



LITTLE NEW YEAR'S REVOLUTIONS: EXAMINING SMALL QUEER SPACES IN CHUNWAN

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Abstract

Chunwan, China's annual New Year's television gala, has been the country's most popular show since 1983 (Lo, 2019). Chunwan's performances simultaneously reinforce, disrupt, and potentially provide spaces for changing dominant discourse around queer identities. Specifically, two research questions guide our examination of five Chunwan performances between 2008-2021: (a) How does Chunwan use queer identities to simultaneously reinforce, critique, and disrupt Chinese cultural norms through humor and performance? and (b) How do Chinese social values support queerness in China and Chinese media? Findings demonstrate that while these performances do not directly represent struggles and successes of the queer community, or feature queer characters in positive ways, or focus on queer protagonists, their inclusion acknowledges the existence of queer Chinese identities with regards to gender and sexuality.

Keywords: queer theory, critical media studies, Chinese media, critical literacy, queer identity representation in media

Introduction

In China, gathering together to watch the annual Spring Festival Gala of China Media Group, commonly called *Chunwan*, or Chinese New Year, is a family tradition. Journalist Rebecca Lo (2019) of *Style* deemed Chunwan "the world's most-watched television show," with the China Global Television Network (January 2020) reporting over 1.12 billion live views on new media platforms, 589 million televisions, and 24.6 million via international media platforms. Each year viewership increases. Geopolitical analysts Chen Liu, Ning An, and Hong Zhu (2015) note that Chunwan, as a state-sponsored program, "plays an important role in propagandising the national policies of China" (p. 611). Though Chunwan manifests official Chinese dominant cultural discourses, it cannot completely control the messages or their reception when providing them for such massive public consumption and interpretation, or what art educator James Sanders (2007) calls "proliferating varied readings of visual representations of sexuality" (p. 46). Increasingly, Chunwan faces globalization's pressures to modernize, creating a Chinese appetite for bolder, more varied pop culture options. Given its role as cultural touchstone, how Chunwan positions and navigates cultural diversity is crucial to our inquiry.

We come to this study from two very different perspectives. Jingyi is a cisgender, heterosexual, native Chinese citizen currently pursuing her Ph.D. in foreign, second, and multilingual language education at a large midwestern public research university. Mindi is a nonbinary, queer, White US citizen and is faculty at that university. We share overlapping interests in arts/visual culture and issues of educational equity, diversity, and inclusion. In discussing Chunwan's influence, we wondered about its depictions of diversity within a Chinese context, particularly around constructions of gender and sexuality. From here, we define *queer* primarily as differing from dominant cultural discourses around gender and sexuality. Our discussions eventually focused on queer 'interruptions' in Chunwan, which, though rare, include a few characters, skits, and performances.

Upfront Disclaimer

We want to acknowledge the complexity of writing across multiple layers of cultural subjectivities and note a few aspects of this that deserve reader attention and care. First, Chunwan is a Chinese cultural phenomenon performed in Chinese for Chinese people. Second, since Mindi does not speak Chinese, we used Jingyi's translations of the original spoken texts throughout our discussions. Both translation processes are complicated and inexact. Direct translations of terms from Chinese into English (or any language into another) run the risk of sounding/being awkward, funny, displeasing, rude, or offensive in the target language, regardless of their original form/function/tone. The translations used here are as literal as possible whenever possible. The words do not have the same impact/meaning as in the original, for good and bad. Also, some things simply cannot be effectively translated.

