Queer comrades
Digital video documentary and LGBTQ health activism in China

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Abstract
This chapter examines health activism in the People's Republic of China by focusing on China's LGBTQ communities. Using *Queer Comrades* (*Tongzhi yi fanren* 同志亦凡人), a Beijing-based queer community video streaming website, as a case study, I discuss some of the tactics that China's LGBTQ communities use for health communication, represented by the strategic use of digital video (DV) documentaries by a community NGO and video streaming website. In doing so, I examine how health activism effectively combined with media and community activism helps to build communities and promote LGBTQ and community rights while at the same time educating the public. This chapter suggests that health issues are not simply individual problems that can be solved by medical, psychological, and psychiatric interventions; they are political and social issues that involve citizenship rights and societal support.

In July 2017, a gay man from Central China's Henan Province, identified by his surname as Yu, won an apology and compensation from a mental hospital which had administered so-called 'conversion therapy', a pseudo-scientific medical treatment designed to turn gay people straight, to him without his consent. He was admitted to the hospital by his wife and relatives in 2015 and was forced to take medicine and have injections over a period of 19 days. Although the court found that being forced into a mental institution infringed Yu's rights, insofar as he did not pose a danger to society, the ruling did not express an opinion on whether it was right for the hospital to practise gay conversion therapy (BBC News 2017). The success of the court case was celebrated by some as reaffirming the depathologisation of homosexuality since the removal of homosexuality from the third edition of the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders*, CCMD-3 (*Zhongguo jingshen jibing fenlei fang'an yu zhenduan biaozhun* 中国精神疾病分类方案与诊断标准, 第三版) in 2001. However, for others, it serves as yet another reminder of the ambiguous, and often problematic, status of homosexuality in China's public health discourse. The case also highlights some of the constraints and promises of health activism in contemporary China, whether practised by individuals such as Yu himself or through organised collective action, in this case represented by the 'rescue operation' carried out by the Guangzhou-based PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) China and the legal support provided by the LGBTQ Rights Advocacy China. The collective action aimed at fighting for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) health rights, often carried out by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), is the focus of this chapter.
In this chapter, I examine health activism in the People's Republic of China by focusing on China's LGBTQ community. Using *Queer Comrades* (*Tongzhi yi fanren* 同志亦凡人), a Beijing-based queer community video streaming website as a case study, I discuss some of the tactics that China's LGBTQ communities have adopted for health communication, including the strategic use of digital video (DV) documentaries by a community NGO and video streaming website, and examine how health activism effectively combined with media and community activism can help to build communities and promote LGBTQ rights while educating the public.[1]

Depathologising and repathologising homosexuality
Homosexuality is widely considered to have been depathologised in China since 2001. However, such 'depathologisation' is only partial. The CCMD-3 distinguishes between two types of homosexuality: ego syntonic homosexuality, i.e. those who feel comfortable with their sexual identity, and ego dystonic homosexuality, i.e. those who do not (Kang 2012). What constitutes 'feeling comfortable' or being 'in harmony with oneself' (*ziwo hexie* 自我和谐), has only been vaguely defined and is thus open to interpretation. The CCMD-3 stipulates that ego-syntonic homosexuality is normal and requires no treatment. However, those who feel 'anxious, depressed,

conflicted' about their sexual identity, and those who 'seek change of gender and sexual identity through treatment', are still seen as suffering from mental disorders (Zhou 2009: 125). This understanding of homosexuality is still prevalent in China today and it provides justification for medical and psychological interventions to 'treat' homosexuality.

A recommended text for mental health education, *Zixun xinlixue* 咨询心理学 (*Consulting Psychology*) (Qiu 2013) published by the Guangdong Higher Education Press, describes homosexuality as a 'disorder' (Norton 2016). The textbook recommends four ways of giving treatment: changing one's lifestyle and circle of friends so as to make a radical break with the past, forming a platonic relationship with a person of the opposite sex, using heterosexual images and audio recordings to 'transfer' one's sexual desire to the opposite sex, and finally, 'repulsion therapy', i.e. inducing nausea with forced vomiting or fear of electrocution when homoerotic thoughts emerge (BBC News 2017). The court case mentioned at the beginning of this chapter involves 'repulsion therapy', otherwise known as conversion therapy, aversion therapy, or reparative therapy. In this particular case, Yu was strapped to a hospital bed and force-fed drugs for 19 days (Beech 2016). The practice of using electroshock for conversion therapy on LGBTQ people in China is widely documented, including by a Chinese LGBTQ community webcast documentary *Cures That Kill* (*shenglai tongzhi* 生来同志) (dir. Wei Xiaogang 魏小刚, 2011), a UNDP and USAID report on LGBTQ issues in China (UNDP and USAID 2014), and a UK television documentary titled *China's Gay Shock Therapy* (Channel 4 2015).

