

## **Introduction: What is Queer about Queer Chinese Art?**

**Hongwei Bao, Diyi Mergenthaler and Jamie J. Zhao**

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One of the most exciting developments in the Chinese art world in the past few decades has been the emergence of queer Chinese art; that is, artworks that celebrate gender and sexual diversities and that are often produced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) identified artists. In 2012, the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities (Östasiatiska museet) in Stockholm hosted the *Secret Love* exhibition, the biggest queer Chinese art exhibition outside Asia to date. The exhibition brought together 150 works created by twenty-seven renowned queer Chinese artists such as Chi Peng, Ma Liuming, Ren Hang and Shi Tou (Si 2012, 8). These bold works feature gender fluidity, sexual diversity and polymorphous desire. Coming from a country where homosexuality remains largely taboo and is often censored in official and mainstream media, these artworks took the world by surprise. Ten years have passed since *Secret Love*, and such exhibitions remain few—a notable exception is the *Spectrosynthesis: Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now* exhibition that took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei in 2017. We still know very little about these artists and their artworks. In academia, there has been a dearth of scholarship on contemporary queer Chinese art to date, both in English and Chinese languages. This book fills this gap in knowledge. It brings, for the first time, some of these artworks and artists to visibility in the Anglophone world. It presents creative, reflexive and critical essays written by sixteen artists, curators and art critics. In doing so, the book offers readers a rare glimpse of some of the recent developments in contemporary queer Chinese art from the People's Republic of China (PRC)

and its diaspora. It also presents a unique perspective on the dynamism of Chinese society and contemporary Chinese art in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

This introductory chapter serves as both a contextualization of the topic and a theoretical intervention into the intersecting fields of queer studies, China studies and art history. In putting the book together, we invited our contributors to consider the following key questions: what is queer about queer Chinese art? How has ‘Chineseness’—understood in contingent, flexible and non-essentialized ways—impacted our understandings of queer art? What is art, and furthermore, what makes records of queer lives and queer activism a work of art? Through our diverse case studies on the topics of gender, sexuality, identity, transnational mobility, transcultural curation and art activism, we aim to think critically and radically about these questions as we cross the disciplinary boundaries between relevant academic fields such as art history, queer studies and Chinese studies.

In this introduction, we first explain the keywords crucial to our analysis, theorization and discussion, including queerness, Chineseness and contemporary art. We then move on to a brief overview of the key chapters and themes in the book, which is contextualized in the Chinese avant-garde art movement, feminist art practices and transnational queer movement, as well as international exhibition and curating cultures. These material and historical contexts have played a key role in the emergence and development of contemporary queer Chinese art in multiple forms, styles and media, and with local, regional and global ramifications.

### **De-Westernizing Queerness**

This book uses the English term ‘queer’ to encompass a wide range of nonnormative genders and sexualities. The English term ‘queer’ used to carry a derogatory tone when deployed to refer to LGBTQ people, especially in the Anglophone context, until queer activists and academics in the US appropriated the term for positive use in the 1980s and 90s (Brickell and

Collard 2019; Jagose 1997; Lord and Meyer 2013). This linguistic and social background of ‘queer’ has often been referenced as a key point in global queer art history (Tong 2011; Lord and Meyer 2013; Li 2014). In the Chinese-language sphere, the term was translated as *ku'er* 酷儿 (a transliteration of queer) and *guaitai* 怪胎 (freak) in Taiwan in the 1980s and later *ku'er* in the mainland Chinese context (Lim 2008, 2009; Bao 2021). The Chinese term 酷儿 has often been used by urban youth to celebrate individuality, non-conformity and ‘coolness’. It has also been used by activists, artists, writers and academics who endorse a non-essentialist and anti-identarian political stance towards gender, sexuality and identity. It is in this sense that we talk about *ku'er yishu* 酷儿艺术 (queer art) as a contemporary form of art and culture in China and globally.

When conceptualizing the project of *Contemporary Queer Chinese Art*, we acknowledge these trans-geo-cultural and cross-linguistic flows of queer politics and knowledge, as well as the term’s Western origin and constantly mutated and glocalized meanings. Meanwhile, our usage of queer in studying contemporary Chinese art recognizes the constructive, radical, norm-defying power of queerness as a critical theoretical-analytical approach in an age of globalization and digitization that has been fraught with information flows, social-political contestations and (trans-)cultural encounters, creolization and hybridization. In particular, we employ queer in this project to contest heteronormativity, patriarchy and all kinds of norms and ideals associated with gender, sexuality, nationality, class and other sociocultural identities in the Chinese-speaking context. By so doing, we reflect on the queer-centred knowledge production, artwork production, circulation and interpretation, and subject making and remaking in local, transnational and global settings that have been shaped by contemporary Chinese queer and feminist movements, as well as modern and postmodern Chinese art cultures.

