

**Queer eye for Chinese women: Locating queer spaces in Shitou's film *Women Fifty Minutes***

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**Abstract**

This article offers a critical analysis of Chinese lesbian artist, filmmaker and activist Shitou's 2006 film *Women Fifty Minutes* (*nüren wushi fenzhong*). Focusing on the representation of queer women in the film, I discern the existence and conditions of queer subjectivities and spaces in a postsocialist Chinese context. This article aims to disentangle different discourses of women and feminism in contemporary China as represented in the film and, in so doing, unravel the importance of sexuality in understanding feminism and women's experiences. By looking at Chinese women through queer eyes, Shitou's film brings queer public space into existence through representational and activist strategies; it also introduces sexuality and queerness into feminist debates.

**Keywords**

Shitou

*Women Fifty Minutes*

women

queer

film

art

China

Hailed as ‘one of the most outstanding female artists in contemporary China’ (Dixon Place 2018), lesbian artist, filmmaker and queer activist Shitou uses films and artworks to explore bold and intimate issues such as gender, sexuality and identity. Her films, artworks and activist practices contribute to the formation of queer identities, communities and spaces in postsocialist China. In this article, through an analysis of the representation of queer spaces (*ku'er kongjian*) in Shitou’s 2006 film *Women Fifty Minutes* (*nüren wushi fenzhong*), I discern the construction of queer women’s subjectivities and spaces through her representational and activist practices.

Shitou’s artworks, films and activism have been discussed separately and often in isolation by scholars from different academic fields (Sang 2003; Chao 2010; Liu and Rofel 2010; Martin 2010; Bao 2010, 2018; Tong 2011; Huang X. 2018). This article brings together her film, artwork and activism through an analysis of her representative work *Women Fifty Minutes*. With an emphasis on space and place, I examine the construction of queer women’s subjectivities and spaces through representational and activist strategies. In doing so, I hope to delineate the emergence of queer women’s subjectivities and spaces through film, artworks and activism in postsocialist China, and interrogate how sexuality contributes towards a more nuanced understanding of feminism and feminist art practices in China.

### **Shitou and *Women Fifty Minutes***

As an artist, photographer, independent filmmaker and queer activist, Shitou is one of the best-known queer public personas in mainland China.<sup>1</sup> She was born in 1969 into a family of Miao, an ethnic minority in south-west China’s Guizhou Province, and

trained as a painter at the Guizhou Art Academy. After graduation, she taught art at a local high school for several years before leading a nomadic lifestyle as an artist, travelling to different parts of China. In the early 1990s, she went to Beijing and became a member of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, a group of artists who experimented with modern art as social and political critiques (Welland 2018). Art critic Huang Zhuan (2008) considers Shitou as one of the most outstanding female artists in contemporary China and notes how her ethnic, gender and sexual identities may have had an impact on her artworks:

Her nuanced visual treatment of Chinese queer women in particular has given her a unique place in contemporary Chinese arts. Shitou's experience as a member of the marginal artists in the early 1990s at Yuan Ming Yuan, together with her later nomadic experience in Northwest China and her belonging to an ethnic minority in China, have all contributed to the delicacy, sophistication, and humanity of her artistic touch.

In 2001, in the immediate aftermath of the depathologization of homosexuality as a mental disorder, Shitou took part in a TV talk show about homosexuality on the Hunan Satellite Television with sociologist Li Yinhe and queer writer Cui Zi'en. She subsequently became mainland China's first 'out' lesbian celebrity. In the same year, she played a lead role in China's first lesbian feature film *Jinnian xiatian (Fish and Elephant, Li Yu, 2001)*. The success of the film at numerous film festivals, including

winning the Elivra Notari Prize at the Venice International Film Festival, gained her international reputation. Shitou has played an important role in mainland China's queer activist movements since the 1990s. After the *Fourth World Conference on Women* held in Beijing in 1995, which officially recognized lesbian issues as women's issues and subsequently inspired a wave of feminist and queer activism in China (Wei 2015), Shitou has led queer community groups, hosted community hotlines and organized queer film festivals. Together with other queer activists in Beijing, she coorganized the Cross-Cultural Dialogue (*dongxifang xiaozu*) (a queer-themed reading and discussion group in Beijing), the Beijing Sister Group (the first lesbian-focused grassroots organization in Beijing) and the Beijing LGBT hotline (the first community hotline offered to queer people in the PRC) in the 1990s and thus became one of China's earliest feminist and queer activists in the Reform era. After her media 'coming out' in 2001, she became even more active: she participated in the organization of China's first national queer conference in Beijing in 2001, the Beijing Queer Film Festival (the longest-running queer film festival in China since 2001) and the China Queer Film Festival Tour (a queer film collective initiative that bring films to different Chinese cities for community screenings) (Guo 2011; Engebretsen 2014; Wei 2015; Bao 2018).