In addition to language translation issues, we also remind ourselves and readers not to apply contemporary European/US queer theories to evaluate Chinese culture and media without deeply interrogating one's own positionality, assumptions, and biases. China need not follow the US timeline or roadmap concerning queer representation. Importantly, US media depictions/discourses of queerness only improved drastically in the past couple of decades, which we address later. Also, cultural conceptions and markers of identity vary widely between China and the US, with different signifiers around gender, sexuality, race, age, socioeconomic status, among other signifiers. Queer theorist Hongwei Bao (2020) describes how, despite governmental pressures and crackdowns, Chinese queer activists continue to operate, often in extremely localized contexts, working to "appropriate [media] forms and practices in their own way and for their own purposes" (p. 123). Bao notes these activists "work along with, beside, towards and sometimes even against the scripts from transnational LGBTQ movements," disrupting dominant global queer hegemony through further "appropriation, parody, and subversion" as ways to manifest their particular forms of agency and identity (p. 124). Chinese queerness itself is complicated, non-monolithic, and rapidly evolving in terms of what it means to be queer and Chinese in and out of China.

Finally, we are two people working to make sense of this data outside/

across our own hybrid individual "languages" (i.e., language, culture, sexuality, gender identity). We are interested in how Chunwan presents intersections of gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and nationality, and we are looking at openings and possible points of pressure that might be useful for considering and catalyzing positive change.

Methods

We started this research in 2019, originally selecting Chunwan performances from the decade 2008-2019, then incorporating broadcasts through 2021. For Stage 1, Jingyi re-watched all 14 broadcasts completely, taking detailed notes about each performance, including time, type, characters, plot, themes, and other defining aspects. Working collaboratively, with Jingyi translating/summarizing for Mindi, we identified five performances—two in 2009, two in 2013, and one in 2015—that included visibly queer characters or explicitly mentioned/referenced queerness in the dialogue, action, or lyrics. Of these, four were comic sketches and one was singing.

For Stage 2, Jingyi re-watched these five performances, taking more detailed notes, noting potential queer aspects. In addition to greater specificity concerning storylines, dialogue, and lyrics, these notes address costuming, action, communication/discourse (including body language), and audience response. Afterwards, we collaboratively used a qualitative analysis approach, reviewing the data corpus, developing and applying a grounded theory coding scheme, and creating memos as our main analytic tools within a two-part review process.

For Stage 3, we collaboratively re-read the data, discussing, highlighting and preliminarily coding any 'queer' signs, references, or behavior including dress/attire, use of make-up, gestures, dialogue about queerness, and audience response. For Stage 4, to increase reliability, we re-watched and re-coded the performances. Afterwards, we reviewed both coded data sets—with Jingyi's detailed Chinese memos and English translations—noting, resolving, or detailing any deviations and identifying the specific queer aspects of each performance.

For Stage 5, we collaboratively analyzed the data from each individual performance. Then we reviewed the data corpus, synthesizing the separate analyses under broader themes, considering findings and significance. The final

stage is the production of this manuscript.

Chunwan as (Visual) Cultural Powerhouse

While there is minimal scholarship on Chunwan, exemplary studies providing rich data and analysis of multiple aspects of other television shows reveal immense potential for research. In the 1990s, China's economic reforms created thriving commercialism, consumerism, and pop cultural expansion highlighting Europe/US concerns with identity, sexuality, and gender expression (Lavin, Yang, & Zhao, cited in Bao, 2020, p. 9).

Media sociologist Bin Zhao's (1998) analysis of the social functions of 1997's Chunwan, performed in the context of Hong Kong's return to China, found Chunwan served as a useful modern propaganda tool, strengthening national pride and reinforcing unity through different forms of entertainment. Zhao's study also highlights the challenges of constructing a national show connecting younger generations to Chinese ideology as increasingly youth no longer "relate to the experience and memories of the elder generation of revolutionaries" (p. 52). In response, Chunwan made concessions, allowing some youth-oriented performances freedom from including "ideological and moral overtones" (p. 53). For Bao (2020), this shift signals a subtle willingness to accept modest changes to the dominant Chinese discourse, perhaps as a price of admission into neoliberal capitalist markets.