Furthermore, through queer, we highlight and link together the subjectivities of gender

and sexual minorities, artists and Chinese-speaking communities. We do so by situating their marginalized feelings, lived experiences, memories and practices in the contexts of global queer histories, politics and art creations. This practice, rather than simply a linguistic borrowing from Western articulations, symbolizes the ‘intra-actions’ (Barad 2003, 815) between Chinese and Sinophone contexts that cultivate different understandings of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality associated with works of art.

When naming the works discussed in this book as ‘queer’ Chinese artworks, we are aware that this practice might risk reducing and even excluding the participation of non-‘queer’ (or at least not self-identified as such) subjects, or those who resist being represented by queer, in Chinese activist and artistic discourses. The complex relations between queer art, queer practices, queer meaning, and queer sexuality and identity raise a series of key questions. For instance, how can ‘queer’ be used to describe subject positions and art productions that are made possible by self-identified heterosexual artists or named as heterosexual ones in Chinese art history? How can one perceive queer Chinese identity and identification in a work of art or as an aesthetic experience? Inspired by Gayatri Spivak’s (1998) famous provocation ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, our contributors use their knowledge and experience to explore whether and how queer Chinese citizens as socially marginalized subjects can speak and be heard, both in China and internationally.

In this book, we highlight that the English term ‘queer’ and its associated Chinese terms such as *tongzhi* 同志 (comrade or gay or queer), *ku'er* and *lala* 拉拉 (lesbian) conceive great potential for gender and sexual minorities to challenge normativity and hegemony in the transnational Chinese context. On the one hand, these terms open up new spaces for people to configure self-affirmative sexual and gender non-conforming identities. On the other hand, they facilitate a site of belonging with considerable degrees of self-governance. We especially highlight the importance of affectively collecting and connecting the fragmented lived

experiences, remembrances and stories of gender and sexual minorities outside a universalized heteronormative history. By contemplating the affective connections between queer, art and Chinese subjects, we revise the ‘chrononormative’ (Freeman 2010, 3) narratives that are often used to justify the performance of a repetitive and reproductive lifetime as the only meaningful bodily experience of time. We interrupt ongoing institutional and intersectional violence against non-conforming bodies in order to create a sense of discord, resistance and queerness.

### **Problematizing Chineseness**

The articulation of Chineseness is important in art and culture. It can inform audiences of imagined ethnocultural features, but it can also be problematic if these features are taken for granted without ‘examin[ing] the function each configuration serves, the legitimizing discourse behind each mobilization, its efficacy in unsettling the sign of the national in all its guises, and the agents empowered and disenfranchised in the process’ (Lim 2006, 6). Sinologist Tu Weiming (1991) traces the development of a Chinese cultural consciousness and its tie to a cumulative image of China as an uninterrupted civilization until the Western invasion in the late nineteenth century. This consciousness has been seen as the cornerstone of Han-centric Chinese nationalism in alignment with the unquestioned identification with a shared past mapped by particular territorial, linguistic and ethnic-religious terms, such as the ‘Wei River Valley’ (regarded as the geographical origin of Chinese civilization) (Shih 2007; Tu 1991, 3). In recent years, Sinophone studies have called into question the ‘self-evident’ nationalism and the shared knowledge of a ‘China proper.’ It also highlights the transcultural shaping of the everyday experience and identity formation in Sinitic-language cultural regions, where Chinese ethnocultural frames have dwindling influence over accelerated regional disintegrations, ethnolinguistic diversification and geopolitical conflicts.

The concept of ‘queer Sinophonicity’ (Chiang 2014, 19-21) destabilizes both queer studies and Sinophone studies by treating each field as a way to shape an alternative epistemology in the other field. Similarly, Jamie J. Zhao and Hongwei Bao (2022) advocate using ‘queer/ing China’ as a critical paradigm to challenge the essentialized notions of Chineseness and queerness, to bring China out of the ghetto of area studies and to transnationalize and decolonize queer studies. All these scholarly interventions bespeak the productivity of bringing queerness and Chineseness into critical dialogues with each other, which is also a key aim of this book.

