

# Resisting Trauma: Exploring Queer Emotional Narratives in *Madame* from the Perspective of Cultural Politics of Emotion in Chinese Context

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into the documentary *Madame*, examining the intricate emotional narrative of Qihui Fan within the Chinese cultural framework using Sara Ahmed's Cultural Politics of Emotion. By analyzing Fan's experiences, encompassing childhood strife, youth prostitution, and grappling with a sense of nothingness in middle age, the exploration delves into his emotional journey and the construction of his queer identity. Employing Ahmed's framework, it dissects how emotions, notably pain and pleasure, interplay within Fan's narrative. Through resisting societal norms and embracing a persona—madame "BILAN DE LINPHEL," Fan navigates pleasure as a form of rebellion against heteronormativity. However, this pleasure is fleeting, entangled in a cycle of despair, as his narrative oscillates between self-empowerment and trauma-driven despair. The analysis uncovers Fan's struggle for recognition in a society with limited tolerance for queer identities. It scrutinizes the performance of emotions, the role of pleasure in resistance, and the narrative's performative nature. Ultimately, this examination unravels the complex interplay of emotions, societal control, and identity struggles within the context of Chinese queer culture, shedding light on the challenges and nuances faced by individuals like Fan.

## 1. Introduction

Filed towards the end of 2009, the documentary *Madame* stood out with its unique format, featuring a one-man oral drama centered on protagonist Qihui Fan. It intertwined his personal narrative with stage performances, spotlighting his self-identity exploration and the challenges of being queer within the societal landscape of that time. Covering three decades of a transvestite's identity evolution, the documentary offered a profound and inclusive examination of queer experiences, setting itself apart from narrative-driven films and documentaries.

Despite homosexuality being officially removed from China's list of mental illnesses in 2001 and a gradual increase in social tolerance, the mainland environment remained largely closed to queer communities. Limited spaces were designated for their existence, with queer individuals still being associated with a sense of disease. Discussions around sexuality predominantly revolved around risk behaviors and diseases, highlighting the persistent marginalization of queer individuals in Chinese society, despite improving discourse (Huang, 2020).<sup>[1]</sup>

However, recent years witnessed a shift toward broader attention and depth regarding queer groups, aligning domestic public opinion with international voices. Though official media began focusing on events related to domestic queer communities, it remained within the tolerance and permissions set by mainstream heterosexual norms (He, 2018).<sup>[2]</sup> The voices within the queer

community lacked extensive representation, limiting their discourse power and government incorporation. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, queer-themed movies and television gained traction, primarily in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Mainland China, on the other hand, showcased a diverse underground cinema, offering a wider spectrum of representations for queer individuals in visual media (Zhang, 2016).<sup>[3]</sup> While mainstream movies progressively transitioned from negative stereotypes to more positive depictions, breaking away entirely from heteronormative norms remained a challenge.

*Madame*, through the lens of the character Qihui Fan's personal narrative, provided an honest portrayal of the myriad obstacles faced by the queer community over the past thirty years. This authenticity elevated its research value above many other director-driven films, television productions, and event-centered documentaries. Therefore, this study aims to delve deeply into how Qihui Fan interprets and defines his identity within the documentary, examining his struggle against societal oppression and exclusion of queer individuals. Focusing on his emotional journey from a cultural research perspective offers insights into the societal contradictions faced by queer communities, unveiling their concealed acceptance and struggle amidst identity dynamics and discourse power.

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## 2. Chinese LGBTQ+ Culture in the Film and Television Industry

The ongoing debate between homosexual essentialism and constructivism has been a cornerstone of discussions since the public became aware of homosexuality. Homosexual essentialism, while advocating for the equality of rationality within the homosexual community akin to the nature of life, has faced criticism for overlooking the cultural and historical dimensions of the issue (Byne, 1997).<sup>[4]</sup> The intricate nature of sexual orientation and identity has made it challenging to establish a scientific basis for essentialism, leading to its critique for insufficient evidence (Wang, 2017).<sup>[5]</sup> Consequently, the constructivist viewpoint, inspired by Alfred Kinsey's work, has gained traction, asserting that "gay-straight" isn't polar opposites but rather the ends of a sexual continuum. Butler's perspective on gender orientation directly opposes essentialism, viewing gender identity as fluid. She draws from Foucault's theory, contending that gender operates as a primary cultural agent shaping concepts like masculinity/femininity and heterosexual/homosexual identities (Butler, 1990).<sup>[6]</sup>

