network, and while a strict ranking system exists, for instance between A- and B-festivals, policed by an international federation (FIAPF), the system as a whole is highly porous and perforated.<sup>15</sup>

Elsaesser uses “nodes” as a metaphor to describe the position of every film festival on the circuit, which showcases how the films flow within it (from one node to another). This metaphor is frequently adopted by other film festival scholars. Elsaesser also underlines the hierarchical relationships that exist in film festival networks. He particularly indicates the impacts of the FIAPF regulations on the stratification of film festival networks. Inspired by

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<sup>15</sup> Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 87.



Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT),<sup>16</sup> Elsaesser states that film festival networks are "tightly woven" by "the interactions between various 'network actors'", while the film festival circuit "provides the structures and interchanges permitting both chance and routine to operate."<sup>17</sup> These "network actors" can be understood as the multiple stakeholders who are involved and negotiated in the film festival circuit, such as filmmakers, producers, distributors, journalists, and audiences.

Similarly, Marijke de Valck also adopts ANT to approach film festival networks. De Valck regards the film festival network as an "alternative" cinema network that "both operates with and against Hollywood."<sup>18</sup> In other words, having a complex relationship with Hollywood, the intent and operation of the film festival network is different from traditional theatrical networks. According to de Valck, applying ANT in the film festival context can "move away from the notions of 'institution' and 'nation-state'."<sup>19</sup> ANT provides the flexibility to explore the film festival circuit and it accentuates the interactions between all kinds of actors. The Latourian network includes both "living and non-living actors,"<sup>20</sup> where living actors are the previously mentioned players in the circuit, and non-living actors refer to accreditation systems, funding and films, among others. However, applying ANT directly to film festivals fails to capture the unique characteristic of film festival networks: "the phenomenon of value addition."<sup>21</sup> As de Valck further illustrates, "by travelling the circuit, a film can accumulate value via the snowball effect. The more praise, prizes and buzz a film attracts, the more

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<sup>16</sup> ANT is a social theoretical and methodological approach in which everything in society or nature is in an ever-changing network of interrelationships. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9-11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 101.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 35.

attention it is likely to receive at other festivals.”<sup>22</sup> In practical respects, this accumulation of values is the pursuit of the films in the flow of the film festival circuit.

Elsaesser’s and de Valck’s analyses lay the foundation for further scholarly discussions on the film festival circuit, however, both frameworks are overly Europe-centric. Both frameworks mainly focus on the European context and the relationship between the European film industry and markets and Hollywood’s, further constructing the Western-Europe-centrism in film festival studies. In practice, film festival circuits cover most continents across the world. Nornes argues that the geopolitical structure of the world is embodied in the Western-centrism in the international film festival circuit, in the form of “first Europe, then elsewhere.”<sup>23</sup> The geopolitical disparities lead to the ignorance of the film industry and academia when it comes to film festivals beyond the West. There are some scholarships aiming to increase the voice of researching non-Western film festivals, such as Iordanova and Ruby Cheung’s volume.<sup>24</sup> However, the Western dominance still exists in film festival studies.

The elements circulating within the film festival circuit are more than just films. Loist regards film festival circuit as “the trajectory of a specific product through a global network of festivals,”<sup>25</sup> with the “specific product” mainly referring to films. In addition to film circulation, there are two more kinds of elements that move around the film festival circuit. Dina Iordanova compares the film festival circuit to a “festival treadmill”, arguing that the circuit can be only constituted if personnel (such as consultants, programmers, critics and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Nornes, “Yamagata-Asia-Europe,” 246.

<sup>24</sup> Dina Iordanova, “East Asia and Film Festivals: Transnational Clusters for Creativity and Commerce,” in *Film Festival Yearbook 3: Film Festivals and East Asia*, edited by Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2011), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Skadi Loist, “The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation,” in *Film Festivals*, 59.

buyers) keep travelling to different film festivals.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, developing Iordanova's argument, Loist points out three elements – films, people and money – that both construct the film festival circuit and circulate within it.<sup>27</sup> This chapter regards all these elements that circulate within the circuit as film festival resources. According to Loist's clarification, this chapter states that three main types of festival resources flow in the film festival circuit, including money (sponsorships, public funding, box office revenue), personnel (festival organisers, volunteers, film-industry insiders, audiences and tourists, critics and scholars, and media representatives) and films (including films themselves as well as festival logos and awards). Hence, from my perspective, the film festival circuit is a trajectory constructed by the flows of these three types of film festival resources. More importantly, festival films are the core resource in the film festival since the flow of films mobilises the flow of other kinds of film festival resources.

Due to the many factors that can affect the operation of a festival as well as the flow of films, understanding the concept of the film festival circuit in a realistic context is relatively complex. Likewise, avoiding "conceptualising film festival network as an organic global organism," Ragan Rhyne addresses the complexity of the actual operation of film festivals.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, with evermore queer film festivals around the world, there has also been a relative proliferation of cooperation and competition between queer film festivals. However, the increasing collaboration between film festivals does not erode the independence of each festival. Along with the emergence of festivals of varying themes and scales, Loist addresses the diversification of the film festival circuit, claiming the existence of parallel circuits.<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Dina Iordanova, "The Film Festival Circuit," in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit* edited by Dina Iordanova and Ragan Rhyne (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2009), 31.

<sup>27</sup> Loist, "The Film Festival Circuit," 59.

<sup>28</sup> Ragan Rhyne, "Film Festival Circuits and Stakeholders," in *Film Festival Yearbook 1*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Loist, "The Film Festival Circuit," 56-57.

diversity of film festivals regarding scale, target audience and mission leads to the formation of various kinds of film festival circuits.

In addition, the film festival circuit involves hierarchal relationships. Regarding the relationships between film festivals, Loist highlights the hierarchy within the film festival circuit.<sup>30</sup> Not every film festival is on an equal level with the other film festivals in the circuit, instead, the hierarchal relations exist from the formation of the circuit. The way films flow embodies the hierarchy of the film festival circuit. In other words, films circulate from the film festivals situated in the dominant position of the circuit to those in the secondary position. In terms of various levels of film festivals, as Loist states, the first-tier film festivals refer to some “A-list” film festivals that were founded before the 1960s, while the Sundance Film Festival (Sundance) and the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), both established in the 1970s, are considered second-tier film festivals.<sup>31</sup> The possession of film festival resources and festival influence both determine the position of a film festival in the circuit. World premieres are the significant and scarce kinds of festival resources that film festivals fight for. According to Loist, “festivals usually aim for international or national premieres because timeliness secures interest and media coverage in this era of the ‘attention economy’.”<sup>32</sup> The hierarchy in the film festival circuit rests “on an ideology of premiere status.”<sup>33</sup> That is to say, the ability to attract more world premieres can sustain the dominant position of a film festival in the circuit. These loose, diverse and hierarchal film festival circuits become significant parts of global film industries, shaping worldwide film culture.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Skadi Loist, “A Complicated Queerness: LGBT Film Festival and Queer Programming Strategies,” in *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals*, edited by Jeffery Ruoff, 161.

<sup>33</sup> Skadi Loist, “Crossover Dreams: Global Circulation of Queer Film on the Film Festival Circuits,” *Diogenes* 62, no. 1 (2015): 62.

In general, film festival circuits have played a significant role in the global film industries, as they have connected various sectors of the industries. The international film festival circuit has gradually formed. As Ragan Rhyne notes, “the schedule of the international festival circuit had become a fixture in the lives of most film industry executives.”<sup>34</sup> Bill Nichols argues that “the international film festival circuit was no longer a peripheral phenomenon but an integral part of a larger pattern of circulation and exchange.”<sup>35</sup> Cindy Wong also identifies that the international film festival circuit has deeply engaged in film production, distribution, circulation and exhibition, covering most film industrial sectors.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the hierarchy of the power in the international film festival circuit provokes the local/global dynamics. As Nichols states, “the festival circuit allows the local to circulate globally, within a specific system of institutional assumptions, priorities and constraints.”<sup>37</sup> Lydia Papadimitriou and Jeffery Ruoff suggest paying more attention to the “peripheries” of the international film festival circuit.<sup>38</sup> That is to say, from geographical perspective, non-Western festival resources are more difficult to be globally circulated in the international film festival circuit. In addition, numerous sub-circuits with particular themes are largely ignored by industry and academia. Thus, this chapter aims to expand the theoretical discussion on the international film festival circuit, both geographically and thematically.

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<sup>34</sup> Ragan Rhyne, *Pink Dollars: Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals and the Economy of Visibility* (PhD Thesis, New York University, 2007), 13.

<sup>35</sup> Bill Nichols, “Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism,” in *The Film Festival Reader*, edited by Dina Iordanova (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2013), 35.

<sup>36</sup> Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 131-153.

<sup>37</sup> Nichols, “Global Image Consumption” 29.

<sup>38</sup> Lydia Papadimitriou and Jeffrey Ruoff, “Film Festivals: Origins and Trajectories,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 14, no. 1 (2016): 1

## The hierarchy of the global queer film festival circuit

The previous section highlighted the diversity in the international film festival circuit: there are various kinds and scales of sub-circuits or parallel circuits. As Loist observes, up to 2014, 326 queer film festivals had been founded worldwide, and 225 were active festivals in the mid-2010s.<sup>39</sup> With the boom in queer cinema and film festivals, the film festival circuit for queer films has existed for several decades. According to Jenni Olson, the queer film festival circuit “came into its own in the early 1990s, just as the ‘New Queer Cinema’ achieved mainstream recognition.”<sup>40</sup> The circulation of queer films has gradually constructed the global circuit. Olson further argues that the queer film festival circuit has become a “queer film eco-system,” explaining,

The film and video makers create the movies, the festival organizers show the movies, the distributors circulate the movies, the publicists draw attention to them so that the gay movie lover will plunk down a few dollars to see the movies, so that the whole process can happen again.<sup>41</sup>

Faced with the pressure of other distributing platforms, such as theatre, DVD and the Internet, the emergence of a queer film eco-system shows that queer film festivals can serve as a well-developed alternative distribution path for queer films. Olson also outlines the main actors and their roles in the queer film festival circuit so that the loop can be constructed and maintained.

The queer film eco-system has laid the foundation for subsequent scholarly research on the queer film festival circuit. Developing Olson’s concept, Loist suggests that the queer

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<sup>39</sup> Skadi Loist, “Queer Film Culture: Performative Aspects of LGBT/Q Film Festivals” (PhD Thesis, University of Hamburg, 2014), 105.

<sup>40</sup> Jenni Olson, “Film festivals,” in *Gbltq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture* (2001), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

film ecosystem “operates largely on community logic,” and that the “ecosystem does not work completely independently of the larger media industry and distribution circuits.”<sup>42</sup> The queer film festival circuit serves the interests of queer communities through the selection and worldwide promotion of specific queer films. Antoine Damiens argues that the ecosystem “depends on an interplay between various regimes of taste” (“relationship between cultural and economic capital”).<sup>43</sup> To sustain queer films and festivals, the queer film festival circuit operates through both cultural and commercial considerations. Moreover, the interplay in cultural and economic regimes involves conflict, so the queer film festival circuit seeks balance. Both Loist and Damiens concentrate on the distribution side of the queer film festival circuit, demonstrating how the queer film festival circuit contributes to the development of queer films as well as queer communities and culture.

Based on all these theoretical discussions about the (queer) film festival circuit, in this chapter, I foreground the concept of the “global queer film festival circuit.” Borrowing the metaphor of the treadmill used by Iordanova, the global queer film festival circuit can be understood as a treadmill constructed by the flows of festival resources mobilised by the flows of queer films. Most research regarding the queer film festival circuit, such as Loist’s and Damiens’, is Eurocentric – the intention of proposing the concept of the global queer film festival circuit is to expand existing discussions to include a mass of small-scale queer film festivals in the Global South, which have been greatly influenced by the global queer film festival circuit. In other words, the “global” in this concept emphasises the global part of the queer film festival circuit. In addition, this framework particularly accentuates how small-scale queer film festival in the Global South are influenced by major film festivals in the West. The

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<sup>42</sup> Loist, “Crossover Dreams,” 63-64.

<sup>43</sup> Antoine Damiens, “The Queer Film Ecosystem: Symbolic Economy, Festivals, and Queer Cinema’s Legs,” *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 1 (2018): 10 and 13.

global queer film festival circuit involves a strongly hierarchical relationship, which is shaped by the possession of film festival resources and influence. The global queer film festival circuit is constituted by two tiers: top-tier film festivals and second-tier queer film festivals.

Top-tier film festivals of the global queer film festival circuit can be divided into two kinds, including top-tier general international film festivals and top-tier queer film festivals. Highlighting the complexity of the actual circulation of queer films, Loist and Ger Zielinski observe that,

The queer film festival circuit is connected to the larger film festival circuit, but it also forms a separate parallel entity. This network can be further differentiated into several levels. Going top-down one can differentiate between the queer-friendly 'A-list' festivals and markets, 'wholesale' or 'business' queer film festivals and a large number of smaller 'retailer' festivals.<sup>44</sup>

When queer films commence their journey in the global queer film festival circuit, they not only circulate among queer film festivals, instead most also circulate between both general film festivals and queer-themed film festivals.

Regarding the top-tier general international film festivals, the "Big Three" that occupy the predominant positions in the global queer film festival circuit are the most representative. As these major film festivals draw the greatest global media attention, which queer film festivals cannot compete with, film distribution companies first submit their queer films to international major film festivals – this is a common marketing and distribution strategy. With the rise of interest in queer films, the Big Three have gradually set up queer-themed awards as official awards within their festivals. The Berlinale was the first "A-list" film festival to

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<sup>44</sup> Skadi Loist and Ger Zielinski, "On the Development of Queer Film Festivals and Their Media Activism," in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, edited by Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012), 53.



establish a specific section and award for queer-themed films in its official programme: the Teddy Awards were founded in 1987 and has become an official award of the Berlinale. The Teddy Awards are presented by an independent jury that is not selected by the committee of the Berlinale. As Damiens states, due to the establishment of the Teddy Awards, the Berlinale has gradually become “the main market for gay and lesbian films,” as “queer distributors, producers, and festival planners come to Berlin in the hope of developing their respective projects, selling their films, or promoting their new features on an international scale.”<sup>45</sup> The Berlinale has become one of the most important nodes in the global queer film festival circuit.

In addition to the Berlinale, many queer films have been programmed by the Cannes and the Venice since the 1990s, and some have even won major official awards. For instance, *Happy Together* (1997) won Best Director at the Cannes, and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) won the Golden Lion. In seeking inclusivity, the Venice and the Cannes have each set up queer-themed awards, the Queer Lion and the Queer Palm, in 2007 and 2010 respectively. Among the Big Three, the Berlinale usually programmes almost twice as many queer films as the Cannes and the Venice. For example, in 2019, compared to 30 feature-length queer films at the Berlinale, 17 feature-length films were qualified for the Queer Palm contest, while only nine feature-length films fought for the Queer Lion.

In addition to the Big Three, some large-scale international film festivals, such as the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and Sundance, can be considered as top-tier film festivals in this circuit. B. Ruby Rich identified the rise of New Queer Cinema at the 1991 Toronto International Film Festival, observing that, “there, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising

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<sup>45</sup> Antoine Damiens, “Queer Cannes: On the Development of LGBTQ Awards at A-List Festivals,” *Synoptique* 3, no. 2 (2015): 93-94.

histories in their image.”<sup>46</sup> Rich identifies the role Toronto and Sundance played in the formation of the global queer film festival circuit as well as the birth of the “new queer cinema” in the 1990s.<sup>47</sup> To address the diversity of festival programmes, the TIFF screens a number of queer-themed films every year. For instance, the TIFF programmed 10 feature-length queer films and 11 queer short films in 2019. Compared to the total of 333 films programmed by the TIFF, the number of queer-themed films was small, however, eight out of eleven had their world premieres at the TIFF, and the other three queer films had previously been programmed at the Cannes. Most of these eight queer films were produced in the West and mainly aimed at the Western market (North American markets, in particular) or awards season. The TIFF can be considered a suitable choice by film distribution companies for world premieres, as the festival can attract hundreds of thousands of attendees. The TIFF has also collaborated for many years with the Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film Festival, one of the largest global queer film festivals.

Similarly, Sundance has played a significant role in the development of independent queer cinema in North America. According to film critic Jude Dry, the Sundance has programmed numerous “transcendent, experimental, and provocative queer films” over the decades.<sup>48</sup> Over the years, several queer films that premiered at the Sundance, such as *Paris is Burning* (1991), *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), and *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), have achieved great box office revenue and critical acclaim globally. In 2020, 14 queer-themed feature films premiered at Sundance.<sup>49</sup> At the Sundance in 2021, 13 queer-themed feature films had their

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<sup>46</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *The New Queer Cinema: Director’s Cuts* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 16-17.

<sup>47</sup> Rich, *The New Queer Cinema*, 26-27.

<sup>48</sup> Jude Dry, “Sundance 2020: The LGBTQ Films We Can’t Wait to See in Park City,” *IndieWire*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/01/sundance-lgbt-films-gay-lesbian-queer-2020-1202204796/> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

world premieres.<sup>50</sup> As the largest independent film festival in North America, Sundance is the first large-scale film festival held at the beginning of calendar year that can attract global attention. Some independent queer films produced in North America start their journey in the global queer film festival circuit at Sundance. Some of these films were also programmed by the Berlinale at the same time or shortly after Sundance, such as *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020). Film distributors intend to add value to the films through the tour of (queer) film festivals before wider release (through cinemas, television, online platforms or DVD). In general, the Sundance and the TIFF become the alternative to the Big Three, giving them the dominant position in the global queer film festival circuit, as they can hold world premieres.

Top-tier queer film festivals also occupy a dominant position in the global queer film festival circuit. Compared to most queer film festivals around the world, top-tier queer film festivals possess an abundance of festival resources as well as globally profound impacts. Frameline and Outfest are two iconic, top-tier queer film festivals in the circuit. Founded in 1977, Frameline<sup>51</sup> is the first and oldest film festival devoted to queer programming in the United States. According to its official website, it is the largest LGBT film exhibition event in the world, with annual attendance of 60,000 to 80,000 people; it is also the most well-attended LGBT arts event in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Outfest, founded by UCLA students in 1982, has become one of the largest and most influential queer film festivals in North America. Outfest screens more than 200 feature-length and short films every year, and

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<sup>50</sup> Mey Rude, "Here's All 13 LGBTQ+ Films Premiering at Sundance 2021," *Out*, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021, <https://www.out.com/film/2021/1/28/heres-all-13-lgbtq-films-premiering-sundance-2021#media-gallery-media-1> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

<sup>51</sup> The festival was previously called the San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival. In 2004, the festival's 28<sup>th</sup> year, it was renamed the Frameline Film Festival.

<sup>52</sup> For more information: "About," *Frameline*, <https://www.frameline.org/about> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

organisers claim that annual attendance can exceed 40,000 people, which makes Outfest the largest film festival of any kind in Los Angeles.<sup>53</sup> There are several other queer-themed film festivals that belong to the top-tier queer film festivals in the circuit, such as BFI Flare, but the scale of Frameline and Outfest are larger than other queer film festivals around the world.

Compared to top-tier general film festivals, top-tier queer film festivals, such as the Frameline and the Outfest, have another role in contributing to the circulation of queer films. As discussed, increasing numbers of queer films prefer to showcase their world premieres at the Big Three festivals with the aim of receiving bigger festival buzz. These queer films continue to be showcased in queer-themed film festivals. Although the large proportion of the films they programme have been screened before, the Frameline and the Outfest work as integration and promotion mechanisms for queer films on the global queer film festival circuit. The Frameline and the Outfest assemble and reselect the queer films from the last few months of the previous year and the first half of the current year, and then promote them to other queer film festivals. Indeed, there are still queer films that choose to have their world premieres at the Frameline and the Outfest. Even though the Frameline and the Outfest are held in North America, their programming scope encompasses the whole world, including the Global South. Their globally significant influence can contribute to attracting queer films from Asia, South America and Africa, which maintains their worldwide impact on the circuit as well.

Regarding the actual influence of the top-tier film festivals in the circuit, they are also considered to be dominant in the global market of queer films. In other words, the queer films programmed by top-tier film festivals are comparatively more accessible to the global market. The top-tier film festivals are the first choice for many queer films to commence their

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<sup>53</sup> For more information: "Outfest Los Angeles LGBTQ Film Festival," *FilmFreeway*, <https://filmfreeway.com/OutfestLosAngeles> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

circulation owing to their vast festival resources and accumulated influence. Hence, top-tier film festivals can select films of relatively good quality from a wide range of submissions from around the world. At the same time, the reputation that top-tier film festivals have built up over the years ensures that their selections can be well promoted in the global market. Moreover, since top-tier film festivals work with a wide range of journalists from all over the world, their programmed queer films can receive worldwide media exposure. Similarly, as Diane Burgess notices, “smaller festivals are able to draw on the global media attention generated by the A-list festivals in order to attract local audience attention to their program selections.”<sup>54</sup> When other smaller-scale queer film festivals select queer films previously programmed by top-tier film festivals, the resources required to promote these films can be saved. The top-tier film festivals can control the trends of the global market.

Furthermore, queer awards play an important role in the global queer film festival circuit for increasing the commercial value of the films. According to de Valck and Soeteman, “winning the award leads to media exposure, best of fest screenings and better distribution.”<sup>55</sup> For small-scale queer film festivals, programming films that won awards at top-tier international film festivals, like the Big Three, can sell more tickets. Nevertheless, queer awards are comparatively scarce as, in practice, only a few queer films find themselves eligible for awards. Moreover, winning awards is unpredictable in film festival competitions. Hence, from a practical perspective, being programmed by top-tier international film festivals (the Big Three in particular) is a more controllable and more significant than winning awards. According to de Valck and Mimi Soeteman,

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<sup>54</sup> Diane Burgess and Brendan Kredell, “Positionality and Film Festival Research: A Conversation,” in *Film Festivals*, 166.

<sup>55</sup> Marijke de Valck and Mimi Soeteman, “‘And the Winner is...’: What Happens Behind the Scenes of Film Festival Competitions,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2010): 291.

Making it into a festival programme seems a bigger achievement than the actual winning of an award. For many filmmakers, being selected for the festival is, indeed, what matters, not only because the invitation already adds (modest) value, but mostly because it grants them access to the professional (network) opportunities of the event.<sup>56</sup>

For queer films in the circuit, festival logos become an alternative to film awards to accumulate symbolic capital, which can be transferred into box office revenue during their circulation on the circuit. Both festival logos and film awards are significant to the global distribution of queer films, since only a small proportion of queer films can be awarded, while festival logos are comparatively easier to achieve.

In addition to the significant role played in the distribution of queer films, top-tier film festivals in this global queer film festival circuit have been actively involved in film production in the new millennium. Loist notes that, “with the new funding and festival growth, LGBT/Q film festivals also entered a new phase of industry interaction.”<sup>57</sup> Some queer film festivals have become “active players” through “providing film funds, script labs or even distribution arms” in the global queer film industry since the 2000s.<sup>58</sup> Due to increasing commercial sponsorships or cooperation with other cultural organisations, top-tier film festivals are able to take part in the production of queer filmmaking.

These film festivals organise competitions to select the projects they intend to fund or provide grants through examining applications. For instance, the Frameline’s LGBTQ+ Film Grant Completion Fund (up to \$5,000) “seeks to provide a much-needed source of financial

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<sup>56</sup> de Valck and Soeteman, “And the Winner is,” 297.

<sup>57</sup> Loist, “Queer Film Culture,” 144.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

contributions to artists who often struggle to secure funding to complete their works.”<sup>59</sup> In addition, top-tier film festivals arrange workshops and education programmes to assist the careers of young queer filmmakers around the world. The Berlinale Talents has served as a talent development programme, providing various resources and guidance to emerging filmmakers around the world since 2003; the Berlinale Talents also works with the European Film Market, the World Cinema Fund and the Berlinale Co-Production Market.<sup>60</sup> While the programme is not LGBTQ-specific, it has accepted numerous rising queer filmmakers each year. For instance, 211 young film industry insiders were selected for the Berlinale Talents 2021, with 76 showing particular interest in queer filmmaking.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, mixing the forms of workshops and competitions, the winners of the Outfest Screenwriting Lab can receive guidance for a whole year, as part of the Outfest Forward, an artist development programme.<sup>62</sup> These industrial promotion measures can cultivate new generations of queer filmmakers, which greatly contributes to the future development of queer cinema.

The top-tier film festivals are also considered as sites for social networking. Queer filmmakers can build up relationships with other filmmakers and production and distribution companies, and they can even seek funding on a global scale at the festivals. Engagement in queer film production can secure the ability to programme world premieres for these queer films. The development of top-tier film festivals’ roles in both production, exhibition and

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<sup>59</sup> Established in the 1990s, the Frameline Completion Fund has financially supported over 150 queer projects. The Fund pays increasing attention to the voices of minorities within queer communities. For more information, see: “Apply Now for Completion Fund,” *Frameline*, <https://www.frameline.org/year-round/frameline-blog/completion-fund-now-open-x7812> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

<sup>60</sup> For more information: “Our Mission,” *Berlin Talents*, <https://www.berlinale-talents.de/bt/page/c/our-mission> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

<sup>61</sup> Data provided by the official website: “Talents and Alumni,” *Berlin Talents*, <https://www.berlinale-talents.de/bt/?e=Berlin+2021> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Started as a screenwriting contest in 1997, the Outfest Screenwriting Lab has gradually become a significant part of education and mentoring programmes, Outfest Forward. For more information: “Outfest Screenwriting Lab,” *Outfest*, <https://outfest.org/swl/#elevent> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

distribution intensifies the gap between top-tier and second-tier queer film festivals, as top-tier film festivals can possess more resources which can increase their impact.

There are over 200 queer-themed film festivals currently running around the world, while only a few film festivals, as previously mentioned, occupy dominant positions in the global queer film festival circuit. Most queer film festivals around the world are considered as second-tier queer film festivals in this circuit. That is to say, the global queer film festival circuit can be seen to have a pyramid structure. A few top-tier film festivals dominate the flows of festival resources (queer films, in particular) within the global queer film festival circuit. The scale of second-tier queer film festivals is generally small, possessing extremely limited festival resources. Large numbers of them are located outside Europe or North America.

Overall, as a sub-circuit, the global queer film festival circuit has deeply integrated into the international film festival circuit. Regarding queer film festival networking, Rhyne claims that the queer film festivals have become an entirety since the early 1990s.<sup>63</sup> Queer film festivals around the world have not only become a sub-circuit, but have also integrated with the main international film festival circuit. Queer films do not just circulate among queer-themed film festivals. Rhyne notices that “New Queer Cinema did not premiere on the gay and lesbian film festival circuit, but on a growing network of high-profile mainstream festivals that were taking on a new significance in the industry.”<sup>64</sup> As previously claimed, a large numbers of top-tier film festivals in the global queer film festival circuit are non-queer international film festivals. In particular, with the increasing involvement of queer capital, the global queer film festival circuit has engaged with various industrial sectors to be a “active

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<sup>63</sup> Rhyne, *Pink Dollars*, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Rhyne, *Pink Dollars*, 150.



player”. One noteworthy point, nevertheless, is that the global queer film festival circuit is not equal to the international film festival circuit. There are hundreds of second-tier queer film festivals in the circuit forming a unique operating logic other than other sub-circuits and the international film festival circuit.

As the first queer film festival in Asia, the HKLGFF is situated in the second tier in the global queer film festival circuit. As previously argued, the ability to host world premieres, the possession of film festival resources, and the status of the film festival influence all contribute strongly to festival stratification. The HKLGFF’s status as a second-tier festival in the global queer festival circuit can be unpacked from two perspectives. First, the scale of the HKLGFF is comparatively small and the festival possesses limited festival resources. As Table 2.1 below shows, from the perspective of numbers of programmed films, apart from the 2020 edition, the HKLGFF screened around 28 feature-length queer films on average from 2015 to 2019. By contrast, the Berlinale programmed at least 27 new queer-themed feature-length films in 2019, even though it is not a specialised queer-themed film festival. Among top-tier queer-themed film festivals, the BFI Flare Festival screened 50 feature-length films in 2019, and Frameline programmed 91 films in 2018. Moreover, the HKLGFF falls into the category of an “audience festival,”<sup>65</sup> since there is no market section for film companies to buy films and for filmmakers to look for investment, hence there are no profits available to the HKLGFF from a market section. Although the festival can sustain itself mainly based on box office revenue, the HKLGFF is still short of festival resources (funding, in particular) to offer more services – one result, for instance, is that the festival fails to provide Chinese subtitles for every film. In

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Peranson, “First You Get the Power, then You Get the Money: Two Models of Film Festivals,” *Cineaste* 33, no. 3 (2008): 27.

general, the HKLGFF lacks all kinds of festival resources, such as funding, human resources, contact with filmmakers around the world, and press cooperation.