### **Queering Art**

The term ‘art’ is derived from the Latin word *ars*, meaning skill and craft. In the twentieth century, the sphere of art has expanded from ‘fine art’ (e.g., paintings, sculptures and prints) to ‘contemporary art.’ Many authors attribute the start of contemporary art history to 1989, a year marked by significant events in sociopolitical, economic and cultural fields across the globe, including the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the end of Apartheid in South Africa and the culmination of student protests in postsocialist China (Bauman 1998; Danto 1997; Harvey 1989; Smith 2009, 2010). As a keyword of this book, the term ‘contemporary’ highlights the artists’ agency to appropriate existing cultural forms to engage with the present time (Danto 1997; Gao 2011; Gladston 2014; Jiang 2021; Smith 2009, 2010). Besides denoting a surge of art materials, techniques and styles, the term ‘contemporary’ indicates a postmodern understanding of cultural practices in the Euro-American-centric art world in the post-1989 economic and cultural globalization. It captures the moment when the Western modernist organization of knowledge lost its ‘self-evident’ tone, while postcolonial, feminist and queer epistemologies started to unravel the internalized violence and hierarchy in the sign of ‘art’. For example, the

multi-modernity discourse has marked non-Western scholars' efforts to decolonize the Eurocentric art history and to reconfigure the meanings of art and cultural production by and for people from economic peripheries (Enwezor 2002; Gao 2005, 2011; Mosquera 2013; Wu 2008). In particular, Chinese feminist and queer politics have problematized the dominance of patriarchal, heteronormative representations of the body in Chinese visual culture (Bao 2020; Si 2012; Tong 2011, 2017).

Against this background, we use 'queer Chinese' as an adjective for art. In doing so, we underline the creative dimensions of premodern, modern and postmodern cultural practices in Chinese-speaking regions. We pay attention to queer-themed self-expressions and works created by artists in the Chinese and Sinophone worlds which have produced meanings of Chinese queerness and queer Chineseness. In this book, a special focus is given to the lived experiences, stories and memories inscribed in these contemporary artworks and practices, which reflect the artists' approaches to dealing with the conceptual, sensual and affective dimensions of intersected identities and stereotypes, such as the ones concerning Chineseness, Asianness, womanhood and queerness. This understanding of 'queer' as 'diverse modalities of hybridity' (Shohat 1992, 110) compels us to inspect the complex nature of Chinese visual arts and cultural production.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, we recognize the crucial role of these identities and communities in shaping today's visual culture.

At the same time, we also treat 'queer' as a verb to contest the patriarchal academic discourses in visual culture, the dominance of a Western anthropocentric organization of artworks by ethnocultural features, the forcible divorce of queerness from Chinese representations and the separation of queer popular culture from art. By naming 'queer Chinese art' an art category, we 'relay certain erotic, moral, and political horizons of the ideal' (Davis

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<sup>1</sup> According to Ella Shohat (1992, 110), as a descriptive catch-all term, hybridity 'fails to make distinctions between diverse modalities of hybridity, for example, forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political co-optation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence'.

2010, 34) and, thus, rethink art history as ‘an edgy discipline capable of veering between hostility and hospitality to border crossing from adjacent fields such as literature, cinema, and cultural studies’ (Mitchell 2015, 6).

### **A Brief Queer Chinese History**

As anthropologist Lisa Rofel (2007) points out, neoliberalism has nurtured desiring subjectivities such as queer identities in the post-Mao era. With the government’s official decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and depathologization of homosexuality in 2001, there has been a proliferation of queer culture in post-2000 China. In retrospect, curatorship and art criticisms were not yet institutionalized in the 1990s. Queer artistic freedom owed much to the relatively relaxed postsocialist cultural policy in the 2000s. Grassroots feminist and queer movements gained momentum in postsocialist China after the United Nations World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. In contrast to the underground art scene in the 1990s, artists could undertake an individual, digitized and semi-public mode of art production in the 2000s (Gao 2005, 2011; Li 1993; Wu 2008). Early queer Chinese arts and activists, including Ma Liuming and Shi Tou, emerged at this historical juncture.

Between 2000 and 2015, the Chinese authorities softened control over gender- and sexuality-related arts and culture. The relatively liberal cultural policies and globalized art networks created opportunities for queer Chinese artists to communicate with the international art world and transnational queer movements. Most of the artists covered in this book created their works and made their names during this period.

Transnational feminist and queer movements inspired many queer Chinese art practices in the second half of the 2000s. Particularly after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, many grassroots queer art, activist and cultural events took place in semi-public or public spaces.



