Western-Centrism and the Global Queer Film Festival Circuit: The Example of the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival

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ABSTRACT

Since they emerged in the late 1970s, queer film festivals have turned into a global cultural activity. A complex worldwide network of queer film festivals has also formed. This article establishes the framework of the global queer film festival circuit to examine the hegemonic relationships it produces. The global queer film festival circuit comprises top-tier film festivals and second-tier queer film festivals. As the first queer-themed film festival in Asia, the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGFF) is situated in a subordinate and passive position. Aiming to emphasize the unbalanced relationship among queer film festivals on a global scale, this article argues that due to commercial considerations and the lack of festival resources, the HKLGFF’s programming is dominated by the choices of top-tier film festivals and thus reproduces Western-centrism. Through the analysis of the HKLGFF’s programming process and criteria, it also demonstrates how top-tier film festivals influence the programming of second-tier queer film festivals by dominating the global market of queer films. Overall, this article expands the concept of the queer film festival circuit, addressing the significance of small-scale queer film festivals in the global South to worldwide queer culture as well as the global circulation of queer films.
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Introduction

As a cultural activity, film festivals generally showcase series of films from certain periods and certain places. The first Venice International Film Festival (Venice) took place in 1932, marking the birth of the contemporary film festival model. Queer film festivals, as a type of identity-based film festival, were born in the late 1970s, when festivals began to diversify. Stuart Richards has proposed a general definition of the queer film festival, referring to it as “a series of film screenings that primarily focus on queer themes.” In 1977, the very first queer-themed film festival, the Gay Film Festival of Super-8 Films (now known as the Frameline Film Festival) took place in San Francisco. Skadi Loist has described it as “a prototype for LGBT/Q film festivals that followed,” as it “performed a social cinematic space where queer artists making films put on a public and inclusive (rather than private and exclusive) show and thus opened up a counterpublic sphere.” Queer film festivals first emerged in the West and gradually spread to other parts of the world beginning in the 1990s. Globally, the scale and influence of queer film festivals have increased, and the 2010s witnessed the formation of regional and global networking among queer film festivals. After more than forty years, queer film festivals are no longer simple, informal events organized by a few grassroots queer activists; instead, they have become a major part of the queer movement and the global queer film industry.

The first and longest-running queer film festival in East Asia, the Gay and Lesbian Films Season, now known as the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGFF), was founded by Edward Lam, a well-known Hong Kong film director and gay activist, in January 1989, when the phenomenon of hosting queer film festivals had just reached areas outside the West. The Hong Kong Arts Centre and Lam took full responsibility for organizing the HKLGFF from 1989 to 1998 (the period I refer to as the HKAC period). At that time, the HKLGFF was an experimental, politically oriented cultural event. However, due to various factors (including lack of funding), Lam left the HKLGFF, and the festival faced suspension in 1999. The HKLGFF experienced a rebirth in the new millennium, when Raymond Yeung and Walter Baranchet took over the festival in 2000. The festival then commenced its commercial transformation. As one of the main stakeholders in the HKLGFF in the 2000s, Fortissimo Films has played a significant role in the festival’s commercialization, building up the connection between the HKLGFF and other film distribution companies in particular. Since then, the HKLGFF has gradually transformed into a self-sustained, market-driven queer film festival. Concurrently, queer film festivals have proliferated across Asia. The connection between the HKLGFF and other regional and global (queer) film festivals has been increasingly intimate.

When clicking on the official website of the HKLGFF or scanning its catalogue, visitors might notice that some film festivals’ names are repeatedly mentioned on the program page, including the Berlin International Film Festival (the Berlinale), Cannes Film Festival (Cannes), the Frameline Film Festival (Frameline), and the Outfest Los Angeles LGBTQ Film Festival (Outfest). In the HKLGFF 2018 program, for example, among twenty-eight selected feature-length queer films,
ten had been previously programmed by Outfest. The other frequently mentioned film festivals included Frameline (three mentions) and the Berlinale (two mentions). Hence, one can wonder if the HKLGFF’s programmers prefer to select films that have been previously featured at well-known Western film festivals. Given these discursive connections, this article raises two fundamental questions: How does the HKLGFF construct its program? And what is the relationship between the HKLGFF and other film festivals around the world?

