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## From 'Celluloid Comrades' to 'Digital Video Activism': Queer Filmmaking in Postsocialist China

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## Abstract

Although homosexuality was decriminalised in 1997 and partially depathologised in 2001, LGBTQ issues are still strictly censored in the Chinese media. With the rapid growth of China's LGBTQ community, an increasing number of independent films featuring LGBTQ issues have emerged in the past two decades. In this article, I trace a brief history of queer cinema in the People's Republic of China in the postsocialist era (1978 to present). In particular, I chart the significant turn from 'celluloid comrades', i.e. queer people being represented by heterosexual identified filmmakers in an ambiguous way, to what leading Chinese queer filmmaker Cui Zi'en calls 'digital video activism', in which LGBTQ individuals and groups have picked up cameras and made films about their own lives. In doing so, I unravel the politics of representation, the dynamics of mediated queer politics and the political potential of queer filmmaking in China. I suggest that in a country where public expressions of sexualities and demands for sexual rights are not possible, queer filmmaking has become an important form of queer activism that constantly negotiates with government censorship and the market force of commercialisation. Rather than representing a pre-existing identity and community, queer films and filmmaking practices have brought Chinese gay identities and communities into existence.

## Contributor Note

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## I. Introduction

Talking about queer filmmaking in the People's Republic of China immediately raises the question of its seeming impossibility.<sup>1</sup> Although homosexuality was decriminalised in 1997 and partially depathologised in 2001, homosexuality is still largely seen as taboo in contemporary Chinese society (Bao 2010a).<sup>2</sup> The Chinese government bans public representation of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual and Queer) issues in mainstream media and social media. China's media censorship also applies to filmmaking: queer films have been excluded from accessing public funds and gaining public screening rights. Despite the aforementioned constraints, independent, or often known as underground, queer filmmaking is booming in China. With the rapid growth of China's LGBTQ community, an increasing number of independent films featuring LGBTQ issues have emerged in the past two decades.

Despite the continuing existence of media censorship, films have contributed to, and participated in, the way that LGBTQ people understand their gender

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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this article appears as a blog entry (see Bao 2016). Unless otherwise stated, 'China' in this chapter refers to the People's Republic of China, or Mainland China. For discussions of queer filmmaking in Hong Kong, Taiwan and diasporic Chinese contexts, see Fran Martin (2000), Song Hwee Lim (2006) and Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2008).

<sup>2</sup> While I use LGBTQ as a shorthand to refer to all sexual minorities, I acknowledge the limitations and problems of such a 'naming' strategy. I hope that this article can shed light on the complexity of the 'naming' issue, especially in the Chinese context.

and sexual identities and build their communities. More importantly, in a country where opportunities for grassroots political mobilisation remain limited and where LGBTQ issues stay controversial, queer filmmaking has become an important part of China's ongoing LGBTQ activism; it has contributed to a changing landscape of gender, sexuality and desires in today's China.

In this article, I trace a brief history of queer cinema in the People's Republic of China in the postsocialist era (1978 to present).<sup>3</sup> In particular, I chart the significant turn from 'celluloid comrades', i.e. queer people being represented by heterosexual identified filmmakers in an ambiguous way, to what leading Chinese queer filmmaker Cui Zi'en calls 'digital video activism', in which LGBTQ identified individuals and groups pick up cameras and make films about their own lives.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, I unravel the politics of representation, the dynamics of mediated queer politics and the political

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'postsocialist' and 'post-Mao' China/era interchangeably to refer to the historical period after Mao when China embraced capitalist economy and neoliberal ideologies. For a discussion of postsocialism in the Chinese context, see Lu, 2007; McGrath, 2008; Xudong Zhang, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'celluloid comrades' to refer to implicit and often ambiguous representations of homosexuality in cinema. I have borrowed the term 'celluloid comrades' from Song Hwee Lim's 2006 book titled *Celluloid Comrades*, which probably got its inspiration from Vito Russo's 1995 book titled *The Celluloid Closet*.

Unless otherwise specified, I use the *hanyu pinyin* system of Romanisation unless the conventional spelling of a person's name is otherwise, e.g. Stanley Kwan and Chou Wah-shan. I also follow the Chinese convention in spelling Chinese names, i.e. surnames first, followed by first names, e.g. Cui (surname) Zi'en (first name).

potential of queer filmmaking in China. I suggest that in a country where public expressions of sexualities and demands for sexual rights are not possible, queer filmmaking has become an important form of LGBTQ activism that constantly negotiates with government censorship and the market force of commercialisation. Rather than representing a pre-existing identity and community, queer films and filmmaking practices have brought Chinese gay identities and communities into existence.

## II. Problematising queer cinema

In this article, I use the term 'queer cinema' or 'queer films' loosely to encompass a wide range of cinematic representations and media practices surrounding LGBTQ issues. I am aware of the problems in talking about the 'queer cinema': both 'queer' and 'cinema' are vague and illusive terms whose meanings are open to debate and resignification. Questions such as how 'queer cinema' might be different from 'lesbian and gay cinema', and what is so 'queer' about 'queer cinema', have triggered heated debates in academia (Aaron 2004; Benschoff and Griffin 2004; Mennel 2012). This article makes no attempt to engage with these complicated debates; I hope to present the complexity of the issue through unfolding a contested history of queer filmmaking in contemporary China. However, if we acknowledge that films, both in their traditional forms and in the form of digital videos, have dealt with LGBTQ issues in various ways, and that the term 'queer' (*ku'er*), in its ongoing process of cultural translation, has a life in contemporary China, it is still possible

to talk about 'queer cinema' in multiple and contingent ways.