Examples include the Shanghai Pride, the first queer art exhibition ‘Difference-Gender’ held in Songzhuang—a place north of Tongzhou District on the outskirts of Beijing, the gay and lesbian wedding performance on Qianmen Street in Beijing in 2008 and the annual Queer University filmmaking workshops. In the early 2010s, the proliferation of social media (e.g., Weibo and WeChat), art market websites and online art magazines contributed to the democratization of the contemporary Chinese art environment. In addition to diversifying the modes of shaping, sharing and archiving artworks, commercial virtual spaces and organizations also introduced a thriving Chinese queer activist and cultural scene to the international art world, and vice versa.

Since the mid-2010s, the Chinese government has tightened control over queer culture and shut down queer and feminist activism, public events and social media accounts (Bao 2018, 2020; Deklerck and Wei 2015; Tan 2016; Zhao 2020, 2022). The Beijing Queer Film Festival 北京酷儿影展, which started in 2001, was forced into a guerrilla mode of curation, holding irregular screening events in queer-friendly cafés, bars, foreign embassies and even on a moving bus. In 2020, Shanghai Pride, the biggest queer public event in mainland China, was shut down despite the relaxation of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures at the time. Queer Chinese culture and activism are faced with serious challenges in the middle of a global pandemic and under constant government crackdowns on civil society. It is in this historical context that this book was put together as an effort to document fast disappearing and resurging queer history and culture, reflect upon what has happened and what has been achieved in the past decades and consider what we can learn from this important history.

Throughout the book, we explore ‘queer Chinese art’ with various academic, artistic or personal lenses, through interdisciplinary approaches and via multidimensional affective histories. Contributors to this book come from various academic and art fields and different parts of the world. Most have actively engaged with queer Chinese cultural productions,

circulations and interpretations on local, transcultural and global scales. The book's geographical contexts span Asia, Europe and North America; its cultural forms encompass art, performance, media and activism. This book is thematically divided into the following four parts, which also represent four key themes of the book.

### **Queering Forms, Materials and Traditions**

As Jean Molino (1992, 11) notes, 'life and metamorphosis do not merely have a historical dimension; they characterize forms in all circumstances, and the immediately perceived form takes on movement, is already movement.' In this sense, a form is more than a trace of human activity situated in a historical time and a geographical space. More importantly, as a medium, a form mediates between its creator's and spectators' subjectivities and lived experiences. The practices of storytelling and comprehending human lives contain a certain degree of ambiguity, because these narrative forms are often institutionalized, ritualized and contextualized in different historical periods and geographical locations. Moreover, a variety of forms only become available to the eyes in transcultural encounters. By comparing forms, one learns to imagine the relationship between self and others. When configuring forms to create an aesthetic experience, an artist fuses personal experiences with particular social histories inscribed on these mediums.

The emergence of queer Chinese art (同志艺术 *tongzhi yishu* and 酷儿艺术 *ku'er yishu*) can be traced back to the late-1970s, following our usage of 'queer' as an affirmative expression by and for people with sexual and gender non-conforming identities. When speaking of 'queerness' as a form of Chinese culture, we recognize the dual narratives enclosed in this form, including an artist's self-expression and the allegory of premodern, modern and contemporary Chinese subjects. For example, as demonstrated in Chapter 2 of this volume, Xiyadie uses a

traditional Chinese women's craft, papercutting, to express homoerotic fantasies and lived experiences. The form of papercutting creates an analogy between the inferior status of gay men in a heteronormative society and that of village girls under patriarchy, who, like their mothers and other illiterate female relatives, have to rely on papercutting skills to document personal stories and engage in village affairs, such as praying to deities and commemorating the dead. In his diaristic-style papercuttings, Xiyadie recounts the experiences shared by many Chinese gay men of his age, who have hidden their sexualities from the public and struggled for social acceptance in small Chinese towns and villages. Like many other queer people, Xiyadie could not imagine himself coming out as a gay man, because coming out risked being charged with *liumangzui* 流氓罪 (the crime of hooliganism) before 1997 and being treated with conversion therapy before 2001. Xiyadie's papercuttings, therefore, challenge the taken-for-granted equation between queer and a Westernized, urbanized contemporaneity. In his works, queer can be articulated as folk, rural and traditional. Furthermore, the papercuttings provide an excellent example to democratize contemporary art forms and Chinese aesthetics. They illustrate that papercutting can also be a contemporary artmaking technique.

In Chapter 3, kink practitioner and queer activist Gandalf Bohan Li explores human subjectivity and intimacy through rope bondage. Rope bondage can be traced back to the methods of tying up captives and also erotic performances in Japanese history. Through tying practices, Li encourages participants to perceive the rope as a means to undo binary-gendered bodies. In what he calls 'the art of vulnerability', Li uses rope and tying skills to open up discussions on intersubjectivity, intimacy and human connectedness.