**Table 2.1** Films' screening status before the HKLGFF's programming

Year	Total films	Films selected by top-tier film festivals	Films only chosen by non-top-tier film festivals	Films have world premiere screening at the HKLGFF	Films have not been screened at other queer film festivals but openly released in other countries or areas
<b>2020</b>	17	12	5	0	0
<b>2019</b>	30	21	7	0	2
<b>2018</b>	28	23	4	0	1
<b>2017</b>	24	19	3	1	1
<b>2016</b>	27	24	1	2	0

More importantly, the HKLGFF lacks the ability to programme comparatively new films with world or even regional premieres. Analysing the festival programmes of the HKLGFF from 2016 to 2020, I categorised the feature-length films into four types, based on whether the film had been screened at other film festivals or publicly screened in other areas. Table 2.1 shows that over 70% of programmed films had been previously screened in top-tier film festivals. These top-tier film festivals typically include both types of top-tier film festivals of the global queer film festival circuit, such as the Berlinale, the Cannes, the Sundance, the TIFF, and the Outfest, the Frameline, and BFI Flare (top queer-themed film festivals). In addition, no more than 14% of the selected films had been screened in non-top-tier film festivals (including just one in 2016). These non-top-tier film festivals include general regional film festivals, such as the Busan International Film Festival, the Golden Horse Film Festival, the Osaka International Film Festival and the Champs-Élysées Film Festival, and regional-based queer film festivals, like the Rainbow Reel Tokyo, the Taiwan International Queer Film Festival (TIQFF) and the Tel Aviv International LGBT Film Festival (TLVFest). Regarding world premieres,

the HKLGFF has only programmed three feature-length queer films with world premiere priority in the six years studied, including *Berlin Drifters* (2017), *Fathers* (2016) and *Love Next Door 2* (2016). Although HKLGFF is one of the oldest and largest queer film festivals in Asia, the festival still fails to attract Asian queer films to showcase through world premieres. Film distribution companies for Asian queer films prefer to submit to top-tier film festivals first before they tour the global queer film festival circuit.

### **Programming process and strategies of the HKLGFF**

Programming is the core act in organising a film festival. Film festival programming can be understood, in Peter Bosma's words, as "the activity of selecting films and scheduling them purposefully for screening to an audience."<sup>66</sup> Programmes are considered to be the product of film festivals.<sup>67</sup> Regarding the classification of film festival programming, Bosma identifies four scopes: "the scope of content", "the scope of territory of the programme", "the scope of exclusivity," and "the scope of target groups."<sup>68</sup> These four aspects address the diversity of film festival programming. The types of film festivals greatly influence the process, purpose and style of programming. Similarly, as Raya Rastegar claims, "the curatorial process of evaluating films varies greatly according to a festival's mission and size."<sup>69</sup> The programming strategies and the style of industry-oriented film festivals are different from those of community-based film festivals.

Programming is the process of selecting suitable films, regardless of the type and scale of film festivals. According to Rastegar, industry-based film festivals are regarded as the "gates through which these films and their makers must pass in order to gain larger public

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Bosma, *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>67</sup> Bosma, *Film Programming*, 71.

<sup>68</sup> Bosma, *Film Programming*, 71-72.

<sup>69</sup> Roya Rastegar, "Seeing Differently: The Curatorial Potential of Film Festival," in *Film Festivals*, 186-187.

and create cultural shifts on a broad scale,” while festival programmers work as the “gate keepers.”<sup>70</sup> This act of gatekeeping can be seen as the process of “selection” in film festival programming.<sup>71</sup> As Rastegar further demonstrates, there are two steps for festival programming: “editorial” (tens of thousands of films “submitted for consideration be ‘edited’ out of the selection process”) and “curatorial” (“identifying groundswells of filmmaking styles and storytelling practices”).<sup>72</sup> Liz Czach argues that film festival programming is not just about selection – it is also a process of rejection.<sup>73</sup> For those major industry-based film festivals, festival programmers are usually overwhelmed by thousands of films submitted from around the world. Due to the limit of showcase windows and varied film quality, compared to the films selected by programmers, the majority of submitted films can only face rejection. Through the process of rejecting and selecting films, film festival programming can actively shape film culture.

Addressing difference is the key for the formation of film culture through festival programming, including different kinds of films, people and ideas. Film festival programming creates the “exhibition spaces” that gather various players from different parts of the film industry and from different regions in this circuit.<sup>74</sup> Film festivals are the space where various kinds of elements, including films, people and ideas, assemble and integrate with others. Difference can also refer to the uniqueness of each film festival by indicating its difference from other film festivals. Due to the diversity of film festivals regarding scale, type, purpose and target audience, programming difference can subjectify the festival per se. Similarly, according to Rastegar, one of the purposes of film festival is to programme difference; more

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<sup>70</sup> Rastegar, “Seeing Differently,” 182.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Rastegar, “Seeing Differently,” 182 and 183.

<sup>73</sup> Liz Czach, “Affective Labor and the Work of Film Festival Programming,” in *Film Festivals*, 198-199.

<sup>74</sup> Rastegar, “Seeing Differently,” 192.

significantly, film festival programming is “shaped by and through difference.”<sup>75</sup> Each film festival selects films according to their own purpose, style and target audience, which then illustrates the difference between film festivals.

De Valck identifies a shift in film festival programming to be critically political following the May 1968 riots in Paris, and sees the 1970s as “the age of programmers,” referring to the period when programmers were able to select films without paying close attention to national cinema building, audience expectations, or commercial considerations; subsequently, the influence of commercialism in film festival programming has intensified since the 1980s.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, as de Valck states, political turmoil significantly influences film festival programming, which also cultivates “young, critical voices.”<sup>77</sup> This turn in festival programming stimulated the diversification of such programming, since the festivals considered younger and even more radical filmmakers. In the meantime, film festival programming has been gradually diversified since the late 1970s when the increasing new types (specialised themes) of film festivals began to appear.<sup>78</sup> Each film festival with a specific theme has gradually evolved a particular style for its programming.

Due to the different festival missions and target audiences compared to other types of film festivals, the uniqueness of queer film festival programming is noteworthy. As Loist states, queer film festivals provide “specific platforms for positive and political images”, which have greatly influenced the programming of queer film festivals.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Zielinski claims that queer film festivals founded by grassroots activists were initiated to correct the conservative and even homophobic images of queer communities that were shaped in

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 27 and 28, 167 and 168.

<sup>77</sup> de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 178.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Loist, “A Complicated Queerness,” 161 and 162.

mainstream media in the 1980s.<sup>80</sup> The early history of queer film festivals demonstrates that the primary aim of queer programming is to promote the circulation of progressive and diverse representations of queer communities. In terms of the actual process of queer film festival programming, Loist argues that the programming of queer film festivals is mainly the outcome of the relationship between a queer film festival and its audience and community.<sup>81</sup> Frederik Dhaenens claims that film festival programming is mainly based on “a careful negotiation between various stakeholders within particular societal contexts.”<sup>82</sup> In addition to festival programmers, other stakeholders, such as film distributors, sponsors and audiences, have significant impacts on the process and style of programming.

Generally, there are two main methods of programming for queer film festivals. One, which Dhaenens calls “traditionalist programming strategies,” tends to feature “predominantly positive and inclusive representations of the LGBT community.”<sup>83</sup> However, Dhaenens observes that these traditionalist queer films are “often hampered by an emphasis on homonormative, white-washed and commodified tropes,” further claiming that “traditionalist programmers often dismiss films that employ radical and transgressive approaches to representation and aesthetics.”<sup>84</sup> Richards also argues that traditionalist programmes can lead to the construction of homonormativity.<sup>85</sup> This homonormative programming style reveals the dominance of commercial logics, demonstrating the influence of neoliberalism on both queer movements and the operation of queer film festivals. Richards

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<sup>80</sup> Ger Zielinski, “Furtive, Steady Glances: On the Emergence and Cultural Politics of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals” (PhD Thesis, McGill University, 2008), 68.

<sup>81</sup> Loist, “A Complicated Queerness,” 165.

<sup>82</sup> Frederik Dhaenens, “Pink Programming Across Europe: Exploring Identity Politics at European LGBT Film Festivals,” *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no.1 (2018): 2.

<sup>83</sup> Dhaenens, “Pink Programming Across Europe,” 2.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 143-144.

also illustrates how queer film festivals acknowledge and tackle homonormativity that is constructed through programming, claiming that queer film festivals are able to programme queer films with political engagement, denaturalisation of domesticity and diverse representations and cinematic forms.<sup>86</sup> Responding to nonnormative programming as a common phenomenon in queer film festivals globally, Loist argues that queer film festival programming lacks the “integrating criticism of identity politics.”<sup>87</sup> In general, traditionalist programming strategies can attract a broader audience but at the cost of reproducing homonormativity.

To construct the “truly inclusive and diverse counterpublic,” Loist proposes another method of programming, “queer programming strategies,” that aims to counter traditionalist programming strategies.<sup>88</sup> According to Loist, queer programming strategies involve a mixed programme that combines queer and racial issues and abandons the focus on attracting specific kinds of audiences.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, since festival programming is an act of balancing, Dhaenens put forward an idea that negotiates traditionalist and queer programming strategies, which aims to balance the pursuit of profits and the fulfilment of social and political agendas.<sup>90</sup> As mentioned, film festivals programme difference through difference. In other words, Loist’s, Richards’ and Dhaenens’ discussions about reckoning with homonormative programmes, diversification regarding representation, subject matter and filmmaking techniques and forms, so that more minority members of queer communities and queer issues can be represented and discussed. In addition to the significant roles that top-tier international film festivals play in the global queer film festival circuit, Dhaenens also notes

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<sup>86</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 175-200.

<sup>87</sup> Loist, “A Complicated Queerness,” 169.

<sup>88</sup> Loist, “A Complicated Queerness,” 165.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Dhaenens, “Pink Programming Across Europe,” 11.

that international film festivals “are engaging in identity-based programming to cater to LGBT audiences and to promote themselves as socially inclusive festivals.”<sup>91</sup> Dhaenens proposes the idea of “moderately queer programming” for non-queer-oriented international film festivals, suggesting the programming style without privileging homonormative representations of queer communities and combining queer films with other types of films.<sup>92</sup> To conclude, queer film festivals actively address social and political agendas and represent the interests of queer communities through programming. Moreover, the programming of queer film festivals can involve efforts toward diversity, challenging homonormativity.

Turning to the HKLGFF, the timing (when and how long the festival is) and scale (how many films are shown) of the festival are the basis for the festival’s programming. Before 2014, the HKLGFF was held around mid-November, but in subsequent years, the festival has been held in mid- or late September. From the perspective of scheduling, the HKLGFF appears in the latter part of the annual festival calendar. As previously illustrated, festival programmes frequently mention the names of top-tier film festivals, such as the Berlinale, the Frameline and the Outfest, since these (queer) film festivals are organised in the first half of the calendar year. The whole process of the preparation of the HKLGFF mostly works in accord with the annual timing of festivals in the global queer film festival circuit. Furthermore, in terms of the scale of the HKLGFF, as discussed in the previous section, the festival showcases a limited number of queer films. In addition, the size of festival programming team is relatively small. Four or five programmers select around 27 feature-length films every year. According to Lillian Liu, every programmer has their own type(s) of films that they programme, and if programmers encounter some good films that are the specific type programmed by other

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<sup>91</sup> Frederik Dhaenens, “How Queer is ‘Pink’ Programming? On the Representational Politics of an Identity-Based Film Programme at Film Fest Gent,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 5-6 (2018): 794.

<sup>92</sup> Dhaenens, “How Queer is ‘Pink’ Programming?” 804.



programmer, they will recommend the films to that programmer.<sup>93</sup> The programming team members maintain a relatively clear division of duties.

Regarding to the HKLGFF's programming process, there is no open submission for feature-length queer films, and HKLGFF mainly relies on visiting the top-tier film festivals or seeking their line-up online to search for suitable films. In most cases, there are three general meetings for the programming process. According to current festival director Joe Lam,

The programming process starts from the visit to Berlinale every year, the first general meeting will be held after the Cannes. The second meeting is usually held after the Outfest and the Frameline in July. The final meeting will be conducted before the launch of the festival programme in August [my translation].<sup>94</sup>

Liu added that in January there is a meeting which is mainly used to review how the festival was organised last year and to discuss the new agenda of the coming edition.<sup>95</sup> In addition to some general meetings, the programming team also has other smaller meetings. Furthermore, the specific arrangements for the programming sessions vary every year.

The programming process of H the KLGFF relies on other major (queer) film festivals. Programmers of HKLGFF attend some of these festivals to watch the latest films, then ask for contacts of filmmakers or distributors through paths provided by the hosting film festivals for screening permissions when they identify suitable films for the HKLGFF. One of the current programmers, Sophia Shek, mentioned that except for the big queer film festivals, she also pays attention to local queer film festivals when she travels.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, Shek also recognised the difficulty of this process, claiming that it is more difficult to look for suitable

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<sup>93</sup> Lillian Liu, 2021, personal interview, Zoom, 18<sup>th</sup> June.

<sup>94</sup> Joe Lam, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 15<sup>th</sup> September.

<sup>95</sup> Liu 2021, personal interview.

<sup>96</sup> Sophia Shek, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 21<sup>st</sup> September.

films for the HKLGFF at small-scale and local queer film festivals.<sup>97</sup> Lam admitted that the HKLGFF lacks connections with other filmmakers and distribution companies from all over the world.<sup>98</sup> The HKLGFF is an example that demonstrates how small-scale queer film festivals in the global queer film festival circuit process their own programming under most conditions. Due to the scarcity of festival resources as well as the limit of global impacts, second-tier queer film festivals like the HKLGFF seldom become the first choice of film distribution companies to arrange world premieres. Thus, the festival does not provide a path for feature-length film submission. The process of the HKLGFF's programming significantly relies on connections with top-tier film festivals. This reliance highlights the passive position of second-tier queer film festivals in the circuit.

To maintain the festival's programming style and conduct the programming process more efficient, the programming team for each festival abides by relatively consistent programming criteria. Since Lam works as the festival director for the HKLGFF, according to Shek, Lam sets the tone for the festival, and "Joe has the final say" during the programming process.<sup>99</sup> In terms of the programming criterion of HKLGFF, Lam states that the primary factor for the team to select a film is "whether the films will touch Hong Kong audiences' hearts."<sup>100</sup> He further explains,

being able to see yourself, your friends or your family's experiences in a film is essential; it makes you really connect to the film. In the selection process we had

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>99</sup> Shek, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>100</sup> Hsiu-wen Liu, "Heart to Heart: HK Gay Film Festival Seeks Emotional Appeal," *Asian Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2017, <https://asiatimes.com/2017/09/heart-heart-hk-gay-film-festival-seeks-emotional-appeal/> (accessed 24<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

to give up several good productions because the themes were too distant to Hong Kong audiences emotionally.<sup>101</sup>

The HKLGFF aims to programme films that can reflect lives of local queer communities and the issues they face. This is a core obligation of audience-based and locally-served queer film festivals. Indeed, from the commercial perspective, the queer films reflecting local gay scenes and issues are also relatively more likely to attract audiences.

**Table 2.2** The KLGFF's feature-length queer films 2016-2020

	Total	Films were showcased in same calendar year	Films were showcased in the previous calendar year	Films were showcased two or more years before
2020	17	10	7	0
2019	30	12	15	1+2 <sup>102</sup>
2018	29	18	11	0
2017	24	18	6	0
2016	27	15	11	0

Another important programming criterion of the HKLGFF is to programme the latest queer films. Lam particularly mentioned that the HKLGFF prefers to select feature-length queer films that were released in the last one or two years.<sup>103</sup> Table 2.2 categorises the programmed films according to when they were first screened and shows that the HKLGFF prefers to programme recent queer feature-length films. The table demonstrates that, except for 2019, over half of the films programmed by the HKLGFF were only showcased in that same calendar year. At the HKLGFF 2019, there was only one documentary, *Monument of Pride*, that had been screened two years previously, in 2017. As the HKLGFF is scheduled in late

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> There was a special section called Hong Kong Retrospective to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> edition of HKLGFF. Two Hong Kong queer films, *Yang and Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (1997) and *Butterfly* (2004), were included.

<sup>103</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

September, there is enough time for the team to check the programmes of the Frameline and the Outfest, which assemble many queer films from all over the world in the same calendar year. Moreover, queer films from the previous year that have not been screened in Hong Kong cinemas or online platforms are also considered by the HKLGFF's programmers. Faced with threats from online streaming platforms and piracy, programming the latest films is a commercial consideration of the HKLGFF.

In addition to the two main criteria of the HKLGFF's programming, every programmer has their own criteria and preferences. Another interviewed festival programmer, Shek, also mostly follows the programming criteria of the HKLGFF. In interviews, Shek kept mentioning her core programming criterion: "a good film is a good film."<sup>104</sup> Shek examines the quality of a queer films mainly from two aspects: how the story is told and what queer agendas are advocated.<sup>105</sup> Other factors, such as subject matter, prospective ticket sales and relationships with filmmakers, are not her priorities. Programming is a complex activity, balancing the interests of different programmers. Shek admitted that there were several occasions when she and Joe Lam had some conflicts about programming and budgets.<sup>106</sup> For instance, she believed that *Bao Bao* (2018) was not a good choice as a lesbian Closing Film of the HKLGFF 2018 since the story was outdated, while Joe Lam insisted on it.<sup>107</sup> Given the situation that the HKLGFF lacks festival resources, selecting suitable films for Hong Kong queer communities is always a difficult task for the programming team of the HKLGFF.

The programming of HKLGFF also takes account of the prospective commercial value of the programmed films. The films programmed by the top-tier film festivals in the circuit

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<sup>104</sup> Shek, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

receive more attention in the market globally, which reflects the dominance of these Western-based major film festivals on the business of second-tier queer film festivals. As previously discussed, the top-tier film festivals in the circuit can be regarded as market dominators. The programming of the top-tier film festivals selects certain films and privileges them in the global circulation of queer films. More significantly, awards are more likely to significantly contribute to a film's commercial value since awards can catch media attention and become a selling point for the film. *Blue is the Warmest Colour* is an excellent example, as ticket sales for this film were outstanding at the 2013 HKLGFF. Lam observes that while lesbian films are usually hard to sell tickets for, *Blue is the Warmest Colour* performed extremely well at the HKLGFF.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, Lam emphasises that "some audience expressed that they came to watch *Blue is the Warmest Colour* particularly because it has won the Palme d'Or at Cannes that year in 2013" (my translation).<sup>109</sup> In addition, *120 Beats Per Minute* was another commercial success in 2017, having also won the Grand Jury Prize and the Queer Palm at the Cannes. The HKLGFF audiences have flocked to films that received awards at the Cannes a few months earlier, demonstrating the global impact of major film festivals in the circuit.

Furthermore, the promotional strategies of HKLGFF indicate the dominance of top-tier film festivals in the circuit. Both the official website and the printed catalogues of the HKLGFF highlight film festivals where films have previously been showcased. In most cases, queer films circulate among other (queer) film festivals before screening in Hong Kong; the HKLGFF only mentions the name of the major ones, such as the Big Three, the Frameline or the Outfest. As the festival director of the HKLGFF, Lam also oversees the design of the official

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<sup>108</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

website and the printed catalogues – he contends that they offer the quickest and the easiest way to attract audiences’ interest and offer prospective audiences a guarantee of quality.<sup>110</sup> He further explains, “visitors usually spend less than a minute on each film when they leaf through the catalogue or the website, so this highlight can tell a reader that this is a good film immediately” (my translation).<sup>111</sup> Similarly, Shek notes that highlighting other major film festivals is a unique promotional strategy in Hong Kong, highlighting, “it works perfectly.”<sup>112</sup> Other film festivals in Hong Kong also mention some international major film festivals for promotional purposes.

From the perspective of the local audience, addressing the name of top-tier film festivals can be regarded as a kind of the guarantee of film quality. My two interviewed audience members considered that they had been at least partly influenced by these highlighted top-tier film festivals in the HKLGFF promotional materials when deciding what films they intended to watch. According to G,

I don’t know much about film festivals, I have heard of the Cannes, the Venice and the Berlin[ale], because these three film festivals are always heard in reports. I think the choices of these three film festivals should be guaranteed a certain quality. Therefore, when I was choosing which films I would like to watch in the HKLGFF, if the promotional materials mention one of these three film festivals, it will make me more interested in the films (my translation).<sup>113</sup>

G particularly mentioned the significant impacts of the Big Three, indicating that being programmed by these top-tier film festivals becomes a selling point. Similarly, K also declared,

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Shek, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>113</sup> G, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

The HKLGFF only provides a brief synopsis, one or two photos and a trailer. Whether or not it is mentioned in the introduction [on web pages or catalogue] that the film has been selected and screened by some well-known film festivals becomes an important index, especially if the film has won any awards in the world-renowned film festivals (my translation).<sup>114</sup>

Both G and K acknowledged this promotional strategy. The awards won at top-tier film festivals can be used as a significant selling point, even though the subject matters of the films may not be popular in the market. For business considerations and festival sustainability, commercially-run second-tier queer film festivals such as the HKLGFF follow the market trends shaped by top-tier film festivals and programme films that have high commercial potential.

In addition, the changes in the HKLGFF's programmes reflects the influence of the global queer film festival circuit. During the 1990s, the HKLGFF mainly programmed short films, most from the United States and the United Kingdom. Only a few short films from other countries, including Canada, Spain and Japan, were programmed. In the 2000s, lacking the full support of the Hong Kong Arts Centre, the programming style of the HKLGFF became greatly box-office-driven to sustain the festival. At that time, there were increasing numbers of queer films with highly commercial value that employed naked muscular gay bodies to sell in the West. Generally, the commercialised HKLGFF adopts what Dhaenens has termed "traditionalist programming strategies." Ka-wai Pang criticises the commercial and gay-oriented programming style of the HKLGFF in the new millennium, reflecting that the HKLGFF

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<sup>114</sup> K, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 21<sup>st</sup> September.

strictly follows the logic of the pink economy.<sup>115</sup> Especially, young and muscular gay bodies still dominate the HKLGFF's screenings. In other words, commercial considerations result in the marginalisation of lesbian and transgender representation. However, the number of lesbian and transgender feature-length films increased slightly in the HKLGFF's programmes in the late 2010s. A subtle but significant and progressive change of programming style of the HKLGFF also appeared, with transgender films a particular focus of festival promotion since 2017.

In order to discover the queer films with highly commercial potential, programmers follow changes in the global queer film market. Regarding the newly emerging trend in the pink market, according to Lam, "gay and lesbian seem no longer popular now, transgender becomes the hit topic (my translation)."<sup>116</sup> He further explains,

We think that society nowadays is more accepting of gays and lesbians, but not of queer or transgender people. The film festival is a way to shed some light on the issue. We had only one queer/transgender programme in last year's film festival (2016), but in this year (2017) it is up to five.<sup>117</sup>

In addition, according to Shek, "I used to have three or four, no more than five slots to programme lesbian and transgender films. But in this year [2018], I programmed seven lesbian and transgender films. Joe has given me a couple more slots."<sup>118</sup> Shek noticed the increasing numbers of good quality lesbian and transgenders films on the global queer film

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<sup>115</sup> Pang Ka Wei 彭家維, "Tamen de Gushi: Xianggang Tongzhiyingzhan Yanjiu" 她們的故事:香港同志影展研究 [Herstories: The Research of Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival] (Master's Thesis, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), 72-74.

<sup>116</sup> Cow Chan 陳奉京, "Jinjie Jujiao Kuaxingbie, Zongjian: Tongzhi Yingpian Buzhigei Tongzhikan" 今屆聚焦跨性別 總監:同志影片不止給同志看 [Focusing on Transgender, Festival Director: Queer Films are not Only for *Tongzhi*], *HK01*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2017, <https://www.hk01.com/藝文/117137/同志影展專訪上-今屆聚焦跨性別-總監-同志影片不止給同志看> (accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2021).

<sup>117</sup> Liu, "Heart to Heart."

<sup>118</sup> Shek, 2018, personal interview.



market.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, as Lam suggested, “apparently, there are more and more lesbian and transgender films in those major film festivals; meanwhile, the quality of these films is way better than in the past” (my translation).<sup>120</sup> In other words, the changes reflected in queer films and film festivals that begin at the top-tier film festivals, for instance, lesbian and transgender films becoming hot topics, can significantly influence the programming style and content of second-tier queer film festivals, which can be seen as a manifestation of the dominance of Western-centrism in the global queer film festival circuit.

### **Western-centrism and homonormativity**

Under the pressure of top-tier film festivals on the programming process, small-scale queer film festivals like the HKLGFF reproduce Western-centric approaches. As discussed in the second section, top-tier film festivals in the circuit are all major (queer) film festivals in the West. Western-centrism is a commonly used critical term in film festival studies and queer studies that reflects unbalanced geopolitical power relations. In this chapter, Western-centrism can be interpreted from two perspectives: film production; and queer politics. Moreover, Western-centrism can cause negative impacts on the small-scale queer film festivals in the circuit.

On one hand, from the industrial perspective, Western-centrism can be understood as the dominance of Western queer films and the non-Western queer films selected by the West. The market for queer films in the West is relatively large, with a significant number of queer films produced in the West every year. There are more resources for queer film production and distribution. The queer films produced in the West reflect the stories of the queer communities in the West. Furthermore, the Western-based top-tier film festivals

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

control the queer films in the Global South. There were increasing numbers of queer films from Asia and South America programmed by top-tier film festivals in the circuit in the 2010s. Only a small proportion of the queer films in the Global South can circulate outside local or regional areas. In their selection of non-Western queer films, Western programmers more or less take into account whether the subject matter or cinematic forms of these films would be accessible to local (Western) audiences. There are more non-Western queer films (amateur productions, in particular) that do not receive global attention. As previously discussed, top-tier film festivals in the circuit financially or technically sponsor queer film production outside the West. This is one way in which the West interferes with the production of non-Western queer films. Overall, Western representations, stories and aesthetics dominate the global circulation of queer films.

In terms of the impact on the small-scale queer film festivals in the Global South, such as the HKLGFF, Western-centrism can lead to a lack of focus on local or regional content in programmes. Table 2.3 categorises films according to production location and illustrates that, although the HKLGFF's programmes indeed cover most parts of the world, the majority of the films' stories take place in North America and Europe. According to the table, the number of queer films in a Chinese context are greatly limited. Even with the addition of Korean and Japanese queer films, East Asian queer films still make up a small percentage of the HKLGFF's annual programme. However, as discussed, the intention of the HKLGFF is to programme queer films that "touch Hong Kong audience's heart," but the HKLGFF overwhelmingly represents stories of queer life in the West. Although queer people around the world share certain similarities regarding queer living and culture, the comparative data in Table 2.3 still raises the question, in terms of the Western-centric programmes of the HKLGFF, of how many of these foreign films can represent the difficulties that Hong Kong queer communities face.

**Table 2.3** Production locations<sup>121</sup> of films, the HKLGFF 2016-2020

	<b>2020</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2016</b>
<b>All</b>	17	30	28	24	27
<b>Hong Kong</b>	1	1 (2) <sup>122</sup>	1	0	1
<b>Mainland China, Macau, Taiwan</b>	3	2	2	1	1
<b>Japan and South Korea</b>	1	3	3	1	1
<b>Southeast and South Asia</b>	0	5	2	3	3
<b>UK and Ireland</b>	3	2	1	0	3
<b>West Europe</b>	6	6	4	6	7
<b>North Europe (except UK and Ireland)</b>	0	0	1	3	0
<b>South Europe</b>	0	3	1	0	0
<b>North America</b>	1	4	10	7	6
<b>South America</b>	0	2	2	2	4
<b>Oceania</b>	2	0	1	0	0
<b>Middle East</b>	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Africa</b>	0	0	0	1	0

Western-centrism in the circuit can lead to homogenisation of programmes as well. This homogenisation can be approached in two ways. First, the homogenisation of programmes can be understood as the similarity in both top-tier film festival programmes and second-tier queer film festival programmes. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, the 2018 the HKLGFF promotional materials mentioned Outfest 10 times. Eighteen (over 64%) of the HKLGFF's 28 selected feature-length films screened at Outfest, around three months before the opening of the HKLGFF. Second, homogenisation can also reveal the similarity between second-tier queer film festival programmes. For instance, in 2016, the Taiwan

<sup>121</sup> The division of Europe follows the United Nations statistical division. These clarifications are not perfect and might cause some confusion, due to the complexity of queer filmmaking. Transnational queer filmmaking is becoming more and more popular. Moreover, diasporic queer films can easily be found in queer film festival programmes. In terms of films that involve different locations, I categorise the film based on the primary shooting location.