Shitou has worked with different forms and media of art, including painting, photography, installation and film, during the past two decades. Ever since 2001, filmmaking has become an important part of her life. Her films include *Dyke March* (2002), *Gu Wenda: Art, Politics, Life, Sexuality* (2005), *Women Fifty Minutes* (2006), *Gate, Mountain, River* (2006) and *We Are Here* (2016). Most of these films are made in collaboration with her lesbian partner Mingming, who often acts as Shitou's model

and cameraperson (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Many of Shitou's films are independent documentaries made with digital video cameras and for the queer communities; they form part of China's New Documentary Movement (Berry et al. 2010) and the 'New queer Chinese cinema' (Leung 2004). These films engage with manifold issues about China's social changes in the Reform era (1978–present) and its impact on people's lives, with an emphasis on gender, sexuality and identity.

**Figure 1:** Shitou (left) and Mingming (right). Courtesy of Shitou and Mingming.

From 2000 to 2004, Shitou and Mingming travelled to different parts of China to make a documentary about China's social changes and their impact on women's lives. The film was shot with a digital video camera and on a shoestring budget. The shooting of the film takes place in a wide range of geographical locations that they had visited: from cosmopolitan Beijing to small towns in south-west China's Guizhou Province, from nomadic tents in Qinghai to lama temples on the Tibetan Plateau. The female characters represented in the film include breastfeeding mothers, ice-skating children, wedding couples, weeping mourners, praying Tibetans and homeless beggars. The film even contains unexpected scenes captured spontaneously on camera, such as a traffic accident, drug trafficking on a long-distance coach and a queer couple kissing inside a Beijing subway station. Through representing women's individual and collective experiences, this film unfolds a panorama of Chinese society in the Reform era, with its dreams and despairs, excitements and disenchantments, all of which are deeply gendered. The film is titled *Women Fifty Minutes*, indicating the subject matter and the length of the film (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** *Women Fifty Minutes* (dir. Shitou, 2006, China), DVD cover. Courtesy of Shitou.

*Women Fifty Minutes* does not have a single, unified and coherent narrative. It consists of more than twenty short clips montaged together, each set in a different place and focusing on a specific scene, although there are occasional overlaps of people and places. Some clips are as short as a few seconds and others are longer than five minutes. Assembled together, they make strong statements about women and China; they also challenge the narrative and aesthetic conventions of documentaries at the time. As *Reel China* (2009) notes, ‘its combination of narrative and experimental moments provides an edgy and beautiful counterpoint to more straightforward recent social documentary’. Indeed, if most films in China’s New Documentary Movement are obsessed with constructing a single, linear and coherent narrative, *Women Fifty Minutes* refuses to follow this narrative pattern. Furthermore, as many male Chinese documentarians strive to expose the harsh realities of marginalized people’s lives by using their signature documentary realism borrowed from direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*, *Women Fifty Minutes* mixes up documentary realism with poetic romanticism and even dream-like surrealism, and frequently intercepts objective documentation with the filmmaker’s personal voices and subjective perspectives. The film even blurs the boundary between documentary and painting by incorporating some of Shitou’s artworks into the film narrative, and, in doing so, lends to the film a painting-like artistic quality and an old photo-style nostalgic ambiance. All these features make *Women Fifty Minutes* a distinct film in China’s independent documentary movement.

*Women Fifty Minutes* touches on many social issues including women's lives, intimacy between queer women, life in different parts of China, folk traditions such as ethnic and rural weddings and funerals, religious and folk practices, China's environmental problems and uneven economic development. It is very difficult to sum up in a single statement the themes of the film. Perhaps it is the refusal to make grand narratives, the focus on multiplicity and differences, the attention to meticulous details and mundanity of everyday lives that make Shitou's film intrinsically queer, in the sense that queer defies definition and celebrates a non-conformist way of life. Shitou (quoted in Gardiner 2009) explains her motive of making such a film in an interview with a *Fridae* website correspondent: 'I want to explore the different ways that women live in these places, and by showing how different they are you can see how society is changing and how women's lives are changing'.

Indeed, this film is primarily about 'Chinese women' in a rapidly changing Chinese society under neo-liberal globalization. In contemporary China, there are as many ways of being a woman as there are as many discourses of feminism. An examination of how Shitou represents women in *Women Fifty Minutes* will unfold different types of female subjectivities and discourses of feminism in postsocialist China. It will also reveal the limitations of these subjectivities and discourses in understanding women's lived experiences: indeed, without taking sexuality into account, the understanding of feminism and women's experiences would certainly be incomplete. It is sexuality, and furthermore, queerness, that Shitou tries to insert in Chinese women's narratives.