Wei Yimu, in Chapter 4, reflects on his role as an artist and a teacher in children's art education. He recounts how he creates gender-fluid *dingding* 丁丁 (willy in English) representations for his own pleasure and, at the same time, shows his commitment to engaging the audience with queer topics through children-friendly art practices. Wei recounts that his

*Rainbow Base* series was influenced by American TV shows and comics such as *Superjail* and *The Avengers*. The *dingding* series was inspired by his nine-year-old pupil's drawing. Instead of representing a gender-binarist, hetero-sexualized maturity, Wei fuses *dingding* with objects that seemingly lack masculine characteristics, such as clothes hangers, polished nails and toys. In so doing, Wei's *dingding* paintings reveal the porous boundaries between childhood and adulthood in a playful manner.

### **Feminist Interventions**

In this section, we query how factors such as artists' sensibility, consumer culture and queer theory combine to create queer feminist art. We ask: how are queer women represented in contemporary Chinese art? How do queerness and feminism intersect in these artworks? What roles does art play in feminist and queer activism in transnational Chinese contexts?

In her study of Chinese feminist art, Tong (2011, 2017) distinguishes three political spheres, including gender politics, identity politics and queer politics. In the sphere of gender politics, female same-sex erotica, BDSM-themed art and transgender performance constitute some of the confrontational feminist vocabulary that disputes the ideal womanhood constructed through the male gaze and by patriarchal institutions. At the same time, these forms emphasize women's autonomy in determining their own gender role, sexual orientation and objects/subjects of desire. In the sphere of identity politics, female same-sex erotica produces the political articulation of *tongzhi yishu* 同志艺术 (works of art based on same-sex identifications) and an appeal for the recognition of same-sex subjectivities and rights. In the sphere of queer politics, queer Chinese art expressions question gender binary, homonormativity and heteronormativity. They also transcend the boundaries between the corporal and the conceptual through embodied performances (Tong 2017). Tong's schematic

mapping offers us a critical lens to examine the complexities of gender and sexuality in contemporary Chinese art.

The nuances of artists' lived experiences and political standpoints have created various modalities of queer and feminist art practices. The boundaries between feminist, avant-garde and queer are not always clear. In a strictly censored political and cultural environment, avant-garde and feminist aesthetics can become a useful channel to expose oppressed gendered bodies, articulate queer voices and unmask the hidden queer Chinese subject, which has yet to gain recognition in contemporary Chinese society.

Studies show that China's official media has deployed a new set of rhetorical devices to transform class struggles into the pursuit of individual economic success since the early 1980s (Bao 2020; Dai 2007; Tong 2011). In this process, masculinized socialist women subjectivities (e.g., 'iron girls' 铁姑娘 and the 'barefoot doctor' 赤脚医生) were devalued in 1980s popular culture in China. At the same time, postsocialist official discourses embraced an objectified and sexualized image of women in consumer culture and revived the idea of traditional Chinese womanhood that revolves around (neo-)Confucian, patriarchal family values (Dai 2007, 36-37; Zhu and Xiao 2021). In the field of art, the first women's art exhibition in post-Mao China, *The Female Artists' World* 女画家的世界, took place at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing between May 20 and 30, 1990. The exhibition manifested the resurgence of a binary gender discourse.

The United Nations World Conference on Women (UNWCW hereafter) took place in Beijing in 1995. This historical juncture witnessed the resurfacing of feminist critiques in art magazines and journals in post-Mao China. Many Western feminist scholarly works were translated and published in China around the same period. These works were met with

enthusiasm in an urban reading community.<sup>2</sup> Before the UNWCW, local authorities shut down two artist communities in Beijing: Dongcun 东村 (the ‘East Village’ of Beijing; see, Rong 2019; Wu 2008, 38) and the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village 圆明园画家村.

Queer feminist artist Shi Tou used to live and work in the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village. As Shi recalls, she had to move into her friend’s place in downtown Beijing after the forced closure of the village (Huang 2018). Nevertheless, this experience also brought Shi closer to the urban feminist and queer reading communities in Beijing. In 1998, Shi and her friends organized the first Chinese Lesbian Conference, founded the first lesbian group, ‘Beijing Sister’, ran the first lesbian hotline and published the first lesbian magazine titled *Sky* 天空 in mainland China. Her oil painting *Female Friends* (c. 1997) documents not only the feelings of feminist sisterhood, but also the existence of female same-sex intimacy in the 1990s. In Chapter 7, Shi introduces three series of her works, i.e., the *Calendar* series, the *Butterfly* series and the *Underwater* series, which were all created during her participation in the transnational feminist and queer movements.

