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# “And We Never Saw Each Other Again:” The Impossibility of Queer Love, Desire, and Sexuality in Your Name Engraved Herein

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## Abstract

Japan's defeat in the Second World War heralded the transfer of Taiwan's political authority from Japanese colonisation to that of the Nationalist Kuomintang government (KMT) under the Republic of China (ROC). To diffuse Japanese cultural elements from Taiwanese socio-cultural milieu, the KMT implemented a regime of cultural hegemony to uphold the demonstration of traditional Chinese ethics. Its microcosm was constituted by the gender normative family structure, sustained by the moral conditioning of filial duty, heterosexual procreation, along with the appropriation of heteropatriarchal gender roles, practices antithetical to queer subjectivity. This essay attempts to map the centrality of stigma that heteronormativity associates with queer love, desire, and sexuality in Kuang-Hui Liu's film, *Your Name Engraved Herein* (2020). Set in the backdrop of 1987 Taiwan, as Martial law ends in the country, the film depicts the relationship between its protagonists, Chang Jia-han and Birdy Wang, conditioned by the institutionalities of Christianity, the school, and familial associations. Denaturalising sexuality through repressive disciplining and corporeal punishment, the narrative highlights heteropatriarchy's discrepancy towards a subjective gender conditioning. The essay will trace the narrative's dissociation of institutionality from an emotional and sexual subjectivity. Jia-han's character is identified with a societal hesitation, corresponding to the initiation of his 'coming-out' narrative to his family, peers, and Father Oliver. The analysis will incorporate theoretical frameworks from Gender and Sexuality Studies and Film Studies. It will map heteropatriarchy's 'otherisation' of queer desire and sexuality for the manifestation of an economic productivity, as Birdy alienates himself from his relationship with Jia-han to prepare for his college-entrance examination.

## Keywords

- Desire
- Heteronormativity
- Heteropatriarchy
- Sexuality
- Queer

In the twenty-first-century digital milieu, the implementation of data as power, accompanied by the formulation of discourses pertaining to queer identities, have influenced global perspectives towards LGBTQIAP+ narratives. The indispensable media of the cinema, the print journals, and the internet, along with a public interest of the queer 'other,' have sustained such a phenomenon. In the essay, "Media, Political Movement, and Ideology: Queer Theory in The United States," Fanqing Wu observes that the Stonewall Rebellion in New York City in 1969 marked the inception of a civil rights movement led by and for the queer community. (434). It has manifested the socio-political recognition of queer identities, as the US Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment Act legally protects gay and lesbian marital association on a federal pedestal. Nevertheless, it also highlights the gradual autocratic attempt to disempower the socio-economic and political discourses by and for the queer identities that have surfaced in the contemporary government regime. It alludes to Trump's implementation of an anti-LGBTQIAP+ narrative in his political campaigns of 2024, stating, "Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you." (Bender).

Owing to its cultural affinity with China, political diplomacy with the US, and a cosmopolitan influence from Japan, Taiwan situates itself as a meditating country between the superpowers. Beyond Taiwan's Confucian Asian cultural roots, a homo/heterosexual bifurcation is formulated by the 'modern West.' Although homoeroticism has been alluded to in multifarious dynasties in the Han-centric history, it has never been more oppressed with sustained scrutiny during the Martial Law Period. (Lim 240). Since 1949, the imposition of the Taiwan Martial Law has decentralised the propagation of discourses pertaining to gender identities 'other' than normative heterosexuality. Incorporating the pathologised associations of homosexuality that alludes to the US AIDS crisis in the 1980s, the discourse, promoting homosexuality as a signifier of the diseased body, acquired public propagation during the Martial Law. Medical journals often incorporated publications that connected gay identities with AIDS, apparent psychological suffering, oppressive parenting, amongst others. (Hant 68–75). On May 17, 2019, Taiwan emerged as the first Asian country to recognise the legalisation of same-sex matrimonial alliances, marking a significant victory for the social recognition of LGBTQIAP+ rights. However, it also obscured the phenomenon that in a referendum series on November 24, 2018, the Taiwanese citizens overwhelmingly voted against the legalisation of same-sex marriages. This socio-cultural chasm between public opinion and legislation situates *Your Name Engraved Herein* (2020) as a timely cultural manifestation to assist in bridging the aforementioned breach. The film attempts at depicting the corrosive effect of institutional and interpersonal manipulation for perpetuating power within a heteropatriarchal society. The social contextualisation of the LGBTQIAP+ identities in Taiwan has been considerably influenced by the confluence of traditional values,