### **Locating female subjectivities in Chinese feminism**

In her pioneering work on Chinese feminism, Tani Barlow (1994, 2004) glosses the

different Chinese terms frequently used to refer to women in postsocialist China: *funü*, *nüxing* and *nüren*. Although all three words mean ‘women’ in the Chinese language, their social and cultural connotations differ. They also represent different but intersecting subjectivities, or rather, subject positions, that contemporary Chinese women inhabit. In contemporary China, the three terms *funü*, *nüxing* and *nüren*, and their associated subject positions, coexist and often conflate. They circulate simultaneously to reveal the complex landscapes of gendered subjectivities and discourses as China bids farewell to state socialism and embraces neo-liberal capitalism.

The first term, *funü*, is a popular term used in the socialist and postsocialist state feminism, which is sometimes called ‘state feminism’, ‘official feminism’ or ‘socialist feminism’ (Barlow 1994, 2004; Yang 1999). Under state feminism, the state has instituted All China Women’s Association (*Fulian*) as a national organization representing women’s interests; it also celebrates the Eighth of March as the International Women’s Day. A sequence in *Women Fifty Minutes* presents a picture of how state feminism works in the Reform era by documenting a Spring Outing (*chunyou*) event organized by a local *Fulian* on a Women’s Day. The scene is set in a rural area in south-west China: a group of women arrive at a scenic spot. They talk happily to each other as they walk past a bridge and to some simple do-it-yourself entertainment facilities. After singing some folk songs following the local tradition, these women play mahjong and card games; some participate in a jogging competition. Everybody seems contented in the picture, and the *Fulian* does seem capable of mobilizing the women to form a community of mutual help and support. In documenting the scene, Shitou shows the self-organization and empowerment of rural



women under China's state feminism. In the film, state feminism is tinted with a nostalgic sentiment at a time when state socialism is questioned, rejected and even forgotten.

*Nüxing* and *nüren* have emerged in postsocialist China as subject positions in response to and as a correction of *funü* the subject of state feminism. *Nüxing* can roughly be translated as 'woman the sexed subject, the other of humanist Man' or 'essential woman' (Barlow 1994). It highlights 'sex differences' (*xing bie*) by interpreting gender in sexed, othering and binary terms. It celebrates gender and sexual differences and 'individual choice' brought about by China's entry into global capitalism with the state endorsement of neo-liberal ideologies. *Nüxing* the sexed subject is mostly portrayed negatively in Shitou's film: at a night club, lights are dim, and music is loud; a blond girl is dancing while flirting with her male clients. *Nüxing* the sexed subject is treated with the director's disapproval of a westernized capitalist modernity, commercial culture and male desires.

The category *nüren* emerged in China's women's studies movement in the Reform era. Leading Chinese feminist scholar Li Xiaojiang maintains that Chinese women are collectively oriented, and that they should seek not so much individual rights and interests but pursue the universal good for all of humanity. The turn to universalism, represented by the *nüren* subject, in the first few decades of the Reform era bespeaks Chinese intellectuals' imagination of a postsocialist modernity and women's position in such a modernity. Although state feminism represented by the *funü* subject is widely questioned on the ground that it 'erases' women's 'sex difference', western liberal feminism represented by *nüxing* the sexed subject is seen as equally

problematic because of its complicity with consumer capitalism. *Nüren* should thus be seen as Chinese intellectuals' efforts to rethink women's role in a postsocialist world and to remap Chinese feminism beyond a socialism/capitalism binary. Shitou's use of the term *nüren* to designate women in this film should be understood in this light.

Shitou's *Women Fifty Minutes* focuses primarily on *nüren*, woman as the universal subject. In the film, women and men are not seen as binary opposites. Rather, they work and live together to fight against the tyranny of dominant social structures such as the nation state, capitalism, consumerism and uneven development. Women of different races, ethnicities, religious beliefs, classes and sexualities all find their way under the umbrella term of *nüren*. In the film, the poor woman praying on the Tibetan plateau may have little in common with the middle-class woman practicing yoga in Beijing. Yet it is their perceived biological traits that bind them together. Like Li Xiaojiang, Shitou seems to believe in women's biological and cultural specificities, such as their birth, marriage, pregnancy and mothering experiences, which make them intrinsically different from men. This type of female subjectivity is far from being individualistic; it is situated in complex and interwoven social structures such as family, kinship, cultural tradition, state power and economic development. Shitou's conception of women is thus close to the female subject in the socialist feminist discourse, which places an emphasis on social structures such as patriarchy and capitalism that combine to subjugate women. It is this type of female subjectivity that Shitou attributes to women, and it is in this belief that *Women Fifty Minutes* uses gender as a lens to look at Chinese society. In recovering the histories and memories of state feminism, and in embracing universalism and internationalism, Shitou's film

launches a socialist feminist critique to the reification of gender and the individualization of society under the influence of capitalist globalization.

### **Queer political space**

*Women Fifty Minutes* is an ambitious project: besides trying to understand and reconstruct women's subjectivities and experiences in the Reform era, Shitou also strives to insert sexuality into the discourse of gender and to combine queerness with feminism. This is demonstrated by her representation of queer subjectivities and spaces in the film.