In a book titled *Zhongguo tongxinglian yanjiu* 中国同性恋研究 (*Studies on Chinese Homosexuality*) published in 2005, one of the authors, Dr Lu, a neurologist from Nanjing Medical University, documented case studies of treating homosexuality by injecting 'gay patients' with apomorphine, a drug that induces nausea, and requiring them to keep a diary frequently checked by doctors (Liu and Lu 2005; Bao 2012). According to the book, Dr Liu gave advice to 2,534 gay 'patients' from 1987 to 1997. Among the 1,000 gay 'patients' whom he treated with his 'guided corrective psychotherapy', 79.8% came to him of their own accord, and 20.2% were referred by others, including family members and relatives. Among the 82 'patients' that he treated, a one-year follow-up study suggested that 13.5% had 'overall recovered'; 13.5% made 'considerable progress'; 39% made 'some progress'; 34% 'showed no sign of change' (Liu and Lu 2005: 277). These statistics, problematic as they are, shed light on the precarious mental health of LGBTQ people in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the pathologisation of homosexuality itself.

The medical, psychological, and psychiatric treatment of homosexuality in China stems from a deeply rooted belief that homosexuality is a disease and a form of mental disorder. This idea had its origins variously in the translation of Western theories of psychology and medical science into Chinese in the Republican era (Chiang 2010; Sang 2003; Kang 2009), in Maoist understanding of homosexuals as 'hooligans' (*liumang* 流氓) whose mentality and behaviour was incompatible with the socialist mindset required by the state, and in post-Mao Chinese intellectuals' obsession with a highly selective body of works in Western psychology, psychiatry, and medical science often equated with scientific objectivity and authority. The governance of non-heteronormative sexuality is not only a matter of public health, with its agenda of producing modern and healthy citizens, but also a concern for the state to establish a heteronormative, family-oriented and socially conservative moral and social order (Jeffreys 2006; Jeffreys and Yu 2015).

In this context, the high profile of mental health issues in China's LGBTQ community is hardly surprising. According to a national survey published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2016, only around 5% of LGBTQ people surveyed had chosen to 'come out', i.e. to disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity to family, friends, and the wider public. Gender and sexuality-based discrimination occurs most frequently in families (56.1%), followed by school (39.6%), and workplace (21%). Over 70% of LGBTQ people have been emotionally troubled by their sexual orientation and gender identity (UNDP 2016: 26–7). Some LGBTQ people have sought medical and psychological treatment; others have even attempted suicide. A survey of 1,000 gay men and lesbians in China by mental health experts found that 40% had attempted suicide, while a 2002 survey found that 33% of gays and lesbians had unsuccessfully attempted suicide. A mental health survey of 200 gay men, published in 2008, found that among them, 45% had anxiety symptoms and 57.5% had symptoms of depression (UNDP and USAID 2014: 40). There seems to be a strong correlation between the inability to reconcile with and articulate one's gender and sexual identity and LGBTQ mental ill-health.

As in many other countries, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) have posed serious threats to the lives and health of many LGBTQ people in China. The specificity of China lies in the simultaneity, or even overlap, of LGBTQ and HIV/AIDS issues, to such an extent that the gay identity, not long after it emerged in China's public discourse, became pathologised and stigmatised because of its close association with HIV/AIDS. This was hardly surprising because LGBTQ issues could only be legitimately talked about in relation to HIV/AIDS prevention in China's public discourse. It is worth noting that HIV/AIDS cases have spread rapidly since the identification of China's first reported case of HIV/AIDS in Beijing in 1985. Perceptions of HIV/AIDS have since evolved from a disease of 'the Other' – foreigners, minorities, and rural, peripheral, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of people – to an epidemic that threatens the general populace (Yu 2012: 3). Despite this shift, gay people are still referred to as Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSMs) (*nan nan xingxingwei zhe* 男男性行为者) and are considered a high-risk group for HIV/AIDS infection in public health discourse. In 2006, the Ministry of Health pledged to send AIDS prevention volunteers to LGBTQ groups and also included MSMs in its Five-Year Plan. By 2008, the Chinese government had launched the first national programme devoted to the prevention of HIV/AIDS among MSMs (Hildebrandt 2012: 852). China's Health and Family Planning Commission (2015) officially estimates the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among MSMs to be 7.7% in 2015.[2] MSMs are estimated to represent over a quarter of new reported infections each year (UNAID 2013). The association of HIV with homosexuality has seriously stigmatised LGBTQ people, but it has also produced some unintended consequences of encouraging LGBTQ community building and promoting health activism.