Mainly inspired by Loist’s and Antoine Damiens’ discussions on the queer film festival circuit, this article proposes the concept of the global queer film festival circuit to emphasize the unbalanced relationship among queer film festivals on a global scale. The global queer film festival circuit comprises top-tier film festivals and second-tier queer film festivals, with the HKLGFF situated in a comparatively subordinate and passive position. This article argues that, due to commercial considerations and the lack of festival resources, the HKLGFF’s programming is dominated by the choices of top-tier film festivals and thus reproduces a Western-centric approach. Regarding its theoretical contribution, for one thing, this article seeks to extend the concept of the queer film festival circuit to a global context, highlighting the significance of small-scale queer film festivals to the circuit. It also identifies the hegemony existing in the circuit and attempts to counteract the Western-centric trend of film festival studies in general.

Understanding the Global Queer Film Festival Circuit

The general understanding of “circuit” refers to the way some elements flow along a specific and closed route. Abé Markus Nornes observes that reference to a “circuit” in the film festival context began in 1959, implying “a kind of free circulation, an open system of film prints moving effortlessly around the earth. They alight at one node or another for projection and enjoyment, before returning on their circuitous path home.”

Nornes’s description highlights the flow of films, which is key to understanding the concept of the film festival circuit. Scholars differ in their definitions and interpretations of the film festival circuit and greatly contribute to the understanding of this term. Thomas Elsaesser’s work laid the foundation for analyzing film festival networks (or the film festival circuit). Illustrating how the networking of film festivals has been shaped, Elsaesser used “nodes” as a metaphor to describe the position of every film festival on the circuit, and highlighted how films flowed within it from one node to another.

Since then, this metaphor has been frequently adopted by other film festival scholars. Marijke de Valck regards the film festival network as an “alternative” distribution and exhibition network that “both operates with and against Hollywood.” In other words, having a complex relationship with Hollywood, the intent and operation of the film festival network is different from traditional theatrical networks. As de Valck further observes, “by travelling the circuit, a film can accumulate value via the snowball effect. The more praise, prizes and buzz a film attracts, the more attention it is likely to receive at other festivals.” In practical respects, this accumulation of value is the pursuit of the films in the flow of the film festival circuit.

The elements circulating within the film festival circuit are more than just films. Loist regards the film festival circuit as “the trajectory of a specific product through a global network of festivals,” with the “specific product” mainly referring to films. In addition to film circulation, there are two additional elements that move around the film festival circuit. Dina Iordanova compares the film


14. Ibid., 35.

festival circuit to a "festival treadmill," arguing that the circuit can be only constituted if personnel (such as consultants, programmers, critics, and buyers) keep travelling to different film festivals. Moreover, developing Iordanova's argument, Loist points out three elements—films, people, and money—that construct the film festival circuit and circulate within it. This article regards all the elements that circulate within the circuit as film festival resources. Following Loist's clarification, it suggests that three main types of festival resources flow in the film festival circuit, including money (sponsorships, public funding, box office revenues), personnel (festival organizers, volunteers, film-industry insiders, audiences and tourists, critics and scholars, and media representatives), and films (a category which also includes festival logos and awards). Hence, the film festival circuit is a trajectory constructed by the flows of these three types of film festival resources. More importantly, the films that travel around the circuit are the core resource in the film festival since the flow of films mobilizes the flow of other kinds of film festival resources.

In addition, the film festival circuit involves hierarchical relationships. Regarding the relationships between film festivals, Loist highlights the hierarchy within the film festival circuit. Not every film festival is on an equal level with the other film festivals in the circuit; instead, hierarchical relations have existed ever since the circuit started to emerge. The way films flow embodies the hierarchy of the film festival circuit. In other words, films circulate from the film festivals situated in the dominant position of the circuit to those in the secondary position. The possession of film festival resources and festival influence both determine the position of a film festival in the circuit. World premieres are the significant and scarce kind of festival resource that film festivals fight for. According to Loist, "festivals usually aim for international or national premieres because timeliness secures interest and media coverage in this era of the ‘attention economy.’" The hierarchy in the film festival circuit rests "on an ideology of premiere status." The ability to attract more world premieres can sustain the dominant position of a film festival in the circuit.

According to Jenni Olson, the queer film festival circuit "came into its own in the early 1990s, just as the 'New Queer Cinema' achieved mainstream recognition." Olson further argues that the queer film festival circuit has become a "queer film ecosystem," explaining, "the film and video makers create the movies, the festival organizers show the movies, the distributors circulate the movies, the publicists draw attention to them so that the gay movie lover will plunk down a few dollars to see the movies, so that the whole process can happen again." Faced with the pressure of other distributing platforms, such as theaters, DVDs, and the Internet, the emergence of a queer film ecosystem shows that queer film festivals can serve as a well-developed alternative distribution path for queer films.