<sup>122</sup> *Yang and Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (1997) and *Butterfly* (2004) were selected in the Hong Kong Retrospective to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> HKLGFF. The directors were also invited to present the films with questions and answer sessions held after the screenings.

International Queer Film Festival (TIQFF) programmed 18 feature-length queer films in total, eight of which were programmed by the HKLGFF three months later. In addition, *Front Cover* (2015) programmed by TIQFF in 2016, was the Opening Film of the HKLGFF 2015. This homogenisation of programmes also indicates the dominance of Western, urban, middle-class queer representations in commercial cinema and the marginalisation of queers of colour, working-class and non-Western representations. Furthermore, due to the unique societal context and the various levels of development among queer movements and queer rights, each queer film festival has its own speciality. As a kind of audience festival, second-tier queer film festivals respond to the needs of local queer communities. Nevertheless, due to the homogenisation of programmes on the global scale, second-tier queer film festivals fail to capture the sense of local queer communities and culture. In other words, homogenisation reveals the lack of investment in or engagement with local, regional and independent queer productions.

On the other hand, the HKLGFF's programmes reflect the interpretation of queer culture and issues in the Western-centric discourse. As explored above, the HKLGFF has increased its number of transgender films. Transgender subjects have become increasingly significant in queer movements in the West. Transgender communities have also become more visible on various Western media platforms. However, the connection between the HKLGFF and local transgender communities has not been strengthened. Their participation in the HKLGFF's events is hard to find. The voices of transgender communities in Hong Kong have been covered by other sexual minorities (gay communities, in particular). Furthermore, the HKLGFF's programmes address the general subjects or themes of the queer movements in the West. For instance, the HKLGFF programmes numerous queer films that discuss gay

marriage or surrogacy, such as *Mom+Mom* (2018). Comparatively, issues faced by local queer communities are not being reflected at the festival.

In general, Western-centrism reveals homonormativity reproduced in a Hong Kong context, which is the greatest concern for the HKLGFF. These Western-based top-tier film festivals control the programming process of second-tier queer film festivals. Thus, the Western understanding of queerness has radiated out through the Western-dominated global circulation of queer films. Natalie Oswin notes that the trend of homonormativity has become a global phenomenon.<sup>123</sup> The example of the HKLGFF indicates that homonormativity can spread to the Global South through the circulation of the global queer film festival circuit. However, Lisa Rofel argues that the globalisation of Western queerness is a process that is not without its obstacles, when she analyses the relationship between gay and lesbian identities and neoliberalism in China.<sup>124</sup> The force of local specificities in shaping local queer identity and culture cannot be ignored. Even under the global trend of homonormativity, for queer film festivals like the HKLGFF, the emphasis on local specificity should be an aspiration, if not a necessity.

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how Western-centrism is constructed in the HKLGFF and how it significantly influences the HKLGFF through its programming. The festival acknowledges and periodically attempts to redress the consequences of Western-centrism. Since the early 2010s, the HKLGFF has formed a fixed section of official programmes, called Asia Focus, which aims to increase attention on Asian queer films. Moreover, to play an increasingly significant role

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<sup>123</sup> Natalie Oswin, "Producing Homonormativity in Neoliberal South Africa: Recognition, Redistribution, and the Equality Project," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 3 (2007): 658.

<sup>124</sup> Lisa Rofel, "Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 4 (1999): 469-470.

in the global queer film festival circuit, the HKLGFF aims to work as the Asian version of the Frameline or the Outfest. Thus, mirroring the function of the Frameline and the Outfest in the global queer film festival circuit, the HKLGFF assembles and reselects from other non-top-tier film festivals and becomes a platform to introduce these selected queer films globally. According to Lam, “some queer film festival programmers in the West contacted me and asked for the catalogues of the HKLGFF in order to have a sense of new Asian queer films and newcomer queer filmmakers from Asia.”<sup>125</sup> Faced with the Western-centric landscape of queer cinema, the increasing numbers of Asian queer films and the expansion of the market makes an Asian identity more significant to the global queer film festival circuit. Future analysis of the global circulation of queer films should pay more attention to queer regionalism, as it is the key to challenging the Western-centrism in the circuit.

The framework of the global queer film festival circuit in this chapter may not fully account for all types of queer screen production, in particular queer short films. The discussion of queer short films can be regarded as another important way of exploring the circuit. As the programmer for the short film section, Liu said that queer short films rely more on the top-tier film festivals in the circuit compared to feature-length queer films, since queer short films have comparatively fewer resources for circulation and promotion.<sup>126</sup> The circulation of queer short films in the global queer film festival circuit differs from that of feature-length films, and this circulation can be difficult to trace. Nevertheless, queer short films are indispensable festival resources that circulate along with feature-length queer films in the circuit. The sections of festival programmes devoted to short films become the sites for programmers to showcase avant-garde cinematic forms and aesthetics and to allow

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<sup>125</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>126</sup> Liu, 2021, personal interview.

expression of progressive political messages. Further research can also address the circulation of queer short films regionally or globally.

This chapter has expanded the concept of the global queer film festival circuit, addressing the significance of small-scale queer film festivals in the Global South to worldwide queer culture as well as the global circulation of queer films. The unequal power relations in the global queer film festival circuit have resulted in small-scale queer film festivals operating under the constraints of other major film festivals. The chapter has identified the hegemony that second-tier queer film festivals endure from top-tier film festivals on programming. More significantly, it has demonstrated that the Western-centrism constructed in the circuit is not only reflected in the control of Western film festivals over the global flows of queer films, but also in the Western-dominated interpretation of queer issues and queer rights.

## Chapter Three

### The Commercialisation of the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival

The HKLGFF announced *Your Name Engraved Herein* (2020) and *Two of Us* (2019) as the Opening Films on its Facebook and Instagram account on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020, and the ticket pre-sales for these two films started at 6 pm the same day. Within an hour, the two screenings of *Your Name Engraved Herein* were sold out. Due to the buzz the film generated in both Taiwan and Hong Kong it became the fastest film to sell out at the HKLGFF.<sup>1</sup> The majority of screenings at HKLGFF sold more than 70 percent of their tickets in the late 2010s. More than 20 years ago, however, the festival faced a severe financial burden, which impacted ticket sales, thus encouraging the HKLGFF's commercial transformation in 2000. Then, as mentioned in the Introduction, the HKLGFF has grown increasingly established as a festival. Thus, this chapter responds to two questions: How and why has the HKLGFF commercialised over the years? How has commercialisation influenced the HKLGFF?

Through the analysis of the 30-year history of the HKLGFF, this chapter argues that in order to comply with the neoliberalised Hong Kong cultural politics and the increasingly market-driven landscape of queer cinema, the HKLGFF has survived and further developed through commercialisation. The analysis pays attention to changes in funding patterns and stakeholders. This chapter regards commercial transformation as a method that utilises the dynamics of the market but retains the political nature of queer film festivals. This chapter is divided into four sections. The first adopts the framework that refers to the commercialisation

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian Liu, 2021, personal interview, Zoom, 18<sup>th</sup> June.



of non-profit organisations to demonstrate that queer film festivals maintain their political nature even after commercial transformation. Then, focusing on the first decade of the HKLGFF when the festival had not yet become commercialised, the second section explores how the HKLGFF was organised by Hong Kong Arts Centre. To analyse the process of the commercial transformation of the HKLGFF, the next two sections explore how the two main stakeholders have engaged in this commercialisation as well as how the festival management has adjusted according to such transformation. This chapter also investigates the cultural politics in Hong Kong and the global queer landscape (queer cinema and queer consumption in particular). In other words, it illustrates the necessity and the feasibility of the HKLGFF's commercialisation.

### **Commercialisation of queer film festivals**

The concept of “stakeholders” is important in the analysis of film festivals since it can reveal both the organisation of the festivals and the power relations among all the components of their operation. Janet Harbord identifies four different discourses that operate in film festivals, including “discourses of independent film makers and producers,” “discourses of media representation,” “a business discourse of purchase, price and copyright” and “the discourse of tourism and the service industry.”<sup>2</sup> These various discourses refer to different stakeholders. Based on Harbord's four discourses, Ragan Rhyne proposes five types of stakeholders: “1) filmmakers and producers, 2) journalists, 3) the film industry of financiers, distributors and studios, 4) tourist and ancillary industry, and 5) policymakers, funders and festival managers.”<sup>3</sup> Rhyne adds the perspective of the state (or policymakers) to Harbord's classification, since cultural politics and public funding significantly influence festival

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Harbord, *Film Cultures* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Ragan Rhyne, “Film Festival Circuits and Stakeholders,” in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit* edited by Dina Iordanova and Ragan Rhyne, (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2009), 17-18.

operation. In addition to Rhyne's categorisation, this chapter also considers Lena Mossberg and Donald Getz's interpretation of stakeholders, which includes "owners, employees, suppliers, the community, customers, and the public sector (e.g. the state)."<sup>4</sup> In the case of queer film festivals, the stakeholders are: the hosting organisations of the festival (owners), festival programmers and volunteers (employees), filmmakers, film distributors (suppliers), the press, sponsors and the programmers of other film festivals (the community), the audience (customers) and policymakers (state).

In addition, regarding the concept of festival funding, this chapter briefly considers film festivals' financial resources and their combination. Due to the diversity of film festivals in terms of scale, theme, purpose and social context, the types of funding and how these financial resources combine vary greatly. As a result, Ruby Cheung separates festival financial patterns into three models based on where the main funding comes from: home country with commercial sponsorship; host country/city funding with commercial sponsorship; and predominantly private donations combined with commercial sponsorship.<sup>5</sup> This kind of categorisation addresses the influence of geopolitical factors on festival operation. Box office revenue are another important type of financial resource for some film festivals. To better understand festival funding, this chapter identifies seven types of funding resources: public funding, non-governmental organisation funding, individual donations, commercial sponsorships, organisation's own benefits (providing other services), membership, and box office revenue. Generally, film festivals have more than one type of funding. Cheung also

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<sup>4</sup> Lena Mossberg and Donald Getz, "Stakeholder Influences on the Ownership and Management of Festival Brands," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 6, no. 4 (2006): 311.

<sup>5</sup> Ruby Cheung, "Funding Models of Themed Film Festivals" in *Film Festival Yearbook 2: Film Festivals and Imagined Communities*, edited by Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2010) 74-75.

notes the possible changes of the funding patterns of a film festival,<sup>6</sup> which can be dynamic, as the festival can adjust the types of financial resources and how they combine in order to respond to the changes of the world.

With the development of film festivals over the decades, various types and scales of film festivals have gradually appeared, and funding patterns have also become increasingly diversified. Modern film festivals seldom rely on a single funding resource, instead, the funding pattern is normally formed by multiple sources. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, queer film festivals were organised by grassroots group or individual activists and the scale of queer film festivals was limited, thus the budget for hosting a queer film festival was comparatively small. Individual donations and sponsorships were common funding resources for queer film festivals. While the scale and influence of queer film festivals has increasingly expanded, funding patterns have also been adjusted to fit the changing situation. Queer film festivals determine how the funding model is constructed based on their own operational scale and the economic and cultural background of the host city. The diversification of funding resources can reduce financial risks in some way, and the funding patterns and financial resources of queer film festivals echo global issues of political and economic development.

In recent decades, market-driven forces have gradually become increasingly important in cultural sectors globally. When neoliberal-style cultural policies were widely adopted by governments, the pressures the cultural industries suffered to seek profits began to intensify from the 1990s. Since the operation of film festivals involves market and business, festivals cannot avoid contending with the impacts of global neoliberal trends. Moreover, as film industries work as a vital stakeholder in the operation of film festivals, they “are likely to

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<sup>6</sup> Cheung, “Funding Models,” 76.

be affected by the recent trend of commercialization.”<sup>7</sup> In this project, I broadly define commercialisation as the process that brings products or services to the market. Festival funding is the core of the discussion about festival commercialisation. Rebecca Finkel proposes three ways in which commercialisation acts on arts festivals:

Arts festivals are affected by commercialisation processes in three different key ways: (1) when they are organised principally for financial gain and when revenue generation becomes the principal aim, (2) when they are sponsored by a for-profit enterprise and (3) when they become vehicles for executing economic agendas.<sup>8</sup>

Commercialisation affects how festivals are funded and how they operate. For example, since their funding is mainly gained through box office revenue and commercial sponsorships, they operate with commercial agendas. Similarly, since a film festival is a broad type of arts festival, there are two aspects to interpret the idea of commercialisation in the film festival context: the process of altering funding patterns to a commercialised focus and the adjustment of operations to accommodate the commercialised funding model. Thus, changes of funding pattern essentially influence all aspects of the actual operation.

Diverse factors contribute to a festival’s commercialisation. When a film festival instigates commercial transformation, in most cases, commercialisation results from the interactions of multiple factors – a direct reason is the scarcity of financial resources. For instance, a decrease in public funding can put economic pressures on festivals, thus commercialisation becomes a potential strategy. The societal context of the film festival significantly influences the festival’s development as well as the process of commercialisation.

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<sup>7</sup> Marijke de Valck, “Supporting Art Cinema at a Time of Commercialization: Principles and Practices, the Case of the International Film Festival Rotterdam,” *Poetics* 42 (2014): 41.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Finkel, “Re-imaging Arts Festivals through a Corporate Lens: A Case Study of Business Sponsorship at the Henley Festival,” *Managing Leisure* 15, no. 4 (2010): 238.

Most queer film festivals have turned to commercialisation since the 1980s. Since many began as and still view themselves as non-profit organisation, their commercialisation is considered as the commercialisation of non-profit and non-governmental organisations. Tuula Mittila defines commercialisation of non-profit organisations as “a strategic process of developing an organisation’s mission into products and services, marketing and management of stakeholder relations and relationships, both internal and external.”<sup>9</sup> Although commercial sponsors’ goals do not often align with those of non-profit organisations, the organisations can still adopt marketing strategies to financially contribute to fulfilling social and political agendas. Similarly, as the research regarding queer film festivals is set in the context of the creative industries, Richards utilises the concept of “social enterprise” to analyse festival development or evolution. Social enterprise an operating model used by organisations, which “sees profitable activities serving a social goal.”<sup>10</sup> In this case, targeting a niche market of queer communities, queer film festivals utilise commercialised operational strategies for social empowerment, which is the essence of the commercialisation of queer film festivals. In other words, commercialisation is a method, and the ultimate goal is not merely generating box office revenue but to use increasing financial resources to serve queer communities.

In addition to being non-profit and non-governmental organisations, queer film festivals are centred on audience. According to Mark Peranson, film festivals can be categorised as business festivals and audience festivals.<sup>11</sup> Business festivals refer to “major festivals with markets or de facto markets,” such as Cannes Film Festival and Berlin

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<sup>9</sup> Tuula Mittilä, “Commercialisation of Non-Profit Organisations,” *Lugano: The 19th Annual IMP Conference*, 2003, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film*, 99.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Peranson, “First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models of Film Festivals,” *Cineaste* 33, no. 3 (2008): 27-28.

International Film Festival.<sup>12</sup> They devote most of their resources to industry attendees to promote the film industries. Audience festivals are comparatively low-budget and small-scale film festivals that generally serve local or regional audiences.<sup>13</sup> Most queer film festivals around the world, including the HKLGFF, function as audience festivals. Commercialisation of queer film festivals does not change the essence of audience-oriented film festivals. For instance, Jonathan Petrychyn argues that although the programmes of queer film festivals in Canada became increasingly commercial around the 2000s, they still “remained mostly outside of this primarily commercially-driven system, operating more and as audience festivals than business ones.”<sup>14</sup> Even after commercialisation, as the majority of queer film festivals are small-scale and locally served, they have not become primary places for film industry insiders to do business, to buy or sell films, or to look for funding – the priority of the commercialised queer film festivals remains to serve local queer communities.

Commercialisation is a common operating strategy adopted by queer film festivals. The factors that affect the commercialisation of queer film festivals are multiple, although the financial issue of hosting or sponsoring institutions is one of the main reasons, similar to the situation of general film festivals. For example, while in the 1990s queer film festivals relied mainly on public funding and some private donations,<sup>15</sup> decreasing levels of these two types of funding in the 1990s and 2000s severely endangered the operation of small-scale queer film festivals.<sup>16</sup> This meant that most queer film festivals are currently in a fragile financial situation. Thus, in terms of increasingly unstable financial resources, the commercialisation

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<sup>12</sup> Peranson, “Two Models,” 26.

<sup>13</sup> Peranson, “Two Models,” 27-28.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Petrychyn, “Networks of Feeling: Affective Economies of Queer & Feminist Film Festivals on the Canadian Prairies,” (PhD Thesis, York University, Toronto, 2019), 159-160.

<sup>15</sup> Skadi Loist, “Precarious Cultural Work: About the Organization of (Queer) Film Festivals,” *Screen* 52, no. 2 (2011): 268-269.

<sup>16</sup> Loist, “Precarious Cultural Work,” 272-273.

of queer film festivals can be considered as “an essential coping strategy for those non-profits that are affected by the cuts in public funding.”<sup>17</sup> In response to the decrease of public funding, corporatisation is a strategy for festivals that were originally funded and organised by the government. Festival corporatisation refers to the structural change of film festivals from state-owned to in-depth engagement with commercial enterprises.<sup>18</sup> Commercialisation that diversifies financial resources is one approach adopted by festivals during the process of corporatisation.

As a type of identity-based and community-oriented film festival, the difficulty facing commercialised queer film festivals is whether they can balance commercial demands with the fulfilment of political and social agendas. Furthermore, after a long-term commercialised transformation, some queer film festivals have become successful from the perspective of business management. However, as Richards states, ticket sales cannot be the only criterion to evaluate a queer film festival.<sup>19</sup> Since commercialisation only responds to economic pressures, it raises the question of whether commercialised queer film festivals can better fulfil political and social agendas. Thus, the attempt to achieve balance between commercial and political pursuits is always the focus during the operation of queer film festivals.

### **The HKLGFF in the HKAC period: 1989-1999**

As mentioned in Chapter One, as a member of Zuni Icosahedron in the 1980s, Edward Lam was the key person who established and developed the HKLGFF in the late 1980s and 1990s. During a trip to Britain in 1987, Lam was inspired by the local queer culture, and felt that the

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<sup>17</sup> Gabriela Vaceková, Vladislav Valentinov and Juraj Nemec, “Rethinking Nonprofit Commercialization: The Case of the Czech Republic,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 28, no. 5 (2017): 2105.

<sup>18</sup> Ruby Cheung, “Corporatising a Film Festival: Hong Kong,” in *Film Festival Yearbook 1*, 101.

<sup>19</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film*, 136-137.

LGBT community in Hong Kong had no similar means or space to express itself.<sup>20</sup> Lam then came up with the idea and the project plan of establishing a local queer film festival. He proposed the idea to Hong Kong Arts Centre (HKAC), the only non-profit arts organisation in Hong Kong in the late 1980s. Two members of the film department of the HKAC at that time, Ain-ling Wong and Yau Ching, who had studied abroad and were hugely interested in gender and sexual minorities, supported Lam's idea and decided to facilitate the HKLGFF. Wong and Yau's living and study experiences in the West, which provided advanced and open-minded perspective to queer subjects, greatly contributed to the establishment of the HKLGFF. The first festival-like queer-themed screening event in Hong Kong finally appeared in January 1989.

Before concentrating on the operation of the HKLGFF by HKAC, the discussion of the key stakeholder's (HKAC) history and development as well as its funding pattern can offer a general picture about the relationship between the HKLGFF and HKAC. A lack of public venues has limited the development of Hong Kong arts and culture over the decades, and the HKAC was established to alleviate this situation. Regarding places to host arts and cultural events in colonial Hong Kong, according to Oscar Ho, "private social/arts clubs organized most cultural activities" before the early 1960s, as the colonial government had never highly considered cultivating arts and culture since the British took over Hong Kong.<sup>21</sup> A new Hong Kong City Hall<sup>22</sup> was built in 1962, being the first modern complex to provide municipal services for every citizen, including performing venues and libraries. Nevertheless, the only arts and culture venue failed to meet demands for increasingly prosperous activities. In 1968, local

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<sup>20</sup> Pang Ka Wei 彭家維, "Tamen de Gushi: Xianggang Tongzhiyingzhan Yanjiu" 她們的故事:香港同志迎戰研究 [Herstories: The Research of Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival], (Master's Thesis, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Hing-kay Ho, "Growing into Failure: the Hong Kong Arts Development Council," in *Arts and Cultural Leadership in Asia*, edited by Josephine Caust (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 39.

<sup>22</sup> The Old City Hall Hong Kong (1866-1933) was the first public culture and recreation centre; it mainly served Western upper-class people in Hong Kong and had extreme restrictions for local Chinese citizens.



artists and arts groups started to petition the government for a new arts venue. In the meantime, as Ho notes, after the Riot of 1967, the British colonial government started to actively promote local arts and cultural events as “a tool for social mediation and development.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, with the continuous efforts of local art associations over many years, Hong Kong Arts Centre, the first non-profit multi-functional arts organisation in Hong Kong, was inaugurated in 1977.

The HKAC has played a significant role in promoting Hong Kong arts and culture across more than forty years, especially from the 1970s through the 1990s. During its first decade of operation, there were two primary functions on which the HKAC focused: one was to organise exhibitions, addressing both overseas and local talents; and another one was to support local artists by providing venues. In 1984, the the HKAC’s Film Department was established with the help of Ain-ling Wong. The HKAC converted its basement studio into the first avant-garde cinema called Lim Por Yen Film Theatre (now Louis Koo Cinema) in 1988, intending to bring forth the latest cinematic trends of the West. In the new millennium, the HKAC began to provide arts education (establishing Hong Kong Art School and providing programmes in collaboration with other universities). The HKAC has now become “a multi-arts center that fosters artistic exchanges locally and internationally, bringing the most forward creations to Hong Kong and showcasing homegrown talents abroad.”<sup>24</sup> The HKAC has also become an important stakeholder in numerous local cultural events or organisations.

HKAC relies on the market. Regarding the funding resources of the HKAC before 2000, it is difficult to gather exact data, since the official website does not provide annual reports from the HKAC’s early years. Nevertheless, there are some materials available to estimate

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<sup>23</sup> Ho, “Growing into Failure,” 39.

<sup>24</sup> Official website: “About,” *Hong Kong Arts Centre*, [https://hkac.org.hk/about\\_hkac/](https://hkac.org.hk/about_hkac/) (accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

how the HKAC was funded. According to an interview of Michael Chen<sup>25</sup> conducted by Vincent Tao and Angie Chen in 2013, the colonial Hong Kong government exempted the HKAC's debts (for building construction) on the condition that the government no longer provided funding to the HKAC, therefore, to increase revenue, the HKAC started to rent out its premises.<sup>26</sup> Based on the annual reports (from the 2010s) of the HKAC, its funding sources greatly vary; major funding resources include donations and sponsorships, property rental, course income and auditoria and facilities hire income.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the HKAC's funding has been strongly related to the market since the 1980s. Indeed, the financial situation of the HKAC has greatly relied on the development of Hong Kong's wider economy.

Hong Kong Arts Centre and Lam took full responsibility for organising the HKLGFF from 1989 to 1998 (the period I refer to as the HKAC period). HKAC provided assistance in three main aspects. The Film Department (led by Ain-ling Wong<sup>28</sup> and Yau Ching) of the HKAC was responsible for administration and festival programme management.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the HKAC provided screening venues and places to hold other events. The HKLGFF showcased most of their screenings in this period at Lim Por Yen Film Theatre and held some events, such as Richard Dyer's lectures (in 1992), at McAulay Studio. As the HKAC organised the HKLGFF and it also owned the venues, the festival did not need to pay to use them. Meanwhile, Lam's

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Chen is a Hong Kong-based artist and curator. He worked as Art Director of HKAC from 2001 to 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Vincent Tao and Angie Chen 陶穎康 陳安琪, "Chenzanyu Fangtanlu," 陳贊雲訪談錄 [Interview with Michael Chen], in "Yu Xianggang Yishu Duihua: 1980-2014" 與香港藝術對話：1980-2014 [Communication with Hong Kong Arts: 1980-2014], edited by Victor Lai and Eva Man (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2014), 277.

<sup>27</sup> HKAC revealed their annual reports from 2008-2019 to the public on their official website: "Annual Report," *Hong Kong Arts Centre*, [https://hkac.org.hk/about\\_report/](https://hkac.org.hk/about_report/) (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Ain-ling Wong was a renowned film critic and researcher in Hong Kong. She previously worked as the Head of Film Programming at Hong Kong Arts Centre (1987-1990), Programmer of Asian Cinema at Hong Kong International Film Festival (1990-1996), Research Officer at Hong Kong Film Archive (2001-2009).

<sup>29</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 39.

friends, such as Mai Ke<sup>30</sup> and Winifred Lai<sup>31</sup>, offered to help organise the HKLGFF, including writing and translating festival programmes and promotional materials. Therefore, festival costs were comparatively lower than in later years.

In the HKAC period, the HKLGFF was an experimental and politically oriented cultural event. Generally, according to Pang, due to the funding provided by HKAC, in this period the HKLGFF maintained a strongly political agenda and actively responded to the social and political events of the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> Lam was the leading figure of the HKLGFF in the HKAC period, since he established and programmed the festival. His taste and understanding of queer cinema and politics determined the characteristics of the festival as political and avant-garde. Moreover, the HKLGFF significantly mattered to Hong Kong queer communities before the 2000s, as the festival offered a space for building queer communities when they still faced social homophobia.<sup>33</sup> In the HKAC period, the festival was repeatedly renamed, changing in line with the development of queer culture. First, it was The Gay and Lesbian Films Season, then The Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1992, and the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival from 1993. In 1998, it was renamed again as the Hong Kong Queer Film/Video Festival. The name change reflected the identity politics of programming and the theme of that year. Furthermore, in terms of festival programming, the HKLGFF mostly programmed short films, which aimed to introduce the latest ideas to Hong Kong and to discuss queer issues in the Hong Kong context. The programmes of short films with political themes attracted narrow audiences with specialised tastes, causing box office failures. Meanwhile, the festival invited

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<sup>30</sup> Mai Ke originally from Singapore, now works as a freelance writer. He has been writing for many years in Hong Kong, covering film, literature, sex, humanities and performing arts, as well as translating subtitles for film. He was also the first person who used “tongzhi” to name gay people.

<sup>31</sup> Winifred Lai was a Hong Kong-based cross-media cultural figure who specialized in commenting on local popular culture.

<sup>32</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 37.

<sup>33</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 27-28.

some scholars and activists from the West to Hong Kong to introduce the latest trends of queer cinema and queer politics in the 1990s. Instead of being concerned with box office revenue, the HKLGFF addressed issues of political and cultural significance in this period.

Although the HKLGFF received funding from the HKAC, the festival still endured a financial burden. The funding of the HKLGFF was not abundant in the mid and late 1990s. Travis Kong identifies how the “tight funding constraint” could not meet the requirement of organising the festival on a large scale.<sup>34</sup> Hence, the HKLGFF started to seek commercial sponsorship in the mid-stage of the HKAC period (from 1995). The prominent Hong Kong gay disco Propaganda<sup>35</sup> started to support the HKLGFF from 1995, and its sponsorship lasted more than two decades, until Propaganda closed in 2016. Furthermore, several commercialised companies began to support the HKLGFF from 1998. In particular, the fashion brand Agnès b. built a close relationship with the HKLGFF. The types of commercial sponsors gradually diversified. Pang discovered some full pages of commercial advertisements in festival catalogues in the late 1990s, which showed the HKLGFF’s intention to address commercial sponsorships.<sup>36</sup> The increasing commercial sponsorship indicates that it was harder for the HKAC to provide sustained funding to the HKLGFF – this also marked the prelude to the commercial transformation of the HKLGFF.

The HKAC’s financial constraints led to the suspension of the HKLGFF in 1999. According to Man-Yee Fung, the boom in real estate boosted rental income for the HKAC;

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<sup>34</sup> Travis SK Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (London: Routledge, 2010), 70.