Talking about 'queer' and 'cinema', as well as the combination of the two, often conjures up a post-Cold War imagination of China: with China's entry into the global neoliberal economy, both sexuality and media are also 'opening up' to 'global' practices despite the long-lasting constraints. Such an imaginary predicts the complete 'liberation' of the two and the fully-fledged development of queer representations in some unknown future, when China is fully incorporated into neoliberal capitalism. The 'postsocialist allegory of modernity', in Lisa Rofel's (2007) words, puts gender, sexuality and desires at the core of the social imaginaries and ideological contestations, thus effectively legitimising the neoliberal present at the cost of the complete erasure of the socialist past and its related social concerns.

The queer cinema in China is of necessity a Leftist and socialist project that recognises the legacy of the past, as well as the democratising, participatory and even utopian dimensions of media engagements at the present. Such a project usually starts from the 'pre-queer' era of the 1980s and 90s.

## III. 'Celluloid comrades'

Although explicit depictions of homosexuality were banned in mainland China in the 1980s and 90s, LGBTQ-themed films from overseas entered China in the form of pirated video cassettes, VCDs and DVDs. At the same time, many mainstream films were seen by the LGBTQ audience as 'queer' for their homoerotic 'subtexts', or 'hidden messages', e.g. the display of male

bodies and homosociality in Sun Yu's 1934 film *The Big Road (Dalu)* and Cheng Kaige's 1986 film *The Big Parade (Dayuebing)*. Beginning in the early 1990s, gender and sexually ambiguous figures began to appear on the Chinese screen. Cheng Kaige's 1993 film *Farewell, My Concubine* draws on the crossdressing and homoerotic tradition in classical Chinese opera and depicts the emotional entanglements between two theatre actors in the midst of China's social turmoil in the twentieth century. The film was awarded the Cannes Palme D'Or in 1993. Although the adaption from fiction to film erased some homoerotic narratives, probably to meet the requirement of the censors, the film was still widely seen as a gay-themed film among the LGBTQ audience. The leading actor Cheng Dieyi was played by Leslie Cheung, an out gay celebrity from Hong Kong. Independent filmmaker He Jianjun's 1996 film *Postman (Youchai)* and Kang Feng's 1998 film *Who Has Ever Seen the Wild Animal Day? (Shui jianuo yesheng dongwu de jieri)* both contain sexually ambiguous figures in the film narrative, but the LGBTQ identity was not raised as a central issue for these films. The first film that explicitly dealt with homosexuality in the post-Mao era was Zhang Yuan's 1996 film *East Palace, West Palace*. Based on Wang Xiaobo's screenplay, the film features an overnight interrogation of a self-identified gay man caught cruising in a park by a patrolling policeman. The film has often been read as an 'allegory', for example, for marginalised social groups to gain access to the public discourse (Berry 1998) or to explore the state's relationship with its homosexual subject and with its intellectuals (Lim 2006). Homosexuality becomes an overburdened sign that mediates between an authoritarian state and its repressed

citizens that aspire to gain recognition and freedom. Many LGBTQ people approach the film as a historical account, with artistic licence, of the public gay cruising culture in Beijing in the 1980s and 90s. The film also features the 'sad young man' figure which was the dominant mode of representing homosexuality in East Asia at the time (Berry 2000).

The year 2001 witnessed the production of two lesbian-themed films: *The Box (Hezi)*, dir Echo Y. Windy, aka Ying Weiwei, 2001) and *Fish and Elephant (Jinnian xiatian)*, dir Li Yu, 2001), often hailed respectively as China's first documentary and feature film that feature lesbian subjects. Both films were motivated by a strong 'feminist consciousness' (Chao 2010a, 79) and both portray lesbian couples' negotiations of their sexual identities with pressures from their natal families to enter into heterosexual marriages. The two films present the 'family' as the central problematic to structure lesbian subjectivity in China. Indeed, *jia* ('home' or 'family' in Chinese) has proved central to the LGBTQ identity formation in Asia and to queer Asian cinema in general (Berry 2001). The lesbian subject is often represented as being trapped in the space between the desire to 'come out' to their families and society by openly declaring their sexual identities and the reality of 'going in', i.e. forgetting their homoerotic desires and compromising into a heterosexual marriage (Martin 2000).

Queer representations in Chinese cinema in this era manifest many common features: most of them were made by heterosexual-identified filmmakers and with deep humanistic concerns or special artistic pursuits; many were therefore 'underground films',

'avant-garde films' and 'auteur films' at the same time, with the filmmakers' artistic styles and political stances strongly manifested in the film narratives and the *mise en scène*. Most films were dark, slow and sad, which result from a number of factors such as the technological and material conditions of underground filmmaking, the filmmakers' auteur style as well as the subject matter represented. They featured the subject of 'sad young man/woman', a homosexual character trapped in an overwhelmingly repressive social structure seeing little hope for a queer future, a somewhat realistic depiction of the LGBTQ lives at the time. Furthermore, many films drew on 'Chinese traditions' such as crossdressing in classical Chinese theatre to evoke a sense of 'Chineseness', sometimes to the extent of essentialising and exoticising such cultural differences (Lim 2006; Ma 2015). In addition, many films were read 'allegorically': the film texts were often interpreted as narrating the relationship between individuals and the Chinese state or Chinese culture. The sexual minorities remain at the margin of all these political and artistic agendas: they were represented but they could not really speak for themselves. Their images become signs that signify a bigger picture than their own lives and desires. This also risks to erase the diversity and internal differences of the sexual identities and communities.