Sociocultural communication scholar Xiao Wang's (2010) analysis of the cultural, political, and economic themes embedded in the first 26 years of Chunwan reiterates its function as a form of mass social education that reinforces party ideology and leadership, producing and consolidating what constitutes the Chinese "national identity" (p. 395). Chinese language and culture scholar Jin Liu (2013) employed Bakhtin's theory of folk humor to analyze popular comedian Benshan Zhao's use of regional discourses, both to echo the official discourse (Mandarin Chinese) while simultaneously subverting it, exploiting the ambiguity and contrast for humorous effect (p. 104). Multimodal discourse and language education scholar Dezheng Feng (2016) applied a social semiotic framework to the 2014 gala to highlight Chunwan's deliberate construction and conveyance of social values and moral messages, implicitly and explicitly, through well-designed,

didactic narratives. More recently, former investigative journalist-turned-academic, Yan Yuan (2017) analyzed 25 performances that included "rural migrants" over a 30-year span, concluding Chunwan mediated the shifting images of these migrants, reinforcing/maintaining the ritualized production and collective experiencing of the show (p. 170).

Mainstream media primarily reflects dominant cultural ideologies, depicting conservative notions of femininity and masculinity. For queer studies educational scholar J. B. Mayo (2017), marginalizing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) characters sends a clear message about "the consequences of deviating from heterosexual expectations" (p. 303). In contrast, in recent years, an increasing number of pop stars in Chinese popular music playfully engage queerness (e.g., wearing provocative makeup and unusual costume-clothes) to transgress binary and heterosexual gender/sexuality norms in the entertainment industry (Wang, 2015). Such surface-level queer visual representation brings Chinese pop stars popularity and commercial success, but avoids deliberately advancing queer issues. Despite deviating from dominant norms, these stars still must conform enough not to "transform queer entertainment into queer politics" (Wang, 2015, p. 175). For example, Chinese literature, culture, and queer studies scholar Alvin Wong (2020) examines the "affective work" embedded in two popular shows depicting romances between young men, a genre called *Boys' Love* featuring "male-male romance created by and for women and sexual minorities" (p. 1). Wong's analysis reveals how queer desire mediates "the institutional, economic, and structural aspects of neoliberalism in postsocialist China" (p. 12). Wong proposes *Boys' Love* shows are both constrained by "the economic infrastructure of heteronormative kinship norms" and "residual forms of socialism," while serving as important sites to acknowledge diverse identities (p. 1). This is in sharp contrast to what Stephen Tropiano (2002), author of *The Prime Time Closet* calls "the patterned representation of hysterically tragic or dismissively comical characters in most early televised portrayals," with "slow and gradual shifts in these renderings, toward ... more lovable ... trendy and fashionable characters" (in Sanders, 2007, p. 52).

In many ways, China acknowledges queer people exist but remains conflicted around queer issues. In "Postsocialist metamorphosis," Bao (2020) notes

that state surveillance still prevails, often canceling queer public/university events and censoring media content. But queer people persist. In fact, Bao argues, “queer communities’ engagement with cultural production functions as a crucial form of social and political activism in China today,” what he calls “cultural activism” (p. 4). For Bao, queer art and cultural production “provide a unique lens into these contradictory and complex processes of transformation. They offer us hope for a queer future” (p. 5). The openings for using these lenses are small, but they exist.

Small Queer Spaces in China’s New Year’s Galas

Contemporarily, queer popular culture in China is shaped by “both transnational flows of queer knowledge and sentiments and local genealogies and social-cultural contexts, particularly conditions of media control and censorship” (Song, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, a discussion of Chinese queer performances assumes a position that understands this issue globally but more importantly, locally. Given this context, recent years reveal growing queer visibility in Chinese media. Chinese Transnational Gender and Sexuality Studies scholar Lin Song (2020) states, “As queer sensibilities become an increasingly welcomed aesthetic, it is incorporated into mainstream and popular cultural products as well” (p. 6). Digital technologies, such as community-based documentary workshops (Tan, 2016), TV series (Wong, 2020), films, and online videos have included queerness and addressed diversity.