<sup>35</sup> Propaganda (also known as PP) was one of the very first gay clubs in Hong Kong. PP was founded in 1991 and became one of the most popular gay clubs in Hong Kong. However, it was closed in February 2016. For more information: Simon Liu, “Bendi Laopai Gaybar Jiang Jieye, Zheshe Ershiwunian Lai Tongzhiquan Bianhua,” 本地老牌 gay bar 將結業 折射 25 年來同志圈變化 [Long-established Local Gay Bar to Close, Reflecting Changes in the Gay Scenes Over the Past 25 Years], *Stand News*, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2016, <https://www.thestandnews.com/lgbtq/本地老牌-gay-bar-將結業-折射-25年來同志圈變化> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 51.

however, the economic crisis seriously affected its financial resources, which reduced by almost half the rental income of the HKAC in the following three years.<sup>37</sup> In addition, during the economic crisis, Hong Kong residents had less income for discretionary spending on arts and cultural activities. The HKAC thus had insufficient funding to organise relatively large-scale activities such as the HKLGFF at that time. In the meantime, disappointed by what he perceived as the Hong Kong queer communities' consumerism and lack of political engagement, Lam decided to leave the HKLGFF.<sup>38</sup> Regarding the ticket sales of the HKLGFF, Lam claimed that Hong Kong gay men "only care about where there are handsome guys. Any film that features handsome guys, the gay men who do not wear clothes, in particular, will be very popular" (my translation).<sup>39</sup> Although Lam came back to support the HKLGFF several times in the 2000s, he no longer led the operation of the festival.

The operation of the HKLGFF faced different kinds of difficulties (and even suspension) during its first ten years; however, the festival played a significant role in shaping queer communities and culture in Hong Kong. On one hand, the HKLGFF has provided a comparatively safe public space for the formation of local queer communities: when the festival was originally held in 1989, male same-sex conduct had not been decriminalised. The audience took a risk in even attending the festival. Establishing and organising a queer-themed film festival at that time was an important breakthrough for queer culture in Hong Kong, where the mainstream society was not queer-friendly. The queer communities were able to socialise with others on the occasion. On the other hand, the HKLGFF has functioned as a promoter of knowledge regarding queer identities and issues. Meanwhile, the festival

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<sup>37</sup> Fung ManYee 馮敏兒, "Art Centre 30th Anniversary," *AppleDaily HK*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2007, <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/supplement/culture/art/20070228/6855023> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Xiaofei Zhen 甄曉菲, "Shishi Feifei Tongxinglian Yingzhan," 是是非非同性恋影展 [Shishi Feifei: Queer Film Festival], *Southern Weekly 南方周末*, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

was also a platform for the public in Hong Kong to encounter and understand queer identities and communities.

### **New stakeholders of the HKLGFF: Fortissimo Films and Edko Films Ltd.**

After a year of suspension, the HKLGFF was reorganised in the new millennium, although it struggled to transform itself in the early and mid-2000s. Since then, the festival has gradually become a stable, self-financed queer film festival. The rebirth of the HKLGFF was a consequence of the efforts of two people, Raymond Yeung and Wouter Barendrecht, both of whom had backgrounds in filmmaking and film festivals. Yeung devoted himself to queer-themed filmmaking and Barendrecht (who died in 2009) specialised in distribution of independent films and also worked at International Film Festival Rotterdam and Berlin International Film Festival. According to Pang, when learning that the HKAC had suspended the only queer film festival in Hong Kong, Yeung and Barendrecht decided to revive it and proposed the idea to HKAC.<sup>40</sup> In March 2000, Yeung and Barendrecht officially relaunched the film festival and determined its name as the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, with the help of several Hong Kong filmmakers and film critics such as Shu Kei.<sup>41</sup> One year later, Barendrecht and Yeung founded the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival Society (HKLGFFS), a non-profit and non-governmental organisation aiming to “promote equal opportunities and eliminate discrimination against sexual minority groups in Hong Kong through cinematic works of art.”<sup>42</sup> The establishment of the HKLGFFS indicates the start of the transformation of the HKLGFF as an independent operation. The entity of the the HKLGFF overtly sees itself as a non-profit and non-governmental organisation, explicitly addressing its political agenda.

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<sup>40</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 52.

<sup>41</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 52-53.

<sup>42</sup> From the official website, “About Us,” *HKLGFF*, <http://www.hklgff.hk/about-us> (accessed 12<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

Following the break-up with the HKAC, the HKLGFF lost various kinds of resources, including funding and screening venues. At this difficult moment, two main stakeholders, Fortissimo Films and Films Ltd., fully engaged in the transformation of the HKLGFF. Founded by Barendrecht in 1991, Fortissimo Films is an international, independent producer-distributor and sales agent. With the assistance of Barendrecht, Fortissimo became one of the official sponsors of the HKLGFF. Fortissimo dominated the early and middle stage of the transformation in the 2000s, which mainly involved programming, funding and administration. Fortissimo contributed to the festival programming process: with the help of Fortissimo, the HKLGFF was able to “obtain internationally renowned films”<sup>43</sup> and in addition, acquire certain films with no rental cost.<sup>44</sup> Fortissimo also contributed to the funding and administration of the HKLGFF. As Rhyne observes, “Barendrecht’s own commercial success translated into a solid foundation of private funding for the HKLGFF.”<sup>45</sup> For example, as Denise Tang states, Barendrecht’s own social network secured support from local businesses, especially to promote “festival parties at [the] gay bar Propaganda with little cost.”<sup>46</sup> The opening and closing parties were held in Propaganda and the bar also sponsored the events by providing venues and part of the costs of drinks. Tang also claims, “not only does the festival [use] Fortissimo Films’ address as the festival address, the festival’s bank account is also managed by the company’s administrative staff.”<sup>47</sup> The next section will discuss Fortissimo’s influence

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<sup>43</sup> Denise Tse-Shang Tang, *Conditional Spaces: Hong Kong Lesbian Desires and Everyday Life*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 176.

<sup>44</sup> Richards, *Queer Film Festivals*, 82.

<sup>45</sup> Ragan Rhyne, “Comrades and citizens: Gay and lesbian film festivals in China,” in *Film Festival Yearbook 3*, edited by Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2011), 116.

<sup>46</sup> Denise Tang, “Demand for Cultural Representation: Emerging Independent Film and Video on Lesbian Desires,” in *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*, edited by Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger (Bristol/Chicago: Intellect, 2009), 176.

<sup>47</sup> Tang, “Demand for Cultural Representation,” 187.

on programming. During the 2000s, Fortissimo played a significant role in organising the HKLGFF and its transformation as well participating in various parts of the festival's operation.

In addition to Fortissimo Films, another main stakeholder, Edko Films Ltd., has greatly supported the HKLGFF since 2001, become more engaged in festival operations after 2009. Founded in 1950, Edko Films Ltd. is one of the main Hong Kong-based film companies, specialising in film production, distribution and exhibition. During the first few years of the festival's transformation, although the HKAC did not participate in festival operation (programming and funding, for instance), it still provided screening venues for HKLGFF. The collaboration between the HKLGFF and the HKAC ended in 2002. Broadway Circuits owned by Edko Films, which is the largest cinema circuit in Hong Kong, gradually succeeded the HKAC to provide the screening venues for HKLGFF. The cooperation between the HKLGFF and Broadway Circuits is a commercial relationship: Broadway Circuits earns profits through providing screening sites for the HKLGFF. According to Joe Lam, although the HKLGFF does not need to pay Broadway Circuits rental fees for using the venues, the festival must share half of its box office revenue with the cinemas.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the festival pays for its screening venues another way. Compared to paying a fixed rental fee for each screening, this method of cooperation can reduce box-office pressures on the festival, as the fee is comparatively lower for those films that lack commercial potential. When Barendrecht died in 2009, the cooperation between the HKLGFF and Fortissimo ended. At the early stage of the transformation, Edko Films was mainly in charge of providing the screening venues. As Edko Films also works in film distribution (of global arthouse films in particular) in Hong Kong, since 2009, Edko Films has been supporting festival programming as well.

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<sup>48</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 73.



The HKLGFF was funded by the HKAC in the 1990s, and when the HKAC stopped hosting the festival, seeking funding was the primary issue for the festival management in the early 2000s. However, the biggest challenge of researching the development of the HKLGFF was that I could not access the exact data of the HKLGFF's funding; the HKLGFF has not revealed its financial reports. Furthermore, during an interview with the current festival director (Joe Lam), I tried to ask about the funding of the HKLGFF (such as, how much funding it needs every year and how the funding is spent), but he avoided all these questions.<sup>49</sup> Thus, this chapter mainly relies on existing materials, such as other scholarship and interviews. After the break-up with the HKAC, according to Richards, the HKLGFF was reignited as "a commercial venture, which saw the festival funded through private funding and sponsorship."<sup>50</sup> At the beginning of the transformation, the financial issue was severe. At that time, the box office revenue could not maintain the operation of the HKLGFF. The festival once organised private fundraising parties to seek for donations. Compared to other queer film festivals, the funding resources of the HKLGFF are relatively less diverse. For instance, the HKLGFF has not launched a membership scheme, which is a common funding resource for queer film festivals. In addition, there is no link for individual donations on the HKLGFF's official website. HKLGFF's long-term development and investment means that box office revenue can support the operation of the HKLGFF.<sup>51</sup> The current funding pattern of the HKLGFF has formed as a hybrid that mainly relies on box office revenue and some commercial sponsorships.

The transformation of the HKLGFF into an independently run queer film festival echoes the neoliberalised cultural environment of Hong Kong. Hong Kong became a typical

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<sup>49</sup> Joe Lam, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 15<sup>th</sup> September.

<sup>50</sup> Richards, *Queer Film Festivals*, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Richards, *Queer Film Festivals*, 133.

commercial society that has pursued the free-market economic model since the 1980s. Commercialisation and market-driven forces dominate the survival and development of Hong Kong arts and culture. According to Ke-huan Lin, Hong Kong culture does not exclude mainstream and popular elements, instead, Hong Kong culture coexists with consumerism.<sup>52</sup> After the handover, the Hong Kong government aimed to build up and expand the local creative industries. Po-Shan Leung states that the Hong Kong government's culture policy has been chaotic, as the government has failed to tackle the issues of Hong Kong's creative industry to formulate a long-term plan to support the industry.<sup>53</sup> The essence of its culture policy followed the principle of the British colonial government, which was positive non-interventionism.<sup>54</sup> The government invites commercial sectors into cultural policy making. Horace Chin argues that neoliberalism allows business sectors – large enterprises in particular – to erode the arts and cultural space in Hong Kong.<sup>55</sup> Chin further contends that under the influence of neoliberalism, public funding is used not to promote arts and culture, but to generate more economic benefits; thus, attendees, costs, commercial sponsorships and box office revenue are primary factors assessed when applying for public funding.<sup>56</sup> The neoliberal-oriented cultural policy has a significant influence on the whole arts and cultural environment of Hong Kong.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, two public institutions and one governmental department oversee arts and culture in Hong Kong. Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) is a statutory authority that was created in 1995, focusing on “grant allocation, policy and planning,

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<sup>52</sup> Ke-Huan Lin 林克歡, “*Xiaofei Shidai De Xiju*” 消費時代的戲劇 [Theatre in Consumer Society] (Taiwan: Bookman Publication Ltd, 2007), 8.

<sup>53</sup> Po-Shan Leung 梁寶山, *我愛 Art Basel*, [I Love Art Basel] (Hong Kong: Dirty Press, 2018), 40.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Horace Chin 陳雲, “*Wenhua Zai Xianggang: Xianggang De Wenhua Zhengce*” 文化在香港：香港的文化政策 [Culture in Hong Kong: The Culture Policy of Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Arcadia Press Ltd, 2017), 226.

<sup>56</sup> Chin, *Culture in Hong Kong*, 211.

advocacy, promotion and development, and programme planning.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (WKCD) is another quasi-governmental public institution, which focuses on the development of West Kowloon Cultural District.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, formed in 2000, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) is a department in the Government of Hong Kong that directly reports to the Home Affairs Bureau. Unlike the HKADC or the WKCD, which mainly concentrate on arts and cultural events, the functions of the LCSD cover a much wider range. The LCSD coordinates and provides services for sports, antiquities, culture and arts in Hong Kong, and it organises and supports different screening-related events every year – it also normally engages in the operation of three film festivals: the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF),<sup>59</sup> the Hong Kong French Film Festival, and the KINO German Film Festival.<sup>60</sup> In particular, the LCSD has a long-term collaboration with the Hong Kong French Film Festival and HKIFF. The KINO German Film Festival is a new festival, and the LCSD supported it in 2017 and 2018.

In terms of the main arts body for funding arts and culture activities in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Arts Development Council provides limited funding for film festival projects. Focusing on the HKADC granted projects from 2015 to 2019, Table 3.1 below lists all its film festival-related projects. According to Table 3.1, the HKADC usually offered small amounts of financial support for three to six projects each year. The HKADC sponsors thousands of projects annually, and only a few are film festivals. Moreover, the amount of funding granted

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<sup>57</sup> For more information see the official website, “About HKADC,” *Hong Kong Arts Development Council*, <http://www.hkadc.org.hk/?p=81&lang=en> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Originally proposed in 1998, West Kowloon Cultural District is a development project that aimed to form an international arts and culture hub in West Kowloon.

<sup>59</sup> According to Cheung, “the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, assists this 32-year-old festival indirectly by renting out venues at a reduced rental rate for festival screenings during the March-April festival season.” Cheung, “Corporatising a Film Festival,” 103.

<sup>60</sup> Organised by Goethe-Institut Hong Kong, KINO German Film Festival is co-curated by Goethe-Institut and Hong Kong International Film Festival Society.

for these film festival projects is quite small. Comparing to the HKADC's own film festival and short film competition, the Fresh Wave, the HKADC sponsors only one tenth or even one thirtieth of the Fresh Wave's funding amount to other projects. The limited number of successfully funded projects demonstrate the difficulty and intensity of applying for the HKADC's grants. Furthermore, among the successful applicants from 2015 to 2019, three film festivals – the HKIFF, the Hong Kong International Deaf Film Festival, and the Hong Kong Independent Film Festival – received funding from the HKADC almost every year. For the Hong Kong International Film Festival, the HKADC offers around one third of the HKIFF's operating budget.<sup>61</sup> The HKADC usually sponsors one of the HKIFF's events, for example, Filmmaker in Focus in 2018 and 2019. However, the application process and assessment system of the HKADC raise several issues, such as insufficient funding and overly commercial-oriented assessment.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, the HKADC remains the main public funding source for film festivals in Hong Kong.

**Table 3. 1 The HKADC Granted Film Festival Projects 2015-2019<sup>63</sup>**

	<b>Annual Total (HK\$)</b>	<b>Project Name</b>	<b>Name of Grantee</b>	<b>Grant Amount (HKD)</b>
2019-2020	92,115,760	The 10 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hong Kong International Deaf Film Festival & The 2 <sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Deaf Cinema	Asian People's Theatre Festival Society	460,000
		The 44 <sup>th</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival - Filmmaker in Focus	The Hong Kong International	453,200

<sup>61</sup> Cheung, "Corporatising a Film Festival," 103.

<sup>62</sup> Ching Wong 黃靜, "Duli Dianyingtuan Yingyizhi Tingzishijian" 獨立電影團體影意志停資事件 [Independent Film Group Ying E Chi Funding Suspension], *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2011, [https://yingechi.blogspot.com/2011/07/blog-post\\_17.html](https://yingechi.blogspot.com/2011/07/blog-post_17.html) (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

<sup>63</sup> All data collected from the annual reports of grant recipients or projects on the official website: "Recipients List," *Hong Kong Arts Development Council*, <http://www.hkadc.org.hk/?p=2242&lang=en> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

			Film Festival Society Limited	
		The 5 <sup>th</sup> Sangwoodgoon Food and Farming Film Festival	Li Chun Nei	203,700
2018-2019	89,441,950	Hong Kong Independent Film Festival 2019	Ying E Chi Limited	166,300
		The 9 <sup>th</sup> Hong Kong International Deaf Film Festival	Asian People's Theatre Festival Society	201,400
		The 4 <sup>th</sup> Sangwoodgoon Food and Farming Film Festival	Chow Sze Chung	177,800
		The 43 <sup>rd</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival- Filmmaker In Focus	The Hong Kong International Film Festival Society Limited	399,900
		Kaohsiung Hong Kong Independent Film Festival	Ying E Chi Limited	118,000
		Hong Kong Independent Film Festival in Berlin	Ying E Chi Limited	150,000
2017-2018	88,597,540	The 12 <sup>th</sup> Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival	Hong Kong Arts Development Council and Fresh Wave	4,275,000
		The 8 <sup>th</sup> Hong Kong International Deaf Film Festival	Asian People's Theatre Festival Society	180,500
		The 42 <sup>nd</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival – Appreciation of Film Arts	The Hong Kong International Film Festival Society Limited	406,900
		Participating Overseas Film Festivals / Film Screenings * <sup>64</sup>	Ying E Chi Limited	61,300
		Hong Kong Independent Film Festival 2018	Ying E Chi Limited	155,000
2016-2017	144,206,707	The 11 <sup>th</sup> Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival	Hong Kong Arts Development Council and Fresh Wave	5,000,000
		Ground Up Student Film Festival 2016	Lam Sum	120,300
		Chinese Documentary Festival 2017	Visible Record Ltd.	359,700
		The 41 <sup>st</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival	The Hong Kong International Film Festival Society Limited	200,250

<sup>64</sup> Except for this project, all other listed projects were film festivals organised in Hong Kong.

		The 41 <sup>st</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival - Community Programme (Community Screenings and Exhibition)	The Hong Kong International Film Festival Society Limited	205,500
		The 3 <sup>rd</sup> Ground UP Student Film Festival	Ground Up Film Society	176,900
		Inheritance of Hong Kong Indie Film Festival (Provisional)	Ying E Chi Limited	98,800
2015-2016	117,534,448	The 10th Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival	Hong Kong Arts Development Council and Fresh Wave	5,000,000
		The 40th Hong Kong International Film Festival	The Hong Kong International Film Festival Society Limited	188,800
		The 6th Hong Kong International Deaf Film Festival	Asian People's Theatre Festival Society	252,000
		Chinese Documentary Festival 2016	Visible Record Ltd.	345,800

The early transformation of the HKLGFF reflects Hong Kong's neoliberal, highly commercial arts and cultural ecology. Although the festival team of the HKLGFF did not clarify why the festival lacks public funding, in terms of governmental sources, Gary Mak, a former festival programmer and the co-organiser of the HKLGFF from the mid-2000s to 2019, claimed that the Hong Kong government is reluctant to sponsor film events as they think film is commercial.<sup>65</sup> The highly competitive application process for public funding and its limited budgets are factors that reduce the HKLGFF's intention to seek funding from governmental institutions. Faced with the lack of public funding, the rebirth of the HKLGFF could not rely on support from the state, thus the festival needed to transform into a single entity. The independent operation provides flexibility to seek alternative funding sources. Meanwhile, its

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<sup>65</sup> Richards, *Queer Film Festivals*, 80.

self-sufficient business model gives the HKLGFF more freedom to organise the festival.<sup>66</sup> In this situation, the strategies of organising the HKLGFF have also been greatly adjusted.

### **Adjusting festival management: screening venues, programming and commercial sponsorship**

When the HKLGFF became a corporate body in the early 2000s, the festival's need for independent pursuit of funding emerged. Under this circumstance, the HKLGFF has adjusted its operational strategies to be more market oriented. The mission of the HKLGFF is to promote queer equal rights as well as eliminating discrimination against queer communities, and the festival team aims to continually fulfil social and political purposes through the commercialisation of the HKLGFF. According to the main resource of the HKLGFF's funding (box office revenue), the key focus amid commercialisation is to increase festival attendance and thus achieve increased box office revenue and attract more commercial sponsorships. The commercial transformation of the HKLGFF is interpreted by exploring how the main stakeholders, Edko Films and Fortissimo, and other commercial sponsorships have influenced and even engaged in the operation of the HKLGFF.

As discussed, Edko Films (or Broadway Circuit) has replaced the HKAC to provide screening venues since the early 2000s. Table 3.2 lists all the screening venues of the HKLGFF from 2000-2020, showing that more and more commercial cinemas engage in providing screening sites. The first one was Broadway Cinematheque, which opened in 1996 and is a local multi-screen specialty venue in Kowloon District, screening a wider spectrum of films including independent and art films compared to other cinemas in Hong Kong. Moreover, initiating its long-term partnership with the HKLGFF since 2001, Broadway Cinematheque has

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<sup>66</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 78.

become the longest-cooperating cinema in providing screening venues. Furthermore, as a commercial cinema that aims to nurture cinematic culture and to enlarge the audience base for non-mainstream films in Hong Kong, Broadway Cinematheque supports marginal and independent film screening events. In addition to engagement in the HKLGFF, Broadway Cinematheque also provides screening sites for relatively small-scale film festivals of various kinds, such as the Hong Kong Asian Film Festival, the Hong Kong European Film Festival, and the Human Rights Documentary Film Festival.

**Table 3.2** Screening Venues of the HKLGFF, 2000-2020

	Screening Venues
2000	Lim Por Yen Film Theater (now Louis Koo Cinema)
2001	Lim Por Yen Film Theater, Broadway Cinematheque
2002	Lim Por Yen Film Theater, Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc
2003	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc
2004	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc
2005	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc
2006	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk (closed now)
2007	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk
2008	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk
2009	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk
2010	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk
2011	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk, The ONE
2012	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk, The ONE
2013	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk, The ONE
2014	Broadway Cinematheque, PALACE ifc, AMC Festival Walk, The ONE
2015	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place
2016	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place
2017	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place
2018	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place, Movie Movie
2019	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place, Premier Elements, Louis Koo Cinema (Hong Kong Arts Centre)
2020	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place, Premier Elements, Louis Koo Cinema (Hong Kong Arts Centre), Movie Movie, My Cinema Yoho Mall



Seven commercial cinemas have become the HKLGFF screening venues over the last two decades. Some, such as AMC Festival Walk, have since closed; while others, such as Movie Movie, only provided screening sites occasionally. Table 3.2 also shows various brands of cooperating commercial cinemas in Hong Kong. However, all these cinemas, including AMC Festival Walk and AMC Pacific Place, belong to Broadway Circuits. AMC Theatres opened their first cinema (AMC Festival Walk) in Hong Kong in 1998, while the brand sold the cinema business in Hong Kong to Suntech International Management Limited, owned by Edko Films, in January 2006. Thus, although AMC Cinemas appears as a different brand from Broadway Cinemas, AMC Cinemas are operated by Broadway Circuits in Hong Kong.<sup>67</sup> Since all the screenings are shown in commercial cinemas, the ticket pricing is set as the general standard (around 100HK Dollars), which is almost twice the price as in the HKAC period. Box office revenue have gradually become the main funding resource for the HKLGFF.

The engagement of these commercial cinemas has led to the increasing visibility of the festival as well as of queer communities. During the HKAC period, almost all the screenings were showcased at Lim Por Yen Film Theatre; while with the involvement of more cinemas after 2001, the HKLGFF could cover a couple more districts. Audiences can participate in the HKLGFF in both Kowloon District and Central District, and even in Eastern District (in 2018) and in the New Territories (2020). More significantly, except for Broadway Cinematheque, most of these cinemas are situated in commercial spaces. Broadway Cinematheque is located in a residential neighbourhood, while the other cinemas are located in high-end shopping malls. Joe Lam, the current festival director, sees cooperating with several commercial

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<sup>67</sup>“Kowloon Tong AMC cinema to move to Yuen Long as rent skyrockets,” *ejinsight*, latest update, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2015, <http://www.ejinsight.com/20151130-kowloon-tong-amc-cinema-move-yuen-long-as-rent-skyrockets/> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2021)

mainstream cinemas as a gradual process of “coming out.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, the cooperation with mainstream commercial cinemas, especially those situated in shopping malls, indicates that the HKLGFF has left the comfort zone created by HKAC and entered the broader public space where the festival is exposed to all kinds of people.

The increasing exposure of the HKLGFF in commercial public spaces can enlarge and diversify the audience base. Regarding to the initial cooperation with Broadway Circuit, Raymond Yeung mentioned the key person in the festival catalogue of the HKLGFF 2019, stating,

In 2001, Gary (Mak) was working for Edko Films, which ran the Broadway Cinematheque. He offered to work with us, so we could have more venues to showcase our films. The addition of commercial cinema screenings helped show the public that LGBTI films were no longer considered just as art-house movies; they could attract wider audience, which both gay and straight could enjoy.<sup>69</sup>

The engagement with Broadway Circuits can attract three more types of audiences. Firstly, Broadway Cinematheque is a semi-art house commercial cinema; hence, it has already formed a core audience of moviegoers who accept comparatively non-mainstream films. Joe Lam claims that the HKLGFF can attract the “indie film lovers, [who] might be here to watch their favourite movie star.”<sup>70</sup> Secondly, screening in high-end shopping malls can attract gay audiences who are not frequent movie-goers. For example, in terms of the audience of the

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<sup>68</sup> Chan Cow 陳奉京, “Jinjie Jujiao Kuaxingbie, Zongjian: Tongzhiyingpian Buzhigei Tongzhikan” 今屆聚焦跨性別總監:同志影片不止給同志看 [Focusing on Transgender, Festival Director: queer films are not only for Tongzhi], *HK01*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2017, <https://www.hk01.com/藝文/117137/同志影展專訪上-今屆聚焦跨性別-總監-同志影片不止給同志看> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

<sup>69</sup> Raymond Yeung, “Au Revoir,” in *Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival Catalogue 2019*.

<sup>70</sup> Hsiu Wen Liu, “Heart to heart: HK gay film festival seeks emotional appeal,” *Asia Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/article/heart-heart-hk-gay-film-festival-seeks-emotional-appeal/> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2021).

PALACE ifc, Mak states that “there is a gay crowd coming down from the gym to the cinema.”<sup>71</sup> They are not regular festivalgoers, but they choose to attend festival screenings. Attending a queer film festival can represent part of a trendy consumer lifestyle that reflects good cultural “tastes” and middle-class distinction. The third type of audience are ordinary customers. The customer flow rate of these shopping malls is extremely high. Moreover, Joe Lam states that queer films are no longer only for queer communities.<sup>72</sup> In other words, from the viewpoint of the festival committee, the HKLGFF should no longer only serve the queer community. The further discussion in terms of the relationship between these screening venues and audience as well as ticket pricing is investigated in Chapter Three.

With the engagement of Fortissimo and Edko Films, the programming style of the HKLGFF adjusted to be market oriented from 2000. This chapter interprets this commercial orientation of the programmes in the new millennium from three aspects. In terms of genre, romantic comedy dominates the programmes; regarding on-screen representations, white muscular gay men are the overriding images that sell tickets, and nudity is a significant selling point. The third aspect is that the HKLGFF prefers to programme films that receive media coverage. The programming style is greatly different from Edward Lam’s. To increase box office revenue, the HKLGFF hosts opening and closing ceremonies as well as an after party. Pang also found that, to promote the festivals as well as attract bigger audiences, most of the opening and closing films are commercial queer films.<sup>73</sup> In the beginning of the commercialisation, the programming team of the HKLGFF intended to change Edward Lam’s political-oriented style, thus they wanted to “bring in more accessible work.”<sup>74</sup> As the

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<sup>71</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 83.

<sup>72</sup> Chan, “Jinjie Jujiao Kuaxingbie.”

<sup>73</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 97-98.

<sup>74</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 82.

sustainability of the HKLGFF greatly relies on box office revenue, the commercialisation of the programming is an essential strategy. Meanwhile, the festival team intends to screen comparatively more commercial and popular queer films in the cinemas situated in high-end shopping malls. The ultimate goal of commercialised programming style is to attract a bigger audience, then to seek increasing box office revenue.