The queer film ecosystem has laid the foundation for subsequent scholarly research on the queer film festival circuit. Developing Olson's concept, Loist suggests that the queer film ecosystem "operates largely on community logic" but that the "ecosystem does not work completely independently of the larger media industry and distribution circuits." The queer film festival circuit serves the interests of queer communities through the selection and worldwide promotion of specific queer films. Damiens argues that the ecosystem "depends on an interplay between various regimes of taste" ("relationship between cultural and economic capital"). To sustain queer films and festivals, the queer film festival circuit operates through both cultural and commercial considerations. Moreover, the interplay in cultural and economic regimes involves conflict, so the queer film festival circuit seeks balance. Both Loist and Damiens concentrate...
on the distribution side of the queer film festival circuit, demonstrating how it contributes to the development of queer films as well as queer communities and culture.

Based on these theoretical discussions about the (queer) film festival circuit, in this article, I foreground the concept of the global queer film festival circuit. Borrowing the metaphor of the treadmill used by Iordanova, the global queer film festival circuit can be understood as a treadmill constructed by the flow of festival resources mobilized by the flow of queer films. Whether it is for the general film festival circuit or the queer film festival circuit, most of the research is still distinctly Euro-American-centered. Nornes argues that the geopolitical structure of the world is embodied in the Western-centrism of the international film festival circuit, in the form of “first Europe, then elsewhere.” The geopolitical disparities lead to relatively modest attention being paid by the film industry and academia when it comes to film festivals beyond the West. Nevertheless, in practice, the queer film festival circuit covers most continents in the world. The intention behind proposing the concept of the global queer film festival circuit is to expand existing discussions to include a mass of small-scale queer film festivals in the global South, which have been greatly influenced by the global queer film festival circuit. For instance, Qin points out the lack of works that highlight the multifaceted and complex nature of queer film festivals in different cities connecting different parts of Asia. Jia Tan has explored how the Asia Pacific Queer Film Festival Alliance contributes to the rise of Asian queer film festivals to challenge the spatio-temporal hierarchy of the film festival circuit. At a time when regional connections between queer film festivals are on the rise, these queer film festivals in the global South as the main part of the global queer film festival circuit cannot be overlooked. Additionally, this framework particularly accentuates how small-scale queer film festivals in the global South are influenced by major film festivals in the West.

The Hierarchy of the Global Queer Film Festival Circuit

The global queer film festival circuit involves a strongly hierarchical relationship, which is shaped by the possession of film festival resources and influence. The global queer film festival circuit is constituted by two tiers: top-tier film festivals and second-tier queer film festivals. Top-tier film festivals of the global queer film festival circuit can be divided into two kinds, including top-tier general international film festivals and top-tier queer film festivals. Highlighting the complexity of the actual circulation of queer films, Loist and Ger Zielinski observe that “the queer film festival circuit is connected to the larger film festival circuit, but it also forms a separate parallel entity. This network can be further differentiated into several levels.” When queer films commence their journey along the global queer film festival circuit, they not only circulate among queer film festivals; instead, most also circulate between both general film festivals and queer-themed film festivals.

Regarding the top-tier general international film festivals, the “Big Three” (the Berlin International Film Festival, the Cannes Film Festival, and the Venice Film Festival) that occupy the predominant positions in the global queer film festival circuit are the most representative. As queer film festivals cannot compete with the global media attention that these major film festivals draw, a common marketing and distribution strategy is for film distribution companies to first submit their queer films to international major film festivals. With the rise of interest in
queer films, the Big Three have gradually established queer-themed awards as official awards within their festivals. In 1987, for example, the Berlinale created a specific section and award for queer-themed films in its official program: the Teddy Awards. As Damiens states, due to the establishment of the Teddy Awards, the Berlinale has gradually become “the main market for gay and lesbian films.”

In addition to the Berlinale, many queer films have been programmed by Cannes and Venice since the 1990s, and some have even won major official awards. In seeking inclusivity, Venice and Cannes have each set up queer-themed awards, the Queer Lion and the Queer Palm, in 2007 and 2010 respectively.

In addition to the Big Three, some large-scale international film festivals, such as the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), can be considered top-tier film festivals in this circuit. B. Ruby Rich identified the rise of New Queer Cinema at the 1991 Toronto International Film Festival, observing that, “there, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image.”

