

Excluded Film Essay  
Alyx Beaudoin  
Topics in Cinema and Gender Studies: Contemporary Queer Cinema  
Fall 2023  
Dawn Johnston  
University of Calgary

“The Night Deeply Drunk on the Spring Breeze”

My selection for the excluded film of choice is the Chinese drama film *Spring Fever* (2009) directed by Lou Ye. We may all be aware that tensions rise high in the context of Queerness in combination with the People’s Republic of China. This, of course, is true for that of a Chinese film as well—*Spring Fever*, although filmed in Nanjing with a Mandarin script and undoubtedly Chinese cast, was produced and distributed in France by Le Pacte motion picture company. During the time of its creation, Lou Ye was amidst his 5-year production ban, resulting from his unauthorized (under the CCP Department of Publicity) submission of his other film, *Summer Palace*, to the 2006 Cannes Film Festival (Associated). To avoid the Chinese government in the production of *Spring Fever*, he had the film registered as a Hong Kong/French co-production (Elley). It is for these reasons and many more that I chose this particular Lou Ye film. Although our FILM 307 course had a lovely variety of films, I believe for any addition it would be crucial to consider an international film, especially one that makes known how difficult queer cinema can be to produce in spaces that are not within the Developed West. *Spring Fever* covers a multitude of the topics that we covered throughout our content and more, so, come with me whilst I explore what makes this film stand out in a crowd.

*Spring Fever* is a melodramatic film heavily inspired by the writings of the poet Yu Dafu. It follows the story of our main character, Jiang Cheng, a gay man of unknown age or profession, who endeavours to peer into the humble life of someone just plain and simply seeking companionship. We are provided additional cast in the form of two heterosexual couplings, Wang Ping and his girlfriend Lin Xue, and Luo Haitao and his girlfriend Li Jing. The film begins with the exciting and passionate pairing of Jiang Cheng and Wang Ping sharing a loving space and time. This is juxtaposed with Lin Xue meeting private investigator, Luo Haitao, who shows her the findings of having followed the previously mentioned coupling. With this news, she

lashes out at Wang Ping and then threatens and harasses Jiang Cheng in his workplace, leading to breakups between all three. Jiang Cheng seeks escape at a gay bar he was once regular to, where he continues to be followed by Luo Haitao, who has taken a personal interest in him. Luo Haitao pursues a relationship despite his girlfriend at home and, following the news of Wang Ping's suicide, Jiang Cheng finds comfort with him. Shortly into their new connection, Jiang Cheng must leave for a work trip and Luo Haitao is invited to join him on the road. However, after the sudden closing of the factory where she worked, Li Jing joins the trip, where she subsequently learns of the tryst. She attempts to be open to the relationship, and love Luo Haitao alongside Jiang Cheng, but she's ultimately dissatisfied and leaves the group unseen. With tensions so high, the men fight shortly thereafter and Luo Haitao also goes his separate way, not without tears shed. In the last legs of the story, Jiang Cheng is jumped by Lin Xue, almost killing him with a slice to his throat. The story closes with Jiang Cheng showing a fresh neck tattoo to his newest boyfriend, then a memory of Wang Ping that fades to the credits.

The story is rife with sex, need and desperation. It seems that every character grapples with their own loneliness and seeking companionship regardless of others' intentions. It takes on concepts around infidelity and queerness, and the inherent need to do so behind another's back to keep the covert nature of ~the tryst~ concealed. We see elements of escapism when Jiang Cheng performs Drag at the gay bar while trying to cope with the recent breakup, and also the safe space that the community can provide him. And additional queer dynamics come through with Li Jing, Luo Haitang and Jiang Cheng's attempt at pseudo polyamory, despite its ultimately ill success. All these elements are not ones foreign to the Westernized norm of cinema, but the international cultural contexts bring a more nuanced tone. Taking on queer media content within an international breadth is essential in ensuring that the Western canon does not limit our scope of thought. When we talk about representation and its incredible influence on reception, not only is it necessary to at least consider what that means for an international context but also how international content can permeate other demographics and have a wider and more critical reach. Post-colonial perspective is needed to emphasize the non-homogenous society that we live in, and the diverse realities people face across the world. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a good step forward for this international concept, speaking to Chinese diaspora and the adversity faced by immigrants and people within stricter cultural spaces. However, still within the Western lens.