The commercialisation of the HKLGFF's programming is largely based on the global commercialisation of queer cinema. Thus, the HKLGFF's programmers can provide a good number of queer films with market potential to Hong Kong audiences. The niche market first gradually formed in the West, with the success of new queer cinema in the 1990s. Due to technological developments (both in filmmaking and online distribution) and the enlarging market for queer films, Western low-budget gay films that regard muscular male bodies as a selling point, such as the *Eating Out* series (2004-2011) and *Another Gay Movie* (2006), emerged in large numbers in the 2000s. They represent a kind of soft porn, featuring muscular male bodies and (partial) nudity. Some proved popular, becoming box office hits at queer film festivals. The HKLGFF also programmed these gay films, such as the *Eating Out* series in 2005, 2009 and 2011, earning good box office revenue. With the expanding niche market of queer films, increasing capital has been invested in queer filmmaking. Moreover, queer cinema has become more mainstream since the late 2000s, breaking boundaries and highlighting the commercial value of queer films in the US film industry.<sup>75</sup> Queer films (mainly gay films) boomed in the mainstream in the late 2010s, such as *Moonlight* (2016), *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) and *Love, Simon* (2018), which stood out in terms of box office and film awards.<sup>76</sup> Some

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<sup>75</sup> Neta Alexander, "No Longer Silent: Queer Cinema Leaves Fringe for Mainstream," *Haaretz*, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013, <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-queer-cinema-goes-mainstream-1.5298950> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

<sup>76</sup> Alex Jung, "What's Happening to 'Queer' Cinema in the LGBT Film Boom?" *Vulture*, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/queer-cinema-whats-happening-to-it.html> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

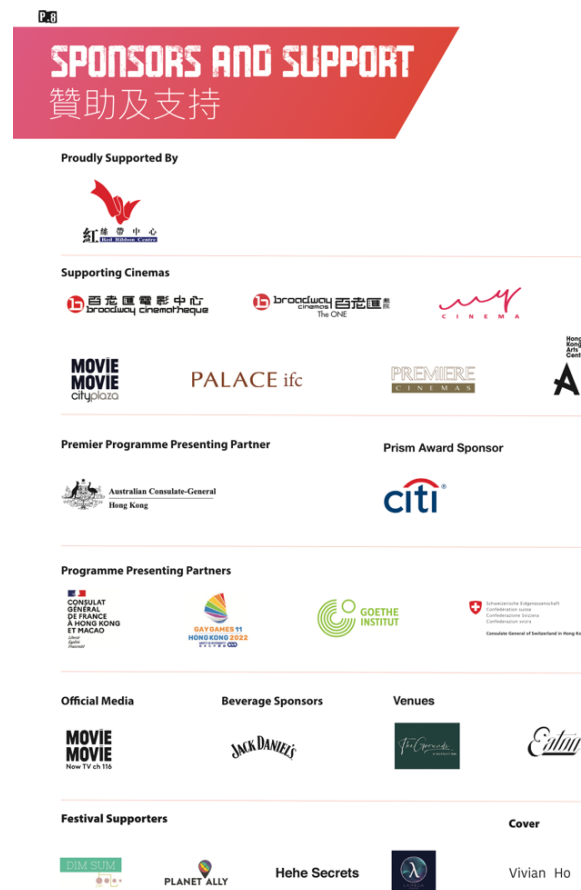
award-winning queer films are comparatively more popular than other queer films in queer film festivals due to wide media coverage. Chapter Four explores the HKLGFF programming in detail.

As commercial transformation and the actual festival operation cannot just rely on Fortissimo Films and Edko Films, various kinds of sponsors have collaborated with the HKLGFF. As discussed in the second section, the engagement of sponsors in the HKLGFF can date back to the HKAC period. Following decades-long commercialisation, as Figure 3.1 shows, the sponsors of the HKLGFF have become much more diversified. In addition to commercial sponsorships, some non-profit institutions also sponsor the HKLGFF. The ways in which the HKLGFF cooperates with sponsorships also vary. As Figures 3.2 and 3.3 show, commercial sponsors' advertisements appear on festival catalogues and the festival's official website. In addition, sometimes the advertisements, such as one in 2018 for Laser Kool (a laser hair removal service exclusively for men), appear on the big screen ahead of the films. Moreover, some companies or institutions support the screenings of queer films by paying screening fees. For instance, at the HKLGFF 2019, the local branches of the Goethe-Institut (a German non-profit cultural organisation) and the Dutch Embassy supported queer films from their respective countries. Other forms of cooperation include providing venues or food and beverages (Jack Daniels and Finlandia, for instance) and paying for private screenings (for own staff). Seeking sponsorships has not proved to be easy, especially in the early and mid-2000s. According to Pang, the festival particularly expressed difficulties in finding suitable sponsorships in the catalogue of the HKLGFF 2005.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, as the festival's operations and the pink market in Hong Kong matured, seeking commercial sponsorships became slightly

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<sup>77</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 65.

easier in the 2010s. Through researching festival catalogues, Pang claims that the HKLGFF's catalogues have become more colourful and eye-catching since the introduction of commercialisation.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, numerous commercial sponsors, including gay bars, hotels, airlines, skin care products, and condoms, have been listed in the festival catalogues, mirroring an idealised Western, middle-class, consumerist gay lifestyle.<sup>79</sup> Following its commercial transformation, the HKLGFF has built up long-term and stable relationships with some companies and institutions, such as Citi Bank, Jack Daniels, the Goethe-Institut and Bottom 9 (men's swimwear and underwear).



**Figure 3.1** Sponsor page in the festival catalogue of the HKLGFF 2020

<sup>78</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 72.

<sup>79</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 73-74.



**Figure 3.2** Advertisement page in the festival catalogue of the HKLGFF 2019



**Figure 3.3** Screenshot of the official website of the HKLGFF 2019

Queer consumption is an important factor in examining the increasing commercial sponsorships of the HKLGFF. As discussed in Chapter One, queer consumption plays a significant role in the formation of queer culture in Hong Kong, and the niche market for queer commerce has gradually expanded in the new millennium. The average annual purchasing power of the queer communities in Hong Kong is estimated to be as high as US\$22 billion.<sup>80</sup> Mainstream businesses have started to pay more attention to local queer communities. They

<sup>80</sup> “Burong Hushi! Xiaofeili Gao, Fenhong Jingji Juan Quanguo” 不容忽視！消費力高「粉紅經濟」捲全球 [Do not Ignore! The High Consumption Power, Pink Economy Sweeps the World], *Think Hong Kong*, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2018, <https://www.thinkhk.com/article/2018-10/19/30366.html> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

have also become the major sponsors of local queer events. For instance, large foreign transnational corporations in Hong Kong are also willing to sponsor large-scale queer activities.<sup>81</sup> The development of queer consumption in Hong Kong has offered favourable conditions for the commercialisation of the HKLGFF.

With the increasing commercial sponsorship of the HKLGFF, sponsors have comparatively subtle impacts on the actual festival operation. Joe Lam explicitly claims that the HKLGFF's corporate sponsorship does not influence any programming decisions.<sup>82</sup> However, such influence is structural: the festival needs to attract larger audiences, so that it can secure commercial sponsorship. In other words, this commercial consideration is unavoidable in the festival operation. Regarding the commercialisation of the HKLGFF, Richards argues that the transformation "is indicative of the trend for major queer film festivals growing into the creative industry," which shows that queer film festivals "have now obtained an economic status and are attractive to corporate sponsors."<sup>83</sup> In this situation, where the HKLGFF lacks other funding resources, relying on box office revenue and commercial sponsorship contributes to the sustainability of the HKLGFF.

The phenomenon of commercialisation has provoked criticism among scholars, film festival programmers, and even queer filmmakers. For instance, scholar Roya Rastegar addresses the increasing competition among commercialised queer film festivals, claiming:

The festival must be able to operate successfully as a hierarchically structured institution to secure growth and stable resources and funding, as well as remain

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Richards, *Queer Film Festivals*, 130.

<sup>83</sup> Richards, *Queer Film Festivals*, 84.



connected to market-based alliances required for commercial success in the broader gay and lesbian film circuit.<sup>84</sup>

The local market for a queer film festival is narrow, and the commercial sponsorship that a queer film festival can draw from is also limited. Due to scarce resources (audience, films, media coverage and sponsorships, for example), the competition between queer film festivals is intensive. Meanwhile, there is a competition for resources (commercial sponsorships, in particular) between queer film festivals and other local or regional organisations. These various competitions further intensify queer film festivals' focus on commercial considerations. Queer filmmaker Todd Verow once publicly decried "the commercialisation of queer cinema and the ways in which LGBT film festivals collude in this process," since the preference of queer film festivals' programmers for "non-threatening, audience pleasers" films can encourage queer filmmakers to produce "more commercial and accessible work."<sup>85</sup> His claim shows that for box office success, rather than directly influencing content, festival programmers' preferences certainly factor into filmmakers' considerations about what goes into their films. Commercial considerations of queer film festivals even have an impact on the production of queer films. Thus, queer films with commercial potential are encouraged, which might cause the homogenisation of queer films in terms of genre, narrative and casting. Furthermore, commercialisation means that queer film festivals concentrate on only certain types of audience who can make a great economic contribution, while overlooking members of queer communities who are economically unprivileged.

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<sup>84</sup> Roya Rastegar, "The De-Fusion of Good Intentions: Outfest's Fusion Film Festival," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 3 (2009): 482.

<sup>85</sup> Todd Verow, "No More Mr. Nice Gay: A Manifesto," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 394.

Criticisms mainly concern how the HKLGFF has become Western-oriented, gay-oriented and middle-class oriented since its commercialisation. Firstly, Westernism is reflected in festival programming. The programming process of the HKLGFF relies on the engagement of Fortissimo or Edko Films. As Pang notes, the majority of selected films are from either Fortissimo or Edko Films, thus Western queer films dominate the programmes.<sup>86</sup> Regarding Western-centric programmes, Day Wong criticises the HKLGFF for overly relying on Western-queer culture and for having “failed to capture the Chinese experience of same-sex desire and relationships.”<sup>87</sup> Qin Qin further argues that “this lack of onscreen representation of the local LGBT community and a favouring of Western cinema could alienate the Hong Kong *tongzhi* community.”<sup>88</sup> Serving Hong Kong queer communities as its core mission, most of the films programmed by the HKLGFF are about queer life and culture in the West. The topics or issues that these Western queer films discuss do not fully reflect the experience of the local queer communities.

Secondly, gay men are the targeted audience of the HKLGFF. In her investigation of the film selections from 1989 to 2007, Pang notes that the number of lesbian films is consistently much lower than gay films.<sup>89</sup> This imbalance, she concludes, has been especially evident since 2000, when the number of gay films selected has been several times greater than lesbian films.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Yau outwardly critiques the HKLGFF for having been “programmed” to take white, mainly gay, content and for having only started to include a

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<sup>86</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 95.

<sup>87</sup> Day Wong, “Hybridization and the Emergence of ‘Gay’ Identities in Hong Kong and in China,” *Visual Anthropology* 24, no. 1-2 (2010): 157.

<sup>88</sup> Qin Qin, “A Waning Queerscape: the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival,” *Journal of Film and Video* 71, no. 3 (2019): 44.

<sup>89</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 99-101.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

little more lesbian content since the 2000s.<sup>91</sup> The gay-driven programming is closely linked to the situation of being overly commercialised. Tang suggests that lesbian films and programmes fail to generate much revenue for the festival.<sup>92</sup> The festival intends to attract a gay audience, as gay men in Hong Kong generally have more disposable income than other sexual minorities.

Finally, middle-class orientation refers to the middle-class taste and middle-class audience base of the HKLGFF. Pang highlights that the HKLGFF has been overly middle-class centric since the early 2000s.<sup>93</sup> The operation of the HKLGFF is distinctly based on middle-class logic. Even in the selection of screening venues, the festival chooses commercial cinemas with middle-class audience bases.<sup>94</sup> For the sustainability of the festival, the HKLGFF tends to try and attract a middle-class audience. In general, the HKLGFF has consolidated and strengthened the image of middle-class and Western-style gay consumers. Chapter Three discusses the audience base of the HKLGFF in detail.

Middle-class, Western and gay orientations are the three main issues that the HKLGFF has been struggling with. In other words, Westernism, gayness and middle-classness can be synthesised as the global gayness of queer film festivals. Yau argues that almost all the queer film festivals in Asia face three battles: “the globalisation of Euro-American white gay culture; the colonial histories; and the chauvinism embedded in the queer communities.”<sup>95</sup> The HKLGFF has been significantly influenced by global gay culture. The global gayness constructed through queer film festivals has a strong relationship with neoliberalism and post-colonialism.

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<sup>91</sup> Yau Ching, “Bridges and Battles,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 606.

<sup>92</sup> Tang, *Conditional Spaces*, 124.

<sup>93</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 87.

<sup>94</sup> Pang, “Herstories,” 59-60.

<sup>95</sup> Yau, “Bridges and Battles,” 606.

## Conclusion

After surviving a difficult period that lasted over a decade since the late 1990s, the HKLGFF has gradually become successful from a commercial standpoint in the 2010s. Regarding the business of HKLGFF, according to Mak,

For the immediate figures, it is the box office [that counts]. So far, the festival has been doing well, especially in the last three to five years (interviewed by Stuart Richards in 2014, I added), [when] we have been nearly sustainable just from the box office [takings] we earn.<sup>96</sup>

The funding pattern of the HKLGFF mainly relies on box office revenue, supplemented by commercial sponsorships. Mak's claim demonstrates that this kind of commercialised operating mode secures the sustainability of the HKLGFF. Furthermore, this financial sustainability can support the HKLGFF to organise some events catering to the interests of local queer communities. The commercialised HKLGFF still attempts to fulfil its social and political agendas, although the festival also considers ticket sales.

By exploring the historical development of the HKLGFF, this chapter has identified numerous forces and stakeholders that have contributed to the festival's commercialisation. It has also demonstrated that commercialised queer film festivals still maintain a political aspect. This chapter has illustrated both sides of influences caused by commercialisation on the festival. Although I could not access primary materials about the budget and spending of the HKLGFF, to explore the changes in the festival's funding patterns and managements, this chapter has provided a framework that focuses on the context (such as the social and cultural backgrounds of the host city) in which festivals are located. While the existing scholarships

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<sup>96</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 133.

focuses more on the festival, per se, this chapter addresses the significance of the context that shapes queer film festivals.

## Chapter Four

### Festival Audiences and Class Distinction

To illustrate the audience experience of the HKLGFF, I begin this chapter with a brief personal observation. On 21<sup>st</sup> September 2018, I attended one of the screenings of the HKLGFF, which was the French gay film *Sorry Angel* (2018). The film was screened at Movie Movie cinema, situated on the top floor of Cityplaza, a spacious high-end shopping mall in Quarry Bay, Eastern District. The time was about 21:30 and the mall was still crowded. I found the cinema after a long search around the shopping mall. It was not easy to notice the existence of the HKLGFF at the cinema; there was only a promotion poster for the festival in one corner. I did not have the feeling of participating in a queer film festival until I approached the screening hall. There were two young men giving every audience member two condoms and some leaflets about AIDS prevention and the Pride Parade to be held in November. In the screening room, the big screen was filled by the festival poster for the HKLGFF. Looking around the hall, most of the seats were occupied; most of the audience were male, seemingly in their 30s. Before the screening started, one of the festival team members gave a short introduction about the film in English. When the film ended, everyone just left without discussion.

The experience in 2018 made me wonder whether the HKLGFF wanted to attract certain types of audiences. Thus, aiming to explore the relationship between the actual festival practices and the formation of its audience base by introducing the perspective of social class, this chapter argues that the HKLGFF prioritises a middle-class gay audience due to commercial considerations, advocating the homonormative lifestyle. This chapter starts by

conceptualising class in three different contexts – queer studies, (queer) film festivals, and Hong Kong – aiming to highlight the significance of social class as a critical lens in the research of the HKLGFF. The second section demonstrates the importance of inclusivity in queer film festivals and discusses the issue of festival exclusion from economic and linguistic angles. Then, turning the focus to HKLGFF, the chapter explores how the festival excludes audiences economically and linguistically, to explore what kinds of audience does festival attract. The analysis also pays attention to the factor of urban space, as the chapter analyses the relationship between the location of the screening venues and the construction of a middle-class audience. Meanwhile, examining the festival programmes, the perspective of gender is also considered in the discussion of the formation of a targeted audience base. This chapter ends by illustrating what a homonormative lifestyle is as well as investigating how the HKLGFF advocates this gay lifestyle. It also examines the advertisements in the festival catalogues.

### **Introducing the perspective of class**

Class works as one of the vital axes in the research of humanities and social sciences. With improvements in productivity as well as the emergence of social divisions of labour, people have become divided into various social groups based on the material and symbolic resources to which they have access. In terms of understanding capital, Pierre Bourdieu expands the Marxist concept of capital (economic capital) by introducing three more types: social, cultural and symbolic.<sup>1</sup> Although class is regarded as an economic category in the traditional way, the interpretation of class becomes multidimensional as well, involving more factors, such as the level of education and lifestyle. As Lisa Henderson states, class can be defined as “economic and cultural coproduction of social distinction and hierarchy.”<sup>2</sup> In daily life, social class has

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1986), 243.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Henderson, *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 5.

greatly influenced the behaviours and ideologies of people. Similarly, social class cannot be neglected in research about a city, an organisation or a community, since class reflects the power relations between economic and social relations.

There is an extremely close relationship between queer culture and social class. In general, sexual identity has historically been related to class identity. Some historians trace the daily life of American queer communities to the early 1900s. For instance, Lillian Faderman points out the explicit class division among lesbian communities in the 1920s: they were clearly divided into middle-class groups and working-class groups, and lesbians only socialised with others from the same class.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, these two groups formed totally different class-based social spaces.<sup>4</sup> In addition, similar class division could also be found in gay men's spaces and lives. Documenting the lived experiences of gay communities in early 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City, George Chauncey discovered that gay working-class culture revolved around public spaces such as pubs, balls and saloons on the Lower East Side.<sup>5</sup> In comparison, middle-class gay men gravitated to private places on the Upper East Side.<sup>6</sup> These historical facts illustrate that class has structured queer communities' lives and was a crucial impediment to solidarity within queer communities. Social class has divided queer communities' consumption and socialising spaces, and this class-based spatial segregation still exists globally. In particular, with the increasing pink capital in the queer world, Henderson suggests that it is necessary to explore "the ways in which class has appeared, structuring queer difference and being restructured by queer specificity" in mainstream

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<sup>3</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 179.

<sup>4</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 178-179.

<sup>5</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 158-159.



commercial media.<sup>7</sup> The main reason is that, in commercial media, “class is queered by the slow drip of queer characters into an otherwise unchanged stream of class difference.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the perspective of social class becomes significant in queer studies.

As illustrated in Chapter One, Hong Kong is an economically well-developed city with severe wealth disparity. Consequently, social class is one of the key categories through which to explore and understand the city. For a long time in Hong Kong’s colonial history, the majority of Hong Kong residents were situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Hong Chan argues that the “old Hong Kong” was made up of three classes: British colonisers, Chinese compradors, and laborers.<sup>9</sup> With the booming of the economy and the subsequent structural adjustment, the social stratification of Hong Kong has changed since the 1970s. According to Tai-lok Lui, in the 1970s and 1980s, Hong Kong’s economy took off and the public education system developed. A large number of professionals, administrators and managers appeared, and, as a result, the middle class has gradually formed in Hong Kong.<sup>10</sup> Lui observes that the term social class (middle class, in particular) was not popular in the discussion of Hong Kong society until the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> The consciousness of social class has advanced along with the rise of Hong Kong’s middle class.

Under the neoliberal waves, a mass of wealth has been assembled by several real estate giants and governmental financial supports of social welfare has been greatly limited, intensifying the gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, for the middle class, the

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<sup>7</sup> Seidman, “Class matters,” 57.

<sup>8</sup> Henderson, *Love and Money*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Hong Chan, “Xianggang De Bentu Ziben Yu Xinzhongchan Jieji,” 香港的本土資本與新中產階級 [Hong Kong’s Local Capitalism and the New Middle Class] in *Jieji Fenxi Yu Xianggang* 階級分析與香港 [Class Analysis and Hong Kong] edited by Tai-lok Lui and Wai-pong Wong (Hong Kong: Youth Literary Book Store, 1998), 83.

<sup>10</sup> Tai-lok Lui, “Rearguard Politics: Hong Kong’s Middle Class,” *The Developing Economies* 41, no. 2 (2003): 165 and 170.

<sup>11</sup> Lui, “Rearguard Politics,” 164.

current economic structure is likely to go against maintaining their social status. Hong Kong's middle class suffers from anxiety about personal financial insecurity and the depravation of both local and global economic environments, and they feel pessimistic about the younger generation's career development as well.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, social mobility in Hong Kong has slowed in the new millennium. Real estate hegemony results in expensive housing prices in Hong Kong, and most professionals find it difficult to afford an apartment without aid from older generations such as their parents.<sup>13</sup> The severe structural economic injustice intensifies class conflicts in Hong Kong, which permeates almost every aspect of the city.

Class plays an important role in shaping queer culture and communities in Hong Kong. In Chapter One, based on discussions with Travis Kong and Denis Tang, I investigated Hong Kong queer communities and culture in the discourse of social class, a dynamic that highlights the class-based spatial segmentation of queer consumption and social spaces as well as the middle-class orientation in Hong Kong pink business. Hong Kong queer culture is built to a great extent on queer consumption. The Central area, where businesses flourish, has become the heart of queer consumption in Hong Kong. Ting-fai Yu notes the absence of the class perspective in the analysis of local queer culture.<sup>14</sup> However, he highlights the significance of class to queer communities, arguing that "it plays a remarkable role in structuring queer people's lives in domains such as family, intimacy, friend."<sup>15</sup> Class discourse can be witnessed

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<sup>12</sup> Hou-sing Yeung 楊皓鉞, "Cong Jueqi De Xinyidai Kan Zhongchanjieji Zhuangtai De Bianhua," 從崛起的新一代看中產階級狀態的變化 [Exploring the Changes of the Middle Class From the Rising New Generation], *HK 01*, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2019, <https://www.hk01.com/周報/406434/中產階級-一從崛起的新一代看中產階級狀態的變化> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Ting-jau Gou 高天佑, "Xianggang Jieji Guhua Mailou Kao Shixi" 香港階級固化 買樓靠世襲 [Class Solidification in Hong Kong Buying Property by Hereditary], *Hong Kong Economic Journal* 信報, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2019, <https://monthly.hkej.com/monthly/article/id/2164001/香港階級固化%20買樓靠世襲> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Ting-Fai Yu, "Class as a Method to Localise Queer Studies in Hong Kong," *Gender, Place and Culture* 25, No. 2 (2018): 309.

<sup>15</sup> Ting-Fai Yu, "Spatialities of Queer Globalization: Middle-and Working-Class Hong Kong Gay Men's Subjective Constructions of Homophobia," *Sexualities* 24 No. 4, (2020): 3.

in almost every aspect of queer people's lives, in particular, social class significantly influences how queer people face their own sexual identity. According to Yu, compared to his middle-class interviewees' attitudes towards coming out, his working-class interviewees were less willing to reveal their sexual identity to family members, colleagues and even friends.<sup>16</sup> They cannot afford the possible economic cost of revealing their sexual identity. Due to costly rents, the majority of working-class queer people live with family members, lacking their own private space. Meanwhile, coming out could lead to job loss, which can greatly jeopardise their survival in Hong Kong. As such, Yu's discussion indicates the fundamental role that social class plays in the formation of queer identity as well as the strategies dealing with the conflicts between their own sexual identity and society.

In 2010, an argument regarding the relationship between social class and Hong Kong queer movements arose. Regarding the middle-class orientation in Hong Kong queer parades, Kitty Hung criticises the ignorance of queer people situated at the bottom of society.<sup>17</sup> Hung illustrates that grassroots queer people include all kinds of people who have been marginalised by mainstream queer communities based on age, income, education, appearance, social class and other factors.<sup>18</sup> She further addresses the wide spectrum of queer movements and states that the pink economy as a strategy adopted by Hong Kong mainstream queer movements causes marginalisation of grassroots queer people.<sup>19</sup> In other words, working-class queer people have difficulty being seen and heard in mainstream queer

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<sup>16</sup> Yu, "Spatialities of Queer Globalization," 9.

<sup>17</sup> Kitty Hung 洪曉嫻, "Changshi Huidao Jiceng De Xingbie Yundong" 嘗試回到基層的性別運動 [Sexual Movements Attempting to Return to Grassroots] *Chinese University Student Papers* 中大學生報, September 2010, <http://cusp.hk/?p=1603> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Kitty Hung 洪曉嫻, "Tongzhi Yundong De Fenfan Keneng" 同志運動的紛繁可能 [The Possibility of Diversifying Queer Movements] *Chinese University Student Papers* 中大學生報, October 2010, <http://cusp.hk/?p=1617> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

movements in Hong Kong, such as the major parades. However, Joseph Cho argues that the lives of working-class queer people can also be intriguing and diverse, and every queer individual regardless of income is able to be queer with pride.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, even though their income is comparatively lower, working-class queer people can still pursue a mainstream lifestyle. Indeed, categorising queer people into a specific type of class overlooks subtle differences within the individual social classes.

However, the general marginalisation of working-class queer people in queer movements and daily life cannot be ignored. With the increasing influence of the pink economy, queer movements are dominated by the middle-class contingent of the communities. Economic injustice in queer communities has seldom become the key agenda of Hong Kong mainstream queer movements. Furthermore, discrimination from the social aspect on poverty becomes another burden on working-class queer people, which hinders the formation and development of their own queer social life. According to Yu, “market capitalism has enabled the recent proliferation of queer Asia,” while economic inequalities reproduce class stratification among Hong Kong queer communities.<sup>21</sup> Due to the ignorance of class perspective, Hong Kong queer communities have gradually divided into separated groups with their own specific queer cultures and social circles, which hardly connect with others. The severeness of class distinction has not raised the focus on class issues in queer communities and culture among Hong Kong scholars and activists. The detailed analysis of class is still absent in most explorations of Hong Kong queer issues. Since the financial burden

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Cho 曹文傑, “Cushu De Jieji Fenxi Xiaai De Zhengzhi Xiangxiang” 粗疏的階級分析, 狹隘的政治想象 [Cursory Analysis of Class Provincial Political Imagination] 7<sup>th</sup> September 2010, *inmediahk* 獨立媒體, <https://www.inmediahk.net/node/1008152> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Ting-Fai Yu, “Reconfiguring Queer Asia as Disjunctive Modernities: Notes on the Subjective Production of Working-Class Gay Men in Hong Kong,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, No.6 (2020): 864-866.

has been increased on working-class queer people, a deep reflection about how Hong Kong queer movements overlook social class as a critical perspective becomes vital.

In addition to the discussions of queerness and class from historical and geographical perspectives, a class-based perspective also illuminates queer organisations and cultural activities. Influenced by neoliberalism, a certain number of queer organisations or cultural events fully or partially adopt commercial logic to achieve sustainability. As queer film festivals can be regarded as a type of both queer organisations and cultural activities, class as a critical perspective significantly matters to the analysis of festivals. On one hand, class perspective can reveal the unequal power relations among the film festival audience. With the increasing influences of the pink market and neoliberalism, commercial logic has gradually become one of the principles of the operation of commercialised queer film festivals. Queer film festivals intend to attract certain audience members who can greatly contribute to the festival business for sustainability. Thus, those in a difficult financial situation are likely to be overlooked and class conflicts have appeared and intensified. On the other hand, class-based perspectives can reveal the economic, political and cultural influences from broader society on queer film festivals and their audience. Queer film festivals closely interact with the wider society in various ways. Social hierarchy can also be reflected in the operation of queer film festivals.

Although social class works as a significant critical perspective, a lack of focus on class discourse can be seen in the analysis of queer film festivals. As a term, middle class is sometimes mentioned in queer film festivals studies. For instance, Skadi Loist notes that the programming strategies of numerous queer film festivals mainly “cater to a mainstream, homonormative, sponsorship-friendly group-an imagined white, affluent, homosexual (male)

middle-class,” while only a fraction of programmes feature trans or racial issues.<sup>22</sup> Loist addresses the intention of queer film festivals to form a specific kind of audience base (middle class, in particular) for commercial considerations. This middle-classness constructed through queer film festivals has negative effects on queer culture, such as increasing the homogenisation of representation, audience, programming and agendas. Existing scholarship concentrates on the relationship between festival programming and the formation of a middle-class audience base. The ways of reproducing class distinction in queer film festivals vary greatly. To investigate how class division is constructed and address the marginalisation of working class within queer communities, this chapter investigates festival operations, including ticket pricing, and the use of languages and subtitles, in the discourse of social class. In other words, this chapter expands the understanding of the construction of class segregation in queer film festivals by framing the class issue as a structural problem. Some of these practices, such as subtitling and ticket pricing, cannot be fully controlled by the festival, due to a lack of resources and limited cooperation with other stakeholders. However, these practices have sometimes been overlooked by scholars and organisers, even though the practices, per se, can reproduce class discrimination. Meanwhile, this chapter examines the construction of a middle-class queer subject from the gender perspective.

### **Festival inclusion and exclusion: queer communities and access**

As previously discussed, queer film festivals position themselves as audience festivals – audiences are the centre of the operation of queer film festivals, as the festivals serve the audience. Nevertheless, research on the audiences of queer film festivals can be expanded as existing scholarship focuses more on the relationship between queer film festivals and

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<sup>22</sup> Skadi Loist, “A Complicated Queerness: LGBT Film Festivals and Queer Programming Strategies,” in *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals*, edited by Jeffrey Ruoff (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Books, 2012), 164.

community. In terms of the discussion of queer film festival reception, scholars sometimes use these “audience” and “community” interchangeably, while the difference between them can be highlighted. The use of audience usually refers to the attendees, or participants, who can be individual or a collective. In the context of queer film festivals, the term “community” can refer to sexual minorities in general. Community can also mean a transient audience group, which is constructed in a specific time and space. In this chapter, when I refer to attendees and specific or potential festival patrons, I use the term audience; I use communities when I address the group of Hong Kong sexual minorities in general.