While this theory has gained global attention, its integration in China has been relatively recent compared to Western societies. Yinhe Li (2001) introduced the concept, gradually gaining acceptance over the past two decades.<sup>[7]</sup> Wang Jinling defines gender constructivism as a process of gender socialization involving the influence of social norms and an individual's internalization of these norms related to gender (Wang, 2011).<sup>[8]</sup> Surveys indicate that around 20% of domestic college students hold a constructivist view on sexuality, while a larger percentage believe in a mix of nature and nurture influencing sexuality (Liu et al., 2017).<sup>[9]</sup> This diversity in views indicates that the issue remains unresolved in China, with some in the gay community still holding onto essentialist perspectives.

Constructionists have examined the social factors shaping homosexual identity, forming the basis for a minority-like community and politics (Seidman, 1994).<sup>[10]</sup> Constructivism, while highlighting sexual identity and politics, paradoxically categorizes homosexuals as a "minority," complicating gay identity politics itself (Wang, 2018).<sup>[11]</sup> However, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick shifted the debate focus to minority versus universalization, exploring how homosexuality becomes the constitutive "other" of the heterosexual hegemonic structure (Du, 2015).<sup>[12]</sup>

China's government historically adopted a "nonposition" stance toward LGBT individuals, neither approving nor disapproving, leading to marginalization (Moreno-Tabarez et al., 2014).<sup>[13]</sup> Yet, the visibility of queer films has increased domestically and internationally in recent years, presenting diverse and straightforward representations of queer identities. These films, including *Madame*, explore cross-dressing during a time predating China's full embrace of the internet and coincide with the development of queer theory in the country. The documentary features Qihui Fan, probing the connection between queer issues and the broader gender composition

of society, challenging prevailing sexual and gender norms that shaped the emergence of queer theory in China (Ding, 2022).<sup>[14]</sup>

Documentaries delving into queer themes experienced renewed restrictions post-2016, particularly in television series. The General Regulations on Television Content Production categorized homosexuality as abnormal, effectively re-closeting queer films. This repressive environment refocused attention on domestic queer theories, with most underground films openly expressing queer identities but having limited public impact (Zhang, 2016).<sup>[3]</sup> However, *Madame* emerged as a standout on domestic video platforms, gaining popularity for its portrayal of queer characters amidst China's social transformations over three decades. The documentary's unique aspect lies in its extensive interviews spanning time and geography, distinguishing it from other Chinese productions. The director employed a special narrative strategy, spotlighting the character's background to illuminate queer identity within the social context.

Drawing from Stijn Deklerck's (2017) reference to Lisa Rofel's 'nomadic activism,' Chinese queer documentary filmmakers navigate and maneuver within the diverse powers shaping subjectivities, social structures, political beliefs, and economic inequalities in China.<sup>[15]</sup> In a landscape of stringent regulations and limited public visibility for queer art, innovative strategies shedding light on changing times become crucial. This approach not only circumvents censorship but also highlights the regional and epochal qualities of queer art, grounding the queer community within the cultural context of the times—a vital resource for comprehensive studies of queer theories in China.

Amidst numerous studies exploring identity in queer documentaries, *Madame* stands apart due to its distinctive form, housing a wealth of interviews conducted over an extensive period. Spanning 30 years, the film resonates with strong regional and timely elements. Analyzing its narrative text offers insights into how different eras, locations, and cultures have influenced attitudes and the formation of queer identity since the Cultural Revolution.