Situated in the larger ever-shifting popular culture of China, Chunwan characters and casting have undergone noticeable changes since 1983. Starting in the late 2000s, although there is an increase in queer visibility, it is for humorous purposes and often relies on, and exploits, queer deviation from cultural norms, such as “someone being mistaken as gay or straight, or a heterosexual pretending to be gay for fun or profit” (Tropiano, cited in Padva, 2008). The following sections focus on how queerness is represented through two comedy skits in 2009, one comedy skit and a singing performance in 2013, and one comedy skit in 2015.

There are two main types of comedic performances during Chunwan: a two-person stand-up routine (known as *xiangsheng*) and comic sketches (known as *xiaopin*). *Xiangsheng* is a traditional Chinese stand-up show, comparable to US-style comedy duos, where one comedian provides straightforward commentary

while the other responds with punchlines. Chunwan consistently features this traditional, widely popular form. *Xiaopin*, or comedy sketches, is another staple Chunwan component, customarily featuring very relatable themes. The typical formula involves a funny story about a regular event in people’s daily lives with unexpected twists, ending by emphasizing a common moral value. For example, in one sketch, a bicyclist stops to help a fallen old lady then gets blamed for hitting her. This comic sketch criticizes the socioeconomic issue of traffic injury scams while reminding people of their mutual responsibilities for being good citizens. Sections below build on previous research about comic sketches (Liu, 2013) and provide brief descriptions, excerpts, and analyses of select performance segments.

Xiaopin: Joy Street (Xi Le Jie)

In contrast to the lack of visible queerness in pre-2000 Chunwan, the still-relatively-rare queer skit characters, like a female character in “Joy Street” (CCTV Chunwan, 2015), acknowledge, and ostensibly defend, their divergence from social norms. In this comic sketch, Girl 1, who appears conventionally masculine, complains about her life to her two brothers: she does not have a job, money, or a boyfriend. When Girl 2 arrives, with all the conventionally desirable feminine qualities (e.g., delicate features, feminine clothes, makeup, etc.), the brothers comment on both from a stereotypical male perspective:

Brother 1 (looking at Girl 2 admiringly): See, she has self-confidence, which comes from inside. Different people have different looks. She obviously has the look of a goddess!

Brother 2 (looking at Girl 1 contemptibly): You have the look of a man!

The brothers’ comments and facial expressions convey hegemonic cultural messages that men prefer “girly girls” to “manly girls.”

Later, Girl 1 and Girl 2 decide to have a competition between what contemporary Chinese culture terms “girly girls” and “manly girls.” During the match, the two girls walk side by side, posing, and listing their qualities in limericks:

Girl 2: I am pretty. A swarm of boys surrounds me, which makes me feel

proud (have face value).

Girl 1: I am heartless. A swarm of boys surrounds me, but they want to arm wrestle me.

These limericks reinforce the idea that feminine girls attract boys while more masculine traits inhibit girls' heteronormative romantic success. They also reify conventional notions of how to look and behave like a "girly girl." Bao (2020) notes that gender stereotypes in China include stereotypes of 'iron girls' (tie gu'niang), 'tomboy' (jia xiaozhi), and notes "androgynous images of a 'boy in disguise' or a plain-looking 'girl student' dominated popular representations of women and femininity in China for a long time" (p. 89).

In this skit, in contrast to Girl 2's femininity, Girl 1 is a "manly woman" (*Nv Hanzi*), a popular term in Chinese culture referring to women embodying conventional masculine qualities (e.g., strong, fearless, independent). This skit illustrates how *Nv Hanzi* exist, sidestepping the confinement of hegemonic conventional female gender roles. Such women persist despite mainstream desires for their conformity, despite mild cultural derision, despite attempts to belittle their differences.

Xiangsheng: I am a Little Confused (Wo Youdian Yun)

In "I am a Little Confused" (CCTV Chunwan, 2009) two comedians discuss changes in Chinese society over the past 30 years, including changes in clothing styles, catch phrases, among other popular conventions. During their exchange, they mention a controversial figure in China:

Comedian 1: Thirty years ago, people called [middle aged women] "women of fading charms (ban lao xu niang)" but nowadays, we call them "senior beauty (zishen meiren)."