political turmoil, and religious faith. (Wu 74–79). It comprises the Confucian cultural normalisation of filial devotion, prioritising community consensus over individualism. It incorporates the family child to adhere to the tenets of heteronormativity. It highlights the formulation of heterosexual marital association, procreation, and contributing to the national economy through the maintenance of a steady population graph. Although five-percent of the Taiwanese population follows Christianity, they represent the majority, campaigning against the LGBTQIAP+ section. (Rich et al. 329–334).

In the *Book of Leviticus*, Moses dictates, “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is [an] abomination.” (*The American Standard Translation of The Holy Bible*, Leviticus 18:22). This dictum of an essentially moral censurement against homosexuality is echoed in the expository scene of *Your Name Engraved Herein* that begins with a dialogue between Chang Jia-han and Father Oliver:

Father: Why did you get into a fight for love?

Jia-han: I don't know what to say.

Father: You've changed a bit.

Jia-han: So how do you plan to counsel me? Let's start.

Father: Which class is she in? (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:53:59)

A French terminology, ‘mise-en-scène,’ literally translates into ‘placing on stage,’ denoting the constituents of what is placed in a particular scene in a film or a theatre production. It ranges from the positioning of the actors, the props, the lighting, and the camera angles, amongst other significant components. In *Your Name Engraved Herein*, the mise-en-scène's stifling ethos, characterised by a dominant chronic yellow lighting, accompanied by alternate framings of the characters in medium-close-up shots, highlight the dialogical tension within the scene. It anticipates the intrusion of institutionality throughout the narrative, alluded to, by Father Oliver's intention to “counsel.” The scene's postmodern characterisation does not specify the relational association of the “love” in discourse. However, the heteronormative conditioning qualifies the gender as a “she.” Further, Jia-han's speech does not assist him in formulating a teleological reasoning to “fight for love.” His subjecthood submits to power's ubiquitousness to counsel him. Towards the scene's conclusion, while Jia-han gradually gazes back at Father, the scene fades out into the inscriptions of the “Song of Solomon 8:7” (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:53:01):

Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can the floods drown it

“Waters” and “floods,” representing the intervention of institutionality that cannot “quench” or “drown” the gender-queer “love,” highlights the narrative's quest for the contextualisation of queerness beyond the social gaze and recognition of heteropatriarchy.

When Japan was defeated in the Second World War, Taiwan's political authority had been transplanted from Japan's colonisation to that of the Republic of China (ROC) under Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Kuomintang government (KMT). In 1949, the Communists overthrew Chiang, rendering him to install the ROC along with the KMT party to Taiwan to establish an authoritarian government. The Japanese cultural elements that had percolated into the locals' daily living destabilised the KMT regime, because they were denigrated as "slaves" of Japanese imperialism, "contaminated" by Japanese culture. (Winckler 30; Gold 60). Against this backdrop, the KMT implemented campaigns of cultural hegemony like the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement (CCRM) to eradicate the influences of Japanese administration. As a four-step procedure, the CCRM incorporated the revival of Chinese classics, the sustained demonstration of Chinese ethics, the moral upliftment of students, along with the promotion of motherhood as the feminine ideal. (Lin 82). In schools, ethics courses were taught revolving around *siwei bade*, a set of moral standards emphasising upon social harmony obtained via self-introspection through adherence to the patrilineal values of filial devotion and patriotism. (Yang 45). Sustaining the family-unit as the microcosmic representation of the traditional macrocosmic societal values, gender expectations were formulated predominantly by the parents' evaluation of their children's partners. To assist in their son's genealogical duty to reproduce and perform his filial duty, his parents would desire a self-sacrificing daughter-in-law, who was "fertile," "chaste," and "docile," heteronormative traits that could help him to accomplish his duties to his *jiazu* or family. (Wong and Yau 229).