To address the diversity of festival programs, the TIFF screens a number of queer-themed films every year. The TIFF can be a suitable choice by film distribution companies for world premieres, as the festival attracts hundreds of thousands of attendees. The TIFF has also collaborated for many years with the Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film Festival, one of the largest global queer film festivals.

Top-tier queer film festivals also occupy a dominant position in the global queer film festival circuit. Compared to most queer film festivals around the world, top-tier queer film festivals possess an abundance of festival resources as well as globally profound impacts. Frameline and Outfest are two iconic top-tier queer film festivals in the circuit. As the first group of queer film festivals in North America, both now have become the largest queer film festivals in the world, screening hundreds of queer films and attracting tens of thousands of audiences annually. Compared to top-tier general film festivals, top-tier queer film festivals have another role in contributing to the circulation of queer films. As discussed, increasing numbers of queer films prefer to hold their world premieres at the Big Three festivals with the aim of receiving bigger festival buzz. These queer films continue to be showcased in queer-themed film festivals. Although the large proportion of the films they program have been screened previously, Frameline and Outfest work as integration and promotion mechanisms for queer films on the global queer film festival circuit. They assemble and reselect queer films from the last few months of the previous year and the first half of the current year, and then promote them to other queer film festivals. Indeed, some queer films actually choose to have their world premieres at Frameline and Outfest. Even though both festivals are held in North America, their programming scope encompasses the whole world, including the global South. Their globally significant influence can attract queer films from Asia, South America, and Africa, which maintains their worldwide impact on the circuit as well.

Regarding the actual influence of the top-tier film festivals in the circuit, they are also considered to be dominant in the global market of queer films. In other words, the queer films programmed by top-tier film festivals are comparatively more accessible to the global market. The top-tier film festivals are the first choice for many queer films to commence their circulation owing to their vast festival resources and accumulated influence. Hence, top-tier film festivals can select films of relatively good quality from a wide range of submissions from around the world. At the
same time, the reputation that top-tier film festivals have built up over the years ensures that their selections can be well promoted in the global market. Moreover, since top-tier film festivals work with a wide range of journalists from all over the world, their programmed queer films can receive worldwide media exposure. Similarly, as Diane Burgess notices, “smaller festivals are able to draw on the global media attention generated by the A-list festivals in order to attract local audience attention to their program selections.” When other, smaller-scale queer film festivals select queer films previously programmed by top-tier film festivals, the resources required to promote these films can be saved. The top-tier film festivals can control the trends of the global market.

Furthermore, queer awards play an important role in the global queer film festival circuit by increasing the commercial value of the films. According to de Valck and Soeteman, “winning the award leads to media exposure, best of fest screenings and better distribution.” For small-scale queer film festivals, programming films that won awards at top-tier international film festivals like the Big Three can help sell more tickets. Nevertheless, queer awards are comparatively scarce, as in practice only a few queer films find themselves eligible for awards. Moreover, winning awards is unpredictable in film festival competitions. Hence, from a practical perspective, being programmed by top-tier international film festivals (the Big Three in particular) is both more controllable and more significant than winning awards. For queer films in the circuit, festival logos become an alternative to film awards for accumulating symbolic capital, which can translate into box office revenues during their circulation along the circuit. Both festival logos and film awards are significant to the global distribution of queer films, since only a small proportion of queer films can be awarded prizes while festival logos are comparatively easier to achieve.

There are over two hundred queer-themed film festivals currently held around the world, while only a few film festivals, as previously mentioned, occupy dominant positions in the global queer film festival circuit. Most queer film festivals around the world are considered second-tier queer film festivals in this circuit. That is to say, the global queer film festival circuit can be seen to have a pyramidal structure. A few top-tier film festivals dominate the flow of festival resources (queer films, in particular) within the global queer film festival circuit. The scale of second-tier queer film festivals is generally small; they generally possess extremely limited festival resources. Many of them are located outside Europe or North America. As the first queer film festival in Asia, the HKLGFF is situated in the second tier in the global queer film festival circuit. As previously argued, the ability to host world premieres, the possession of film festival resources, and the status of the film festival influence all contribute strongly to festival stratification.