Comedian 2 (looking puzzled): What? "Zishen meiren"?

Comedian 1: Look at this pose. Ka ka ka, come to meet sister Furong (holding right hand over forehead and left hand on his twisted waist, looking towards the audience with a flirtatious expression)

Comedian 2 (looking scared): Your pose is not pretty at all!

The two comedians reference Sister Furong ("furong" means "lotus" in Chinese and usually represents the beauty of youth). Sister Furong is a contemporary Internet star famous for provocative poses, self-promotion, and intimate personal online postings, including openly blogging about sex, considered taboo in Chinese culture. Comedian 1 imitates her contemporarily feminine signature pose, implying Sister Furong is the new standard of beauty. The audience bursts into laughter, indicating the joke's success: that today's "beauties" are not China's conventional notions of beautiful at all. Here, Comedian 1 delivers a queer performance--a man portraying a woman in order to embody and criticize today's feminine beauty standards. Comedian 2, however, rejects this, declaring Sister Furong is not beautiful.

Xiaopin: Money is Not a Problem! (Bu Cha Qian)

Another comic sketch, in 2009, also features queer characters and characterizations (springfestival, 2009). In this, an old man and his granddaughter invite a talent-show host for lunch at a fancy Scottish-style restaurant in an effort to secure the granddaughter a chance to perform. The waiter wears a kilt-like costume/uniform (with two big trouser legs), but the old man thinks it is just a skirt and mistakenly calls him "girl."

Old man: I say, girl, this meal is very important.

Waiter: Oh hell, who are you calling "girl"? I (*renjia*) am a real man!

Old man (surprised): Why do you dress like this, wearing a skirt?

Waiter (feminine tone): This is Scottish style. Also, this is not a skirt. Aren't these pants? Look, aren't these trouser legs? Whoops, I was in such a hurry that I put both my legs into the same trouser leg. Oh my goodness, no wonder I felt like there wasn't a crotch when I was walking around (putting his finger on his mouth, wondering, and acting shy).

Here, the waiter seems insulted when the old man mistakenly refers to him as a "girl," responding defensively, asserting he is a "real man." Meanwhile, his speech

and mannerisms seemingly contradict this, reinforcing the impression of him as a “sissy boy” (according to Chinese cultural norms). He speaks in a feminine tone, uses conventional feminine language, and gestures in feminine ways. For instance, girls sometimes use the word “renjia” (meaning “I”) to describe themselves in a teasing or flirtatious manner. Here, the waiter uses it, stating “I (renjia) am a real man!”, while paradoxically referring to himself with a feminine pronoun. His body language also conveys stereotypical feminine elements of delicateness, such as placing his fingers on his mouth to show surprise and shyness. These actions all trigger audience laughter and applause. When the television host arrives, he is also confused about the waiter’s gender:

Host: Oh! You are a waiter, right? You look ... very *delicate*.

Old man: Let me tell you ... I made that mistake when I arrived, too. Who would dress like that?

Later, after the granddaughter sings part of a song, the waiter reveals he is also talented and wants to perform on the show:

Waiter: [She] is good? Oh my god, if she can be on the show, I can too!

Old man: What can you be on?! Go get the food.

Waiter: I can be on the talent show!

Old man: On what talent show? You cannot even get on a Kang (a heatable brick bed popular in north China).

The old man thinks the waiter is not masculine enough to perform onstage. He mocks the waiter, saying he cannot even crawl onto a bed because he’s wearing a skirt, let alone perform on a stage. This punchline also provokes roaring laughter and applause from the audience. In effect, the humor relies on the customers criticizing the waiter’s femininity, assuming certain failure as a performer.