Queerness has been used to articulate a radical feminist politics in Chinese visual arts since the late 1990s. On March 3, 1998, artists Cui Xiuwen, Yuan Yaomin, Li Hong and Feng Jiali cofounded the feminist art collective ‘Sirens Art Studio’ at the opening of *Century Women*, a remarkable group exhibition in China’s feminist art history. In paintings by Cui, Li and Yuan, in particular, queerness is used as a means to expose, parody and subvert the patriarchal stereotypes of Chinese women as heteronormative, passive subjects. For example, Li’s paintings (e.g., *Existence* 存在 [c. 1995], *Water Lilies* 出水芙蓉 [c.1995] and *The World* 世界

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<sup>2</sup> Published in *Jiangsu Pictorial*, the woman art historian Xu Hong’s essay ‘Walk Out of the Abyss: My Feminist Critiques’ (1994) is widely seen as the first feminist manifesto in the Chinese art world. Chinese translated academic publications such as Linda Nochlin’s *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays* (1995), Griselda Pollock’s *Vision and Difference* (2000), and Jo Anna Issak’s *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* (2000) reached the Chinese artists, art critics and scholars in the 1990s. These books were published by Yuan-Liu Publishing Company in Taiwan. For details, see Li (2012).

[c.1996]) present a tired-and-sad-looking lesbian couple in a poorly furnished toilet. Feminist art critic Tong Yujie (2011, 161) notes that these paintings drew inspiration from Li's observation of Chinese lesbian farm workers located at the margins of a heteronormative urban culture and at the bottom of the neoliberal capitalist system.

The UNWCW contributed significantly to the building of a sustainable network between Chinese feminists, lesbians and their international counterparts. At the conference, lesbian rights were officially put on the feminist agenda.<sup>3</sup> Feminism and queer political agenda converged at a major international conference. Around this period, there was a surge of women's NGOs, which arguably functioned as 'a symbol of the emerging "civil society" and hence a promising sign of democratic development in China' (Brook and Frolic 1997; Howell 2003; Wang 2018). Particularly, project-based women's NGOs gained momentum after the UNWCW (Wang 2018, 262). Around the same period, self-affirmative queer terms in the Chinese language, including *tongzhi*, *ku'er*, *lala* and *kuaxingbie* 跨性别 (transgender), gained growing popularity in gender and sexual minority communities. They gradually replaced *tongxinglian* 同性恋 (homosexuality) and other Chinese expressions, slang and jargon and became prominent signifiers in campaigns for gender and sexual diversities and equal rights after 2000.

Between 2000 and 2015, relatively loose cultural policies and increasing international cultural exchanges expanded the scope and the amount of queer visual cultures produced by self-identified heterosexual artists in mainland China. Songzhuang 宋庄 was the cradle of China's first queer exhibition *Difference-Gender* 别/性 (c.2009), which showed queer artworks by both queer-identified and queer-friendly artists (see Chapter 6 in this volume). The transformation of Songzhuang into an avant-garde art base can be traced back to the mid-1990s.

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<sup>3</sup> See Palesa Beverly Ditsie's statement at United Nation Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing at <https://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/ngo/13123944.txt>.

Accompanying the compulsory closure of the East Village and the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, many migrant artists fluxed into Songzhuang, following prominent contemporary Chinese artists and critics such as Li Xianting, Fang Lijun, Ai Weiwei and Yue Minjun (Sina Finance 2005). By 2005, the successful negotiation between these avant-garde artists and the local government turned Songzhuang into one of the most popular tourist destinations for contemporary Chinese art. The commercial success of Songzhuang encouraged many city governments to support, if not invest in, international art projects such as biennials, triennials and creative sites (including Beijing's 798 Art District, Shanghai West Bund, Songzhuang and Guangzhou Redtory). Artist Ma Yanhong's representation of two fully naked white men in her paintings emerged in this context.

In Chapter 6, Ma recounts the process in which she created oil paintings *A Certain Smile* and *Two Danes*. Due to the depictions of two fully naked white men on canvas, the two paintings often invite queer readings, although they were not intended to. This story reminds us of the multiplicity and unpredictability of queerness in art production, circulation and consumption. International art exchange has inspired queer feminist artist and critic Li Xinmo to develop the method of 'image writing'—a visual form of *écriture féminine*—which rewrites heteropatriarchal social scripts and creates queer meanings. In Chapter 7, Li shares her exploration of feminist art forms during the first *Bald Girls* exhibition and her understanding of gender and sexuality after networking with queer Chinese artists at the *Secret Love* exhibition.