In documenting the Chinese women's lives, Shitou is quick to capture moments of intimacy between women, which would otherwise have gone unnoticed in the grand narratives of women and the nation. *Women Fifty Minutes* is also a film about queer identities and spaces. These queer spaces are at once real and imaginary, material and utopian. They bespeak the fluidity, volatility and hopes of queer women's spaces in contemporary China where queer rights are not officially recognized and queer women's issues are marginalized in gay men-focused narratives (Sang 2003; Martin 2010; Kam 2013; Engebretsen 2014).

In the film, there are several explicit scenes of same-sex intimacy between women. They point to different types of queer subjectivities and spaces. One scene is set at the Tian'anmen Square, the symbolic political centre of the Chinese state. Shitou juxtaposes two sets of shots against each other: one documents a solemn national flag hoisting ceremony; the other shows two girls kissing intimately inside a subway

station (Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Screen grab 1 from *Women Fifty Minutes* (dir. Shitou, 2006, China).

This is perhaps one of the most intimate moments in the film: two girls are kissing each other in a public space. The camera zooms out and reveals a quiet waiting area at a subway station in Beijing. The two girls are so engrossed in their own world that they do not seem to care about, let alone notice, anyone passing by. For one moment, time freezes. The kissing scene occupies the whole frame. A moment later, a subway train pulls into the station. The two women stand up and walk into a train carriage, hand in hand. Before they disappear on the train, the school bags on their back look as bright as booming sunflowers in the heat of the sun. The camera then cuts back to the flag hoisting ceremony at the Tian'anmen Square: the ceremony is still going on, and the soldiers are continuing to march, and yet the whole process has lost its solemnity and significance. Shitou's voice can be heard: 'it is like a fairy tale, isn't it?'

It is not unusual for Shitou to insert her voice and/or body in her own films and this serves as a form of feminist and queer intervention into documentary filmmaking in China's New Documentary Movement (Chao 2010). The playful tone of the voice-over seems to subvert the highly ritualistic, theatrical and mythical hyperreality of the state ceremony. For Mikhail Bakhtin (1965), the carnivalesque ecstasies can potentially collapse the sacred order of the state and religious power, however temporary it may be. The existence of parallel secular times and spaces for queer women can thus decentre the linear, progressive national time and 'the space of

phallic verticality' (Lefebvre 1991: 287).

Back to the Tian'anmen Square, Shitou's camera pushes through the crowd who stand along the Chang'an Boulevard and watch the flag hoisting ceremony. It zooms in on a squad of fully armed soldiers. They are symbols of the Chinese state, which is often seen as masculine and heteronormative.<sup>3</sup> In the subtitle of the film, Shitou comments:

You never know what happens at the Tian'anmen Square:

Ticket sellers selling flight tickets, poor citizens appealing to authorities for help,  
Fighting over a place to watch the national flag hoisting ceremony, begging for  
money [...]

But none of these disturbs the intimate movement between the two girls.<sup>4</sup>

The subtitles, in both Chinese and English, are not literal transcriptions of people's conversations in the film. They function as Shitou's diary or commentary to introduce the background of a story or to make social critiques, thus making the film akin to an 'essay film'. The above commentary about the Tian'anmen Square can be seen as a form of understatement with a heightened rhetorical effect. Certainly, many historical events have taken place at the Tian'anmen Square, with significant impacts on China and modern Chinese history. What Shitou has mentioned in the subtitle may appear mundane and insignificant compared to the monumental historical events such as the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the Red Guard rally during the Cultural Revolution or the student protest in 1989. The understatement reminds audiences of the politically sensitive subtexts hidden in these lines and the way in which the filmmaker uses understatement to circumvent government censorship. It is what is unsaid, and the

tension between ‘banality’ and ‘fatality’ (Morris 1990), that highlights the message that *Shitou* aims to convey. Despite the serious nature of the highly politicized national flag hoisting ceremony, people in the film react to the ceremony in different ways: some smile; some yawn; and others talk to each other while buses and cars continue to drive past the square as usual. This scene reveals the ruptures between the national time and the heterogenous temporalities of ordinary people’s lives and experiences; it challenges the nation state’s hegemony of time and space.

Queer space in this sequence is at the same time a public space. The city planners may not have intended the subway station to be a queer space; yet this does not prevent people from appropriating the public space as spaces of their own. More importantly, by juxtaposing scenes of the state ceremony and queer intimacy, *Shitou* makes a strong political statement: the state, however powerful it is, cannot control people’s pursuit of love and happiness. The private, intimate and queer spaces may well challenge the public, masculine and heteronormative space of the nation state. Admittedly, it is problematic to see sex as antithetic to the state power and queerness as being capable of subverting the hegemonic power of the nation state. However, if Mark McLelland (2009) is correct in noting that ‘kissing is a symbol of democracy’ in his account of post-war Japanese queer culture, and if we take into consideration the development of the queer movement in China, which constantly has to negotiate with government censorship and state intervention, *Shitou*’s position of ‘saying yes to kissing means saying no to power’ becomes understandable in this context.