The relationship between audience and queer film festivals is interactive. Queer film festivals can actively form certain type(s) of audience in various ways, such as programming style and promotional methods. As Roya Rastegar argues, “festivals do not just showcase cinema, they actively build audiences and communities.”<sup>23</sup> For instance, when a queer film festival programmes a gay-focused programme, the festival is more likely to form a gay-dominated audience base. Conducting empirical audience research at the Glasgow Film Festival, Lesley-Ann Dickson states that “physical presence in space with ‘other bodies’ (meaning strangers) is one of the most gratifying aspects of festival culture.”<sup>24</sup> Film festivals become a specific type of space for the articulation of experience and feelings of audience.

Audiences can also have the power to change and shape the subjectivity of queer film festivals. As Richards states, “the queer film festival audience can be a powerful collective.”<sup>25</sup> Richards mentions a classic example: at the Tenth Anniversary of Frameline in 1986, *Ten Cents a Dance* (1985, Midi Ondera), a 30-minute lesbian film with male gay sex scenes, raised anger

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<sup>23</sup> Roya Rastegar, “Difference, Aesthetics and the Curatorial Crisis of Film Festivals,” *Screen* 53, no. 3 (2012): 312.

<sup>24</sup> Lesley-Ann Dickson, “‘Ah! Other Bodies!’: Embodied spaces, pleasures and practices at Glasgow Film Festival,” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* (2015): 703 and 718.

<sup>25</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 19.

among lesbian audience and caused a riot at Roxie Theatre, as they did not see this film as a “proper” lesbian film.<sup>26</sup> According to Loist, this instance of lesbian riot fundamentally changed Frameline in various ways, including increasing the proportion of lesbian films in programmes, inviting more lesbian programmers and financially supporting more lesbian filmmakers.<sup>27</sup> This attempt also significantly influenced other queer film festivals in the 1980s and 1990s in addressing the significance of lesbian content and voices. The relationship between audiences and queer film festivals is always dynamic. The interaction between them can be both prominent and subtle. Queer film festivals can shape and even nurture the audience according to their preference, while the needs and intentions of audiences can also contribute to the development of the festivals.

Queer film festivals, as previously demonstrated, have traditionally been regarded as community-based queer film festivals – seeking more inclusion is one of the significant missions for these festivals. In interviews in recent years, some directors or programmers of Western queer film festivals have addressed inclusivity. For instance, according to Tricia Tuttle, artistic director of BFI Flare: London LGBTQ+ Film Festival, “‘Q+’ in the festival name reflects shifts in cultural conversations around identity, but also the Festival’s own ethos as welcoming and inclusive.”<sup>28</sup> Bruno Wang, founder of the Pureland Foundation, a partner in the 2018 BFI Flare festival, also claimed that the festival aims to “promote inclusion and social well-being and to celebrate diversity in our communities.”<sup>29</sup> Examining the festival programmes as well as the festival guidelines of 57 queer film festivals in the United States,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Skadi Loist, “Queer Film Culture: Performative Aspects of LGBT/Q Film Festivals,” (PhD Thesis, University of Hamburg, 2014), 165-166.

<sup>28</sup> “BFI Flare 2018 full programme revealed,” *British Film Institute*, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2018, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/announcements/bfi-flare-2018-full-programme-revealed> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



Jamie June points out that the majority of the festivals intentionally promote inclusion, which is also a standard for evaluating festivals.<sup>30</sup> Seeking inclusion refers to the fact that queer film festivals embrace diverse aesthetics, agendas and representations (in both audiences and on-screen).<sup>31</sup> Most of the festival programmers (in Europe) interviewed by Frederik Dhaenens, claimed that they “aim to create festivals that are as inclusive as possible.”<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, in practice, it is extremely difficult to achieve inclusion for numerous reasons. For instance, a lack of diversity among festival programmers (in terms of gender, race and age) causes the marginalisation of certain queer issues.

Furthermore, increasing inclusion is beneficial to festival sustainability since it can contribute to the publicity of the festivals and to enlarging and diversifying the audience base. Constructing a diverse audience base is a way of increasing inclusion in queer film festivals. One of the main missions for queer film festivals is to increase the representation of queer communities: the films programmed by the festivals are a form of representation of queer communities on the big screen; and the audience can also become another type of representation, as the embodiment of queer film festivals, since the audience can embody the social and political agendas of the festivals as well as the programming style.

Nevertheless, the actual practices of queer film festivals explicitly or implicitly construct different kinds of exclusion. Queer film festivals economically and culturally exclude certain types of audience: economic exclusion refers to queer people who cannot afford the cost of participating in the festivals. Cultural exclusion refers to unfamiliar foreign culture as

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<sup>30</sup> Jamie L June, “Is It Queer Enough?: An Analysis Of The Criteria And Selection Process For Programming Films Within Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Film Festivals In The United States,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Oregon, 2003), 25.

<sup>31</sup> June, “Is It Queer Enough?” 23.

<sup>32</sup> Frederik Dhaenens, “Pink Programming Across Europe: Exploring Identity Politics at European LGBT Film Festivals,” *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 1 (2018): 1.

well as lacking the proficiency of foreign languages, which greatly increases the difficulty of understanding the films. Overall, festival exclusion is strongly related to the social class of the audience, reflecting the levels of income and education that are required to take part in queer film festivals.

During the actual operation of queer film festivals, getting all queer community members to access queer film festivals becomes an extremely difficult task, due to the complexity of such communities. It is likely to simplify the differences within queer communities when using community to label a group of people. Such supposed sameness is hardly found in queer communities; instead, queer communities embrace a “complex identities and myriad of struggles that are present, the messiness of being in community.”<sup>33</sup> The complexity of community can be interpreted in two ways. One refers to the diversity of demographics of queer communities, the other can be seen as the various understandings of queer identity and attitudes towards queer issues as well. Hence, the level of engagement of queer individuals in queer events greatly varies. Ideally, to achieve increased inclusion, queer film festivals welcome all kinds of audience, and everyone is able to participate in them. In general, queer communities include every queer individual, including various ages, genders, sexual identities, ethnicities and jobs. From the perspectives of income and education, huge differences of social class have always existed within queer communities. The queer people who are situated in an advantageous position in the social hierarchy have comparatively higher degrees of access and convenience to participate in queer film festivals. Although queer film festivals intend to attract all kinds of people, there are still a large number of queer

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<sup>33</sup> Claire Carter and Krista Baliko, “‘These Are Not My People’: Queer Sport Spaces and the Complexities of Community,” *Leisure Studies* 36, no. 5 (2017): 705.

people who fail to access the festivals for some reason, even if they are willing to take part in the events.

Festival organisers acknowledge the people who are excluded and how they are excluded, hence, faced with the criticism, they attempt to seek more inclusion. To better fulfil the social and political agendas, queer film festivals come up with feasible strategies according to types of exclusion and their own conditions as well. For instance, Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival in Tunisia specifically targets the exclusion that is shaped by a white orientation. According to Cyrine Hammemi, the festival's regional coordinator,

There were two criteria for inclusion in the festival: Films had to have been created by someone who identifies as B.I.P.O.C. (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), or had actors or directors who are citizens of 'south country' nations — meaning those from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East or Asia.<sup>34</sup>

Aiming at seeking more inclusion related to race, Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival programmes films that address racial diversity, from a programming perspective. The racial and ethnic diversification of on-screen representations can attract more queer audiences of colour, increasing the inclusion among audiences. Furthermore, the organisers of the Scottish Queer International Film Festival (SQIFF) "prioritise diversity and inclusivity at all events."<sup>35</sup> More specifically, as Leanne Dawson and Skadi Loist claim,

The 2017 Festival's measures included: good access for wheelchair users and people with other mobility issues at all venues; all films screened with English captions or subtitles to make the Festival more accessible for D/deaf and hard

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<sup>34</sup> Noa Avishag Schnall, "A Queer Film Festival in Tunisia — Where Being Gay Is Illegal," *The New York Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/arts/tunisia-gay-lgbt-queer-film-festival.html> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Leanne Dawson and Skadi Loist, "Queer/ing Film Festivals: History, Theory, Impact," *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no.1 (2018): 11.

of hearing audiences; ... several events had BSL interpretation or audio description available; many venues had hearing loop systems; large print versions of hand-outs were made available; a committed focus on community outreach such as screenings and events for schools in deprived areas around Glasgow...<sup>36</sup>

All these measures show that how SIQFF highlights the significance of increasing the inclusion of a disabled queer audience, who are generally a minority within queer communities and usually neglected by various kinds of queer activities.

Turning to the HKLGFF, although inclusivity has not been officially identified as a priority on the festival's political agenda, the festival directors and some promotional materials have expressed the concerns of the local communities as well as the intention to pursue greater inclusion. From 2004 to 2007, Denise Tang and Vicci Ho became the festival directors of the HKLGFF in succession. Ka-wei Pang points out that, in this period when female programmers dominated the festival it intentionally aimed to address the diversity of racial and sexual minorities by increasing the proportion of Asian queer films as well as connections with local queer groups.<sup>37</sup> In terms of the attitude of the current festival director of the HKLGFF towards inclusion, in 2017 Lam organised a portrait photography exhibition called "The Queer of Hong Kong," addressing the demographic diversity of queer communities in Hong Kong.<sup>38</sup> It shows that Lam himself recognises the need and the significance of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ka Wei Pang 彭家維, "Tamen de Gushi: Xianggang Tongzhiyingzhan Yanjiu" 她們的故事:香港同志迎戰研究 [Herstories: The Research Of Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival], (Master's thesis, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2009), 63 and 66.

<sup>38</sup> "The Queer of Hong Kong," *The Foreign Correspondents' Club, Hong Kong*, 1<sup>st</sup> January 2016, <https://www.fcchk.org/event/the-queer-of-hong-kong/> (accessed 6<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

emphasising minorities in Hong Kong queer communities. Thus, as the lead of the HKLGFF, the festival possibly reflects his similar progressive political consciousness.

### **Economic exclusion: costly entry fees**

Before 2000, the HKLGFF's tickets were relatively customer friendly. When the HKLGFF was in the period when the Hong Kong Arts Centre (the HKAC) was fully in charge, according to Ka-wai Pang, the average ticket price was around 33 to 45 Hong Kong Dollars (HKD).<sup>39</sup> Audiences only paid 25 HKD for one film to participate in the first edition of the HKLGFF in 1989, while the ticket price was set at around 33 HKD in the early 1990s.<sup>40</sup> Then, the ticket price was increased to 50 HKD in 1998.<sup>41</sup> As Yiu-Wai Chu points out, the average (non-festival-period) film ticket price in Hong Kong was 32 HKD in 1992.<sup>42</sup> Hence, although the ticket price of the HKLGFF has doubled in about a decade, it was still at the level of the average film ticket price of Hong Kong. Similarly, as Yingjin Zhang shows, "in the late 1990s, theatre chains cut ticket prices to US\$ 5 (around 40 HKD) for Hong Kong films and raised the admission for Hollywood blockbusters to US\$7.5 (around 60 HKD)."<sup>43</sup> Comparing all the numbers above, 50 HKD for a film ticket was the local average in the late 1990s. In other words, the HKLGFF's ticket price remained near Hong Kong's average film ticket price in the HKAC period. The HKAC almost fully financially supported the HKLGFF, so seeking box office revenue was not the festival's priority. Therefore, the HKLGFF could make concessions on ticket prices. Meanwhile, the screening venues at that time, including Lim Por Yen Film Theatre (now known as Louis Koo Cinema), McAulay Studio and Shouson Theatre, were all directly operated by the HKAC. Hence, there was little venue expense when the organisation used its own venues to do the

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<sup>39</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 139.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Yiu-Wai Chu, *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (New York: Suny Press, 2013), 102.

<sup>43</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 262.

screenings. Thus, the ticket price was comparatively affordable when it was fully supported by the HKAC in the 1990s.

With the complete withdrawal of the HKAC from organising the HKLGFF in the early 2000s, one of the features of the HKLGFF's commercialisation and market-oriented trend has been greatly increased ticket prices. Three significant factors have contributed to rising ticket prices. Due to the fact that the HKLGFF now is an independently run and commercial queer film festival, the sustainable development of the HKLGFF relies on box office revenue. Secondly, since the HKLGFF is now cooperating with Broadway Circuit, ticket prices are generally set as the average price of Broadway Circuit, which also takes half of the box office revenue. Moreover, numerous film companies ask for screening fees. Therefore, stemming from the commercial consideration, it is difficult for the HKLGFF to offer any considerable discount on prices.

**Table 4.1** Screening Venues of HKLGFF, 2016-2020

<b>Year</b>	<b>Screening Venues</b>
2020	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, Louis Koo Cinema, PALACE ifc, PREMIERE ELEMENTS, MOVIE MOVIE Cityplaza, MY CINEMA YOHO MALL
2019	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, Louis Koo Cinema, PREMIERE ELEMENTS, AMC Pacific Place
2018	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place, MOVIE MOVIE Cityplaza
2017	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place
2016	Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place

**Table 4.2** Festival prices and general prices in five selected screening venues (Monetary unit: HKD)

	<b>HKLGFF Ticket Price</b>	<b>Full Price Adult Regular</b>
<b>Broadway Cinematheque</b>	85(95/76*)	95
<b>AMC PP</b>	95(105)	95
<b>The ONE</b>	95(105)	105
<b>PALACE ifc</b>	95(105)	130
<b>MOVIE MOVIE Cityplaza</b>	95(105)	95

\*Audience members with a Broadway Cinematheque Membership get 20% discount at that cinema.

Table 4.1 above lists all the screening venues of the HKLGFF from 2016 to 2020. As previously discussed, Broadway Circuit collaborates with the HKLGFF, hence – except for Louis Koo Cinema – the other cinemas all belong to Broadway Circuit. This section focuses on the five specific screening venues, including Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE, AMC Pacific Place, PALACE ifc, and MOViE MOViE Cityplaza. As these screening venues are commercial cinemas, according to Table 4.2, the ticket prices are almost the same as the prices at those cinemas outside the festival period. The festival ticket prices of the Broadway Cinematheque were slightly lower than others at 85 HKD. Situated in the Yau Ma Tei neighbourhood in Yau Tsim Mong district, where rental prices are comparatively lower, the ticket prices of Broadway Cinematheque are slightly lower than the other four cinemas. While those with Broadway Cinematheque memberships were eligible for a 20% discount on ticket prices, this requires the audience to pay 120 HKD for a yearly membership in advance. All these four cinemas belong to the Broadway Circuit, although they are independently operated, so the discount of Broadway Cinematheque membership cannot be used at other cinemas. The ticket prices of the other three cinemas were the same, at 95 HKD. Audiences also need to pay a 10 HKD handing fee for online ticketing. Therefore, the average ticket price of the HKLGFF was around 100 HKD with no discount. In addition, the HKLGFF screens two opening films and two closing films every year, with much higher ticket prices, at 250 HKD. This 250-HKD ticket is a package, including the film ticket and the entry fee for the party held in a gay club nearby right after the screenings. Since the HKLGFF does not offer a festival pass, the audience must buy a sperate ticket for each screening.

Due to the lack of discounts, the ticket price for the HKLGFF is comparatively costly in Hong Kong. One of the interviewed audience members, G, who grew up in and always hangs out in the Central area, goes to the Broadway Cinematheque and the PALACE ifc occasionally. From his perspective, the ticket price of the HKLGFF is acceptable since he pays a similar amount of money for other, non-festival film tickets.<sup>44</sup> However, as mentioned before, only Broadway Cinematheque members are eligible for a discount, while normally discounts cover students and senior audiences, and everyone can watch films with discount during a certain period (see Table 4.3). One of the festival programmers, Sophia Shek, admitted that the HKLGFF does not adequately encourage the younger generation to participate in the festival, suggesting that there should be discounts for students and young adults.<sup>45</sup> Acknowledging this issue, in 2019, the HKLGFF for the first time offered student discounts, with 20 HKD off each ticket in general festival screenings. However, 75 HKD for a film ticket is slightly too expensive for some young students, since they are already under a heavy economic burden due to the high costs of student loans and living expenses.

**Table 4.3** Discounts at Broadway Circuit's selected cinemas at regular times (in HKD)<sup>46</sup>

	<b>Children / Student</b>	<b>Senior</b>	<b>Tuesday Discount</b> (Except public holidays)	<b>Morning Show</b>
<b>Broadway Cinematheque</b>	75	75	75	60
<b>AMC PP</b>	80	80	80	55
<b>The ONE</b>	90	90	90	65
<b>PALACE ifc</b>	100	100	110	85
<b>Movie Movie Cityplaza</b>	55	75	75	55

<sup>44</sup> G, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

<sup>45</sup> Sophia Shek, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 21<sup>st</sup> September.

<sup>46</sup> All data provided by the Broadway Circuit, available online, “百老匯院線票價一覽表 Broadway Cinemas Ticket Price List,” *Broadway Circuit*, <https://www.cinema.com.hk/tc/site/ticketPrice> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).



The screening venues that collaborate with the HKLGFF are considered middle-class commercial cinemas and to audiences like G, the 100-HKD-or-so expense is quite normal. Nevertheless, these cinemas are considered somewhat luxury and upscale cinemas in Hong Kong. According to research that compares film ticket prices globally, the average of Hong Kong's film ticket price was US\$8.41 (around 66 HKD) between 2016 and 2017.<sup>47</sup> Thus, a ticket of 90 HKD or so is at the level of luxury cinemas in Hong Kong. In particular, the festival screening venues (MOViE MOViE Cityplaza, AMC PP, PALACE ifc and the ONE) are cinemas with luxury interior design situated in high-end shopping malls, where audience are more likely to spend more in these cinemas. However, in Hong Kong, many cinemas offer less expensive tickets than the upscale cinemas, such as the Broadway Circuit. For instance, Lux Theatre, situated in the Kowloon District, sells among the cheapest film tickets in Hong Kong, at 45 HKD for a 2D film.<sup>48</sup> As previously noted, the ticket price of the opening and closing film is 250 HKD, and even G stated that this was expensive, and quite over budget for the audience who only want to watch the film without attending the party, which might also stop their purchase. These examples show that the ticket price of the HKLGFF is relatively expensive.

A 100-HKD ticket is already an economic burden for those queer community members with low income since poverty is a severe issue in Hong Kong society as well as in queer communities more broadly. Hong Kong is a modern, globalised society, one also characterised by an extreme disparity between rich and poor.<sup>49</sup> It has become a place with the highest

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<sup>47</sup> James Burton, "How Much Are Movie Tickets Around The World?" *WorldAtlas*, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-most-expensive-movie-ticket-prices-around-the-world.html> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>48</sup> Sharon Lam, "Baoshi Xiyuan," 寶石戲院 [Lux Theatre], *香港舊照片 Old Photos of Hong Kong*, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2015, <http://oldhkphoto.com/寶石戲院/> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>49</sup> Ting-Fai Yu, "Class as a Method to Localise Queer Studies in Hong Kong," *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 2 (2018): 309.

global concentration of billionaires.<sup>50</sup> However, the Hong Kong Poverty Situation report for 2016 shows that about 1.35 million residents were living below the official poverty line and the poverty rate rose 0.2 percentage points to 19.90 percent.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the city's poverty line is drawn at half the median monthly household income according to household size, and the residents living below this line are considered poor.

The seriousness of poverty has intensified in queer communities in the new millennium. Poverty is a global issue that threatens the livelihood of queer communities. A survey conducted by the Williams Institute in 2013 demonstrated that over 20 percent of queer people in the United States were experiencing poverty.<sup>52</sup> The percentage of queer people in poverty is much higher in the Global South. As Alan Sears claims, "queers with limited incomes are invisible because they cannot enter the commodified realm of lesbian/gay visibility."<sup>53</sup> In addition, through the logic of commercialisation, only certain queer communities can achieve the visibility that commerce demands, while the interests of others are more or less sacrificed. Furthermore, in addressing the vulnerability of queer communities in economic dilemma, Amber Hollibaugh argues that "queerness intensifies poverty and compounds the difficulty of dealing with the social service system."<sup>54</sup> For queer people living in countries or regions with severe and deep-rooted discrimination against

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<sup>50</sup> Rosie Perper, "Hong Kong now has more mega-millionaires than New York City," *Business Insider*, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2018, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/hong-kong-has-more-rich-people-than-new-york-city-2018-9?r=US&IR=T> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Census and Statistics Department, *Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2016*, November 2017, [https://www.povertyrelief.gov.hk/eng/pdf/Hong\\_Kong\\_Poverty\\_Situation\\_Report\\_2016\(2017.11.17\).pdf](https://www.povertyrelief.gov.hk/eng/pdf/Hong_Kong_Poverty_Situation_Report_2016(2017.11.17).pdf) (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>52</sup> M.V. Lee Badgett, Laura E. Durso and Alyssa Schneebaum, "New Patterns of Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community," *Williams Institute*, June 2013, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgb-patterns-of-poverty/> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>53</sup> Alan Sears, "Queer Anti-capitalism: What's Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation?" *Science & Society* 69, no. 1: Special issue (2005): 105.

<sup>54</sup> Amber Hollibaugh, "They Are Everywhere. But We Refuse to See Them. Queers Without Money," *Village Voice* (June 2001): 20–26.

sexual minorities, the impacts of poverty on them can be more serious. They must hide their sexual identities to keep themselves afloat in the business environment or job market.

In terms of the actual situation of Hong Kong queer communities in poverty, there is no official research or data. The only number this research could find is based on a report from a financial company.<sup>55</sup> As Ryan Thoreson highlights, queer studies lack “empirical data on the lives of queer persons” and research evidence of “the lived experience of being queer and poor.”<sup>56</sup> There is a similar issue in Hong Kong as well, thus it is difficult to find accurate numbers of queer people living in poverty in Hong Kong. The representations and the voices of working-class queer people have been marginalised by commercial advertising and mainstream media. Meanwhile, the queer people in the working class are comparatively less motivated to come out publicly due to their lack of economic security.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the severity of poverty in Hong Kong queer communities cannot be ignored. Travis Kong is one of the few local scholars who has investigated working class queer people in Hong Kong. In his research into older gay men in Hong Kong, most of his informants were from the working class.<sup>58</sup> Kong argues that working-class queer people have gradually formed a different way and space for socialising and consuming compared to middle-class queer people.<sup>59</sup> Thus, there is indeed a certain number of queer people who are in an extremely difficult financial

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<sup>55</sup> According to Philip Howell-Williams, “it is estimated that 70% of the (queer) community live on a salary of less than 15,000 Hong Kong dollars a month.” As the company is commercially run, this data is probably overstated for commercial consideration. For more information: Philip Howell-Williams, “Better financial planning for Hong Kong’s LGBT community,” *Infinity*, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2014, <http://blog.infinitysolutions.com/posts/71-better-financial-planning-for-hong-kong-s-lgbt-community> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>56</sup> Ryan Thoreson, “Capably Queer: Exploring the Intersections of Queerness and Poverty in the Urban Philippines,” *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 12, no. 4 (2011): 496.

<sup>57</sup> “Xianggang Tongzhi Hechangtuan Yong Yinyue Ningju LGBT,” 香港同志合唱團用音樂凝聚 LGBT [Hong Kong Queer Choir Unites LGBT People with Music], *Read O1*, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2016, <https://read01.com/zh-hk/KONGMO.html> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Travis Kong, *Oral History of Older Gay Men in Hong Kong: Unspoken but Unforgotten* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 6.

<sup>59</sup> Kong, *Oral History*, 18.

situation in Hong Kong. However, they are not fully considered by the HKLGFF, which prevents them from participating in the festival.

In addition, the expense of attending the HKLGFF includes various kinds of additional fees of different levels, such as travel, food and beverage expenses. Additionally, according to Joe Lam, festival director of the HKLGFF, going to the HKLGFF can be seen as an entertaining and social activity.<sup>60</sup> Attending the festival becomes a reason to socialise with friends as well as providing an opportunity to meet new people. My interviewee, G, shared a similar idea:

Attending the festival is not just to watch a film, instead, it is a package, based on my experience, at least. We usually meet up with others at the restaurant near the cinema and go watch the film after dinner. It is possible to have after drinks on Friday nights. Other expenses added together are way more expensive than a film ticket. Therefore, it is not easy to have your friends join you (my translation).<sup>61</sup>

The financial burden caused by these additional expenses cannot be neglected. In particular, for economically disadvantaged queer people, going out and participating in the HKLGFF can be an extravagant occasion. Exploring the poverty issues in Hong Kong as well as the public standard of poverty measurement, Maggie Lau and other scholars suggest that “the minimum standard of living should go beyond basic subsistence needs and allow people to take part in social relationships and customary behaviours.”<sup>62</sup> It is already difficult for a large number of impoverished Hong Kong citizens to maintain the daily necessity of survival even with governmental financial subsidies. Some consumption activities for entertaining and socialising purposes, such as buying new clothes and going out for meals, are extra economic

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<sup>60</sup> Joe Lam, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 15<sup>th</sup> September.

<sup>61</sup> G, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>62</sup> Maggie Lau, Christina Pantazis, David Gorden, Lea Lai and Eileen Suttion, “Poverty in Hong Kong,” *The China Review* 15, no.2 (Fall 2015): 49.

pressures that they cannot afford. Hence, some queer consumption activities, like taking part in the HKLGFF, are well beyond the means of low-income queer people. Economic disadvantage thus impedes social life in low-income queer communities.

Furthermore, the HKLGFF does not financially support the engagement of local minority ethnic communities in the festival. Situated in the southern part of China, over 95% of population is ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong.<sup>63</sup> There is still a considerable number of minority ethnic groups living in Hong Kong. According to Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, the largest minority communities are, in order: Filipino (2.5%), Indonesian (2.1%), Caucasian (0.8%), Indian (0.5%), Nepalese (0.3%), and Pakistani (0.2%).<sup>64</sup> Most are originally from developing countries and areas, and they or their parents came to Hong Kong seeking higher incomes. Shek highlighted that there were two queer Filipino, films *Tale of the Lost Boys* (2017) and *2 Cool 2 be 4goten* (2017), programmed in 2017, although the local Filipino community cannot afford the film tickets.<sup>65</sup> As a result, even though the festival intends to attract queer immigrants from Southeast Asia, their financial situation cannot support them going to the festival.

The ethnic minorities, such as Filipino and Indonesian people, greatly suffer from structural economic inequalities in Hong Kong. The main occupation of the majority of the largest two minority groups (Filipino and Indonesian) is domestic helper. In 2020, for the first time, the average wage of a domestic helper in Hong Kong surpassed 5,000 HKD per month.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Mee Ling Lai, "The Linguistic Landscape of Hong Kong after the Change of Sovereignty," *International Journal of Multilingualism* 10, no. 3 (2013): 252.

<sup>64</sup> All the data come from the Population By-Census 2016. For information, see: "District Profiles," *Population By-census 2016*, <https://www.bycensus2016.gov.hk/en/bc-dp.html> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>65</sup> Shek, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>66</sup> Kathleen Magramo, "Salaries of Hong Kong Domestic Workers Top HK\$5,000 for First Time, but Covid-19 Piles on Pressure from Families Back Home," *South China Morning Post*, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3105993/salaries-hong-kong-foreign-domestic-workers-top-hk5000-first> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

In contrast, “as of 2021, the minimum salary in Hong Kong is of HK\$ 37.5 per hour,” which makes the minimum wage around HKD 7,425 (in a 44 working hours per week, on average) in Hong Kong.<sup>67</sup> The comparison between these two numbers shows that the income of South Asian domestic helpers is extremely low, which demonstrates that their labour force has been greatly exploited. In addition, many South Asian immigrants live on earnings from their own small businesses. Generally, people from South Asian communities face a difficult economic situation in Hong Kong. Furthermore, faced with other burdens, such as employer discrimination or religious prejudices, most queer South Asian immigrants choose to hide their sexual identity to safeguard their employment. Thus, for queer immigrants with low income, participating in the HKLGFF is beyond their economic capacity.

#### **Linguistic exclusion: language barrier**

In addition to the economic exclusion that results from comparatively high ticket prices, the audio language and film subtitles the HKLGFF uses can lead to audiences’ linguistic exclusion. Across the festival’s history, the majority of the HKLGFF’s selected films have been foreign language films (non-Mandarin or non-Cantonese), while only a few of these have been provided with Chinese subtitles. Table 4.4 clearly shows that, before 2018, there were only one or two Chinese or Cantonese language films every year, also reflecting the precarious situation of queer filmmaking in the Greater China region. There have been very few suitable choices of Chinese or Cantonese language queer films for the HKLGFF to choose from, thus the festival has been forced to rely on screening films from the rest of the world, especially from the West. The general programming strategies of the HKLGFF and the global landscape of queer films will be examined in detail in Chapter Four.