## 3.A unique perspective: the cultural politics of emotion

The cultural politics of emotion, as proposed by Sara Ahmed (2015), redefines emotion as a social-cultural practice rather than an individual psychological state. Emotions, in this context, are not confined to subjects or objects but are produced through the circulation of impressions. Ahmed delves into the intricate relationship between emotion, the body, and discourse, emphasizing how emotions assign value to the body and create societal "others" through marginalization. Emotions thus serve as a gateway to the social and material world, forging political and social alliances and shaping national identities. Ahmed focuses on the dynamics of emotions, analyzing how they "move," "stick," and "circulate" in terms of influence and function, shaping our bodily reactions (p. 4).<sup>[16]</sup>

Her analysis explores emotions' role in public texts and social phenomena, offering insights into the concept of the cultural politics of emotion. This paper aims to employ Ahmed's framework to further dissect the documentary *Madame*. The focus lies in protagonist Qihui Fan, a member of a marginalized queer community, aligning with Ahmed's proposition that emotion plays a crucial role in societal marginalization. The documentary, predominantly comprising Fan's interviews and cross-dressing performances, overtly elicits emotions in the audience, making visible the work of emotions, providing a valuable case study for analyzing emotional dynamics through Ahmed's lens.

Moreover, the film captures Fan's emotional connection to China's social changes post the Cultural Revolution. His emotions are deeply entwined with the shifting cultural landscape, making the concept of cultural politics of emotion pertinent to understanding how these transformations impact marginalized groups. The documentary chronicles Fan's life, shaped by tumultuous experiences—a challenging childhood marred by family conflicts, involvement in youth prostitution, and grappling with the disillusionment of middle age. Throughout, Fan navigates a spectrum of emotions, from pessimism and bitterness to a yearning for happiness as a queer individual. This analysis aims to delve into the depths of his emotional journey, exploring both pain and distorted excitement, illuminating the challenges queer individuals encounter in society and their resilient efforts in shaping their identities.

#### **4.Circulation of pain: The struggle of queer identity**

The documentary *Madame* presents a comprehensive view of Qihui Fan's life across eight acts, primarily focusing on three pivotal experiences he narrates. Throughout, he candidly expresses secular desires while navigating ongoing trauma and discrimination from others. I aim to delve deeper into these experiences, elucidating how pain circulated and contributed to shaping his queer identity.

Qihui Fan's upbringing during the waning days of the Cultural Revolution was marred by his father's absence, fostering an estrangement between his parents that left him with childhood insecurities. According to Ahmed's interpretation of impressions, emotional experiences have a bidirectional effect, forming impressions that transpire from one object to another's surface (Ahmed, 2015, p. 6). Consequently, the disharmony within his family left a painful impression on Qihui Fan, shaping his perception of family dynamics as distant and adverse, making family discussions a subject he avoided. The pain he experienced manifested as "the effect of impressions" (p. 8), arising from the conflict within his family and contrasting sharply with traditional notions of familial tolerance.<sup>[16]</sup> This familial pain further contributed to the marginalization of his body as an emotional subject. As he aged, his consciousness of this pain grew, consolidating the surface of his body (p. 24) and compelling him to distance himself from his family. Moreover, "the pain recalls us to the body surface" (p. 26), reinforcing his awareness of physical

presence and enhancing his ability to introspect about a missing sense of identity from his past, ultimately aiding in the establishment of a unique identity at a young age.<sup>[17]</sup>

Continuing trauma prompted Qihui Fan to leave Beijing for Guangzhou, leading to his involvement in prostitution. This decision not only served as an escape from past emotional turmoil but also facilitated the development of a distinct self-identity within a broader social context. Ahmed's explanation of sensations immediately influencing emotions through impressions elucidates why similar emotions from past experiences are rekindled upon encountering mediated sensations (Ahmed, 2015, p. 25).<sup>[17]</sup> Despite his attempt to evade it, the sensation of pain persisted. When he failed to find love in Guangzhou, it reawakened painful emotions as impressions, stemming from the perception that his identity was not accepted. These painful emotions traversed from childhood family trauma through emotional setbacks, ultimately contributing to the dismantling of his self-construction.