Such early queer representations, however, should not be dismissed as negative and counterproductive, as they made an otherwise unknown and unseen subject knowable and visible. Knowledge and visibility, despite their problems, have brought marginalised subjects into existence. LGBTQ people began to identify with these

representations through the mechanism of the 'celluloid closet' (Russo 1995) and this had an impact on LGBTQ identity and community construction. Ah Lan, the homosexual character in *East Palace, West Palace*, was able to talk about his experiences and desires at a police station, although it was a circumstance fraught with tensions and power hierarchies. He managed to enter the public record through the act of 'confession' (Berry 1998). Arguably, the early 'confessional' mode of queer representations through the cinema has brought the homosexual subject into the public sphere.

#### **IV. Transgender representations and the political economy of queer**

The emergence of portable and affordable digital video cameras in the late 1990s ushered in China's New Documentary Movement and provided exciting opportunities for a new generation of filmmakers to explore ways to document the multiple facets of social realities in a transforming Chinese society (Berry, Lu and Rofel 2000). Inspired by the traditions of *cinéma vérité* and 'direct cinema', these filmmakers often adopt an aesthetics of *xianchang*, or on-the-spot realism, to 'objectively' capture the contingency of the social (Zhang 2002; Robinson 2013), while at the same time distancing themselves from the filmed subjects.

In the early 2000s, with the emergence of LGBTQ commercial venues such as bars, clubs and saunas in Chinese cities, gender and sexual non-conformists in urban bars and clubs, in particular the 'drag queen', came under the gaze of young filmmakers. Digital video cameras made it possible for them to work

independently and somewhat discreetly in these semi-legal venues. Particularly between 2000 and 2009, a number of films that document transgender characters emerged: Zhang Yuan's *Miss Jinxing* (*Jinxing xiaojie*, 2000), Michelle Chen's *The Snake Boy* (*Shanghai nanhai*, 2002), Zhang Hanzhi's *Tangtang* (2004), Han Tao's *Baobao* (2004), Gao Tian's *Meimei* (2005), Jiangzhi's *Xiang Pingli* (2005), Du Haibin's *Beautiful Men* (*Renmian taohua*, 2005), Wang Yiren's film *From Chrysalis to Butterfly* (*Diebian*, 2005), and Qiu Jiongjiong's *Madame* (*Gunainai*, 2009). There are complex reasons as to why *fanchuan*, or crossdressing, characters should become the privileged subject for queer representations at this time: apart from the subjects' confidence in coming out as a performing artist, the voyeuristic gaze of the heterosexual-identified filmmakers and audience often play a role in representing the 'other' as exotic and erotic (Chao 2010b; Robinson 2015). This type of representation also situates itself in, and along with, the translation and popularisation of poststructuralist gender theories, represented by Judith Butler's theory of 'gender performativity', in China's academic and filmmaking arena. Although the rendering from 'gender performativity' into *xingbie biaoyan* ('gender performance') may initially look like a partial understanding of the poststructuralist feminist and queer scholarship, the process of cultural translation suggests intricate links between Chinese and Western feminist and queer activism, and globalised forms of knowledge production.

In the analysis of the film *Meimei*, Chao (2010b) draws attention to the material conditions of transgender performance by tracing the life trajectory of the main

character Meimei. Meimei's high-pitched operatic falsetto voice was a recognised art form in China's socialist collective culture but he was also seen as a sexual dissident in a small town in northeast China. At the backdrop of China's rapid urbanisation and privatisation, he migrated to the capital city Beijing in order to gain more economic freedom and sexual autonomy. Having few other choices in the job market, he had to earn a precarious living at gay bars and night clubs by being a drag singer, and was eventually seen as a 'queer figure' and 'discovered' by the curious filmmaker. Being 'queer' thus becomes a way for marginalised subjects to achieve social mobility and to survive in a competitive market economy. The film *Meimei* reminds us of the material conditions of those who choose to, and are pushed to, be 'queer' in the postsocialist China, as well as the political economy of the 'gender performance'.

There is a danger in dismissing the 'crossdressing' representations as stereotyping and effeminising gay characters, or on the grounds that the filmmakers are mostly heterosexual identified people who cast their voyeuristic gaze on the theatrical, spectacular and extraordinary aspects of the LGBTQ culture. At the same time, we should also caution against pushing queer representations to another extreme: the urban, middle-class, and socially respectable masculine gay men and the feminine lesbians with social respectability, 'qualities' (*suzhi*), and more comfortable self-identifications. Both types of representation risk consolidating the gender binaries that queer politics strives to dismantle. As queer representations in today's China increasingly feature young, urban,

cosmopolitan, middle class and confident gay and lesbian subjects, it is well worth going back to the transgender representations to be reminded of the political economy of being queer.