Homosexuality in China was decriminalized in 1997, but depictions of sexuality have been censored in Chinese TV for many decades before, with an ebb and flow of severity. In a very similar but perhaps slightly lagged timeframe of New Queer Cinema, China had its own wave of creative works instead coined as New Age Cinema, which started experiencing peaks in the 1990s. This wave was foundational in feminist and queer content, following suit to the Western equivalent, and trailing into the early 2000s. However, since the appointment of Xi Jinping as the Chinese president in 2012, censorship has only seen an even harsher crackdown, making it nearly impossible to find the kinds of loopholes films like *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) did. In its case: “The fact that it was financed abroad with transnational capital, and had a major star, enabled the film to be made in China, but this, in turn, had the effect of seriously limiting its scope for homosexual expression.” (Song, p. 73) that a film such as *Spring Fever* just couldn’t sacrifice itself for. Benschhoff describes New Queer Cinema as a film using postmodern ideas and aesthetic styles, while often questioning essentialist models of sexual identity that show the inadequacy of the terms "gay" and "lesbian" in defining actual human experience. Furthermore, “The films also regularly explore sexuality concerning gender, race, class, age, etc.-in order to show how other discourses of social difference inflect our understanding of sexuality.” (p. 11) *Spring Fever* does this, being filmed in a ‘home-grown’ sort of way and exploring the lives of the average, if not lower class, people, which is set to distill a sense of modesty that is prevalent in Chinese culture.

The story understood by Chinese viewers has a very prominent subject of dignity: what it means to try to keep it and the stripping of it in the face of love. The story “expresses the pain of an entire era” through the “bizarre, almost eerie” narrative style, as the “harshly ethical opposition” of the beginning portion of the film (that being homosexuality and the extreme reaction of Lin Xue) fades out in place of the overarching sense of powerlessness (Sun). The film uses quotes from the writing called “Nights of Spring Fever” by Yu Dafu, throughout the story; as per the film’s namesake. 5 quotes total appear in the form of written text and of a verbal reading. The first of which, depicting an intimate moment between presumably Jiang Cheng and Wang Ping in a dimly lit bedroom, is read from one to the other. The quote: “Kill myself? Long ago I had the courage to do it. I can still think of these two words now, my confidence hasn't yet worn away completely”, is played early on, before Lin Xue learns of Wang Ping’s tryst, but also

again at the very end, following final intimate scene of Jiang Cheng and his newest lover, just before credits roll. I believe this literature is essential to the understanding of the story this film portrays, particularly to the native Chinese perception of the overall tone. The unfortunate reality of most queer-Chinese people is that their identities are often fraught with an overwhelming sense of shame and isolation. Those who are married usually do so in response to family and social pressures, expressing that “they continue to have a strong homosexual orientation, but do not feel that they have any choice but to live a lie” (Ruan, p. 124). Are overwhelmed by guilt that they cannot love their spouses, and “They constantly suffer tremendous pain because of the necessity of living a double life and resent what they see as their own hypocrisy.” (Ruan, p. 125) These realities contribute to the social understanding of queer depictions being underlined by dread and unavoidable misery.