The memories of childhood disappointment and lost love compel a revisit to painful experiences, intensifying the sensation of pain and deeply embedding it as a palpable presence (Ahmed, 2015, p. 24). Reinterpreting this pain prompts Qihui Fan to contemplate the attribution of his "bodily surface", reshaping his body and crafting new impressions through the narrative of pain (p. 25).<sup>[17]</sup> He condensed his anguish into an on-stage identity, embodied in "Madame BILAN DE LINPHEL," thus reconstructing his sense of self. By externalizing the emotion of pain through symbolic representation, he encapsulated his impressions. However, in perpetuating this symbol of pain, he continually revisited and relived the process of reconnecting with these feelings, establishing a direct link between emotional anguish and an unfulfilled psychological void. Thus, he struggled to "gradually withdraw from the object and hence denies the other through forgetting its trace" (p. 159), ensnaring himself in a cyclical agony, perpetuating self-torment.<sup>[18]</sup>

Hence, I posit that Qihui Fan's recurrent circulation of painful emotions stems from trauma continually interpreted and internalized into his mental state. Consequently, the self-identity he forges evokes past impressions upon facing setbacks, fortifying his anguish and unraveling his subjectivity. This disintegration echoes in his construction of "Madame BILAN DE LINPHEL," initially as a queer self-empowerment but ending in a struggle and failure.

This analysis also explores how Qihui Fan shapes his queer identity, particularly examining the role of societal culture and the emotion of pain in this process. Ahmed highlights that "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 10).<sup>[16]</sup> This assertion resonates in Qihui Fan's formation of his queer identity, where perceiving pain defines the boundaries of his emotions. His queer identity emerges from symbolic representations of traumatic experiences, such as his mother's depression and his involvement in prostitution. Since the 1980s, increasing acceptance and tolerance of

queer identity within our culture have influenced Qihui Fan's own identity. Despite the anguish accompanying this journey, he seeks acknowledgment from others and selectively absorbs positive societal influences, fortifying his self-perception. Presently, his subjectivity assumes a self-appointed authority, resisting aesthetics and gender norms under heterosexual standards during self-construction, while grappling to find solace within the societal construct's informational sphere.

## **5.A performed emotion of pleasure: The building and falling of queer joy**

However, Qihui Fan didn't allow painful emotions to consume him entirely. These emotions surfaced not just in recounting trauma but also in acknowledging the aftermath of his struggle against it. Therefore, analyzing Qihui Fan's emotions should encompass not only the pain he endured as a queer individual but also his efforts to resist. His discourse in the documentary is concise yet vivid, challenging societal norms by embodying madame "BILAN DE LINPHEL" and deriving self-empowerment. This verbal resistance offers satisfaction, aiding in expressing and resolving his traumatic experiences, termed as a form of "detoxification" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 164).<sup>[18]</sup> Pleasures, as Ahmed notes, open bodies to the world, a proclamation of existence for queers, described as "dispersing poison."

Qihui Fan finds pleasure in being queer and in the outcome of his defiance against heterosexual norms. He rebels against the heteronormative system by openly discussing his experiences in prostitution and non-reproductive sexual pleasure. Over nearly three decades, the country gradually allowed space for open discussions on homosexuality, albeit controlled. Fan's rebellion surfaces through recounting experiences, cross-dressing, and embracing non-conventional sexual intimacy. Joyful emotions actively participate in challenging the dogmatic norms of heterosexual intimacy, forming a part of Fan's acceptance of the outcomes of his struggle. Pleasure serves not only as a result of his rebellion but also as an investment to maintain a connection with the audience. It acts as a driving force in his narrative, adopting a flirtatious and assertive tone, positioning himself as the subject of desire while positioning the audience as the object, maintaining a dynamic power status during the struggle process and sustaining his construction of a queer identity.

Qihui Fan narrates his life story uniquely, employing a simple yet detailed language style. He often adopts an objective viewpoint, analyzing his behavior and language. This perspective might stem from childhood trauma, potentially heightening sensitivity to social interactions and threat perception, imprinting painful impressions on his body. Thus, he tends to focus on avoiding threatening information and evading potential oppression. However, in the societal context of China, physical escape from uneasy familial relationships is deemed challenging. Nevertheless, it doesn't hinder the orientation of his thoughts and feelings, leading to an intuitive self-examination perspective. This perspective isn't solely

rooted in painful experiences but also serves as a narrative strategy to convey his emotions and experiences outwardly, connecting with others. In expressing his trauma, this perspective becomes a means of self-empowerment, challenging norms and culminating in a queer declaration of liberation from original trauma, empowering him to critique and resist the constraints of heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2015, p. 164).<sup>[18]</sup>