### **Queer utopian space**

*Women Fifty Minutes* presents the audience with a ‘queer town’ where intimacy

between women is widely practiced. The small town is presumed to be located somewhere in south-west China where Shitou and Mingming are from. Like many other towns in China, it is experiencing a rapid process of urbanization, accompanied by serious environmental problems. In Shitou's camera lens, the sky is grey and the river is dark. Traditional houses and courtyards are demolished to give way to multistory high rises. Rubble is littered everywhere. People from all walks of life are dressed in different styles of clothing displaying an uneven sense of fashion and economic status. On the street, a boy is practicing his street dancing skills to beg for money; people around him look on with indifference and boredom. A group of elderly women are sitting on the outdoor benches enjoying the sunshine. Two of them even appear to be holding each other (Figure 4). Shitou tells the story of the two women in the film subtitle:

Ever since their childhood,  
Granny Chen and Granny Yu have been close friends.  
In their teenage years,  
Arranged by their parents, both got married.  
After their husbands died,  
On sunny days like this, they often come here to enjoy the sunshine together.  
They are in their nineties.  
They have been in love with each other for more than eighty years.  
Other elderly people in this town share similar stories.

**Figure 4:** Screen grab 2 from *Women Fifty Minutes* (dir. Shitou, 2006, China)

We do not know whether the story is true or not, or if it is Shitou who has projected her own assumption onto these elderly women and creatively interpreted their friendship as same-sex intimacy. But the question of whether these women are indeed lesbians seems to bother neither the filmmaker nor the audience. Most would rather believe in such a sweet story, or that such a town really exists in this world.

It is important to note that Shitou does not impose a lesbian, or *lala* (lesbian in Chinese), identity to these women. Her understanding of same-sex intimacy is akin to Adrienne Rich's (1986) notion of 'lesbian continuum' or Eve Sedgwick's (2003) notion of 'homosociality', that is, same-sex intimacies that cannot be encapsulated by fixed modern identity categories. Shitou's film can be seen as an effort to translate western queer theory to China, with her own interpretations and creative licences. It is certainly situated in the long process of translating feminism and queer theory in a transnational context, with interesting local/global configurations (Ko and Wang 2007).

Queer space in Shitou's film can take the form of a romanticized space for women and between women. It transcends time and space and points to immanence and eternity. These women's old age and their 'long-term relationship' bespeak such everlasting temporalities. The implication is clear: queer space is a space for pure love and intense emotional attachment (*qing*).<sup>5</sup> No other forces including family pressures for heterosexual marriages and the passage of time can alter their love. It is easy to see the utopian nature of such a narrative while at the same time miss the social critique that such a narrative embodies: the obsession with true love and utopia can serve as a critique to the commercialization and reification of desire under capitalism



in the Reform era.

The theme of a utopian queer space is also demonstrated in another scene. At a restaurant in the same town, a group of young women are having dinner together and singing Karaoke afterwards. A bit tipsy, they play jokes on each other and even hug and touch each other. A young woman asks the woman sitting next to her, ‘do you love me?’ The reply: ‘I like you, but I also like Xiaohong [another woman’s name]’ (Figure 5). After the dinner, the group, all drunk because of the rice wine, put their arms around each other and dance to the music. The subtitle tells the audience that Qiuqiu, a tomboyish woman, becomes a man after a sex reassignment surgery two years later.

**Figure 5:** Screen grab 3 from *Women Fifty Minutes* (dir. Shitou, 2006, China)

Shitou locates queer spaces in a specific place: a small town in south-west China. She seems to suggest that queer love is a beautiful and special feeling among women, which has not yet been contaminated by the all-pervasive consumer society. With increasing economic development and commercialization of society, it would probably disappear, in the same way that the old houses and streets would be replaced by things modern. ‘Everything shall change for certain’, Shitou writes in the synopsis of the film with a poetic sentiment. It is important to note that this type of queer space, albeit romantic and utopian, is also precarious because it can only be located in a marginalized place such as a small town and is subject to change in a fast-developing society. Shitou’s nostalgic sentiment is nicely captured by soft and dreamy light and old songs used in the film.

## **The aesthetics of queer space**

The queer space that Shitou portrays and imagines is an aesthetic space, constructed by the visual codes that she creates with a video camera. Trained as a painter herself, Shitou's artistic sensibility has lent her film a painting-like quality. Some camera shots carry a strong oil-on-canvas effect and a dramatic musicality. For example, large patches and broad-brushstroke stripes of trees are pushing backward while a motorbike is riding forward at speed on a road while non-diegetic music with strong beats is playing at full volume. In another sequence, a couple of desolate trees stand by the water on a cold winter's day with melancholic music playing in the background.