## V. 'The new queer Chinese cinema'

Ever since Tony Rayns claimed in a film festival catalogue that Cui Zi'en's 2002 film *Enter the Clowns* 'inaugurates a new Queer Chinese cinema' (Leung 2012, 518), the term 'new queer Chinese cinema' has since become popularised in film festival programming and in film studies. Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2012) identifies the term's link with the international movement of 'the New Queer Cinema' and locates the 'queerness' in the following aspects: because they portray lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender characters, but more often because they unsettle the parameters of heterosexuality and its kinship structure; confound expectations of coherence between gender identity, gender expression, and the sexed body; expand the possible configurations of sexual and emotional bonds; and subvert the aesthetic conventions and heterocentric presuppositions of mainstream media (Leung 2012, 518–19).

The term 'new queer cinema' seems a misnomer in mainland China, as it is hard to locate an 'old' queer Chinese cinema before the advent of the 'new'. This is also complicated by the fact that 'queer cinema' in China actually appeared earlier than, or at least concomitant with, 'gay and lesbian cinema', in the same way that queer politics may have appeared earlier, if not at the same time, as gay and lesbian identity politics in China. Situating queer

Chinese cinema in the US and Euro-centric film historiography can sometimes bring a sense of disjuncture and uneasiness. We can still use the term 'new queer Chinese cinema' by treating it as an emerging and performative discourse, insofar as it acknowledges the interactions between academic knowledges and artistic practices in a transnational context, as well as the unequal power relations between China and the West in the process of translating ideas and social practices.

The leading figure of the 'new queer Chinese cinema' in mainland China is Cui Zi'en, associate professor at the Beijing Film Academy, China's lyceum for filmmakers. Cui is a filmmaker, film scholar, literary critic, playwright, writer, film festival organiser and queer activist in one. Born in 1958 in northeast China and to a Catholic family, Cui's religious belief has profound impact on many of his works: his feature films often draw on religious themes and yet he interprets Christianity in a non-dogmatic way. In 1999, he was playwright and actor in China's first gay-identified feature film, *Man Man Woman Woman* (*Nannan nūnū*). After he was interviewed in a talk show programme on Hunan Satellite Television in 2001, he became one of mainland China's first 'out' gay celebrity. Cui has since played an important role in the LGBTQ Movement in China, particularly through organising the Beijing Queer Film Festival.

Cui's films can be divided into two categories: feature films and documentaries. Since his first film *Enter the Clowns* (*Choujue dengchang* 2002), Cui has directed more than a dozen feature films. His films are often low-cost, independent experimental films made

with digital video cameras and with a distinct auteur style. Film scholar Chris Berry compares Cui's films to the pre-Stonewall films of Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith, and summarises the motifs of his films as an 'unholy trinity of themes: the sacred, the profane and the domestic' (Berry 2004, 196). Cui has been compared to Western queer filmmakers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pedro Almodóvar and Andy Warhol (Fan 2015, 259). Cui's films often feature naked queer bodies with fluid genders, sexualities and social relations, through which he aims to deconstruct the morality (*daode*) and kinship (*lunli*) often privileged in the Chinese society (Leung 2012, 530).

Cui has only made three documentaries to date: *Night Scene* (Yejing 2003), *We Are the ... of Communism* (*Women shi shehui zhuyi ...*, 2007), and *Queer China, 'Comrade' China* (*Zhi tongzhi*, 2008). *We are the ... of Communism* documents the forced closure of a primary school for migrant children before the Beijing Olympics; it does not feature queer issues but the narrative has parallels with the forced closure of the Beijing Queer Film Festival that Cui experienced. The film also shows the filmmaker's concerns for marginalised social groups through his participation in China's New Documentary Movement. The film *Night Scene* is a docudrama that features crossdressing sex workers' lives in a night club. It at once highlights and defies the construction of gay culture in China by 'evading official, Western, and academic manipulation and through strategic self-abandonment into marginal positions' (Zhang Jie 2012, 88); it also diverges from the Weismanisque observational documentary tradition widely used in China's New Documentary Movement and signals 'a performative

and embodied turn in independent Chinese documentary' (Wang 2013, 661). Cui's film *Queer China, 'Comrade' China* documents China's LGBTQ history from the 1990s to around 2008. The film uses the traditional 'talking heads' technique to recover the voice of the queer community and to construct an indigenous LGBTQ history (Bao 2015; Robinson 2015). Cui's documentaries have been better received in China's LGBTQ community than his feature films because of their social relevance and his less experimental film aesthetics in queer documentaries.