The HKLGFF’s status as a second-tier festival in the global queer festival circuit can be unpacked from two perspectives. First, the scale of the HKLGFF is comparatively small and the festival possesses limited festival resources. As table 1 below shows, concerning the number of programmed films, apart from the 2020 edition, the HKLGFF screened around twenty-eight feature-length queer films on average from 2015 to 2019. By contrast, the Berlinale programmed at least twenty-seven new queer-themed feature-length films in 2019, even though it is not a queer-themed film festival. Among top-tier queer-themed film festivals, the BFI Flare Festival screened fifty feature-length films in 2019, and Frameline programmed ninety-one films in 2018. Moreover, the HKLGFF falls into the category of an “audience festival,” since there is no market section for film companies to buy films and for filmmakers to look for investment. Hence there

31. Diane Burgess and Brendan Kredell, “Positionality and Film Festival Research: A Conversation,” in Film Festivals, 166.
33. Ibid., 297
are no profits available to the HKLGFF from a market section. Although the festival can sustain itself mainly based on box office revenues, the HKLGFF still lacks festival resources (funding, in particular) to offer more services—one result, for instance, is that the festival fails to provide Chinese subtitles for every film. In general, the HKLGFF lacks all kinds of festival resources, such as funding, human resources, contacts with filmmakers around the world, and press cooperation.

More importantly, the HKLGFF lacks the ability to host world or even regional premieres. Analyzing the festival programs of the HKLGFF from 2016 to 2020, I categorized the feature-length films into four types, based on whether the film had been screened at other film festivals or publicly screened in other areas. Table 1 shows that over 70 percent of programmed films had been previously screened at top-tier film festivals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TOTAL FILMS</th>
<th>FILMS SELECTED BY TOP-TIER FILM FESTIVALS</th>
<th>FILMS ONLY CHOSSED BY NON-TOP-TIER FILM FESTIVALS</th>
<th>FILMS HAVING WORLD PREMIERE SCREENINGS AT HKLGFF</th>
<th>FILMS NOT SCREENED AT OTHER QUEER FILM Festivals BUT OPENLY RELEASED IN OTHER COUNTRIES OR AREAS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These top-tier film festivals typically include both types of top-tier film festivals of the global queer film festival circuit, such as the Berlinale, Cannes, Sundance, the TIFF, and Outfest, Frameline, and BFI Flare (top queer-themed film festivals). In addition, no more than 14 percent of the selected films had been screened at non-top-tier film festivals (including just one in 2016). These non-top-tier film festivals include general regional film festivals, such as the Busan International Film Festival, the Golden Horse Film Festival, the Osaka International Film Festival, and the Champs-Élysées Film Festival, as well as regional-based queer film festivals, like Rainbow Reel Tokyo, the Taiwan International Queer Film Festival (TIQFF), and the Tel Aviv International LGBT Film Festival (TLVFest). Regarding world premieres, the HKLGFF has only programmed three feature-length queer films with world premiere priority in the six years studied, including *Berlin Drifters* (2017), *Fathers* (2016) and *Love Next Door 2* (2016). Although the HKLGFF is one of the oldest and largest queer film festivals in Asia, the festival still fails to attract Asian queer films that it might showcase through world premieres. Film distribution companies for Asian queer films prefer to submit to top-tier film festivals first before they tour the global queer film festival circuit.
Programming Process and Strategies of the HKLGFF

The timing (when and how long the festival is) and scale (how many films are shown) of the festival are the basis for the festival’s programming. Before 2014, the HKLGFF was held around mid-November, but since then, the festival has been held in mid- or late September. From the perspective of scheduling, therefore, the HKLGFF appears in the latter part of the annual festival calendar. As previously stated, festival programs frequently mention the names of top-tier film festivals, such as the Berlinale, Frameline and Outfest, since these (queer) film festivals are organized in the first half of the calendar year. The whole process of preparation for the HKLGFF mostly works in accord with the annual timing of festivals in the global queer film festival circuit. Furthermore, in terms of the scale of the HKLGFF, as discussed in the previous section, the festival showcases a limited number of queer films. Four or five programmers select around twenty-seven feature-length films every year. According to Lillian Liu, who works as a programmer for lesbian and transgender short films, every programmer has their own type(s) of films that they program, and if programmers encounter some good films that are the specific type programmed by other programmer, they will recommend the films to that programmer.35