Yet the video camera is not the only form of medium with which Shitou works. She also incorporates some of her own paintings and photography in the film. In the latter half of the film, she exhibits some of her artworks about women's experiences. Most of these artworks are modelled on herself and Mingming. About twenty paintings and three photographic works are featured in the film. In doing so, she blurs the boundaries between different media, and between art and life. Indeed, as Foucault asks, why can't the life of each individual become a work of art (quoted in Eribon 1991: 317–32) and as Shitou suggests: why can't we integrate artwork into life?

**Figure 6:** Shitou, *Weapon Series*, No. 6, 1997. Oil on canvas. 73x60 cm. Beijing. Courtesy of Shitou.

**Figure 7:** Shitou, *Female Friends*, 1997. Oil on canvas. 100x81 cm. Beijing. Courtesy of Shitou.

Shitou's paintings and photography are grouped into several series. Most of them portray nude or semi-nude female bodies and intimacies between women. Many of them use symbolism. For instance, in her 'Weapon' (*Wuqi*) series, beautiful nude female bodies are juxtaposed with lethal weapons of war, such as guns, cannons, bullets and knives. In one of these paintings (Figure 6), the head of a woman is replaced by a pistol, whilst her left breast turns into a blooming sunflower. The painting can be interpreted as a feminist statement to stop war and to embrace peace and love. Shitou explains the picture as an 'incisive, critical look directed at our world, courageous and fearless' (quoted in Sang 2003: 172). Another series (Figure 7) feature women and animals. Women are put in the same frame with ferocious animals such as wolves and sharks. A queer couple, one with a yellow head, presumably representing an Asian woman, and the other looking like a white woman, walk together hand in hand with confidence. In the background, a wolf-shaped animal walks away in despair. With these images, Shitou sends a clear message: with love and international solidarity, women have nothing to fear. Considering that Shitou participated actively in transnational queer activism after the *Fourth World Women's Conference* held in Beijing in 1995, the theme of sisterhood and international solidarity among women in her 1997 painting becomes clear.

**Figure 8:** Shitou, *Zhuangzi Dreams of a Butterfly*, 2000. 50x61 cm. Oil on canvas. Beijing. Courtesy of Shitou.

Another series is titled ‘Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies’ (*yuanyang hudie*) (Figure 8), named after a literary genre of popular romance in late imperial China.<sup>6</sup> The paintings feature young women swimming and hugging in multi-coloured pools. As Sang (2003: 172) comments, ‘the liquid dreamscapes seem to suggest the artist’s visions of blissful, carefree female-female intimacy are somewhat fantastic and utopian’.

This is not the first time that Shitou draws on historical themes or forms. Some of her photographic works (e.g. Figure 9) resemble New Year calendars (*yuefenpai*) from the Republican era (1912–49), with spring couplets (*chunlian*) decorated on both sides of the picture frame, and advertisements for cigarettes and ‘things modern’ dotted around. Shitou and Mingming stand in the middle of the frame, dressed in traditional Chinese cheongsam (*qipao*) and hugging each other intimately.<sup>7</sup> In this series, Shitou combines two types of medium – photography and painting – and she incorporates elements from traditional cultural forms such as New Year calendars and spring couplets. In doing so, her works display a modern but at the same time nostalgic sensibility.

**Figure 9:** Shitou and Mingming, *Commemoration*, 2006. Photography. 127x92 cm. Beijing. Courtesy of Shitou and Mingming.

In Republican China, pictures of female homoeroticism abounded in newspapers and magazines and popular art forms including calendars (Sang 2003; Kang 2009). By rediscovering historical themes and forms, Shitou suggests that same-sex intimacy

between women has a long history in China and that it is indigenous. Shitou's effort to reconstruct a history of female homoeroticism is at the same time the articulation of queer women's desires as legitimate, historical and indigenous. After all, reconstructing a historical past, however faithful or reliable it may be, lends coherence to an imagined identity at present. As Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) reminds us, 'traditions' are new inventions of the past from the perspectives of the present. In the light of this statement, queer history in China can also be seen as an 'invented tradition'. To be sure, contemporary queer identity is vastly different from homoeroticism practiced in the Republican era (Sang 2003). Nevertheless, strategic interpretations of historical events by linking the past to the present play a crucial role in creating a modern lesbian identity. In the case of Shitou's works, she not only invents a history of homoeroticism in China by tracing it to the Republican era but highlights the 'Chineseness' of such identities as well. Her artistic representation of homoeroticism challenges the 'global queering' thesis advocated by Dennis Altman (2001), in whose theorization lesbian and gay identities are imports from America to other parts of the world; it also subverts the ideology of the Chinese state, in which homosexuality is seen as a 'western import' and thus incompatible with Chinese society and culture.