As scholar Qi Wang (2018) notes, compared to state-initiated waves of feminism,<sup>4</sup> practices led by a younger generation of feminist activists (e.g., the Feminist Five discussed in Chapter 8) feature an ‘outer system’ and even dissident political standpoints, ‘philanthropic volunteerism’ and the transformation of performance art and cyberspace into feminist agency. In our book, the activist art practised by prominent feminist and queer activists such as Wei Tingting (Chapter 8) and Popo Fan (Chapter 14) exemplifies the conscious transformation of feminist and queer performances into an activist form that delivers strong social and political messages. Examples of such queer feminist performances include the stage enactments of *Vagina Monologues* (2003–), the anti-domestic violence campaign (2011) and the ‘Occupy Men’s Toilets’ protest (2012), as discussed in detail by Wei in Chapter 8.

### **Feminist, Queer and Trans Curation**

In the context of Chinese avant-garde art, non-queer-identified artists have appropriated queer images in order to contest established Chinese art paradigms represented by the socialist realism aesthetics. In the early 1990s, the opportunities to enter public museum exhibitions were only open to artists and artworks that followed the Party-led socialist academic art tradition (Feng 2007; Gao 2005; Li 1993; Wu 2008). There were very few public spaces for the exhibition of avant-garde and contemporary art. Meanwhile, many avant-garde artists left their hometowns for Beijing to seek career opportunities. They crowded into low-cost suburban areas and founded artists’ communities such as the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village and the East

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<sup>4</sup> Women’s liberation movements have been large-scale state enterprises in much of the modern Chinese history. Before the foundation of the PRC, feminism was seen as part of the national liberation, which recruited Chinese women to fight against imperialist expansion and colonial rule. In the 1950s and 1960s, state feminism invigorated China’s planned economy with the participation of a female labour force. After 2000, the Women’s Federation uses the rhetorical device ‘leftover women’ 剩女 to push young women to get married. Besides, lesbian issues have not been part of the state feminist work, as recalled by the activist Xian (alias), ‘One officer from the Women’s Federation once told me that they could work on sex worker issues, because that could save Chinese women from suffering. But for lesbians, women who choose to “corrupt” themselves, they could not do anything’. See documentary *We Are Here* (2015) directed by Zhao Jing and Shi Tou.

Village.

The genderfluid persona ‘Fen-Ma Liuming’ was born in the migrant artist Ma Liuming’s private studio in the East Village in 1993 (Lü 2010; Rong 2019). Its art life, however, was soon terminated by police in 1994 (see Chapter 8). As a rebellious and ‘futile behaviour of human being’, ‘Fen-Ma Liuming’ witnessed an illiberal political and cultural environment in the 1990s (Li 1994; Lü 2010; Ma 1994). Similarly, the oil paintings of an effeminate Mao (*Rouge* series, ca.1989-mid-1990s) by the political pop artist Li Shan, which expressed the artist’s feeling of uncertainty, could not be exhibited in any art institutions in mainland China during the 1990s (Russell 2013). Both the ‘Fen-Ma Liuming’ figure and Li’s political pop works exemplify an exiled queer Chinese body, which was unable to become an artistic form or a lifestyle in the mainland Chinese society in the 1990s.

As Bao (2020) points out, the intersections between queer and Chinese identities illuminate the metamorphosis of mainland Chinese society towards its postsocialist form, i.e., an ongoing experiment of mingling socialist orthodoxy with Confucian values and neoliberal capitalism. As narrated in the documentary *Zhi Tongzhi* 誌同志 (*Queer China, ‘Comrade’ China*) directed by queer activist, scholar and filmmaker Cui Zi’en, there were a number of interdisciplinary, interregional and transnational collaborations between people and institutions from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora from the 1980s to the 2000s. In particular, transnational queer academic and activist exchanges in the 1990s nurtured the emergence of queer identities and communities in China.

Since 2010, queer curatorial practices and art exhibitions have played a pivotal role in amplifying women, feminist, queer and trans representations in transnational Chinese societies. Examples include the *Spectrosynthesis* art exhibition, the *Secret Love* art tour and the Women’s Arts Festival. These exhibitions raise provocative questions concerning the translatability of Western concepts and the influence of these concepts on queer and feminist Chinese politics.

How can the Anglophone term ‘queer’ convey the anti-hegemonic demands articulated in gender and sexual movements in contemporary China? In this section, our contributors address this from a grassroots perspective with a focus on people’s lived experiences. We regard cross-cultural translation as a productive, generative activity carried out by transnational cultural practitioners.