Cui's experimentalism has much to do with his leftist political stance: his innovations in cinematic style aim to deconstruct all the traditions in filmmaking like 'demolishing the temple' and 'changing blood', largely because of the close relationship between cinema and the capital (Cui 2015, 248-9). For him, filmmaking and holding queer film festivals are like social gatherings, or shared community activities based on the spirit of friendship, camaraderie, and mutual help, an idea close to 'utopianism, or communism' (Cui 2015, 253). He often chooses 'the situation of poverty, or bare, stark nudity' to present his understandings of the world (Cui 2015, 254) and the main characters of his films are often portrayed as *lumpenproletariat*. He compares the exchange of ideas through unofficial and underground channels (such as watching bootleg DVDs and attending international film festivals) to 'communist international of queer films' (Cui and Liu 2010, 422). As a queer auteur and LGBTQ activist with coherent and innovative political ideas, Cui is a unique voice in the polyphony of the queer film culture both domestically and internationally. His 'queer Marxism' (Liu 2015), articulated in

a world dominated by queer liberalism, has yet to receive more critical attention. Cui is not the only unique queer voice in mainland China today; Andrew Yusu Cheng is another director with a distinct auteur style. Cheng's 2013 film *Zero Thousand Li Under the Clouds and Moon* (*Fuyun*), with its exquisite 'cloud road film' (*yunlu dianying*) style (Cui 2014, 36), manifests radically different aesthetics from his first two films, *Shanghai Panic* (*Women haipa* 2002) and *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* (*Mudidi Shanghai*, 2003). The latter two are known for their candid portrayal of the urban youth culture and queer culture in Shanghai and for their Digital Video (DV) avant-gardism. All of his films push the boundaries of what digital video as a medium can achieve in terms of cinematic representations; they also expand the purview of queer Chinese films.

In recent years, a group of independent young queer filmmakers began to emerge, and they include Kokoka (pseudonym of Xue Jianqiang), Yang Pingdao and Zheng Guo. Born in the 1970s and 80s and currently living in Beijing, they make feature films to express their own personal feelings and subjective realities. They do not strive to use films as 'object' documentation; rather, films are used as 'a form of direct corporeal engagement that puts into question the viewers' subjectival position and sense certainty' (Fan 2016). Kokoka's *Martian Syndrome* (*Huoxing zonghezheng*, 2013) and *Deformity Sci-fi* (*Canfei kehuan*, 2013) expose 'both the state power and heteronormative social values that render the LGBTQQ community invisible and reducing them as bare lives'; they also critique 'the conflicting senses of fear, alienation, nihilism, anxiety, self-hate, and

sadomasochism of those queer subjects under state violence and surveillance' (Fan 2016). The new generation of filmmakers have been taking 'queer' seriously in their articulations of a non-normative aesthetics and politics.

In her discussion of the 'new queer Chinese cinema', Leung notes: 'while it is debatable whether a 'gay cinema' actually exists in the Chinese language; there should be much less doubt that a 'queer cinema' clearly does' (Leung 2012, 519). Cui's and other queer Chinese directors' works not only challenge the embedded heteronormativity and even homonormativity in the society; they also experiment with the techniques and aesthetics of filmmaking. The digital video camera has become an important medium not only for queer auteurs to explore individual artistic expressions, but also for the LGBTQ communities in China to build a shared community culture.

Cui Zi'en distinguishes two types of queer cinema in China: 'tongzhi films' (*tongzhi dianying*) and 'queer films' (*ku'er dianying*). *Tongzhi* (literally 'comrade') is one of the widely used Chinese terms for gender and sexual minorities.<sup>5</sup> For Cui, 'Queer films' refer mostly to independent films informed by an anti-identitarian politics and a cinematic avant-gardism; 'tongzhi films', on the other hand, refer to films that are predominantly informed by LGBTQ identity politics and that actively participate in LGBTQ activism (Cui 2015, 246–7). While it is often difficult to discern the boundary between LGBTQ politics and queer politics in today's China due to the simultaneous contemporaneity of the cultural

<sup>5</sup> For a genealogy of the term 'comrade' and its queer appropriation in the Chinese context, see Bao 2012.

translations of queer knowledge and practice, community engagement seems to be a more distinct marker for 'tongzhi films'. As most of the 'tongzhi films' are made by, about, and for the LGBTQ community, and most take the form of documentaries, I call the group of films 'LGBTQ community documentaries'.

## VI. LGBTQ community documentaries

The LGBTQ community documentaries in question are primarily made by a group of young independent filmmakers based in Beijing. The leading figures include Fan Popo, Wei Jiangang, He Xiaopei, Shi Tou and Ming Ming. All of them are gay and lesbian celebrities in China's LGBTQ community because of their politically engaged filmmaking practices and community activism. All of them have been organisers of and active participants in the Beijing Queer Film Festival and China Queer Film Festival Tour. More importantly, all of them identify themselves with being queer, and their documentaries are made about, by, and for China's LGBTQ communities.

The 1985-born Fan Popo was inspired by Cui Zi'en while he was studying at the Beijing Film Academy. He has been an active queer filmmaker and LGBTQ activist ever since. His works feature different aspects of the community life: *New Beijing, New Marriage* (*Xin qianmen daje*, 2009) is a film documenting a same-sex wedding in Beijing on Valentine's Day; the filmmaking process is also part of the queer activism designed by Tongyu, a LGBTQ NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) based in Beijing. *Chinese Closet* (*Guizu*, 2010) narrates young queer people's 'coming out' experiences; *Be A Woman* (*Wuniang*,

2011) documents the lives of drag queens in southwest China; *The VaChina Monologues* (*Laizi yindao*, 2013) traces the rehearsal and performance of the feminist play *Vagina Monologues* in three different locations in China; *Mama Rainbow* (*Caihong ban woxin*, 2012) and *Papa Rainbow* (*Caihong laoba*, 2016) are about the experiences of queer children's parents in reconciling with their children's sexualities. While most of his films use the 'talking head' technique to allow the filmed subjects to talk about their own experiences, *Papa Rainbow* also innovatively involves the fathers in performing a stage play to allow the characters to speak free from the inhibitions of their perceived 'fatherly' authority. The remediation of a stage play in a documentary film and the transmedia story-telling also broadens the purview of *xianchang* in queer Chinese documentaries.