The use of paintings and photography in Shitou's film is particularly interesting because, through media convergence (Jenkins 2006), Shitou creates a mediated and imagined queer space. Such a space is both artistic and utopian. Yet it also translates into people's dreams, fantasies, bodily and affective experiences. This space is what Henri Lefebvre (1991) calls a 'representational space'. According to Lefebvre, representational spaces are spaces 'directly *lived* through its associated images and

symbols, and hence the space of “inhabitants” and “users” and spaces of some artists who ‘describe and aspire to do more than describe’; such spaces are both physical and imaginary, and they challenge the ‘representation of spaces’ mapped out by hegemonic powers and significations (1991: 39, original emphasis). If we consider artworks to be important ways for marginalized social groups such as queer communities to articulate their existence and to fight for cultural hegemony, the production and circulation of queer art, photography and films are certainly instrumental in bringing about a queer public sphere in contemporary China.

### **Queer space as imagined, affective and performative**

Queer spaces that Shitou has depicted in *Women Fifty Minutes* are a combination of real spaces and imagined spaces. On the one hand, queer love and intimacy are romanticized in this film. On the other, these spaces are either spaces that challenge hegemonic spaces of the masculine and heterosexual nation state, or exotic places where true love transcends time and space, or aesthetic spaces that weave together dreams and fantasies in artistic representation. Audiences of the film may ask the following questions: are they real places? Is the film a ‘true’ representation of queer women in China?

Fridae’s Beijing correspondent Dinah Gardner (2009) began her news article ‘Woman on film’ with a blurb: ‘Imagine a village full of queer women, and according to Shitou, the queer filmmaker of a new documentary, *Women Fifty Minutes*, such a place does exist’.<sup>8</sup>

Gardner’s article generated heated discussions online. On the same website, following

the article, several people posted their comments and expressed their interest in visiting this place. One of them, posted by a non-Chinese queer in English, asks: ‘How can non-Chinese lesbians find this place or are we unwelcome (which is, I think, perfectly understandable)?’.

Gardner and the netizens’ readings of the film are fascinating as they have clearly understood the film literarily and ‘misread’ the film. Shitou may not have intended to convey the message that the town is a paradise for queer women, although she has portrayed homoeroticism, or rather, female homosociality, between women in this town in her film. In the film subtitle, she makes the following comment on the town: ‘the strange thing about the town is that there are lots of girls who like and love each other, but I have not noticed any boys in love with each other’. During an interview, Shitou told me that she only suggested that she had not ‘noticed any boys in love with each other’, but this does not mean that there are no such boys. Nor did she suggest that this is a ‘lesbian town’ where queer women stay together and live happy lives free from social prejudice. Her discovery is partly to see what is often gone unnoticed in everyday life (in this case same-sex intimacy between women) and partly her own imagination. However, this does not stop the audience from interpreting in their preferred ways and imagining such a utopia as a ‘queer town’. I consider the readers as engaging in a type of ‘creative reading’ rather than ‘misreading’, through which they share their emotions, dreams and fantasies and mutual support for each other.

Feminist media studies (Ang 1985; Radway 1984; Hermes 1995) have shed light on manifold ways in which women construct their subjectivities through adopting particular reading strategies of media texts. Reading ‘a lesbian town’ out of the film

bespeaks the dreams, fantasies and experiences of the filmmakers, audience and readers. Together, they construct a mythical 'lesbian town', through which queer women share their emotions and construct their identities and communities. Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of 'imagined communities' is useful here: through practices of consuming and interpreting media texts, media producers and users 'imagine' a shared identity and community. Although *Shitou*, her film audience and the netizens may have never met each before, and although their lives and experiences may diverge dramatically, they are still able to identify themselves with being queer, women and lesbian. More importantly, queer women from all over China and the world, despite their differences in language, nationality, ethnicity, race and class, may share the dream of finding and living in a queer utopia. Media such as the film and the Internet certainly play a significant role in constructing such a queer utopian space.

Although Anderson insightfully points out the importance of media, especially print media, to the formation of identities and communities, he has undermined the importance of people's shared and communicated feelings and, emotions in such processes. Feminist scholars including Doreen Massey (Massey 1994), Sedgwick (2003), Elspeth Probyn (2005) and Melissa Gregg (2006) draw our attention to the importance of affect. Space, as Massey argues, is produced culturally by social relations and is invested with emotional commitment so that spaces become places. Emotion, then, lies central to the formation of places and identities. An emotional geography 'attempts to understand emotion – experientially and conceptually – in terms of its socio-*spatial* mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorized subjective mental states' (Davidson et al. 2005: 3, original emphasis). Indeed, as the representation of intimacy between queer women in *Shitou*'s film demonstrates, queer



public spaces are as much imagined as they are affective.