Xiaopin: You Are in Trouble (Ni Tanshang Shir le)

Broadcast in 2013, “You Are in Trouble” (CCTV Chunwan, 2013a) is another queer comic sketch. This skit involves four characters: a male security guard, a male boss, a female boss, and a female employee. On his first day of work, the

guard is told not to let anyone into the building without a pass. Of course, the other three characters want to enter the building without passes, creating comedic confusion. Unexpectedly, the female boss is dressed like a man while the male boss is dressed like a woman, causing the guard and employee to assume they are of opposite genders. This mistake offends the bosses:

Guard: Sir ... Sir.

Female boss: Who are you calling “sir”? How bad is your eyesight?

Guard: Whoops, you are a woman. You look ... so confusing. ...

Guard (towards the audience): Look at her, it’s like she’s had a shot of testosterone.

(later)

Guard: Elder sister ...

Male boss: Who are you calling your elder sister? I am a man!

Guard: A man? Ahh, a girly man!

Male boss: Why you!

...

Female employee: Younger sister...

Male boss: Younger sister, younger sister, who are you calling younger sister? I am your big brother!

Female employee: Ah, gosh, you’re a man! I’m so surprised! (Turns to the security guard, confused.) Big brother, why are people in big cities like this?

In addition to the dialogue that reveals the mistaken gendering, the visual presentation of the two bosses is also heavily queer-infused. The female boss has a slick, short haircut, which is unconventional for Chinese girls. The way she crosses her arms while talking also conveys masculinity. In contrast, the male boss wears a flowery-patterned suit and has long hair. At one point, he holds his braid

while defending his masculinity. Later, when the guard says the male boss looks transgender, the boss responds with “taoyan,” a phrase usually used by women to dismiss something or someone, again, in a teasing and flirtatious manner. The surprised reactions of the female employee and male security guard remind the audience that the boss is transgressing gender norms, and that such transgressions “read” as funny because of the transgressions.

Singing Performance: The Goddess in the Moon (Chang’e)

In contrast to the comedy sketches, where subverting traditional gender norms is done for humorous effect, sometimes gender transgressions occur for the sake of tradition, like in many traditional Peking Opera performances. Yugang Li, a male singer, is famous for dressing in female character. Li performed the song “The Goddess in the Moon” (CCTV Chunwan, 2013b) in a deliberately and unmistakably feminine voice. For the 2013 New Year’s gala, he dressed like Chang’e, the Goddess in the Moon, a well-known Chinese fairy tale figure, performing a song about her feelings and experiences living on the moon. The song welcomes unity, comparing it to the perfect shape of the full moon, in lyrics describing this “wish for people together, a round moon, with the sky and the land united.” Li’s dress features long, silky sleeves and a low-cut neckline. He wears feminine hair accessories, heavy make-up, and an intricately ornate necklace, all in the manner common for female figures in the Peking opera.

Li is a highly recognized singer in China who was already famous for his performances before appearing on the national stage. Unlike the laughter at cross-dressing in comedic performances, the audience solemnly accepts Li’s queer presentation as authentic and marvels at his talent. In this way, more mainstream entertainment demonstrates tolerance for some forms of gender transgressions, raising the possibility of tolerance for others.

Binary Gender Stereotypes Reinforce and Perpetuate Misunderstandings of Queer Identities

In *The Celluloid Closet*, queer film scholar Vito Russo (1987) explores complexities around representation, including how initially US filmmaking reflected “the big lie” that lesbians and gay men “do not exist,” presenting a legally-dictated homosexual-free vision of the American dream (p. xii). Russo

notes this evolved, eventually subsuming theatrical traditions around cross-dressing and mistaken gender identity for humor (p. 4). By the 1930s, and through the 1950s, “the presence of sissies,” or effeminate males, like Franklin Pangborn, and cross-dressing women like Audrey Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett* (1936), served as coded “outlets for unspeakable ideas” (p. 32). Russo argues that these early characters function on two levels simultaneously: as a way to “provid[e] laughs for the majority,” while covertly “introduc[ing] the possibility of homosexual activity into the film for a covert [queer] audience” (p. 14). Using coded references, allusions, and stereotypes allowed mainstream audiences to overlook queerness as personal, quirky, humorous habits and foibles.