A queer filmmaker and a LGBTQ NGO leader, Wei Jiangang founded the LGBTQ community webcast *Queer Comrades* (*Tongzhi yi fanren*) in 2007. The webcast aims to pluralise LGBTQ representations and present 'positive' images about the LGBTQ people (Deklerck and Wei 2005, 19). Three seasons have been produced so far: the first season, broadcast biweekly between April and June 2007, features episodes of talk show programmes by inviting guests to the studio to talk about LGBTQ related issues; the second season, broadcast biweekly between March 2008 and February 2009, features 24 talk show programmes; the still ongoing third season, beginning in April 2009, has shifted its form from talk show to documentaries and short community news videos clips ('Queer Comrades' 2016). Many videos primarily focus on young people's lives in urban and

transnational settings; they document an emerging young, urban and cosmopolitan queer culture in its making. While many show signs of 'queer mainstreaming' often observed in the Western context, in a country where queer representations are far from being 'mainstream', the programme plays an important role in pluralising queer representations and in community building (Deklerck 2017).

HE Xiaopei is a veteran queer activist.<sup>6</sup> She is currently director of a Beijing based LGBTQ NGO named 'Pinkspace', which is dedicated to the promotion of sexual rights and gender equality. In the 1990s, she organised community parties and discussion salons and operated community hotlines in Beijing, which were among some of the earliest LGBTQ activism in China. Her films include *The Lucky One* (*Chong'er*, 2012), *Lesbians Marry Gay Men: Our Marriages* (*yisheng qiyuan*, 2013) and *Yvo and Chrissy* (*ruci shenghuo*, 2017). *The Lucky One* documents the last days of the HIV/AIDS patient Zhang Xi, narrated in the protagonist's own words and self-made video footages. In the film, HE not only challenges the boundary between fiction and reality; she also raises the question about the politics of representation and the agency of the ordinary people: queer and human rights activists often claim to represent, or 'speak for', marginalised groups, sometimes only to silence these subjects' own voices. *Lesbians Marry Gay Men: Our Marriages* complicates people's understanding of the 'pro forma marriages' (*xingshi hunyin*) between gay men and lesbians in China. Arguing against the common conception of dismissing such marriages as being

<sup>6</sup> I capitalise He Xiaopei's surname ('HE') to distinguish it from the third person singular pronoun 'he' in writing.

'inauthentic' and therefore harmful to gay identity and community, HE draws attention to the innovative forms of affective liaisons and intimate relations that such new social forms engender. HE is arguably one of the most 'queer', understood in the sense of anti-normativity, filmmakers living in China today.

As a lesbian couple, Shi Tou and Ming Ming have made a few documentaries together including the *Dyke March* (*Nütongzhi youxingri*, 2005) and *Women 50 Minutes* (*Nüren wushi fenzhong*, 2006). *Dyke March* documents a dyke march in San Francisco. Shitou spontaneously enacts a 'coming out' in front of the video camera, thus crossing the boundary between filmmaker and the filmed subjects (Chao 2010a, 81). *Women 50 Minutes* is concerned not only with feminist and queer issues, but with broader political and social issues such as China's regional differences, environmental and ecological ramifications of economic development, as well as the loss of natural and cultural heritages in the process of modernisation (Bao 2010c). Shi Tou was trained as an artist; her artworks and artistic styles often feature prominently in the films. She was China's first 'out' lesbian public persona and she was cast in the leading role in Li Yu's 2001 film *Fish and Elephant*. Both Shi Tou and Ming Ming came from ethnic minority families in southwest China's Guizhou Province; their lesbian and ethnic minority identities also have a strong impact on their works.

Despite the differences in terms of topics and styles of representation, these young filmmakers all share an identification with and a commitment to the LGBTQ identity and community. Many of their

films can be considered as ‘participatory documentary’, in which filmmaking actively participates in, and consciously shapes, the filmed event. Filmmakers no longer assume an ‘objective’ and distanced stance away from the filmed subjects; rather, they identify and interact with the filmed subjects. Furthermore, their filmmaking activities and the circulation of these films constitute a ‘mediating environment’ that involves ‘an interactive and intersubjective socio-political and critical discourse’ around the films (Fan 2016); they also can be seen as ‘public culture’ that contributes to an emerging queer public space in China (Robinson 2015; Bao 2010b).

## VII. ‘Digital video activism’

Queer films do not exist on their own; they are part of the assemblages that connect state regulation, producers, the audience, the market, various distribution channels and screening opportunities. The production of queer Chinese films should be seen in tandem with its distribution and consumption in the context of China’s film industry and the LGBTQ movement. A large part of the distribution and consumption of queer Chinese films is through community events such as queer film festivals.