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<sup>67</sup> Jon Stotz, “Average and Minimum Salary in Hong Kong,” *Check in Price*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021, <https://checkinprice.com/average-minimum-salary-hong-kong/> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

**Table 4.4** The HKLGFF's selected films in relation to language and subtitles (2016 to 2020)

	Total	Foreign-language films	Chinese/Cantonese language films	Foreign-language films with Chinese subtitles	English-language films without subtitles
<b>2020</b>	17	13	4	2	4
<b>2019</b>	28+2 <sup>68</sup>	25	3+2	10	4
<b>2018</b>	29	26	2+1 <sup>69</sup>	9	10
<b>2017</b>	24	23	1	2	8
<b>2016</b>	27	25	2	3	6

The languages of the HKLGFF's programmes vary greatly. Most of the foreign-language films feature English dialogue; French, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Filipino and Thai language films have also been screened. Of those foreign films shown before 2018, only two or three films were provided with Chinese subtitles, and more significantly, over 20 percent (except for 2019) of English-speaking films were screened without Chinese subtitles. These films require much higher levels of English proficiency to understand, since they often feature different accents and various levels of speaking speed. In addition, those films without subtitles are not user-friendly for audience members with hearing issues.

The lack of Chinese subtitles becomes an issue for the operation of HKLGFF. Richards argues that the lack of Chinese subtitles is "an example of social and economic values coming into conflict," considering offering subtitles to be "an avenue HKLGFF is unable to meet due to financial restraints."<sup>70</sup> Festival director Lam recognises that there are always some complaints from audiences about the lack of Chinese subtitles.<sup>71</sup> According to my interviewee,

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<sup>68</sup> There was a section called Hong Kong Retrospective in 2019, which included two old Hong Kong queer films.

<sup>69</sup> The closing film, *Bao Bao* (2018), was a Taiwanese film, but it had many scenes in English, with Chinese subtitles.

<sup>70</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 114.

<sup>71</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

K, who expressed that he is not confident about his use of English, mentioned the extreme importance of Chinese subtitles to him when he chooses what films to be watched.<sup>72</sup> Hence, he did not pick films without Chinese subtitles, even when the films interested him.<sup>73</sup> The HKLGFF constructs a linguistic barrier; the requirement for English proficiency reduces the willingness of some audiences to watch films and even prevents them from attending the festival altogether.

While all the interviewed festival organisers were aware of the lack of Chinese subtitles, Lam admits that it is difficult for the festival to provide them due to a lack of financial resources.<sup>74</sup> He observes that, “the cost of Chinese subtitles is about 8,000-10,000 HKD [per film], including translation and projection.”<sup>75</sup> Even in a situation where a screening sold out, the HKLGFF would still lose money if the festival pays for Chinese subtitling, because the screening venues take half of the box office revenue and the HKLGFF must pay a screening fee of around 5,000 HKD to the film company too. As illustrated in Chapter Two, the festival team claims that ticket sales can sustain the actual operation and further development of the HKLGFF, while providing Chinese subtitles for every film is beyond what the HKLGFF is capable of due to the restraints of festival resources and funding.

However, the HKLGFF’s festival team realises the significance of Chinese subtitles in the festival’s business, emphasising how they can contribute to ticket sales. Using *God’s Own Country* (2017) as an example, Lam states that the film had been screened widely globally a year before the HKLGFF’s selection – when it was still selected by the festival a Taiwan film distribution company was able to provide a print with Chinese subtitles.<sup>76</sup> The film sold out

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<sup>72</sup> K, 2018, personal interview, Hong Kong, 21<sup>st</sup> September.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Shek, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>75</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 114.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



quickly and the festival organised an additional screening. Moreover, Shek claimed that the tickets for films with Chinese subtitles always sold out very quickly, even without any promotion.<sup>77</sup> In particular, they revealed that local lesbian audiences are less willing to watch films without Chinese subtitles compared to gay audiences.<sup>78</sup> These examples demonstrate how significant Chinese subtitles are to both audiences and the festival, helping to attract local audiences.

Faced with audience complaints about the lack of Chinese subtitles, the HKLGFF has attempted to seek more films with them. As seen above, the HKLGFF 2018 and 2019 had more films with Chinese subtitles, as there were nine or ten films with Chinese subtitles, which was triple the number in previous editions. One of the practical reasons was that Taiwan International Queer Film Festival (the TIQFF) and Taiwan film distribution companies freely provided Chinese subtitles for five films to the HKLGFF. In terms of the collaboration with TIQFF on subtitling, according to Lam, “the HKLGFF was planning to work with TIQFF last year [2017], but it did not happen. This year, I approached them again for the Chinese subtitles” (my translation).<sup>79</sup> The TIQFF provided Chinese subtitles for three films in 2017, and Lam further highlighted the necessity of Chinese subtitles to the audience in Taiwan, claiming,

Due to the fact that the English level of Taiwan is much lower than Hong Kong’s, the festival cannot screen the films without Chinese subtitles, and they also have the financial aid from the government. We won’t copy what they programme, we hope that we can programme one or two more suitable films with Chinese subtitles that happen to be also programmed by the TIQFF (my translation).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Shek, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>78</sup> Lam and Shek, 2018, personal interviews.

<sup>79</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Lam also addressed the booming market for queer films in Taiwan,

We also noticed that we can directly work with Taiwanese distributors. For example, there are quite a lot of LGBT films in the Golden Horses Film Festival. We hope we are able to cooperate with more companies, so that we can have more films with Chinese subtitles (my translation).<sup>81</sup>

In the situation where HKLGFF lacks festival resources, seeking more resources outside Hong Kong, such as collaborating with Taiwan queer film festivals and distribution companies, can significantly contribute to the development of the HKLGFF.

The language used in promotional materials indicates that while the HKLGFF aims to be a bilingual queer film festival, English is its primary language, thus requiring the target audience to have English proficiency. Regarding online promotional platforms of the HKLGFF, except for the official website, HKLGFF also runs official Facebook and Instagram accounts. Both official website and printed catalogue are bilingually designed. However, on their official social media accounts, the HKLGFF uses English much more frequently than Chinese: over half of the posts on their Facebook and Instagram pages were written in English (sometimes with several Chinese hashtags; see examples in Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Almost all these Chinese written posts aim to promote films with Chinese subtitles. For instance, there were 88 posts in total on the official Facebook page for the HKLGFF 2020<sup>82</sup>. Of these, 79 posts were bilingual, 5 were written in English only and 4 were only in Chinese. In addition, the HKLGFF sometimes forwards film reviews as promotions to its Facebook page, as Figure 4.4 shows. Most of these film reviews are written in English. Moreover, in 2019, the HKLGFF invited several filmmakers from different countries to record a short video to introduce and promote their own work

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> The data was captured from Facebook on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

and the festival as well. The HKLGFF posted seven videos on its Facebook page; except for one in Cantonese recorded by Maisy Goosy Suen (Figure 4.4), the other six videos were filmed in English – none of them included English or Chinese subtitles.



**Figure 4.1** Screenshots of HKLGFF's Facebook page (examples of English posts)



Figure 4.2 A screenshot of the HKLGGF’s Facebook page (example of Chinese post)

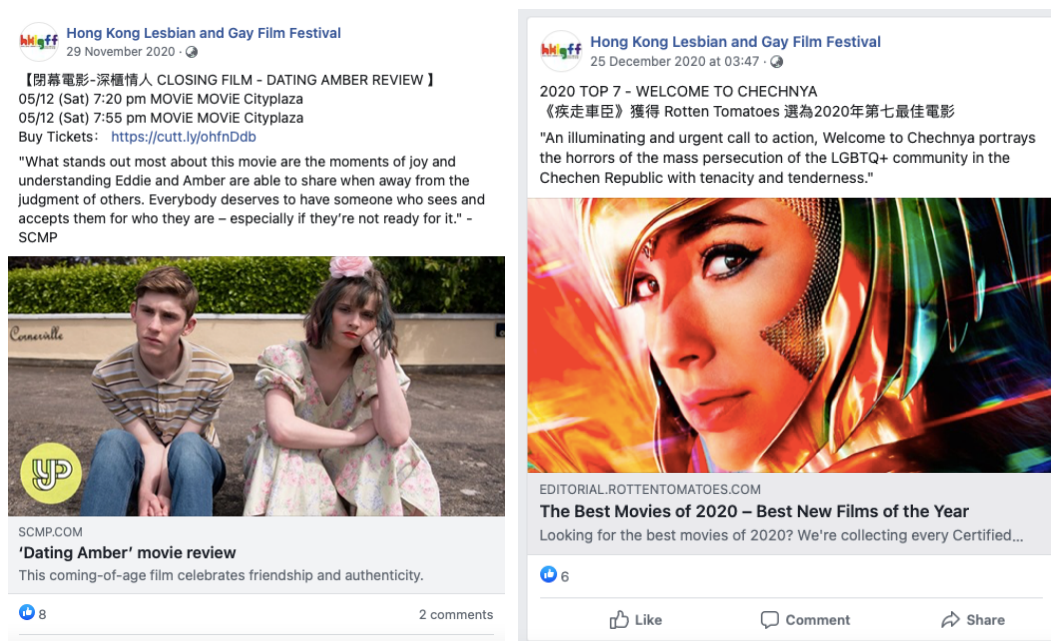


Figure 4.3 Screenshots of the HKLGGF’s Facebook page (examples of promotional posts)



**Figure 4.4** Screenshots of the HKLGFF's Facebook page (promotional post for *A Woman is a Woman*)

In addition to the use of English language in films (including spoken English and English subtitles) and promotional materials, English is the main language used in most of the HKLGFF's screenings and activities. The opening gala and closing gala, for example, usually feature a speech before the screening. In 2018 and 2019, Russell Boaz, an Australia-born curator from the HKLGFF team, hosted both galas in English. Festival director Lam also made 5- to 10-minute speeches in English, without Cantonese translation. Based on my participant observation at the HKLGFF Closing Gala in 2018, English was the only language used across the event. At least a quarter of attendees were Caucasian. Considering the number of Caucasians and other people who do not know Cantonese, this is one of the main reasons why HKLGFF only organises galas in English. In terms of regular screenings of the HKLGFF,

there is a short introduction made by one of the festival team members before screening. I attended three regular screenings at the 2018 HKLGFF. Except for one film which was introduced bilingually, the other two films were introduced in English only. Regarding the introduction conducted in English, my interviewee K claimed that it was difficult to follow the presenters.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, he felt the English-only introduction was unnecessary for audiences like him who lacked English proficiency.<sup>84</sup> The festival also organised academic-oriented panels in 2018 (the Global South Visions: LGBTQ Film Festivals panel) and 2019 (the QUEER POWER panel). The panels invited curators from South and East Asia and were hosted by Hong Kong scholars. Except for the festival curator of Shanghai Pride Festival in the 2019 panel, who spoke in Mandarin (with a Mandarin-English translator), the other participants at both panels all spoke in English. The invited curators came from different places and their mother tongues varied greatly, and audiences asked questions in English as well. In this situation, English was the only language that was understood by participants for discussion. However, these English-language events are not accessible to those queer people who lack English proficiency.

Although Hong Kong was a British colony for over 150 years, English has never become the language commonly used by most Hong Kong citizens. As previously mentioned, the majority of Hong Kong's population is ethnic Chinese, and Cantonese is the most used language in daily life in Hong Kong. Shek, who was born and raised in Scotland, also indicated that she was surprised but confused by the English level of Hong Kong's residents, as their English language ability did not turn out to be as good as she expected when she moved to Hong Kong.<sup>85</sup> In colonial Hong Kong, Chinese residents who were capable at speaking English

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<sup>83</sup> K, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Shek, 2018, personal interview.

were more visible in the mainstream media than others who lacked English proficiency – the number of such Chinese residents was quite insignificant.

The status of English in Hong Kong has been challenged, especially after 1997. Cantonese has become the main government language since the sovereignty handover. The 2018 English Proficiency Index, an annual report on English proficiency, shows that Hong Kong ranked 30<sup>th</sup> in global rankings, dropping one place from the previous year.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, according to research by the Social Sciences Research Centre of Hong Kong University, “6 percent of respondents speak English well and 1.5 percent have a native-like command of the language.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, few Hong Kong residents have high English proficiency. In addition, with reforms of the education system since the handover, the post-colonial government has reduced the significance of English learning. To accelerate the process of decolonialisation, the Hong Kong SAR Government fully implemented and promoted the “Mother-Tongue Teaching” policy beginning in the late 1990s. The government has only retained around 100 middle schools as English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools and has forced over 80 percent of middle schools to become Chinese as Medium of Instruction (CMI) schools. The intensity and time spent learning English by students who study at CMI schools is lower and shorter than students at EMI schools. In the meantime, the status of Putonghua (Mandarin) greatly increased in education and government administration after the handover, and it “has become the most commonly heard non-local language in the streets of Hong Kong.”<sup>88</sup> All

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<sup>86</sup> Zimo Chen, “HK’s English proficiency falls in world rankings,” *China Daily Hong Kong*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2018, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/203/111/200/1541006256425.html> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>87</sup> Karen Cheung, “Community and Education Hong Kong: Only Around 6% of Hongkongers Speak English Well, HKU Study Shows,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2015, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2015/08/25/only-around-6-of-hongkongers-speak-english-well-hku-study-shows/> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>88</sup> Lai, “The linguistic landscape,” 253.

these conditions show the varying degrees of decline of the significance of and proficiency in English in Hong Kong.

The English language and class stratification of Hong Kong society have been closely linked since British colonisation. Due to Hong Kong's colonial history, English was one of the key ways for indigenous Hong Kong people to realise upward social mobility. Although the environment of learning English has changed, this relationship between English and social class has mostly remained the same since the handover. EMI schools are usually considered to be A-class schools for middle and upper class families.<sup>89</sup> Middle-class parents prefer to send their children to EMI schools or international schools since they aim to retain their social class in the younger generation.<sup>90</sup> EMI schools and international schools can provide the chance to build up the social networking with middle class and even wealthy families. The relationship between English and class stratification and the perception of English have been maintained for generations through education.

Turning to the queer communities in Hong Kong, there is also a linguistic issue, which is similar to the poverty issue mentioned earlier. According to Thoreson, "the marginalisation of queer people in poverty is not only economic, but sociocultural."<sup>91</sup> Thoreson's claim points out the cultural dilemmas in queer communities. Representations of queer people who are proficient in English are more visible in Western media, which probably leads to the misunderstanding that queer communities in Hong Kong have a high proficiency in English.

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<sup>89</sup> Shirley Zhao and Laura Zhou, "'Mother-tongue Teaching Policy to Blame' as Hong Kong Slides Down English Proficiency Index for Second Year in a Row," *South China Morning Post*, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2015. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/1875254/mother-tongue-teaching-policy-blame-hong-kong> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>90</sup> Gwok-geoi Wong 黃國鉅, "Xianggangzhongchan Mousha Zijide Muyu" 香港中產謀殺自己的母語 [Hong Kong Middle Class Murder Own Mother Language], *StandNews 立場新聞*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2018, <https://thestandnews.com/culture/香港中產謀殺自己的母語/> (accessed 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

<sup>91</sup> Thoreson, "Capably Queer," 494.



Moreover, this linguistic issue in Hong Kong queer communities also refers to the unbalanced power relationship between indigenous Chinese queer people and Western queer people. As discussed in Chapter One, this relationship was formed in colonial Hong Kong. It means that the queer people who own English proficiency can access more resources in Hong Kong queer communities. Even at the HKLGFF, this asymmetric power relation is deeply rooted.

### **Screening locations and class**

Urban space in Hong Kong is an important factor in analysing the significance of class in the relationship between the HKLGFF and its audience base. The way the HKLGFF selects locations of screening venues reflects the distribution of the class stratification in Hong Kong's urban space: the HKLGFF prefers to choose screening venues in middle-class areas. This selection strategy considers the consumer's income level and English language ability.

In terms of location distribution, the HKLGFF has a relatively high concentration of screening venues. Table 4.5 shows the screening venues and their locations, and the number of screenings at each venue from 2016 to 2020. According to the table, the number of the HKLGFF's screening venues has increased from only three screening venues in 2016 and 2017. Other cinemas, such as MOViE MOViE Cityplaza and PREMIERE ELEMENTS, have gradually become part of the HKLGFF since 2018. The festival deliberately decentralises its screening venues to wider areas, which facilitates reaching a wider audience.<sup>92</sup> After assisting the HKLGFF for the last time in 2002, the HKAC (Louis Koo Cinema) supported the screenings again in 2019 and 2020. In terms of the re-collaboration with the HKAC, according to Liu, the main reason is that the HKAC could offer more time to do a Question and Answer session after the screening compared to the general commercial cinemas.<sup>93</sup> Among these eight cinemas, all are

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<sup>92</sup> Lillian Liu, 2021, personal interview, Zoom, 18<sup>th</sup> June.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

situated in Central and Western District, Wanchai District and Yau Tsim Mong District, with the exception of MOViE MOViE Cityplaza in Quarry Bay (East District) and MY CINEMA YOHO MALL in Yuen Long District in New Territories. In other words, most of the screening venues for the HKLGFF are located in the economic heartland on the two sides of Victoria Harbour.

**Table 4.5** Information about screening venues, the HKLGFF 2016-2020

<b>Year</b>	<b>Screening venues</b>	<b>Number of screenings (feature-length films and short films)</b>	<b>Location</b>
2020	Louis Koo Cinema	2	Hong Kong Arts Centre, Harbour Rd, Wan Chai
	Broadway Cinematheque	11	Public Square St, Yau Ma Tei
	PALACE ifc	9	IFC Mall, Finance St, Central,
	PREMIERE ELEMENTS	6	Austin Rd, West Kowloon
	MOViE MOViE Cityplaza	10	Cityplaza, Tai Koo Shing Rd, Quarry Bay
	The ONE	9	The ONE, Nathan Rd, Tsim Sha Tsui
	MY CINEMA YOHO MALL	2	YOHO MALL I, Long Yat Rd, Yuen Lon
2019	Louis Koo Cinema	2	/
	Broadway Cinematheque	22	/
	PREMIERE ELEMENTS	6	/
	The ONE	14	/
	AMC Pacific Place	8	One Pacific Place, Admiralty
2018	Broadway Cinematheque	22	/
	MOViE MOViE Cityplaza	7	/
	The ONE	17	/
	AMC Pacific Place	18	/
2017	Broadway Cinematheque	18	/
	The ONE	19	/
	AMC Pacific Place	21	/
2016	Broadway Cinematheque	19	/
	The ONE	27	/
	AMC Pacific Place	24	/

Table 4.5 also shows that Broadway Cinematheque, The ONE and AMC (or PALACE ifc) have been the main screening venues for HKLGFF for years. AMC and PALACE ifc are similar in type and they are less than half an hour away from each other. AMC, PALACE ifc and The ONE are all located in large high-end shopping malls, and the decor of the cinemas is luxurious. AMC and PALACE ifc are in Admiralty and Central respectively, both in the Central and Western District. The ONE is in Tsim Sha Tsui, which is part of the Yau Tsim Mong District. Admiralty, Central and Tsim Sha Tsui are the centres of economic activity in Hong Kong, with several office buildings and major shopping districts clustered in these areas. All three are also connected by the MTR or ferry and are hubs for transportation in Hong Kong. The HKLGFF has selected these cinemas as the main screening venues considering their high traffic numbers, since the festival can be exposed to a broader public.

Although Broadway Cinematheque belongs to the same Yau Tsim Mong district as The ONE, Broadway Cinematheque differs significantly from The ONE, AMC and PALACE ifc. As discussed in Chapter Two, Broadway Cinematheque is in a residential area, instead of a high-end shopping mall. It is arthouse-oriented and has been a screening venue for various film festivals since its establishment. In other words, the significance of Broadway Cinematheque to the HKLGFF is that the cinema already has a large audience base of cinephiles. According to Gary Mak, the festival is aware of the difference in audience between Broadway Cinematheque and other cinemas, as Broadway Cinematheque's audience is more cinephile-like while audiences at other cinemas prefer commercial tastes.<sup>94</sup> At this point, Lam explained, the festival programmes films with less commercial potential (such as documentaries) at Broadway Cinematheque and screens popular queer films (such as gay romantic comedies)

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<sup>94</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 232.

at other cinemas in Central.<sup>95</sup> The HKLGFF chooses which films to be shown in a specific cinema based on the location and audience characteristics of the screening venue. The formation of economic and linguistic exclusions is manifested through the class stratification in urban space. In other words, the HKLGFF prioritises the areas where people have comparatively higher income and English proficiency.

**Table 4.6** Median monthly income in selected districts<sup>96</sup>

District	Median Monthly Income from Main Employment (HKD)
Hong Kong (Whole Territory)	15,500
Central and Western	20,800
Wan Chai	20,000
Yau Tsim Mong	15,500

On one hand, the economic exclusion of the HKLGFF can be seen in the various income levels of Hong Kong's districts. Drawing on the Population By-census 2016 in relation to the median monthly income from main employment, Table 4.6 selects three specific districts that have been previously discussed. The table shows that residents in Central and Western District and Wan Chai District distinctly have much higher income (per person) than the average level of Hong Kong. Central and Western District and Wan Chai District are mainly home to middle class residents. The median monthly income of the Yau Tsim Mong District stays at the average level of Hong Kong.

Furthermore, the main screening venues of the HKLGFF overlap the middle-class queer consumption space, which are also the areas with residents of higher income. As explored in Chapter One, the Hong Kong queer consumption landscape is spatially hierarchal:

<sup>95</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>96</sup> All the data comes from the Population By-Census 2016. See: "District Profiles," *Population By-Census 2016*, <https://www.bycensus2016.gov.hk/en/bc-dp.html> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

Sheung Wan, Central, Wan Chai and Tsim Sha Tsui are where middle-class queer people consume and socialise. According to K's experience, he is used to socialising in these areas as well.<sup>97</sup> He underlined the difference of location for queer people's socialisation and recreation during the day and at night.<sup>98</sup> During the day, queer people move around more widely, but still in the big shopping malls. There are numerous high-end shopping malls in these four locations where people can do some shopping, socialise at cafes or restaurants and exercise in gyms. There are even some cultural events that cater to the needs of queer communities. In the evening, these four places are packed with customers of gay bars and clubs. Hence, the cooperation with the cinemas in these locations indicates the intention of the festival to attract queer communities by having screening venues near to where middle-class queer communities consume and socialise.

**Table 4.7** Demographic profiles of selected districts (ethnicity and English language ability)<sup>99</sup>

District	Non-Chinese	Able to write English	Able to speak English
Hong Kong (Whole Territory)	7.97%	66.00%	66.00%
Central and Western	20.3%	78.66%	80.35%
Wan Chai	22.14%	81.08%	83.00%
Yau Tsim Mong	15.55%	69.55%	71.71%

On the other hand, the linguistic exclusion of the HKLGFF is reflected in levels of English language and the number of ethnic minorities in different districts of Hong Kong. Just as in the previous table, Table 4.7 shows the English proficiency and portion of non-Chinese ethnicity of the residents in these three districts, based on the Population By-Census 2016.

<sup>97</sup> K, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> All data comes from the Population By-Census 2016. See: "District Profiles," *Population By-Census 2016*, <https://www.bycensus2016.gov.hk/en/bc-dp.html> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

According to the table, more than 80 percent of residents in Central and Western District and Wan Chai District can speak or write in English, the proportions are at least 15 percent higher than the average English language ability in Hong Kong. Furthermore, the table demonstrates that Central and Western District's and Wan Chai District's proportion of non-Chinese residents are almost three times the average level of Hong Kong – Western experts primarily live in these two areas. The selection of screening venues in these two regions means that the HKLGFF showcases queer films without Chinese subtitles. In addition, as Mee Ling Lai notes, "English has enjoyed the status of a prestigious language strongly associated with higher education, high social status, intelligence and wealth."<sup>100</sup> As mentioned, the residents of Central and Western District and Wan Chai District also have higher income. Thus, in general, the residents of these two areas hold economic and cultural privileges.

Faced with the negligence of queer communities in New Territories, the HKLGFF attempted to cooperate with a cinema in Yuen Long in 2020. Liu mentioned that one of the team members (Celia Li) strongly suggested that the HKLGFF collaborate with a cinema in the New Territories to reach the long-neglected audience there.<sup>101</sup> The New Territories, also called remote areas,<sup>102</sup> is far from the business centre of Hong Kong and its public transportation. Researching the lives of low-income Hong Kong citizens in remote areas (in the New Territories, in particular), Hung Wong states that "the quality of life of youth, women and elderly is adversely affected by limited job opportunities, high cost of travel for employment, and poor neighbourhoods in the community."<sup>103</sup> Moreover, as the consumption level is lower and most of the border checkpoints between Hong Kong and Mainland China

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<sup>100</sup> Lai, "The linguistic landscape," 252.

<sup>101</sup> Liu, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>102</sup> Hung Wong, "Quality of Life of Poor People Living in Remote Areas in Hong Kong," *Social Indicators Research* 100, no. 3 (2011): 435.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

are located in the edge of the New Territories, a large number of new immigrants from Mainland China reside in the New Territories. The demographics of the New Territories are vastly different from the demographics of the Central and Kowloon areas. The New Territories is not the festival organisers' image of where the majority of the audience are located.

Given the lack of experience of organising queer screenings in the New Territories, the collaboration with a cinema in Yuen Long can be considered as HKLGFF's an attempt to challenge the spatial distinction. There were two screenings on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2020 at MY CINEMA YOHO MALL. Linked with several large-size housing estates, YOHO MALL is the largest high-end shopping mall in the Yuen Long District. Also belonging to the Broadway Circuit, MY CINEMA is a newly built luxury cinema. Compared to the average number of ten screenings at other screening venues, the number at My Cinema Yoho Mall was small. Nevertheless, this attempt can be seen as a breakthrough. The HKLGFF selected *No Body* (2020) and *Miss Andy* (2020) to be screened at My Cinema Yoho Mall. Considering that the common level of English usage in the New Territories is much lower than in the Central areas, when HKLGFF attempted to organise screenings in Yuen Long, it chose two Chinese-language queer films with Chinese and English subtitles. However, these two films were not popular among the audience in that area, as only a fraction of tickets (about one tenth) were sold. The festival did not receive anticipated box office revenue in Yuen Long, which highlights the difficulty of screening queer films outside Hong Kong's central business areas. For one thing, the New Territories is not a well-developed space for queer consumption – there are few queer consumers there. For another thing, the screenings in New Territories are more likely to attract an audience from local and adjacent areas.

Ultimately, the choice of certain screening venues clearly reflects that the operation of the HKLGFF is market driven. Broadway Circuit is one of the biggest cinema chains in Hong

Kong, covering most parts of the city; nevertheless, the HKLGFF mainly cooperates with particular cinemas around Victoria Harbour. The density of screening sites reveals the unbalanced development of Hong Kong's urban spaces. For the sake of boosting box office, the festival mainly targets middle-class queer communities. How the HKLGFF fulfils its commercial pursuits has been greatly influenced by the logic of class, leading to economic and linguistic exclusions.

### **The dominance of the gay audience**

Gay films have historically dominated queer film festivals' programmes. Theresa Heath underlines the dominance of gay films in queer film festivals from the 1980s and 1990s, highlighting how some queer film festivals programmers have constantly addressed the lack of lesbian features and have attempted to increase lesbian representations since the late 1980s, although the issue persists.<sup>104</sup> Through an analysis of mainstream queer films, Sydney Dye observed the lack of diverse queer cinematic representations in terms of "gender, race or specific sexual orientation of the characters."<sup>105</sup> Frederik Dhaenens interviewed 24 film programmers from seventeen film festivals across Europe in 2016 who all acknowledged "the omnipresence of white gay men" in queer film festivals; some programmers even accentuated the difficulty in looking for suitable lesbian films.<sup>106</sup> Dhaenens also notes the dominance of gay films in general film festivals that tend to programme a selection of queer-themed films, claiming that these film festivals largely adopt "the safe and predictable path"

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<sup>104</sup> Theresa Heath, "Neoliberalism, Politics and Resistance: Queer Film Festivals and the Fight Against Urban Erasure," *Altre Modernità* 20 (2018): 125.

<sup>105</sup> Sydney Dye, "Representing Sexuality: An Analysis of Coming Out in Contemporary Film," *Elon Journal* (2020): 57.