However, pleasure within him remains fleeting throughout the narrative process. His emotions tend to veer towards despair and pain after he dissects his own thoughts and views. This emotional cycle creates a unique narrative effect through repetition, lending a performative quality to the ostensibly joyful narrative (Ahmed, 2015, p. 92). Qihui Fan employs power relations metaphorically between body and space (Ahmed, 2015, p. 89) through ironic humor.<sup>[19]</sup> He bifurcates himself into two identities: madame "BILAN DE LINPHEL," exuding freedom and pride before the audience, and the talkative queer man, the tailor, haunted by solitude and trauma backstage. While the emotion of happiness fortifies the protagonist's powerful stance, it clashes with the unstable power dynamics during introspection due to identity shifts, recognizing the challenge of acknowledging the construction of a queer identity in the outside world. Thus, as he returns to reality, trauma-induced introspection fragments the facade of happily resisting heterosexual norms. The expression of happiness loses its essence, identities splinter, and the outward expansion of the body diminishes. The occupied space of the body decreases (Ahmed, 2015, p. 164), emotions reverting to reliving traumatic experiences woven into the memories of the joyous resistance narrative and lamenting the loss of that pleasure.<sup>[18]</sup> Consequently, this joyful emotion assumes an inherently transient nature, inseparable from his narrative strategy's performance.

This portrayal of happiness in this context is queer, reflecting self-acceptance amidst stigmatization and resistance, employing non-traditional discourse and imagery, showcasing disdain for what Qihui Fan himself terms as "tristesse." Even if transiently stimulating and offering a form of "detoxification," it also presents a potent rebellion and a "negative model of freedom" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 164) against societal norms of heterosexuality and patriarchy. However, unlike the swift rise of queer politics in the West where queer discourse power and non-transcendental hope can coexist (Ahmed, 2015, p. 165), in the Chinese context, despite having space and voice, low social tolerance restricts survival and outward expression of queer bodies in pleasure. Consequently, the formation of diverse impressions through forbidden contact by queer individuals is constrained, compromising the purity of queer pleasure. Furthermore, Qihui Fan's frequent shifts in identities, both on and offstage, heighten his understanding of the dichotomy between public norms and queer freedom. However, upon re-entering mainstream social settings, expressing these feelings becomes arduous. Thus, his performance of joy and excitement during resistance is deprived. Heterosexual culture's dominance and control over the living space of queer individuals (Ahmed, 2015,

p. 164) lead to the deprivation of this joyful emotion in daily life, deepening the impression of his queer identity and intensifying his struggle with maintaining a stable identity orientation.<sup>[18]</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

In the documentary, Qihui Fan grapples with the emotion of pain, repeatedly internalizing this agonizing impression into emotional fortitude, forging it into a supportive self-construction. Through this process, he seeks to resist societal prejudices as a queer individual, finding glimpses of joy amid resistance. This emotional flux stems from his interpretation of his own queer identity, shaping his performance and expression of self. However, the loss of joy as a focal point and the perpetual cycle of painful emotions erode his grasp on identity. He withdrew from social interactions post-filming and tragically took his own life shortly after the documentary's release. This transition from pain to a somewhat supportive yet stimulating happiness might have foretold the eventual faltering of his struggle. Despite increasing tolerance towards queer individuals in China at that time, their freedom of expression and identity status remained curtailed. The disillusionment and powerlessness experienced in this struggle accelerated the emotional schism within his identity transformation, rendering his resistance unable to be fully acknowledged and comprehended. Consequently, this form of resistance born from pain reflects his personal ethos but lacks a definitive goal in the queer struggle, perpetually separating his identity as one recognized by society. This could explain the uniqueness and representativeness of his image, vividly illustrating the practical hardships faced by queer individuals in Chinese society during that era, portraying their intricate internal battles and transformations.

Nevertheless, the portrayal of the character in the documentary is curated and selected, still subject to the director's narrative control, potentially constrained within the confines of China's mainland censorship mechanisms. Despite documentaries offering a more authentic perspective due to their reliance on real events and characters, their depth often falls short compared to thorough field investigations. The exploration of the documentary's formal expression and its alignment with the cultural milieu of that time, as well as the comprehensive examination of the queer community within China's social context during that period, remains underdeveloped. This warrants further in-depth research to delve into and enrich our understanding of these facets in future studies.

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