LGBTQ health activism

Health activism is usually understood as 'action that involves a challenge to the existing order whenever it is perceived to influence people's health negatively or has led to an injustice or an inequality' (Laverack 2013: 137). Health activism has had a very significant influence on the Chinese healthcare system and national policy on health and well-being. In the past under China's socialist system, public health issues were taken care of by the Chinese state, and citizens were officially entitled to equal health rights. With the gradual deregulation and privatisation of the public health sector, together with an increasing awareness of health rights and citizen power, more and more ordinary citizens have taken action to fight for their health rights and to seek to change flawed public health policies. During the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in 2013, many Chinese citizens organised themselves in order to compel disclosure of government-censored information about the epidemic, pressure national and local governments to take quick actions against the spread of the epidemic, and help local communities to survive the epidemic (Yu 2009). In 2007, some citizens in Xiamen held a demonstration to protest against the construction of a chemical factory because they believed that the chemical PX (short for para-xylene) would be harmful to their health. This organised action, known as the 'PX-Incident' in China, successfully halted the project and served as yet another of the increasing number of successful instances of health activism in China today (Tang 2008).

To date, LGBTQ health in China has been primarily discussed in relation to HIV/AIDS. Perhaps not surprisingly, LGBTQ health activism in China has mostly been seen as HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, and in relation to the state's control of civil society (Hildebrandt 2012, 2013; Jones 1999, 2007; Wei 2015). In an era when HIV/AIDS posed a tremendous danger to the LGBTQ community, and when LGBTQ identity was reduced to a pathologised and stigmatised MSM identity, the scholarly attention paid to HIV/AIDS was fully justified. However, given that necessary international, national, and community resources have been pooled into HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, and that China is no longer one of the high-risk countries, with a low national prevalence at 0.037% in 2015 (China Health and Family Planning Commission 2015), it is high time to pay attention to other health issues troubling the LGBTQ community, including sexual and reproductive health, as well as mental and psychological health.

Despite their ambiguous legal status and the difficulty of getting official registration as legitimate organisations in China, in addition to the Chinese government's tightened control over international support for China's civil societies through the Foreign NGO Law passed in 2016, NGOs play a vital role in health activism in China, especially in relation to HIV/AIDS (Hildebrandt 2013). China's HIV/AIDS crisis provided political as well as economic opportunities for many LGBTQ NGOs in China. As international HIV/AIDS funding began to enter China in the early 2000s, LGBTQ NGOs started to mushroom throughout the country. By 2012 more than 100 LGBTQ organisations had

been established in various parts of mainland China (Hou 2014). It was estimated in 2014 that there was some semblance of an organised LGBTQ group in every major Chinese city (UNDP and USAID 2014). Because of the specific way in which HIV/AIDS funds are distributed (international funds have to be channelled through the Chinese government, primarily the National Centre for Disease Control (CDC), and then trickled down to local governments and NGOs), the HIV/AIDS NGOs in China have become increasingly dependent, financially and politically, on different levels of the Chinese government. Over time, different arrangements with the Chinese government have helped to shape NGOs in diverse ways. Some become partners of the state and shun gay rights advocacy, eventually getting 'de-pinked' HIV/AIDS NGOs; some act in partnership with the state but maintain a focus on gay rights advocacy; some focus on gay rights advocacy and neither partner with nor challenge the state. Very few NGOs challenge the state and focus solely on gay rights advocacy (Chua and Hildebrandt 2013: 1597–9). These different configurations of power relations shape the agenda and scope of health activism for China's LGBTQ NGOs.

Beginning in 2012, many international HIV/AIDS–related donors, including the Global Fund and the Gates Foundation, began to withdraw from China, partly because of China's established status as an 'upper middle-income country' (UNDP and USAID 2014: 51), partly as a result of the contained situation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in China, and more importantly, because of increasing controls over the activities of international NGOs by the Chinese government. This has proven to be both a challenge and an opportunity for China's LGBTQ community. As many HIV/AIDS–focused NGOs disintegrate or change direction, an increasing number of LGBTQ NGOs have begun to devote their attention to identity building, community service, and public education. An example in case is the Shenyang Consultation Centre for AIDS and Health Services (*Shenyang aizhi yuanzhu jiankang zixun fuwu zhongxin* 沈阳爱之援助健康咨询服务中心, which is concerned both with LGBTQ health and LGBTQ community building. Since 2011, in collaboration with 16 LGBTQ grassroots organisations in Northeast China, the Centre has organised annual Northeast Gay Culture Festivals (*Dongbei tongxinglian wenhuajie* 东北同性恋文化节) and various other activities locally, regionally, and nationally. Some of the activities include Dalian Gay Pride Hiking (*Dalian caihong tubu* 大连彩虹徒步), a cross-dressing beauty contest, the Northeast Gay Relatives Talkfest (*Dongbei tongxinglian qinyou kentanhui* 东北同性恋亲友恳谈会), lesbians' rainbow weddings, a rainbow flag relay race across Northeast China, and gay rainbow cycling (UNDP and USAID 2014: 48).