Regarding the HKLGFF’s programming process, there is no open submission for feature-length queer films, and the HKLGFF mainly relies on visiting the top-tier film festivals to find suitable films. The festival team usually follows the latest line-up of major film festivals. Moreover, as circumstances permit, HKLGFF programmers attend some major film festivals to watch the latest films, then ask for contacts of filmmakers or distributors through paths provided by the hosting film festivals for screening permissions when they identify suitable films for the HKLGFF. Sophia Shek, a festival programmer for transgender and lesbian films, recognized the difficulty of this process, claiming that it is more difficult to look for suitable films for the HKLGFF at small-scale and local queer film festivals.36 Joe Lam, the current festival director of the HKLGFF, admitted that the HKLGFF lacks connections with other filmmakers and distribution companies from all over the world.37 The HKLGFF demonstrates how small-scale queer film festivals in the global queer film festival circuit process their own programming under most conditions. Due to the scarcity of festival resources as well as global impacts, second-tier queer film festivals like the HKLGFF seldom become the first choice of film distribution companies to arrange world premieres. Thus, the festival does not provide a path for feature-length film submission. The process of the HKLGFF’s programming significantly relies on connections with top-tier film festivals. This reliance highlights the passive position of second-tier queer film festivals in the circuit.

To maintain the festival’s programming style and conduct the programming process more efficiently, the programming team for each festival abides by relatively consistent programming criteria. Since Lam works as the festival director for the HKLGFF, according to Shek, Lam sets the tone for the festival, and “Joe has the final say” during the programming process.38 In terms of the programming criteria of the HKLGFF, Lam states that the primary criterion for the team to select a film is “whether the films will touch Hong Kong audiences’ hearts.”39 He further explains, “being able to see yourself, your friends or your family’s experiences in a film is essential; it makes you really connect to the film. In the selection process we had to give up several good productions because the themes were too distant to

35. Lillian Liu, interview by the author via Zoom, June 18, 2021, Hong Kong.
36. Sophia Shek, interview by author, September 21, 2018, Hong Kong.
37. Joe Lam, interview by author, September 15, 2018, Hong Kong.
38. Shek, interview.
Hong Kong audiences emotionally.” The HKLGFF aims to program films that reflect the lives of local queer communities and the issues they face. This is a core obligation of audience-based and locally served queer film festivals. Indeed, from a commercial perspective, queer films reflecting local gay scenes and issues are also relatively more likely to attract audiences.

Another important programming criterion of the HKLGFF is to program the latest queer films. Lam particularly mentioned that the HKLGFF prefers to select feature-length queer films that were released in the previous year or two. Table 2 categorizes the programmed films according to when they were first screened and shows that the HKLGFF prefers to program recent queer feature-length films.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>FILMS SHOWCASED IN SAME CALENDAR YEAR</th>
<th>FILMS SHOWCASED IN THE PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR</th>
<th>FILMS SHOWCASED TWO OR MORE YEARS BEFORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The table demonstrates that, except for 2019, over half of the films programmed by HKLGFF were only showcased in that same calendar year. At the HKLGFF 2019, there was only one documentary, Monument of Pride, that had been screened two years previously, in 2017. As the HKLGFF is scheduled in late September, there is enough time for the team to check the programs of Frameline and Outfest, which assemble many queer films from all over the world in the same calendar year. Moreover, queer films from the previous year that have not been screened in Hong Kong cinemas or online platforms are also considered by the HKLGFF’s programmers. Faced with threats from online streaming platforms and piracy, programming the latest films is a commercial consideration for the HKLGFF.

The programming of the HKLGFF takes the prospective commercial value of the programmed films into account. The films programmed by the top-tier film festivals in the circuit receive more attention in the market globally, which reflects the dominance of these Western-based major film festivals over the business of second-tier queer film festivals. As previously discussed, the top-tier film festivals in the circuit can be regarded as market dominators. The programming of the top-tier film festivals privileges certain films in the global circulation of queer films. More significantly, awards are more likely to contribute to a film’s commercial value since awards can catch media attention and become a selling point for the film. Blue is the Warmest Colour is an excellent example, as ticket sales for this film were outstanding at the 2013 HKLGFF. Lam observes that while lesbian films are usually hard to sell tickets for, Blue is the Warmest Colour performed extremely well at the HKLGFF. Furthermore, Lam emphasizes that “some audience expressed that they came to watch Blue is the Warmest Colour particularly because it won the Palme d’Or at Cannes that year in 2013 [my translation].” In addition, 120 Beats Per Minute
was another commercial success in 2017, having also won the Grand Jury Prize and the Queer Palm at Cannes. HKLGFF audiences have flocked to films that received awards at Cannes a few months earlier, demonstrating the global impact of major film festivals in the circuit.