With the idea of international relevance in mind, we are still able to make deep connections to the content of the East to the West. Like *Brokeback Mountain*, *Spring Fever* covers the ideas of taboo relationships and the violence at risk of pursuing it openly *and* covertly. Similarly, one cannot handwave the queerness of the film due to the overt gay sexuality performed onscreen. As “To dismiss the film in this way denies the film any agency for the complex queering going on” (McDonald, p. 82). Like any relationship, there is angst and strife in their stories, but there is a genuine queer tonality that allows for subtle nuances to shine through, like the aforementioned concept of polyamory, the gay community, a deeper sense of identity in Jiang Cheng as a gay man who consistently pursues gay relationships. *Spring Fever* provides not only an avenue for queer representation in the literal senses but also with Doty’s concept of queer theory, as produced around the concern of “non-normative straightness.” (p. 150) There is also that aspect of violence that is seen in *Brokeback* with an assault on Jiang Cheng by Luo before they continue in their relationship. Both stories are built with a melodramatic form that, as McDonald put “is a highly coercive narrative structure that mixes the tensions between romantic love and the interface between clearly delineated good and bad behaviours” (p. 81) and just like the deaths within *Brokeback*, displays a death that heightens viewer empathy. Rather than saying *Spring Fever* should replace *Brokeback Mountain*, I would maybe interpret their relationship as similar to that of *Love, Simon*, to *Pariah*. There is a unique contrast that we were able to examine in

class with those two by the comparison of their plot foundations. Thus, I value even more so the similarities that I was able to see between the two movies.

In the newer uses of the term 'queer', it's often used to "describe the intersection or combination of more than one established 'non-straight' sexuality or gender position" in creative and social works. (Doty, p. 149) Of which, *Spring Fever* has marks all over the map. Even still, with its melodramatic negativity throughout, there is an overarching plot of transitional periods and the ultimate passing of seasons. Jiang Cheng's story is touched by one disappointment after the next but performs a wild ride of happenstances that glimpse queer joy. In the afterglow of sex with his multiple partners, In the gay bar where he is welcomed openly and excitedly, and in the final scenes where he shares soft and loving moments with a hopeful partner, we get to see a new spring blossom literally and figuratively. Even in the smallest inclusions of Li Jing cutting her hair before joining their road trip, or Jiang Cheng making his way through a long bustling crowd, there is a unique sense of divergent identity that rings true to the concepts laid out by Doty and Benshoff. It's because of films, like this, featuring male homosexuality that proliferated in China from the 90s to now that we can envision cinema bringing about societal changes. Precisely because these films are rarely targeted at a local audience, their marginality translates into marketability and can be used within the global cinematic sphere to harness greater representation (Song, p. 69-70). For that exact sentiment, I believe *Spring Fever* is such a film that is worthy of position within our course on contemporary queer cinema.

## References:

\*Translations by myself, Alyx Beaudoin, 2023.

Associated Press. "Banned Chinese Film at Cannes." *The Straits Times*, 24 Apr. 2009.

Benshoff, Harry M., and Sean. Griffin, editors. "General Introduction." *Queer Cinema : the Film Reader* , Routledge, 2004, pp. 1–16.

Chao, Shi-Yan. "Toward an Aesthetic of Tongzhi Camp." *Queer Representations in Chinese-Language Film and the Cultural Landscape*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2020, pp. 199–246, [https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462988033\\_ch04](https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462988033_ch04).

Doty, Alexander, John Hill, and Pamela Church. Gibson, editors. "Chapter 15: Queer Theory." *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* , Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 148-152

Elley, Derek. "Spring Fever Review." *Variety*, 13 May 2009.

Lou Ye. *Spring Fever*. Written by Mei Feng, Le Pacte, 2009.

McDonald, Janet A. "QUEERING THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MASCULINE 'WEST' IN ANG LEE'S BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN." *Gay & Lesbian Issues & Psychology Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2007, pp. 79–85.

Ruan, Fang Fu. "Changing Attitudes Toward Sex in China Today." *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, 1st ed., New York, Springer, 1991, pp. 159–80.

Song Hwee Lim. "Celluloid Comrades." *China Information*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2002, pp. 68–88. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203x0201600103>.

孙晓静 (Sun, Xiaojing). 一个时代的疼痛——《春风沉醉的夜晚》[J]. 大舞台, 2011(6).