The incorporation of the aforementioned values is manifested in the family-dining-scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein 1:28:36*) as Jia-han's father prays before the consumption of their meal:

Our Father in heaven. Thank you for giving us food ... Jia-han is going into 12th grade soon. Please help him improve academically and get into a good university. As for Chia-ming and Hsiao-ling, please bestow your blessings on them too ... in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

The disparate individualities of the family members amalgamate within the family structure to contribute towards the telocentric manifestation of the national economy. The prayers for the different members are based on their familial role. Jia-han's parents, at the brim of their old age, express gratitude for physical sustenance, expecting filial devotion. Jia-han, on the verge of initiating his higher education is expected to excel academically to later procure economic stability to contribute to the family unit. Jia-han's brother, Chia-ming on succeeding in his professional pursuits, is assumed to manifest a marital association with his fiancé. Jia-han's inefficiency in executing the individual role to contribute to the familial collective association is counteracted by institutional discipline. When he transgresses his relational identity of

the desexualised school-going youngest family member to inquire into his elder brother, “How long have you been dating?”, he is reprimanded by the former through, “It’s none of your business.” As the mise-en-scène’s predominantly green-walls signify Jia-han’s sustained emotional discontent against his father for not providing him with a scooter despite possessing the economic solubility for it, the scene’s temperamental volatility anticipates a confession from Jia-han’s mother in the ensuing scene. The scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:26:56) that frames a medium-close-up shot of an emotionally distressed Jia-han, bound by metal railings that symbolise the associative family unit’s encroachment into Jia-han’s individuality, invites his mother’s presence, manifesting their conversation:

Jia-han: Why did you marry him?

Mother: If I didn’t, how would I give birth to you?

Jia-han: So you don’t love him.

Mother: Love? At our age?

As Jia-han qualifies his parents’ martial association to represent “merely procreation,” the status-quo of heteropatriarchy equates the formulation of the family unit with a heteronormative sexual association to continue the progression of the family lineage. In its procreation, it disregards the discourses pertaining to emotional desire and compatibility.

In his seminal text, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, Foucault writes that since the eighteenth-century, the sexuality of children and adolescents have been formulated as a major topic for discourse, accompanied by the implementation of institutional and discursive strategies. Prescribing “moral and medical examples,” the doctors counselled professionals of educational institutions to censure the schoolboy’s apparently precocious sexuality. Provided with a canonical and limited discourse on sex, the teenager was prevented from participating in a transparent discourse on sex, interlocked and hierarchised within a confluence of power relations. The classroom’s dimensions, the shape of the tables, the distribution of dormitories, and the “rules” for censoring bedtime sleeping periods, were performed to monitor the teenager’s sexuality. (28–30). In the film, the institutionality of the Catholic-school represses discourses pertaining to sexuality and desire through sustained scrutiny into the students’ dormitory, accompanied by corporeal punishment. In the scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:49:58), the dormitory inspector states, “Dormitory check is a must before bedtime.” As he intrudes into the students’ dormitory, he scrutinises hidden “adult comics,” postulating about the students’ personal hygiene as the apparent altruistic motive for their “physical and mental development.” His confession, “I’m always watching you,” transmutes the school’s institutionality into a “panopticon” (Foucault Discipline and Punish 201) surveying the students’ privacy. In the next scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:47:50), the male-students abscond the school boundaries to arrive at the cemetery during dawn to engage in physical intimacy with

female identities. As a Foucauldian heterotopia, the site of the cemetery contextualises the students' act of coitus within its situation as "the other city," symbolising a "dark resting place." Housing the dead that supposedly "bring illness to the living" (Foucault "Of Other Spaces" 5–6), the cemetery highlights the students' sexualities as the deviant 'other' to the school's surveyed censure of their desexualisation. As the students are 'disciplined' with corporal punishment for having had "snuck out in the middle of the night" (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:45:18), the school's institutionality formulates a homosocial environment within its tangible boundary. While homosociality emboldens the male-students to transgress the institutional territorialisation, homosexuality emasculates them to anticipate sexual associations amongst themselves. Contextually, the practice of gender stigmatising bullying is implemented. In the scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:44:29), a group of boys, through the implementation of physical violence, manhandle a boy into the space of the students' common washroom. They persecute him verbally, signifying him as a "Fucking queer ... a virus ... [who] peeks at Horn's cock every night."

