ABSTRACT

The last decade of the twentieth century sees a considerable increase in Chinese films that touch on the topic of ‘Forbidden Love’ — homosexuality. The depiction of homosexuality in Chinese films has grown substantially not only in quantity, but also in depth.

This paper explores the representation of homosexuality in fifteen Chinese films of the nineties, mainly from social and cultural perspectives. The term ‘Chinese’ here refers to the ethnicity of the directors rather than the political or geographical distinctions among them. For the purpose of discussion in this paper, ‘homosexuality’ is defined loosely as romantic feelings or sexual desire for another person of the same sex, and hence, a ‘homosexual’ refers to one who has romantic feelings or sexual desire for a person of the same sex.

The first chapter defines ‘homosexuality’ by using the concept of sexual orientation along with various issues closely related to it. The treatment of homosexuality in various Chinese societies, both in the past as well as the present, is also discussed.

The second chapter comprises five separate analyses of a number of films, namely, “The Wedding Banquet”, “A Queer Story”, “He’s a
Woman, She’s a Man”, “Who’s the Woman, Who’s the Man”, “Fleeing by Night” and “Farewell My Concubine”. These films were singled out for individual analysis as each of them shows a particular perspective and treatment of homosexuality.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters deal with specific issues in the representation of homosexuality within the fifteen films. In chapter Three, various depictions of the opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality in individual films are discussed. These depictions are manifestations of the filmmakers’ different attitudes towards sexual orientation. Chapter Four seeks to show that the concept of ‘home’ is a key to understanding the homosexual’s self-identification and acknowledgement of his or her sexual orientation, familial acceptance of the homosexual, and social attitude towards homosexuality as a whole. Chapter Five deals with the phenomenon of homosexuality in the traditional Chinese theatre world, as depicted in several films. Cross-gender performance’s relation to the two sexual orientations is also examined in this chapter.

In the concluding chapter, the value and meaning of homosexual representations in films are discussed. Although homosexuality is becoming better understood and accepted in Chinese societies, it is still considered a
taboo, and hence is not demonstrated freely and openly. The film, as a popular medium, opens up a forum for homosexual discourse and diverse portrayals of homosexuality. One may predict that the theme of ‘homosexuality’, being relatively new and unexplored in the Chinese film industry, would become increasingly popular along with the homosexuals’ struggle for their legal rights and social acceptance.