



Fran Martin. Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

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► **To cite this version:**

Florine Leplâtre. Fran Martin. Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.. 2011. hal-01571402

HAL Id: hal-01571402

<https://hal.science/hal-01571402>

Submitted on 2 Aug 2017

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Fran Martin. Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 290 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-4680-7 (paperback).

For anyone paying attention to the cultural production of Taiwan and Hong Kong in the last twenty years, the importance of the theme of lesbian love is obvious; however, most of the stories end on the impossibility of such a love story, concluding either with the marriage or with the death of one of the protagonists, and such heterosexual conclusions might be perceived as quite disempowering. Building on the tremendous success of the operatic film *The Love Eterne* (Li Han-hsiang, 1962), a love story between two transvestite women in a male school, ending with the reunion of the lovers after death in the form of two butterflies, Fran Martin undertakes a survey of what she calls “the female homoerotic imaginary” in mainstream Chinese media and literary cultures. She questions “the most common narrative, generic and ideological patterns in representations of love between women” (p. 6) and finds that most of the stories are marked by a memorial structure: a grown-up married narrator or protagonist remembers a past love story. She argues that “the markedly mournful cast of these stories’ remembrance of same-sex love as a kind of paradise lost implies a critique of the social imposition of hetero-marital relations upon young women as a condition of feminine adulthood” (p.7).

She uses the phrase “female homoerotic” rather than “lesbian”, as the latter conveys a sense of “minoritizing” subcultural conception of same-sex love – “lesbian” qualifies a more or less stable identity and self-conscious culture – whereas her objects are mostly characterized by a “universalizing”, mainstream vision: that is to say, that any woman is likely to either experience a same-sex love story, to relate to it, or be moved and feel addressed by its representation. For her theoretical background, Martin relies on Sedgwick’s introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*¹, reflecting on the paradigm of “minoritizing” versus “universalizing” conceptions of same-sex love as well as the attention given to the cultural “closet” – the more or less hidden or encoded presence of same-sex love in cultural texts.

The book is organized in six chapters, based on chronological and geographical criteria. In Chapter 1, Martin builds on Sang Tze-lan’s pioneering book *The Emerging Lesbian*² to uncover the origin of the memorial pattern that characterizes female same-sex love stories in the

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1990.

² Sang Tze-lan D. *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

schoolgirl romances of early modern authors Ling Shuhua and Lu Yin. She ironically calls them “going-in stories” (in contrast with Western post-Stonewall “coming out” stories), as adolescent same-sex love is eventually superseded by cross-sex unions. In Chapters 2 and 3, she shifts to contemporary Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC to focus on the “second-wave schoolgirl romance”. This originated in Taiwan with Chu Tien-hsin’s short story “Waves Scour the Sands”, published in 1976, and developed later in Hong Kong and the PRC by authors including Wong Bikwan and Luo Suola. One of the criteria for choosing these stories is the huge success they encountered, both among lesbian-identifying and straight-identifying women. Martin combines reception studies and textual analysis to demonstrate two theses: first, the same-sex love imaginary raises a very wide interest and triggers complex identification, which enables her to argue for a universalizing vision of same-sex love (which might concern any woman); secondly, although not ending with the triumph of same-sex love, these stories give a special importance to the romance by presenting it as a paradise lost. It is the hetero-marital system that sets the lovers apart, applying constraint through the school director’s voice and that of the parents. A more diffuse social pressure is also at work, enforcing what Adrienne Rich has called “compulsory heterosexuality”.

At the beginning of the 2000s, Taiwan TV produced and broadcasted two programmes displaying female same-sex romances, which were very successful with viewers. Chapter 5 focuses on those programs, *The Maiden’s Dance* and *Voice of Waves*. The mnemonic mode of the narrative and the sad ending leads Martin to speak of a “public mourning”. Again, she mingles very precise textual analysis and reception studies (using the TV channel forums) to show that these programs catalyzed the sorrow of lost love, leading the adult viewers to recover a memory from their own lives, and enabling a “mourning” of the loss.

A feature of the Chinese female same-sex culture is the importance of the secondary gender paradigm of *T/po*. *Po* designates the conventionally feminine woman, whereas *T* (for *tomboy*), a quasi equivalent of American *butch*, refers to a masculine woman. In most of the stories mentioned above, the focus is on a conventionally feminine woman – the one who gets married and supports identification from both lesbian and straight readers. She embodies the universalizing vision of female same-sex love. Martin identifies another group of stories, mostly taking place in Taiwan: the “tomboy melodrama”, centered on a non-feminine female character. Taking the film *Blue Gate Crossing* (dir. Yee Chih-yen, 2002) as the starting point for her

analysis, she argues that “tomboy melodrama” is also ruled by a temporal pattern, looking – vainly – towards the future. In conclusion, Chapter 6, entitled “Critical Presentism”, focuses on contemporary underground PRC films, essentially less mainstream, characterized by a representation of same-sex love in the present. Though not without social difficulties, the romance is realized, against the hetero-marital wishes of the parents.

Situated at the crossroad of queer studies, feminist film theory and cultural studies, this book extends brilliantly the work started in *Situating Sexualities*³ on queer culture in Taiwan. Martin’s references to Western scholarship and comparative hypotheses are always very cautious, avoiding cultural essentialism. This is a work of great accuracy punctuated with moments of humour. The main argument is firmly supported by the author’s close reading, surveys of reception, and dialogue with cultural critiques, which combine to make it highly stimulating reading.

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³ Fran Martin. *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture*. Hong Kong University Press, 2003.