In 1994, the theoretical concept of 'queer' as an aspect of identity was first introduced into the Taiwanese literary environment. The article, "A Little Encyclopaedia of Queer," published in the tenth-issue of the journal *Ile Margins*, suggested "queer/ku'er" to mean "cool kid," as a novel idea "about sex, sexual identity, and sexual desire." Accordingly, "queer" alluded to a comprehensive range of sexual practices beyond romantic heterosexual associations, ranging from sadomasochism, transvestism, voyeurism, and fetishism. (Lee). Implementing an essentially heteronormative gaze, the article misrepresented queerness with sexual activities "beyond" and 'other' to heterosexuality. In Liu's film, through the manipulation of language to formulate a heteronormative discourse, along with the incorporation of oppressive physicality, heteropatriarchy situates homosexuality within the school's institutionality as a social and clinical deviation. The justification of the bullies' mistreatment through, "He'll force us to be gay too" (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:42:08), highlights the unconscious psychological 'castration anxiety' that homosexuality is potent with. In Pai Hsien-yung's novel, *Niezi*, in the parents' perception, the social stigma associated with homosexuality is more offensive than a criminal offence. (Chen 222). Within the film's narrative, no homosexual identity is "out and proud." As Jia-han attempts to come out to his parents, Birdy stops him. (Wu 81). In her essay, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler observes that the apparently "naturalistic effects" of heterosexuality are produced through "imitative strategies." (313). She destabilises the heterosexual normativity that situates homosexuality to be an imitative mimicry of heterosexuality. Correspondingly, Butler maps heterosexuality to be an imitation too, unlike the 'ideal' that it claims itself to be. As the Catholic-school introduces female students into its novel academic curriculum, Birdy implements the imitative strategies of a heterosexual identity to destabilise heteropatriarchy's attempt to signify the queer conditioning of his relationality with Jia-han. When Birdy's physical proximity with

Banban increases, this intrusion into the Birdy-Jia-han equation anticipates emotional distress and resistance from the latter. Jia-han confronts the two, “Are you two dating?” (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:06:46). In his confession to Father Oliver, he breaks down, musing, “I thought the world revolved around us. How did I become an outsider all of a sudden?” (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:06:30). In the church-scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:04:51), Birdy says to Jia-han, “Can you stop hanging out with me alone? We can be very good friends. How about I introduce you to a girl?” As Butler theorises that the heterosexual imitation “knows” its vulnerability of “becoming undone,” along with its compulsion to repeat” (314), Birdy’s attempt at distancing himself from Jia-han to formulate his familial role in contributing to a progeny with Banban in the distant future stands ultimately destabilised, owing to the unstable imitative performativity of gender expression. After several years, during the Seventeenth Witt High School Marching Band Reunion, Banban tells Jia-han, “Birdy and I are divorced. I only understood later on. Liking boys is innate.” (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 22:00).

The simultaneity of “coming out” accompanied by being “out and proud” can formulate a culture disjunction in the Chinese social context, because “out” signifies leaving familial association to imbibe individual queerness and “proud” highlight a cultural derogation, implying a “deviant” form of sexuality. (Chou 29–31). Correspondingly, the association between Birdy and Jia-han can sustain until signified by the heteronormative panopticon. Within the privacy of the washroom cubicle, beyond the institutional gaze of the Catholic-school, Birdy’s imitation of a performative heterosexuality disintegrates. In the scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 52:34), owing to Birdy’s arm injury, as Jia-han assists him in bathing, he thoroughly attempts to resist the former. While the camera frames the two in a medium-close-up shot, Jia-han asks Birdy to “turn around.” (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 51:29). In the next framing (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 50:56), as the camera focuses with a close shot of Jia-han’s hand around the Birdy’s lower waist, the latter resists again stating, “that’s enough.” However, after Birdy submits to the proffered masturbation, its eventuality manifests the mutual sexual desire between them. The complexity of their desire is echoed with the sequence fading out into its conclusion before it surfaces Birdy’s sexual guilt, as he confesses thrice, “I’m sorry.”