As the Chunwan comedic skit excerpts indicated, misunderstandings around queer identities often function as punchlines. Chinese audiences find these deliberate transgressions of social norms, with the surprising contrast between their conventional expectations and the apparent reality of the situation, funny. The audiences laugh at the queer characters and their exaggerated stereotypical qualities and behaviors, like the effeminate waiter claiming to be a “real man.” In “I am a Little Confused,” one comedian was perplexed by the drastic change in societal beauty standards. When he imitated a popular contemporary Internet-based queer figure, his partner immediately scoffed at the suggestion she is beautiful, his disapproval and denial instantly triggering the audience’s laughter. In this sense, queerness functions as a Chunwan tool for comic effect instead of being taken more seriously.

In the comic skits, the queer characters and situations reflect what writer/philosopher Susan Sontag (1964) calls “camp,” a very distinct—and queer—approach to humor. Sontag describes camp as “esoteric,” “a private code,” a “badge of identity” (p. 1). Camp is a “particularly fugitive sensibility” that “converts the serious into the frivolous” through a focus on “artifice and exaggeration” (pp. 1-2). Sontag’s concept of camp as animating the “double sense in which some things can be taken” (p. 6) resonates with Russo’s assertions that queerness signals its presence through insinuation, innuendo, and stereotypical behaviors. Specifically, Sontag notes how androgyny functions disruptively as a key element of camp, blurring gender boundaries, while camp simultaneously “relish[es] ... the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality

mannerisms” (p. 5). Sontag calls camp a “mode of seduction—one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another [meaning], more impersonal, for outsiders” (p. 6). For Sontag, “Camp is a vision not the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (p. 3).

Although the audience sees and consumes queer culture, they are concurrently socialized into a dominant perspective that marginalizes and mocks queerness. In effect, queerness is used for entertainment while criticizing its difference. Queer characters in the skits are generally depicted as inferior, with little chance for assimilating successfully into mainstream society. For instance, in “Money is Not a Problem,” the old man and television host insist the effeminate waiter cannot succeed as a singer. In “Joy Street,” a more masculine woman, like many non-stereotypically feminine Chinese women, acknowledges the difficulties she faces finding a decent job and boyfriend, with even family criticizing her differences. Throughout, these skits depict unconventional gender presentation as sharply contrasting with social norms. Though these queer characters appear in this national forum, the criticism and disapproval they encounter attempts to reinforce traditional gender roles.

Importantly, the positioning and treatment of queer characters in these Chunwan performances reflects Mayo’s (2017) assertion that marginalizing LGBTQ characters is an ideological message. However, depictions of queer Chunwan characters contrasts with earlier American depictions of LGBTQ characters. While queer Chunwan characters are clearly non-normative and possess many “markers of [their] marginality” (Mayo, 2017, p. 303), and while this is mostly exploited for humor, they are not positioned as tragic, immoral, or evil and subsequently injured, punished, killed, or suicidal.

Also, except for Li’s singing performance, queer characters are never the lead, and their experiences never constitute the main storyline. Queer characters are marginalized, background players in other characters’ stories. In “You Are in Trouble,” the main storyline involves a gatekeeper demonstrating his strict adherence to company policies and protecting the office building as directed. Same with the other skits: although queer characters provide diversity and humor, they

do not further the storyline. This marginalization allows the audience to avoid any critical reflection about these characters, their identities, and their lives.

In contrast, in Li’s performance of “The Goddess in the Moon,” dressed as a woman and wearing heavy stage makeup, he is undeniably the main character. In fact, the lyrics he sings reinforce one of Chunwan’s main themes: national unity. Such messages about social and family values of togetherness are usually well received on New Year’s Eve, such as Li’s performance, recalling traditional, well-accepted Peking opera practices of queer, cross-gender performances. In addition, Li’s representation as both a man himself and a woman may reinforce the male-centered tradition.