This also raises a central question for our discussion of queer films and public spaces, that is, how do we understand representation? Under the modern episteme, art and media are often seen as ‘representations’ of the real life, in the same way that the Saussurean linguistics consider the signifier as ‘representation’ of the signified. J. L. Austin (1962), Jacques Derrida (1982) and Judith Butler (1990), among others, have reminded us of the importance of performativity: language not only describes things; it also triggers actions and makes things happen. In this way, social realities are constantly produced and reproduced through representational practices. Talking about films as a signifying practice, Michael Ryan (1988: 479) contends that film and the culture and society in which it is produced are not two separate spheres; they are mutually constitutive. In other words, representations produce the social realities that they strive to represent.

Indeed, representations should not be seen as outside reality or merely signifying reality. They impact on and constitute people’s lived experiences. In this sense, *Women Fifty Minutes* not only portrays a picture of queer women’s identities and spaces in contemporary China but also brings them into existence. Such spaces are multiple and contingent. They include multiple dimensions of queer spaces represented in the film: film screening spaces such as queer film festivals, online spaces where people discuss the film and a shared space of identity and community constituted by people from various localities through the use and convergence of media across geographic and national boundaries. Such spaces are at once imagined, affective and performative. They are both utopian and realistic, both imagined and

lived. They constitute what Edward Soja (1996) terms ‘the third space’ and Foucault (1986) calls ‘heterotopia’. The queer spaces in discussion are not perfect. One can point out the precariousness of such spaces and their continuous negotiations with dominant social discourses such as the state control and heteronormativity (Kam 2013; Engebretsen 2014). One can even criticize their limitations in terms of class, gender and ethnicity bias, and the inclusion and exclusion of such identities. However, it is the women’s shared feelings and lived experiences in imagining such spaces that make such spaces ‘spaces of their own’ (Yang 1999: n.pag.).

*Women 50 Minutes* can also be seen as a queer feminist engagement with the postsocialist Chinese society and its visual cultures. This article has highlighted the central role of sexuality in understanding gender, identity and development. After all, ‘Chinese women’ are never simply about gender identities; sexuality, ethnicity, space and place also intersect with gender in significant ways. With the rise of queer feminist activism in recent years (Fincher 2018), a diverse and more inclusive feminist politics would be impossible to imagine without queer interventions.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Shitou's name is sometimes spelt as Shi Tou. It is a pseudonym name that the artist chooses for herself. According to an interview conducted by Xin Huang, Shitou's original name is Shi Xufei and she 'discarded her original typically feminine name given by her parents and claimed a name that seeks to express her queerness' (2018: 128).

<sup>2</sup> As a camerawoman, Mingming has shot many films that Shitou directed. Shitou attributes many of the works, especially photography, to the joint authorship of herself and Mingming.

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese state has been advocating heteronormativity in the names of family values, social stability and cultural nationalism, especially in recent decades. For more discussions about (hetero)sexuality in relation to the biopower of the postsocialist Chinese state, see Evans (1997) and McMillan (2006).

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<sup>4</sup> The film has English subtitles, but I have retranslated them to increase the readability of the subtitles.

<sup>5</sup> *Qing* is a Chinese term referring to deep sentiment or passion between people. The notion of *qing* is central in understanding Chinese conceptions of love, friendship and intimacy, especially in premodern Chinese context. Chou Wah-shan (2000: 15–19) argues that same-sex eroticism in China is characterized by *qing* instead of *xing* (sex) as in the West. According to classical Chinese philosopher Xunzi, nature (*xing*) is that which is formed by Heaven; the disposition (*qing*) is the substance (*zhi*); and the desire (*yu*) is the proper response (*ying*) of the disposition (Yu 1997: 58). In Ming and Qing Dynasties, *qing* refers to the intent of the mind/heart and *yu* refers to the intent of the flesh. (Huang M. 2001) For more discussions about *qing*, see Chou (2000), Huang M. (2001), Plaks (1976) and Yu (1997).

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of ‘mandarin ducks and butterflies’ (*yuanyang hudie*) as a literary genre, see Wang (1997) and Chow (1991).

<sup>7</sup> The ‘new year calendar’ series are not featured in the film. They are photographic works created by Shitou shown in some art exhibitions, including the ‘Dreaming Fantasy’ *Photo Beijing* exhibition held at the Agricultural Exhibition Hall (*nongye zhanlan guan*), Beijing, on 6–9 September 2008. The works in this series include *Karaoke* (*Kala OK*, 127x92 cm, 2006), *Commemoration* (*ji’nian*, 127x92 cm, 2006) and *Witch Work* (*monü gongzuo*, 127x92 cm, 2006). For an insightful analysis of Shitou’s artworks, see Huang X. (2018).

<sup>8</sup> *Fridae* (<https://www.fridae.asia/>) is one of the biggest and most influential queer websites in Asia. Based in Hong Kong and with the slogan ‘connecting gay Asia’, it offers information and personal ads services in both English and Chinese languages to queer communities in Asia and other parts of the world.