<sup>106</sup> Dhaenens, "Pink Programming Across Europe," 73 and 78.



that mainly refers to programming an “abundance of gay male content” for commercial purposes.<sup>107</sup>

As with queer film festivals in general, gay films dominate the programmes of the HKLGFF. Up to 2020, the HKLGFF has been organised for over three decades, while this chapter focuses on the festival programmes during the period from 2016 to 2020 (as mentioned in the Introduction, I only have access to the festival catalogues for these five years). This chapter categorises the HKLGFF’s programmes into four types according to the sexual identity of their protagonists: gay films, lesbian films, transgender films, and queer films. Numerous queer-themed films feature characters of diverse sexual identity. For instance, there are a couple of lesbian characters in supporting roles in *120 Beats per Minute* (2017), while its narrative concentrates on a gay couple, therefore, *120 Beats per Minute* is classed as a gay film. Moreover, the queer films category refers to films featuring main characters with more than one sexual identity such as, *Bao Bao* (2018), which is about a lesbian couple and a gay couple, and *Between the Seasons* (2018), telling a story about a lesbian couple and a transgender woman. From the aspect of genre, most of the films in the queer film category are documentaries, like *Queer Japan* (2019). This categorisation cannot be definitive – its main purpose is to examine the proportion of LGBTQ films in each category.

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<sup>107</sup> Frederik Dhaenens, “How Queer is ‘Pink’ Programming? On the Representational Politics of an Identity-Based Film Program at Film Fest Gent,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 5-6 (2018): 806.

**Table 4.8** Categorisation of feature-length films, the HKLGFF 2016-2020

	Total	Gay Films	Lesbian Films	Transgender Films	Queer Films
<b>2020</b>	17	9	3	2	3
<b>2019</b>	30	16	7	1	6
<b>2018</b>	29	15	7	4	3
<b>2017</b>	24	15	5	3	1
<b>2016</b>	27	20	5	0	2

Table 4.8 shows that the HKLGF has programmed an average of around 27 queer feature films between 2016 and 2019, except for 2020 when the pandemic affected the festival's running. This table clearly demonstrates that gay films have dominated the HKLGFF's programmes for years, accounting for 62.5% and 74.1% of all films shown in 2017 and 2016, respectively. This proportion decreased between 2018 and 2020, but it is still above 50%. This decreasing proportion of gay films indicates that the programming team of the HKLGFF has tended towards showing more lesbian and transgender films. Thus, the HKLGFF is programming an increasing number of films about a wider range of sexual identities. However, the programmes of the HKLGFF are still overtly gay-oriented.

The dominance of gay films in the HKLGFF has historically been a structural issue. Since the 1990s, even though the programming style of Edward Lam (founder and festival director of HKLGFF before 2000) was more avant-garde and political-oriented, the majority of the HKLGFF's programmes were still considered to be gay-themed films.<sup>108</sup> As Lam himself recognised the issue of gay film hegemony, he made some attempts to change the HKLGFF programmes in 1997 and 1998. In 1997, the festival was divided into two parts: Edward Lam programmed the first part (The 6th Gay Film/Video Festival), and he invited four female programmers to programme lesbian content for the second part (The 6th Lesbian Film/Video

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<sup>108</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 42-43.

Festival). Lam even changed the name of the festival to the Hong Kong Queer Film/Video Festival in 1998 to emphasise the progressive political nature of queer film festivals and to adjust the middle-class and gay oriented impression of the HKLGFF.<sup>109</sup> However, the festival's attempts were not well received, given the turbulent socio-economic conditions and the still-developing Hong Kong queer community and culture in the late 1990s. The festival was also in crisis at that time.

With the festival's commercialisation, the gay-orientation has become increasingly distinct since the 2000s. When Raymond Yeung and Wouter Barendrecht took over the HKLGFF, the stakeholders of the HKLGFF also changed. According to Pang, the HKLGFF has been greatly gay and commercial oriented since the early 2000s.<sup>110</sup> The majority of the HKLGFF's programmes were gay romantic comedies or practically soft-porn gay films, as these could generate considerable profits. Pang claims that Yeung and Barendrecht were the programmers with the great emphasis on gay content.<sup>111</sup> However, when the HKLGFF was organised by female festival directors in the mid-2000s, even though they attempted to increase numbers of lesbian features, gay films dominated the festival programmes. As Pang notes, with the engagement of Fortissimo or Edko Films, the programming process of the HKLGFF relies on these stakeholders, and they have almost monopolised the circulation of queer films in the Hong Kong market.<sup>112</sup> According to Denise Tang, when she was working as the festival director of the HKLGFF, Fortissimo and Edko provided the majority of the films for the festival; the programming style of these two companies was overtly Western and gay-content-driven, in particular, Wouter Barendrecht focused on gay commercial films.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 41.

<sup>110</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 52.

<sup>111</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 54-56.

<sup>112</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 95 and 235.

<sup>113</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 235.

Festival programming is a complex process, involving various actors and factors. The long-lasting dominance of gay films in the HKLGFF's programmes cannot be blamed on one programmer's efforts. This dominance has been constructed through long-term interaction with numerous stakeholders and the wider global market of queer films.

The dominance of gay films in queer film festivals reflects queer filmmaking's and the market's preference for gay films globally. Gay films take up the resources and market share of lesbian and transgender films. As a lesbian filmmaker, Kanchi Wichmann uses her experience of the difficulty of finding investment at the Berlinale to illustrate investors' strong scepticism about the commercial value of lesbian films, as they believe that "lesbian films just don't make any money."<sup>114</sup> Wichmann also criticises the conservative attitude of investors and the market towards lesbian and transgender filmmaking.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, Akkadia Ford accentuates the economic inequality that lesbian filmmakers face during film production.<sup>116</sup> According to Dhanens, although the lesbian programmers "strongly disagree with the statement that well-made features with lesbian content are rare," they still "acknowledge that there are fewer films made on lesbian and feminist themes and/or by women due to issues regarding access to important networks within the film industry."<sup>117</sup> The second half of the 2010s has witnessed an increasing number of lesbian and transgender films and the programmes of queer film festivals have generally become diversified. However, the dominance of gay films still exists as an issue in queer filmmaking and queer film festivals globally.

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<sup>114</sup> Kanchi Wichmann, "Lesbian Films Don't Make Money," *Another Gaze*, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2016, <https://www.anothergaze.com/lesbian-films-dont-make-money/> (accessed 18<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Akkadia Ford, "The Queer Film Festival as a Gender-Diverse Space: Positioning the 'L' in GLBTIQ Screen Content," in *Lesbian geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, edited by Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd, 2015), 194.

<sup>117</sup> Dhaenens, "Pink Programming Across Europe," 78-79.

In addition, gay films can generate large box office revenue, leading to their dominance in festival programmes. Compared to lesbian films, gay films are generally more financially viable. Regarding ticket sales at the HKLGFF, Edward Lam claims, “they [Hong Kong gay men] only care about where there are handsome guys. Any film that features handsome guys, the gay men who do not wear clothes, in particular, will be very popular” (my translation).<sup>118</sup> In other words, gay films featuring hot bodies sell tickets. As discussed in Chapter Two, in terms of why Edward Lam left the HKLGFF, one of the main reasons is that he felt quite disappointed about the apolitical and consumption oriented queer culture in Hong Kong.<sup>119</sup> Twenty years later, the preference of Hong Kong gay audiences for muscular male bodies remains the same. Joe Lam notes that lesbian audiences in Hong Kong are less likely to buy tickets.<sup>120</sup> He further claims, “The gay films with hot bodies do sell tickets and Hong Kong audiences love watching naked muscle men, though I do not know why, as you can easily find homoerotic pictures or videos online nowadays” (my translation).<sup>121</sup> From the perspective of the audience, as K states, “there is no doubt that I love watching the gay romantic comedy with naked handsome guys and sex scenes” (my translation).<sup>122</sup> When the HKLGFF broke away from the HKAC’s full sponsorship, the festival considered programming a large amount of gay films for the sake of the festival’s sustainability.

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<sup>118</sup> Xiaofei Zhen 甄晓菲, “Shishi Feifei Tongxinglian Yingzhan,” 是是非非同性恋影展 [Shishi Feifei: Queer Film Festival] *Southern Weekly* 南方周末, December 18, 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> K, 2018, personal interview.

**Table 4.9** Additional Screenings at the HKLGFF 2018

Title	Date
<i>I Miss You When I See You</i>	16/09
<i>Sorry Angel</i>	21/09
<i>Method</i>	22/09
<i>My Days of Mercy</i>	23/09
<i>God's Own Country</i>	23/09
<i>Thirty Years of Adonis</i>	26/09

Moreover, the additional screenings of the HKLGFF can demonstrate what kinds of films are more popular among audiences in Hong Kong. Although not all popular films will have extra screenings, the films with additional screenings are clearly popular. Table 4.9 shows that there were seven additional screenings in HKLGFF 2018. Except for *My Days of Mercy* (2017), the other six films were gay-themed. These additional screenings of the HKLGFF signify the strong position of gay films in Hong Kong's queer market. In particular, films with naked muscular male bodies can sell tickets. As with Scud's other films that have been commercially outstanding at the HKLGFF, *Thirty Years of Adonis* (2017) was one of the fastest-selling of 2018. Scud's films focus on male nudity and eroticism and, as Lam claims, HKLGFF's audiences particularly love his films.<sup>123</sup> *God's Own Country* (2017) and *Sorry Angel* (2018) feature several scenes of athletic build male bodies and sex scenes, even nudity. In terms of how outstanding the box office of the films featuring normative male bodies can be, according to Joe Lam,

Comparing to Scud's films, *Berlin Drifters* (2017) is completely a hardcore gay porn.

Other programmers had concerns and felt that the festival should not programme this film, but I insisted on showing it. Because I thought, why not? In the 1990s, heterosexuals could watch hardcore erotic films together in some public cinemas.

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<sup>123</sup> Lam, 2018, personal interview.

Now that we have the chance, we gay people can watch it too. The film was so popular last year (2017) that three additional screenings were held. There were five screenings of this film and almost every one of them was full house.<sup>124</sup>

The gay films that showcase muscular queer male bodies as a point of attraction generally have a significant commercial appeal at the HKLGFF. Thus, for commercial considerations, the programming teams sustains a certain proportion of these gay films in festival programmes.

### **Gendered class distinction and the homonormative lifestyle**

As explored in the previous sections, the HKLGFF targets a middle-class gay audience. The third and the fourth sections above demonstrated that HKLGFF excludes audiences who lack high income or English proficiency: the HKLGFF targets an audience with economic and cultural advantages. The HKLGFF's audience preference emphasises the reproduction of class distinction. Moreover, the fifth section illustrated that gay audiences are the targeted audience. Aiming to remain financially viable, the HKLGFF targets middle-class gay audience, since they have comparatively higher willingness and capacity to consume.<sup>125</sup> Thus, the festival attracts numerous apolitical middle-class gay consumers.

Although HKLGFF can be considered an important part of Hong Kong queer society, not every audience member self-identifies as a supporter of this society. In particular, attracting gay men who are neither frequent movie-goers nor interested in queer politics to become part of the audience is a way for the festival to pursue sustainability. For example, in terms of the audience of the PALACE ifc, Mak observes that "there is a gay crowd coming down from the gym to the cinema."<sup>126</sup> He continues: they are "more affluent and more English speaking. They talk more about consumption, lifestyle, and parties, instead of sharing

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Liu, 2021, personal interview.

<sup>126</sup> Richards, *The Queer Film Festival*, 83.

about the film.”<sup>127</sup> As previously illustrated, one of the key features of the HKLGFF’s self-positioning is as a consumption activity, thus gay consumers are targeted.

Targeting an apolitical middle-class gay audience reveals that the HKLGFF advocates the homonormative lifestyle. Doris Weichselbaumer argues that the homonormative lifestyle is based on “marriage, a monogamous family life, as well as successful careers, and are closely aligned to the social norms of the heterosexual majority.”<sup>128</sup> Weichselbaumer’s understanding is straightforwardly developed from the concept of homonormativity, highlighting the main factors, such as gay marriage, middle-classness and conservative domesticity. Providing a more comprehensive interpretation of a homonormative lifestyle, Cesare Di Felicianantonio identifies characteristics including seeking a gym-built body and masculinity, desiring gay marriage and offspring and being apolitical.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, Di Felicianantonio uses one of his informants as an example to demonstrate what homonormative lifestyle is in detail:

We can see how JJ’s ‘homonormative’ lifestyle (he practices sport at least four times a week; he goes to gay clubs and parties at least once a week; he travels at least three times per year to attend big gay events and parties around Europe; he avoids “slim feminine guys” since he openly presents himself as a bottom and looks for “very masculine, well-built men”) encounters the widespread activism characterizing Barcelona; individualism and isolation are replaced by civic engagement and strong social ties.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Doris Weichselbaumer, “Testing for Discrimination Against Lesbians of Different Marital Status: A Field Experiment,” *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society* 54, no. 1 (2015): 132-133.

<sup>129</sup> Cesare Di Felicianantonio, “Inclusion in the Homonormative World City: The Case of Gay Migrants Living with HIV in Barcelona,” *Documents d’Anàlisi geogràfica* 65, no. 3 (2019): 522.

<sup>130</sup> Di Felicianantonio, “Inclusion in the Homonormative World City,” 529.



This informant's description addresses the significance of consumption to the homonormative lifestyle. The understanding of homonormative lifestyle mainly follows Di Felicianantonio's interpretation in this project. The middle-class gay audience's participation in the HKLGFF can be considered as the realisation of the homonormative lifestyle. A group of middle-class gay men who dress well attend the festival together and then go to gay clubs afterwards.

Meanwhile, advertisements in the festival catalogues show the HKLGFF's intention of advocating the homonormative lifestyle. Examining the festival catalogues of the HKLGFF from 2016 to 2020, Table 4.10 categorises the advertisements based on whether it is commercial or not. The table also highlights the number of gay-men-targeted commercial advertisements. The table shows that, during these five years, there were slightly more commercial advertisements than non-commercial advertisements in the festival catalogues. Some non-profit queer organisations, such as the Hong Kong AIDS Foundation and the Hong Kong Pride Parade, have constantly sponsored the HKLGFF. In addition, regarding the commercial sponsorships of the HKLGFF, there are four main types: banking, alcoholic beverages, online streaming platforms, and gay-oriented services. The HKLGFF does not advertise lesbian-oriented or transgender-oriented products and services. The gay-exclusive services and products that sponsor the HKLGFF mainly relate to laser hair removal services and underwear, and gay clubs also sometimes sponsor the festival. From the perspective of commercial sponsors, the HKLGFF's audience base is tailored to the commercial sponsors' target consumers.

**Table 4.10** Advertisements in the HKLGFF's festival catalogues 2016-2020

	<b>Non-commercial advertisements</b>	<b>Commercial advertisements</b>	<b>Gay-targeted commercial advertisements</b>
<b>2020</b>	3	5	2
<b>2019</b>	4	7	4
<b>2018</b>	3	7	3
<b>2017</b>	6	8	3
<b>2016</b>	6	8	1

In addition, the images shown in the advertisements in festival catalogues demonstrate that both the HKLGFF and some of their commercial sponsors target middle-class gay men. Examining the photos used by the advertisements in festival catalogues, Pang observes that the HKLGFF's commercial sponsors mainly target middle-class gay men, as all the images are composed of half-naked muscular men.<sup>131</sup> For instance, as Figure 4.5 shows, the advertisements in festival catalogues use photos of topless muscle men or hunks in underwear. Furthermore, these images indicate the advocacy of the homonormative lifestyle. In addition to attracting gay customers, these images featuring topless muscle men also reflect the idea that this kind of muscular male figure is the normative type for queer male bodies. When the mainstream gay communities follow this idea, they are required to have a gym-built body, and these images imply that gay men who desire such bodies are expected to consume these sponsored services or products as well.

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<sup>131</sup> Pang, "Herstories," 71.



**Figure 4.5** Advertisements in the festival catalogue of the HKLGFF 2020

Two main issues arise through analysis of the homonormative lifestyle. On one hand, it can weaken the political nature of queer film festivals. Mark Casey notices that the content that caters to the homonormative lifestyle is more likely to be apolitical.<sup>132</sup> The HKLGFF appeals to middle-class gay men who have little interest in queer politics at the cost of exploring radical queer political issues and representations. On the other hand, the homonormative lifestyle can also marginalise the queer audience who cannot follow this lifestyle. These audiences include queer people with economic disadvantages, queer ethnic minorities, queer immigrants or refugees, the queer elderly and disabled queer people. Furthermore, Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard P. Eibach regard these marginalised queer people as subordinate groups among queer communities, addressing the political, cultural, legal and historical invisibilities they suffer.<sup>133</sup> Their representations also become invisible on the big screen. Ultimately, when the HKLGFF advocates the homonormative lifestyle, the

<sup>132</sup> Mark E. Casey, "The Queer Unwanted and Their Undesirable 'Otherness'," in *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics*, edited by Kath Browne, Jason Lim and Gavin Brown (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 126-128.

<sup>133</sup> Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard P. Eibach, "Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-Group Identities," *Sex Roles* 59, no. 5-6 (2008): 383-387.

festival continues to privilege the middle-class gay audience, while the interests of the subordinate group of queer communities are sacrificed or forgotten.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that the HKLGFF explicitly or implicitly constructs different kinds of exclusion. While the HKLGFF acknowledges the issues caused by middle-class-oriented exclusion, it has also attempted to seek more inclusion, such as increasing the number of films with Chinese subtitles and expanding its influence into the New Territories by cooperating with the cinema in Yuen Long. In addition, the HKLGFF has organised two events to reshape the image of a “middle-class-only” queer film festival. On the one hand, the HKLGFF has organised a campus tour called “HeHeSheSheOut@U” since 2015; the festival cooperates with the Red Ribbon Centre and university departments or student groups to organise short film sharing and discussion forums at university campuses. On the other hand, the HKLGFF has organised community screenings called “We are Gaybours” since 2019. The name “We are Gaybours” addresses the significance of inclusion and also the close relationship between queer and non-queer communities in Hong Kong. The programmes of “We are Gaybours” indicate that the primary principle was to programme locally made films of Chinese context. Both events are free of charge and use Cantonese as their main language. However, these events are not able to fundamentally counter the HKLGFF’s exclusionary tendencies.

This chapter has identified middle-class gay men as the audience base that the HKLGFF targets through the examination of festival practices, covering various aspects, including ticket pricing, the selection of screening venues, subtitling, festival programmes and advertisements in festival catalogues. However, since data about the HKLGFF’s audience cannot be accessed, this chapter could only discuss what kinds of audience the festival intended to target. To

further analyse the audience, future research could gather demographic data for HKLGFF's audience through methods such as questionnaires or observation. This chapter offered a framework that introduces the class perspective into the analysis of queer film festivals, addressing how the practices of festivals have implicitly intensified class distinction and advocated for the homonormative lifestyle.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have investigated how the HKLGFF reproduces homonormativity in the context of the global queer film festival circuit through the examination of festival practices. This project has adopted a combination of methods to gather and analyse a diverse range of data and materials to assemble a more comprehensive understanding of the HKLGFF. I have argued that under the neoliberal trend in the global queer film festival circuit, by privileging middle-class gay identity and commercial interests, the HKLGFF reproduces homonormativity, which characterises the consumption-oriented queer culture in Hong Kong. This research has critically examined three key concepts – film festival circuit, homonormativity and pink capital – and has also scrutinised their relationship, in the context of queer film festivals and Hong Kong. This thesis has expanded the concept of homonormativity and has highlighted that various festival curatorial practices can also contribute to the reproduction of homonormativity. It has also provided a framework to identify the specific qualities of a queer film festival by addressing the interactions between the individual case and its local context and the global queer film festival circuit. As one of the first sustained studies focusing on queer film festivals in Asia, it has sought to document the festival practices of an Asian queer film festival and further contest the Europe-America dominance in queer film festival studies. Moreover, this project has demonstrated how to analyse in depth the operation of a single queer film festival.

This thesis has identified neoliberalism and consumerism as the main forces that have shaped the consumption-oriented queer culture of Hong Kong. As a part of Hong Kong's queer landscape, the HKLGFF is also situated in the societal context shaped by these two forces.

During its first decade, HKAC fully supported the HKLGFF, thus the festival was not required to have a commercial focus. When Hong Kong's economy was in recession in the late 1990s and the HKAC could not continue to support the HKLGFF, commercialisation became a potential strategy to sustain the festival. The HKLGFF has gradually transformed to a self-sustaining queer film festival. With the involvement of commercial stakeholders, the festival operation has become increasingly market driven. The festival targets a middle-class gay audience, in effect advocating a homonormative lifestyle. The programming style and process of the HKLGFF reveals the hegemony of top-tier film festivals in the circuit, since they dominate the global market of queer films. This dominance leads to a lack of Asian representation and the Western-centric interpretation of queer identity and issues. The HKLGFF's self-sustaining funding pattern, commercial considerations and the lack of festival resources all stimulate the reproduction of homonormativity.

The relationship between the HKLGFF and the formation of homonormativity is complicated: the HKLGFF both reproduces and contests homonormativity. However, this thesis has concentrated more on the HKLGFF's reproduction of homonormativity from a critical perspective. The programming team of the HKLGFF has acknowledged various issues caused by the reproduction of homonormativity as well as homonormativity's negative impacts on local queer communities. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated that commercialised queer film festivals still retain their political nature, so they also fulfil the social and political agendas. Thus, as mentioned in Chapters Three and Four, the HKLGFF has attempted to fight against homonormativity by organising community screenings and campus tours, providing student discounts, and programming increasing numbers of lesbian and transgender films, for example. However, all these attempts cannot fundamentally challenge homonormativity. They are symbolically significant, since all these various festival practices of the HKLGFF –

including programming strategies, ticket pricing, selection of screening venues – have acted together to reproduce homonormativity. Moreover, the increasing involvement of pink capital in the operation of the HKLGFF intensifies the negative impacts of homonormativity – the reproduction of homonormativity is a structural issue for the festival.

Regarding the directions of future research, research into queer film festivals in Asia represents a new trend in film festival research. Analysing a region's queer film festivals is a common approach to queer film festival studies. For instance, Frederik Dhaenens has interviewed 24 programmers from seventeen European queer film festivals, and Antoine Damiens has examined minor queer-themed film festivals in North America. Europe and North America are the most studied regions in queer film festivals research. In the Asian context, Qin Qin has investigated how queer film festivals in East Asia shape festival communities from the aspects of queer activism and community building.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Jia Tan has explored how Asia Pacific Queer Film Festival Alliance contributes to the rise of Asian queer film festivals to challenge the spatiotemporal hierarchy of the film festival circuit.<sup>2</sup> These represent the few attempts to analyse queer film festivals from the perspective of Asian regionalism, since Asia has been largely neglected in the English-dominated area of queer film festival studies.

The vastly different political and economic development of various Asian countries and regions and their unique historical backgrounds have led to the emergence of an extremely wide range of queer film festivals. Some queer film festivals, such as the HKLGFF, are highly commercial, and others, such as the Taiwan International Queer Film Festival, are

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<sup>1</sup> Qin Qin, "The urban environment and East Asian queer film festivals," *Gender, Place & Culture* 26, no. 10 (2019): 1497.

<sup>2</sup> Jia Tan, "Networking Asia Pacific: Queer Film Festivals and the Spatiotemporal Politics of Inter-Referencing," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2019): 204-206.



strongly supported by mainstream society, local film industry and the state. In some Asian countries queer film festivals are still regarded as taboo, as is the case for the Beijing Queer Film Festival<sup>3</sup> in mainland China and the Abhimani Film Festival (also known as Celluloid Rainbows) in Sri Lanka. In order to survive in their specific historical and societal landscapes, these queer film festivals have developed unique operational strategies. These Asian film festivals began to strengthen their connections and cooperation with each other in the late 2010s. Further study could explore how these queer film festivals, with various operational structures and strategies, collaborate to increase the significance of Asian queer film festivals and negotiate the dominance of the Western-centric film festival circuit. Additionally, an analysis could focus on how these diverse queer film festivals together shape notions of Asian queerness.

In addition, the study of queer short films would be an important entry point for future research into queer film festivals. As discussed in Chapter Four, compared to the available options for feature-length queer films, the circulation of queer short films depends heavily on the global queer film festival circuit. In some ways, queer short films have greater freedom to explore radical queer politics and representations.<sup>4</sup> In addition, programming strategies often differ for queer short films compared to feature-length works. For example, in most cases, several queer short films are combined into a collection of around 100 minutes in length according to a similar theme or sexual identity, and programmers give special consideration to the order in which these films are shown.<sup>5</sup> However, there has been little research to date that has focused on queer short films in the context of queer film festivals. It was during the

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<sup>3</sup> Hongwei Bao, "Queer as Catachresis: the Beijing Queer Film Festival in Cultural Translation," in *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation*, edited by Chris Berry and Luke Robinson (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2017), 93-95.

<sup>4</sup> Lillian Liu, 2021, personal interview, Zoom, 18<sup>th</sup> June.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

process of researching the HKLGFF that I became aware of the uniqueness of queer short films and their significance to queer film festivals. Whether future research features an analysis of the texts, programming strategies, circulations of queer short films or the funding for short films provided by festivals, this kind of research can enrich queer film festival studies on a wider scale.

From the summer of 2017, when I had just decided that the HKLGFF would be the focus of my study, to the present summer of 2021, the entire society of Hong Kong has undergone swift, radical changes. The political turmoil in Hong Kong, triggered by the protests of millions of citizens against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill in the summer of 2019 continues to fester. In particular, the political environment in Hong Kong deteriorated rapidly after the mid-2020 introduction of the Hong Kong SAR National Security Law, destroying the remains of region's original democratic system and creating many political prisoners and refugees. The universal values in which Hong Kong citizens had always believed have been gradually replaced by ideas promoted by the Chinese Communist Party. A significant number of residents have emigrated or are in the process of emigrating to other countries. As explored in Chapter One, the development of queer culture in Hong Kong echoes the changes of the political and economic landscapes of the city. In this societal context, Hong Kong queer communities and culture face new challenges.

In late June 2021, the Facebook account of Broadway Cinematheque announced the cancellation of screenings of *Taiwan Equals Love* (2020), programmed by U-Asia Rainbow Docs.<sup>6</sup> The official post claimed that the Film Censorship Authority did not allow the full screening of the documentary, while the hosts would not consent to showing it in censored

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<sup>6</sup> Jointly organised by the European Union Office to Hong Kong and Macao, the Goethe-Institut Hong Kong and Broadway Cinemas, EU-Asia Rainbow Docs presents a series of queer documentaries with diverse themes.

form. Therefore, the hosts of EU-Asia Rainbow Docs decided to cancel the screenings. The organisers did not disclose exactly why the film was censored, but it can be inferred that politics played a substantial role. For example, the end credits of the film show that Taiwan was the first country in Asia to guarantee equal rights in marriage. The film's apparent political censorship has sparked considerable discussion within Hong Kong's queer and cinephiles communities. It has also raised my own concern about the deteriorating political environment's damage to queer communities and culture in Hong Kong. Although the HKLGFF is not an intensely political festival with a confrontational strategy, political censorship could easily impact the selection of the HKLGFF films in the future. The HKLGFF will also become a significant case through which to examine how the conflict between the neoliberal market economy and the increasingly repressive political environment influences the operation of a queer film festival.

In the meantime, the global Covid-19 pandemic has hit film festivals around the world with varying degrees of intensity, with numerous festivals cancelling screenings. However, cooperation with online streaming platforms has become a strategy for festivals to maintain a presence during the pandemic. As the Covid situation has been relatively controllable in Hong Kong, it has not caused a complete social shutdown or major medical crisis. Some indoor leisure venues, such as cinemas, were less affected than in some Western countries. The HKLGFF commenced screenings in November 2020, although the festival's continuation was delayed until March 2021 due to the epidemic's spread in December. Nevertheless, compared to many festivals that were simply cancelled or switched to online screenings, the latest HKLGFF has been a success. Following a global health event or political turmoil, organising in-person screenings represents a remarkable achievement. In the post-Covid era, the operation of queer film festivals has changed in a variety of ways. These changes indicate that the

perspectives and approaches to the research of queer film festivals can become more diverse, particularly regarding the impact of online streaming platforms on queer film festivals. For queer film festivals that choose to showcase films on the Internet, there is a challenge to consider how to shape a safe space online where queer communities can socialise and express themselves.

While this thesis represents a small part of the landscape of queer film festival studies, the research is significant in the new insights, on both ontological and methodological levels, it offers scholars. In addition, with the rise of Asian queer cinema and queer film festivals around the world, documenting the particularities of Asian queer film festivals and further exploring the power relations between them and the global queer film festival circuit becomes increasingly significant. I hope to see a further influx of research on queer film festivals in Asia in years to come.

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