In Chapter 9, Jiete Li and Claire Ping introduce their curation of the Women’s Arts Festival, a city-wide, one-month-long event organized by Banying (aka In Light of Shadows) in Beijing in March 2021. Li and Ping discuss feminist politics and their concept of a ‘fluid museum’ through which visitors can find a diverse selection of art events in public spaces across the metropolis. Chapter 10 is written by queer curator Si Han who organized the biggest queer Chinese art exhibition *Secret Love* in Europe. Si Han looks back at the development of contemporary queer Chinese art in the past four decades and offers critical insights on topics and themes covered in this book. He also identifies dominant themes and emerging trends that shape the development of contemporary queer Chinese art at present and in the future. In Chapter 11, curator Brian Curtain offers a critical reading of the *Spectrosynthesis* exhibition, noting that ‘the contexts of Asia complicate [...] questions of recognition, rights and assimilation’ and ‘the lack of a progressive narrative (like *Queer British Art*) of queer liberation in exhibitions in Asia.’ In Chapter 12, Diyi Mergenthaler explores the trans motifs of ‘Fen-Ma Liuming’ with a focus on its agency of translating chronobiopolitics between geopolitical borders and generating possibilities to reimagine a fluid boundary between art and popular culture. Her study highlights the agency of queer and queer-friendly cultural actors to reconfigure the aestheticization of ‘Fen-Ma Liuming’ and provides insights into queer life, self-expression and politics in China.

## **Transnational and Diaspora Queer Art**

According to Arjun Appadurai (1998), the digital mediation of migrants' stories has opened up discussions on cultural pluralism, citizenship and blueprints of a post-national order. The relocation of queer Chinese artists and activists to other parts of the world has contributed to critical reflections on the queer Chinese identity. In this section, we examine the dynamics within which queer and Chinese diasporic positions interact and intersect with each other. In the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Chinese artists have voiced solidarity with Black and Asian activists at the frontlines of anti-racist movements such as 'Black Lives Matter', 'BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour)' and 'Stop Asian Hate' around the world. Several queer and feminist projects by Chinese diaspora artists have also placed emphasis on the racial and ethnic dimensions of queer bodies in Western societies (Bao 2022).

Queer writer and performance artist Burong Zeng moved to the UK in 2016. Zeng created her livestreaming performance *Non-Taster* about food, sense of taste and identity in the spring of 2020 and in the middle of a pandemic lockdown. As elaborated in Chapter 13, in this performance, Zeng adopted a participatory approach to explore the act of swallowing food and its metaphor for the circumstance in which a person must wrap one's head around 'thoughts, feelings and emotions when there is no better option.' Zeng's works point to issues of home, belonging, diaspora identity and human connectivity to engage with contemporary pandemic politics marked by rising individualism, nationalism and xenophobia.

Queer filmmaker Popo Fan has lived in Berlin since 2017. According to Fan's observation in Chapter 14, the mainstream queer identity in Berlin is already 'normalized, commercialized and gentrified', but 'people cannot comfortably connect Asianness and queerness with each other.' Fan discusses two short films *Beer! Beer!* and *Lerne Deutsch in meiner Küche* (Learn German in My Kitchen) that he created in Berlin. In these short films, he uses the affective linkages between him and Asian food to reflect on his queer Asian diaspora

identity living in a European capital. More importantly, he uses food and culinary practices to subvert racialised and stereotypical representations of ‘Chineseness’ and to parody xenophobia in Europe. In doing so, he underscores the intersectionality between queerness and Asianness in the Chinese diasporic body, which embodies the agency to question territorialized social and cultural norms.

In the final chapter of this volume, Bao introduces the *Imagining Queer Bandung* project, a series of film festivals and filmmaking workshops that took place in Berlin in 2021 and in which queer Chinese filmmakers Fan Popo and Kit Hung participated. As Bao eloquently concludes, through connecting with artists, filmmakers and activists from other parts of the world, queer Chinese artists enact ‘minor’ forms of queer transnationalism and articulate a decolonial queer politics based on the political idea of the ‘queer Bandung.’

## **Coda**

Through fifteen chapters, this book showcases the heterogeneity of queer life, culture and experiences in the transnational Chinese context. It foregrounds continuing efforts made by queer Chinese artists, activists, curators, critics and scholars to celebrate queer love, history and culture in contemporary China and cross-geoculturally. By tracing how queer and queer-friendly artists express themselves as individuals and collectives in artist and activist forms, we hope that these critical voices, artistic practices, personal stories, scholarly explorations and reflexive approaches can inspire readers to probe further into issues of identity, aesthetics and cultural politics.

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