Finally, explicitly including more diverse queer identities in national media performances, not as punchlines, followed by critical reflection, could be a powerful means for developing greater Chinese critical media literacy. Younger generations already demonstrate greater awareness and acceptance of queer people and queerness, emphasizing a queer turn in examining contemporary Chinese-language media, “recognizing the co-presence of and continual negotiation between queer and normative fantasies surrounding gender, sexuality, nationhood, ethnicity, and class in Chinese-language media production, circulation and consumption” (Zhao & Wong, 2020, p. 1).

This analysis of five excerpts of Chunwan performances between 2008 and 2021 indicates a problematic past and present, initial signs of progress, and the potential for much improvement. More deliberate inclusion of queer Chunwan performances could provoke meaningful questions around how media messages are “constructed, biased, and used” (Mayo, 2017, p. 306) and how concepts around genders are assumed, presented, and challenged. As critical media culture theorists Kellner and Share (2007) note, critical media literacy’s goal is “to expand the notion of literacy to include different forms of media culture, information and communication technologies and new media, as well as deepen the potential of literacy education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information and power” (p. 59). Assisting younger generations to develop critical interpretations of heterosexual assumptions and social norms can support Chinese people in recognizing and embracing the plurality in Chinese society and globally.

Strategies to Critique Chunwan Gender Performativity to Foster Social Acceptance of a Broader Range of Gender Expression and Sexuality

Using explicit LGBTQ social media images, Mayo (2017) demonstrated how increased visibility, coupled with asking relevant reflective questions, can support students in developing critical media literacy at school. Perhaps the most important issue is how Chunwan functions to manage and mediate changes in Chinese society. As a national show broadcast on the most significant night of the year, it reaches and impacts people of all ages. So far, no performances directly represent the struggle and success of the queer community, focus on queer protagonists, or feature explicitly queer characters in clearly positive ways, with the exception of the classically-queer Peking-influenced opera performance. There is the potential to provide much broader and accepting representation of queer identities, including masculine women, effeminate men, and other people along the gender and sexuality spectrum. Developing more positive representations of queerness, and more tolerant responses to it, could convey a powerful message of greater social acceptance for a broader range of gender expression and sexuality. In an educational context, one strategy in this regard is to design reflective questions and activities to guide how to rewrite scripts that do not reinforce gender stereotypes but still recognize the power of humor and entertainment.

Although the queer “interruptions” presented through a few characters, skits, and performance are rare and espouse standard Chinese ideologies, we believe they can also create micro-opportunities of/for disruption: brief, maybe miniscule, spaces, places, and moments for pause, flashes of recognition, reconsideration, incrementally small change. We recognize Chunwan can simultaneously reinforce, critique, disrupt—and potentially change—Chinese values, understanding, and treatment of queer issues and people. Bao (2020) notes that cultural arts production is not apolitical, with hegemonic forces attempting to determine and control its messages, but that they are also available for queer cultural activism, for “marginalised groups to construct their identities and communities, fight for rights and social justice, and imagine an alternative future” (p. 17). For Bao, these media outlets offer “site[s] for queer identities to be constructed and contested,” where “marginalised social groups may come up with creative ways to use them, to appropriate them and to subvert them” (p. 123).

Considering its significance and popularity in Chinese media culture, it is important to (re)consider Chunwan performances in contemporary Chinese socio-political context. As a national show, Chunwan has been used as a mediation tool to strengthen Chinese political ideology of creating a nationwide unity representation. However, it would not be a unity without having different voices heard. Enhancing awareness and exercising agency would be some initial efforts. Artists and people in the dominant discourses may take actions to help build a potential space for queer performativity, inviting queer artists to bring in different voices. But this takes time. Bao (2020) realizes that Chinese media does deserve criticism about “their limitations in terms of class, gender and ethnicity bias, as well as the inclusion and exclusion of such identities” (p. 65), yet also cautions that “instead of expecting historical ruptures and landmark events, let us appreciate what we have now and the minute changes literature and visual culture make to queer people’s lives and Chinese society” (p. 19). While there are small signs of improvement, there is much room to grow.

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