From the perspective of the local audience, seeing the names of top-tier film festivals can be regarded as a kind of guarantee of film quality. Two audience members that I interviewed, G and K, considered that they had been at least partly influenced by these highlighted top-tier film festivals in HKLGFF promotional materials when deciding which films they would watch. According to G,

I don't know much about film festivals, I have heard of Cannes, Venice and Berlin[ale], because these three film festivals are always heard in reports. I think the choices of these three film festivals should guarantee a certain quality. Therefore, when I was choosing which films I wanted to watch at the HKLGFF, if the promotional materials mentioned one of these three film festivals, it made me more interested in the films [my translation].

G particularly mentioned the significant impact of the Big Three, indicating that being programmed by these top-tier film festivals becomes a selling point. Similarly, K also declared:

The HKLGFF only provides a brief synopsis, one or two photos and a trailer. Whether or not it is mentioned in the introduction [on web pages or catalogue] that the film has been selected and screened by some well-known film festivals becomes an important index, especially if the film has won awards in the world-renowned film festivals [my translation].

Both G and K acknowledged this promotional strategy. The awards won at top-tier film festivals can be used as a significant selling point, even though the subject matter of the films may not be popular in the market. For business considerations and festival sustainability, commercially run second-tier queer film festivals such as the HKLGFF follow the market trends shaped by top-tier film festivals and program films that have high commercial potential.

Overall, commercial factors have played a significant role in the HKLGFF’s programming. For festival sustainability in commercially oriented, neoliberal Hong Kong, the commercialized HKLGFF adopts what Frederik Dhaenens has termed “traditionalist programming strategies.” The festival has programmed increasing numbers of queer films with highly commercial value that employ naked muscular gay bodies to sell in the West. Yau Ching has criticized the HKLGFF for having been “programmed” to take white, mainly gay, content and for having begun to include a more lesbian content only in the 2000s. Richards has criticized the commercial and gay-oriented programming style of the HKLGFF in the new millennium, reflecting that the HKLGFF strictly follows the logic of the pink economy. In other words, commercial considerations result in the marginalization of lesbian and transgender representation. At the same time, this programming style reveals that the HKLGFF mainly targets gay men as the audience base. As Qin claims, the HKLGFF’s programs are “gay-centric,” primarily screening films for the gay male community. Since the HKLGFF began to recognize this issue in the late 2010s, the number of lesbian and transgender feature-length films has increased slightly. Nevertheless, Western gay films with commercial value still dominate the HKLGFF’s programs.
Western-centrism in the Global Queer Film Festival Circuit

Under pressure from top-tier film festivals, small-scale queer film festivals like the HKLGFF reproduce Western-centric approaches in their programming process. As discussed in the second section, top-tier film festivals in the circuit are all major (queer) film festivals in the West. “Western-centrism” is a commonly used critical term in film festival studies and queer studies that reflects unbalanced geopolitical power relations. From the industrial perspective, Western-centrism can be understood as the dominance of Western queer films and non-Western queer films selected by the West. The market for queer films in the West is relatively large, with a significant number of queer films produced in the West every year. There are more resources for queer film production and distribution. The queer films produced in the West reflect the stories of queer communities in the West. Furthermore, the Western-based top-tier film festivals control queer films in the global South. There were increasing numbers of queer films from Asia and South America programmed by top-tier film festivals in the circuit in the 2010s. Only a small proportion of queer films in the global South can circulate outside local or regional areas. In their selection of non-Western queer films, Western programmers more or less consider whether the subject matter or cinematic forms of these films will be accessible to local (Western) audiences. There are more non-Western queer films (amateur productions in particular) that do not receive global attention. As previously discussed, top-tier film festivals in the circuit financially or technically sponsor queer film production outside the West. This is one way in which the West interferes with the production of non-Western queer films. Overall, Western representations, stories, and aesthetics dominate the global circulation of queer films.

In terms of impact on small-scale queer film festivals in the global South, such as the HKLGFF, Western-centrism can lead to a lack of focus on local or regional content. Table 3 categorizes films according to production location and illustrates that, although the HKLGFF’s programs indeed cover most parts of the world, the majority of the films’ stories take place in North America and Europe.