In 2001, some Beijing-based university students and filmmakers organised China’s first ‘Homosexual Film Festival’, later renamed as ‘Beijing Queer Film Festival’ (*Beijing ku’er yingzhan*).<sup>7</sup> With the goal of public education and social enlightenment in mind, the organisers chose Peking University as the film festival venue. The forced early closure of

the first edition and the complete cancellation of the second edition right before its opening night made the organisers aware of the risks and pressures that they had to face in organising such a politically sensitive public event. They changed strategies by incorporating the 3<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the festival into the Songzhuang-based Beijing Independent Film Festival and by positioning queer filmmaking as ‘avant-garde’ and ‘non-political’ artistic expressions. This subsequently raised the question of community engagement. In later editions, the organisers tried to address the audience question by striking a balance between community building and public education, often running the risk of forced closure by the police (Bao 2017).

Each edition of the Beijing Queer Film Festival features predominantly PRC-produced feature films, documentaries and shorts. It also showcases films from other parts of the Sinophone sphere, Asia and the world. The film festival programme often looks transnational and cosmopolitan, without losing its cultural specificity and political stance. The festival has adopted a ‘guerrilla’ type of organising strategy by selecting multiple screening venues and designing contingent screening plans: when one screening venue is shut down by the police, the festival can still continue at another venue. In recent years, the festival has experimented with online streaming of films and with on-board screenings on a travelling bus or train. New technologies and changing material conditions have contributed to the development of some context-specific and culturally-sensitive forms of queer activism.

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<sup>7</sup> The Beijing Queer Film Festival website <http://www.bjqff.com/> [accessed 1 October 2017].

The Chinese term for the ‘film festival’ (*yingzhan*, literally ‘film exhibition’) articulates a particular type of cultural politics: instead of embracing a vertical and hierarchical cultural form, the festival celebrates a horizontal and egalitarian cultural politics. Cui Zi’en summarises the organising principle of the BJQFF in the following ways:

1. Rotating chairperson-on-duty system: there is no permanent chairperson; members of the organising committee take turns to be the chairperson of the BJQFF. The organising committee is open to new committee members.
2. Democratic selection of films: festival programmes are decided by voting of committee members.
3. Inclusivity in the festival programming: films of different genres, topics and styles are selected, with the technical quality playing a less important role (Wang and Fan 2010, 188).

The Beijing Queer Film Festival champions a type of social activism and cultural practice: as it broadens the definitions and practices of film festivals, it also initiates an open, democratic and egalitarian form of public culture (Bao 2017).

In recent years, as part of its outreach programme, the Beijing Queer Film Festival has sponsored audience members from small cities and remote regions in China to attend the festival. The Beijing-based queer filmmakers have also organised the China Queer Film Festival Tour (*zhongguo ku'er yingxiang xunhuizhan*) and screened

queer films all over China through their connections with local LGBTQ NGOs, bars, clubs and university campuses. Queer film festivals and screenings are no longer limited to Beijing, Shanghai and other big cities. As young queer filmmakers gain more opportunities to screen their films, the topics and the styles of their films have also undergone changes, often from a narrow urban and cosmopolitan-centrism to more diversified queer representations, and from a sole emphasis on gender and sexuality to an intersectional approach that attends to multiple coexistent and interacting social relations and identities, as well as the political economy of queer. The Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, a LGBTQ NGO, organised ‘Queer University’ (*ku'er daxue*) programme, which trains LGBTQ community members to use digital video and make their own films. The films made in this programme include *Brothers* (*xiongdi*, dir. Yao Yao, 2013) and *Comrade Yue* (*Xiaoyue tongzhi*, dir. Yue Jianbo, 2013). They cast their attention to the marginalised transgender populations and the rural queer in the LGBTQ community. They embody what Jia Tan (2016) calls ‘aesthetics of queer becoming’. The Rainbow Villager Project and the China Queer Digital Storytelling Workshop have organised digital video training workshops for LGBTQ people all over China. More and more LGBTQ people have started to pick up digital video cameras to explore their identities and to build their communities.

The Shanghai Pride has started to host the Shanghai PRIDE Film Festival as part of the Pride programme since 2015.<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>8</sup> The Shanghai Pride website (including the Shanghai PRIDE film Festival programmes) <http://www.shpride.com> (accessed 1 October 2017).

2016 Shanghai PRIDE Film Festival spanned ten days and included workshops, Q & A sessions and panel discussions with Chinese queer filmmakers. Although the festival's short films competition attracted some Chinese-language LGBTQ submissions, the festival programme was overwhelmingly dominated by non-Chinese queer films. This partly reflects the interests and concerns of the international organising team in making the Shanghai PRIDE Film Festival an international and cosmopolitan event. The Shanghai PRIDE Film Festival has received little intervention from the police in the past years, partly because of Shanghai's special geopolitical status in China (as international and non-political), and partly because of the organisers strategy of not politicising the event. However, the Shanghai Pride manifests a strong sense of commercialisation, a sign of a burgeoning 'pink economy' in an international metropolis. In contrast, the Shanghai Pride Film Festival (SHQFF), newly started in 2017, has attracted more local community participation and has more explicitly championed a queer politics.<sup>9</sup>

In a country where independent filmmaking and public expressions of homosexuality are considered problematic, the mushrooming of queer films and queer film festivals demonstrate strong potentials for LGBTQ culture in China. Films and filmmaking do not have to be political, but in a social context where queer representations and sexual rights are limited, queer filmmaking often take on a political edge. Sitting together to watch a

queer film becomes an important way to construct identities and to build communities; organising a queer film screening despite the state ban may have the same political significance as organising a pride march. The Fifth Beijing Queer Film Festival organiser Yang identifies the 'greatest value and ultimate goal' of holding a queer film festival' as 'challenging and opposing mainstream ideologies' (Yang 2011, 7). Mathew Baren and Alvin Li, coordinators of the 1<sup>st</sup> Shanghai PRIDE Film Festival, locate the significance of the queer film festival in the intimate experience of viewing and sharing films:

There is no shared experience like sitting in the dark room of a cinema ... Watching in the darkness, those who gather are not merely an audience, but performers. They reach out and touch, feeling and sharing every fibre of their experience ... a film festival demands engagement, collaboration and intimacy (Baren and Li 2015, 2).