Mapping the impossibility of queer love, desire, and sexuality that characterises the association of Birdy and Jia-han, highlights the institutional ubiquitousness within Kuang-Hui Liu’s cinematic narrative. Birdy conveys to Jia-han, “If what you give me is the same as what you give to others, then I don’t want it.” (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:30:44). The exclusivity of their queer association remains antithetical to heteronormativity. After the demise of President Chiang, the Catholic-school grants its students institutional leaves to pay homages in Taipei. Utilising this concession to implement their masquerade of national duty, Birdy and Jia-han dissociate themselves

from the social structure of the heteronormative Catholic-school. They attempt to explore their intrinsic queer association in a social contextualisation, beyond the limitations of their familial identities. However, heteropatriarchy's pervasiveness intrudes into their intimacy. In the scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:33:10), the *mise-en-scène's* predominant red lighting symbolises the anticipated emotional and corporeal fervour of the Birdy-Jia-han association. The red colour also echoes the institutional violence meted out to a queer-activist in the previous scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:34:08). As the close-up shot (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:32:00) frames Birdy and Jia-han, preceding their physical intimacy, the scene cuts into the close shot (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 1:31:57) of the subsequent reflection of an external personality gazing into their privacy. The person interrupts into the room without consent under the excuse of room-service, to eventually jeopardise their security, stating, "You can't fool around here."

Similarly, heteropatriarchy's implementation of a linguistic command to suppress sexualities 'other' to heteronormativity is destabilised in another scene (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 32:41). As Jia-han screams into the extensive vastness of the sea and the sky from the rugged shores, the explication of communicable language, formulated by a cultural civilisation is nullified into Nature's predominance. When Birdy and Jia-han immerse themselves into the sea, unclad, screaming in an euphoria of their union, Liu's narrative vision amalgamates their queerness with Nature's clairvoyance, beyond the heteronormative tenets of cultural embellishments. The scene's incorporated shot that frames Birdy and Jia-han in a medium-long shot (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 29:32), seated on the rugged shore, ensues Jia-han's corresponding voice over:

The tide kept rising. I really hoped this would be the end of the world. After that day, he said he'd prepare for the college entrance exam. And we never saw each other again.

It signifies the pragmatic impossibility of a queer contextualisation within Nature dichotomised against culture and civilisation. Birdy eventually dissociates himself from Jia-han to implement his role of academic proliferation, anticipating an economic employment along with his heterosexual formulation of the family unit. Although institutionalisation isolates Birdy from Jia-han, it attempts to situate them in a socio-political and cultural context comparatively sensitised towards queer identities during their school reunion. However, dislocated from time and space, Birdy and Jia-han are not expected to reinstate their desires into a union. The perception of their mutual individualities are engaged in a past timeline, as the narrative's last scene frames the teenagers, Birdy and Jia-han, singing, while the older Birdy and Jia-han consent to walk with each other:

Your name engraved herein  
Making time go by without a trace (*Your Name Engraved Herein* 06:09–08:09)

Upholding the lineage of transnational Chinese cinematic narratives ranging from Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), and Zhang Yuan's *East Palace West Palace* (1997) to Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997), the cinematic individuality of *Your Name Engraved Herein* emphasises upon the localised implications of societal repression on queer rights within Taiwan's socio-political and cultural context in the 1980s. Correspondingly, attempting to glocalise his narrative, Kuang-Hui Liu hoped that LGBTQIAP+ communities in other parts of Asia could appreciate the film as it tells them, "You are allowed to love, you are not guilty." (Moon).

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\*The English translations of the Chinese dialogues within the cinematic text, *Your Name Engraved Herein* have been incorporated from the subtitles of the film's OTT streaming platform, Netflix.

## About the Author

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