The table further shows that the number of queer films located in a Chinese context is quite limited. Even with the addition of Korean and Japanese queer films, East Asian queer films still make up a small percentage of the HKLGFF’s annual program. The intention of the HKLGFF may be to program queer films that “touch Hong Kong audiences’ heart,” but the HKLGFF overwhelmingly presents stories of queer life in the West. Regarding Western-centric programs, Day Wong criticizes the HKLGFF for overly relying on Western queer culture and for having “failed to capture the Chinese experience of same-sex desire and relationships.”52 Qin further argues that “this lack of onscreen representation of the local LGBT community and a favouring of Western cinema could alienate the Hong Kong tongzhi community.”53 In other words, these Western queer films do not necessarily reflect the experience of local queer communities. Although queer people around the world share certain similarities regarding queer living and culture, the comparative data in table 3 still raises the question, in terms of the Western-centric programming of the HKLGFF, of how many of these foreign films represent the difficulties that Hong Kong queer communities face.
TABLE 3: Production Location of Films, HKLGFF 2016–20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainland China, Macau, Taiwan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan and South Korea</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast and South Asia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK and Ireland</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Europe (except UK and Ireland)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Europe</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Western-centrism in the circuit can lead to homogenization of programs as well. This homogenization can be approached in two ways. First, the homogenization of programs can be understood as the similarity between top-tier film festival and second-tier queer film festival programs. As mentioned at the start of this article, the 2018 HKLGFF promotional materials mentioned Outfest ten times. Eighteen (over 64 percent) of the HKLGFF’s twenty-eight selected feature-length films were screened at Outfest, around three months before the opening of the HKLGFF. Second, homogenization can also reveal the similarity between second-tier queer film festival programs. For instance, in 2016, the TIQFF programmed eighteen feature-length queer films in total, eight of which were programmed by the HKLGFF three months later. In addition, Front Cover (2015), programmed by the TIQFF in 2016, was the Opening Film of the HKLGFF in 2015. This homogenization of programs also indicates the dominance of Western, urban, middle-class queer representations in commercial cinema and the marginalization of queers of color, working-class, and non-Western representations. Furthermore, due to the unique societal context and the various levels of development among queer movements and queer rights, each queer film festival has its own specialty. As a kind of audience festival, second-tier queer film festivals respond to the needs of local queer communities. Nevertheless, due to the homogenization of programs on the global scale, second-tier queer film festivals fail to capture the sense of local queer communities and culture. In other words, homogenization reveals the lack of investment in or engagement with local, regional, and independent queer productions.

In general, Western-centrism reveals how global queerness has been reproduced in a Hong Kong context, which is the greatest concern for the HKLGFF. These Western-based top-tier film festivals control the programming process of second-tier queer film festivals. Thus, the Western understanding of queerness has radiated outward through the Western-dominated global circulation of queer films. However, Natalie Oswin notes that global queer culture and local...
queer specialty are not opposed to each other, and that the globalization of queer culture is not an utterly overwhelming force. Lisa Rofel argues that the globalization of Western queerness is a process that is not without its obstacles, when she analyzes the relationship between gay and lesbian identities and neoliberalism in China. The force of local specificities in shaping local queer identity and culture cannot be ignored. Especially within the global force of the Westernized queerness, second-tier queer film festivals in the global South have a greater need to respond to the demands of local queer communities and to highlight local specificities.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how Western-centrism is constructed in the HKLGFF and how it significantly influences the festival through its programming. The festival acknowledges and periodically attempts to redress the consequences of Western-centrism. To play an increasingly significant role in the global queer film festival circuit, the HKLGFF aims to work as the Asian version of Frameline or Outfest. Thus, mirroring the function of Frameline and Outfest in the global queer film festival circuit, the HKLGFF assembles films from other non-top-tier film festivals and becomes a platform to introduce these selected queer films globally. According to Lam, "some queer film festival programmers in the West contacted me and asked for the catalogues of the HKLGFF in order to have a sense of new Asian queer films and newcomer queer filmmakers from Asia [my translation]." Faced with the Western-centric landscape of queer cinema, the increasing number of Asian queer films and the expansion of the market make an Asian identity more significant to the global queer film festival circuit. Future analysis of the global circulation of queer films should pay more attention to queer regionalism, as it is the key to challenging Western-centrism in the circuit.

This article has expanded the concept of the global queer film festival circuit, addressing the significance of small-scale queer film festivals in the global South to worldwide queer culture as well as the global circulation of queer films. The unequal power relations in the global queer film festival circuit have resulted in small-scale queer film festivals operating under the constraints of other major film festivals. The article has identified the hegemony that second-tier queer film festivals endure from top-tier film festivals on programming. More significantly, it has demonstrated that the Western-centrism constructed in the circuit is not only reflected in Western film festivals’ control over the global flow of queer films, but also in the Western-dominated interpretation of queer issues and queer rights.

56. Lam, interview.
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