The Beijing Queer Film Festival's politicised approach and the Shanghai PRIDE film festival's apolitical and intimate touch represent different types of queer politics in China today, both with historical and geographical specificities. Cui Zi'en calls the active involvement of queer films in China's LGBTQ politics 'digital video activism' (*yingxiang xingdong*), which he sees as an anti-elitist stance and as a commitment to praxis: 'We do not think that we should advocate and promote those so-called standard, artistically refined and excellent films. We call for acting with digital videos and changing the world ...' (cited in Wang and Fan

<sup>9</sup> The Shanghai PRIDE Film Festival (SHQFF) website: <http://shqff.org/> (accessed 1 October 2017).

2010, 188). He comments on the role of the Beijing Queer Film Festival:

It is convenient and straightforward to connect films with the hard times and to change the society. The Beijing Queer Film Festival was founded before the digital video era. The festival has since taken an active part in China's development. The festival has set agendas on LGBT issues and has impacted on media representations and public opinions. Indeed, the festival has already changed the times and effected social changes (cited in Wang and Fan 2010, 189).

Cui's words echo those of many filmmakers from China's Sixth Generation Filmmakers and the New Documentary Movement in emphasising the importance of the digital media in representing new subjectivities and effecting social changes. Digital videos, with their portability and affordability, break the monopoly of the state media censorship and commercial media, and celebrate a democratic way of artistic and political expression.

### VIII. A queer future?

Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality in China in 1997 and its depathologisation in 2001, China's official media administration, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) still considers LGBTQ issues sensitive topics for public representation. In the Article Three of the film censorship standards issued by the SARFT in March 2008, contents containing 'homosexuality' should be 'cut or modified' (USAID and UNDP 2015, 44). Although the article was

officially abolished in 2010, LGBTQ-themed films and television programmes are still banned in China. At film festivals and other screening events, queer filmmakers sometimes wear T-shirts with 'we want to see queer films' (*Women yaokan tongxinglian dianying*) printed on them to protest against the policy. In 2015, Fan Popo sued the SAPPRAT for banning his film *Mama Rainbow* from streaming websites. Although the court verdict was ambiguous, the event was still hailed by the LGBTQ community as a victory (Lin 2015).

Since 2011, the LGBTQ NGO Beijing Gender Health Education Institute has organised the annual China Rainbow Media Awards (*zhongguo caihong meiti jiang*) to give awards to LGBTQ friendly journalists and media institutions, as well as to people who have made special contributions to the LGBTQ community. Mainstream media institutions such as *China Daily*, *Southern Weekend* and China Central Television have received awards for their positive representations of LGBTQ issues. This marked a significant change in LGBTQ representations: instead of waiting to be represented by the mainstream media, China's LGBTQ community has started to influence mainstream media representations.

Despite heightened media censorship in Chinese President Xi Jinping's era before and after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the inaugural Shanghai Queer Film Festival (SHQFF) was held at the Vancouver Film Academy and the British Centre in Shanghai on 16-24 September, 2017.<sup>10</sup> Branded as a film festival with a distinct regional focus on Asian queer identities

<sup>10</sup> The Shanghai Queer Film Festival website: <http://shqff.org> (accessed 1 November 2017).

and communities, the Shanghai Queer Film Festival attracted good participation from the local LGBTQ community and is less commercialised than the Shanghai PRIDE Film Festival. This makes Shanghai the only city in China with two queer film festivals. From 2016, the Beijing Queer Film Festival has morphed into the less politically sensitive Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week.<sup>11</sup> On 1-5 November 2017, the Second Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week was held in the Institut Français of Beijing. Apart from screening local and international queer films, the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week also features two panel discussions: one on the visual queer activism in China and Africa, and the other on intersections and solidarity between queer and other social movements. Holding queer film festivals in foreign embassies, consulates and cultural centres in China not only bypasses censorship; it also strengthened the international solidarity between queer communities across the world. Queer cinema has thus become international diplomatic events and carried unprecedented political and ideological ambivalences.

The history of the queer cinema in China is unfolding. Through my brief account of the queer cinema in China, which is of necessity selective, non-linear and unteleological, I hope that I have shed light on the struggles of the LGBTQ community in China in fighting for free and pluralistic expressions of gender, sexuality, art and politics. Such struggles are challenging but they also open up unpredictable and exciting opportunities for queer activism and mediated politics.

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<sup>11</sup> The second Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week website: <http://www.faguowenhua.com/en-article-1003-agenda-11-11-2017> (accessed 1 November 2017).

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