LGBTQ health activism has thus shifted from a sole focus on HIV/AIDS prevention and support to community building and public education. In the process, there has been a reconfigured relationship between international funding support, the Chinese government, and LGBTQ NGOs. There has also been a deepened understanding of the diversity of the LGBTQ community and the disparate health needs of the community. Many NGOs have concluded that LGBTQ health issues are deeply connected to broad social and cultural issues; an improvement of LGBTQ physical and psychological health not only requires identity and community building but rights advocacy and public education as well. In the next section, I focus on Queer Comrades, a Beijing-based LGBTQ community video streaming website, and the ways in which it engages in health activism.

DV documentary and LGBTQ health activism

Founded in 2007, Queer Comrades (*tongzhi yi fanren* 同志亦凡人), originally named 'Queer as Folk Beijing' in English, is an independent LGBTQ video streaming website that aims to document queer culture and raise LGBTQ awareness in China.[3] It is one of the longest running and most popular community video streaming websites for China's LGBTQ community, with more than 20 million hits for its videos hosted on mainstream websites and an average of 15,000 hits on its own website every day (Deklerck and Wei 2015: 24). It regularly updates community news in text and three-to-five-minute short videos. It also hosts talk show programmes and makes community documentaries. Its programmes are mostly disseminated via its own website and on some major streaming websites in China and abroad including Sina, Tudou, and YouTube, often subject to frequent Internet censorship. Some programmes have been made into DVDs and sold at various screenings and fund-raising events.

Queer Comrades is a project administered by the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute (BGHEI) (*Beijing jiande jiankang jiaoyu zhongxin* 北京纪安德健康教育中心), a Beijing-based LGBTQ community NGO.[4] Wei Xiaogang 魏小刚 (aka Wei Jiangang 魏建刚) is the director of the BGHEI and many Queer Comrades programmes, and Stijn Deklerck, a Belgian national, is the

producer of Queer Comrades.[5] Queer Comrades videos were predominantly made by Xiaogang, Deklerck, and a couple of regular film crew members, helped by community volunteers. Queer Comrades is mostly self-funded or supported by international foundations and organisations such as the Dutch Embassy in China, the Ford Foundation and the European Union. (Tan 2016: 45)

Queer Comrades is not the first, or the only, LGBTQ media platform in China to use digital media to engage in health activism. It is, however, one of the most successful organisations that consciously and effectively uses DV documentaries for health education, community building, rights advocacy and public education. Its draws on, and forms part of, China's ongoing digital video revolution and the New Documentary Movement.

China's New Documentary Movement, which started in the early 1990s, witnessed a group of filmmakers including Wu Wenguang 吴文光 who departed from the highly orchestrated realism associated with state film and television studios and experimented with low-budget, experimental, and spontaneous filmmaking characterised by 'on-the-spot realism' (Berry and Rofel 2010a: 5). These filmmakers also shifted the subject matter of their films from state sanctioned topics to the lives of people at the margins of society. The movement received a significant boost when the mini DV camera entered China in about 1997 (p. 8). The relative affordability and 'lightness' (Voci 2010), both in terms of weight and of technical and aesthetic qualities, of DV cameras have encouraged professional and amateur filmmakers alike to pick up their own cameras and document the lives they are most familiar with or concerned about, while the fast expansion of personal computers and the Internet in Chinese households has made it possible for these films to reach a wider audience. A variety of film festivals in China, including the Beijing Independent Film Festival, the Nanjing Independent Film Festival, the Yunfest, the Beijing Queer Film Festival, as well as numerous international film festivals, have promoted the production and dissemination of DV films (Berry and Robinson 2017). DV documentaries, made by professionals and amateurs alike and disseminated through various channels, have mushroomed in China and dramatically changed China's media landscape.

The development of DV culture coincides and intersects with the development of LGBTQ activism in China. In a country where public assemblies, demonstrations, and protests are considered politically sensitive and therefore shunned, LGBTQ activism mostly takes place in private homes, commercial venues, education spaces, and in the forms of dinners, karaoke parties, sporting events, film screenings, academic lectures etc. A historical coincidence has also shaped the trajectory of LGBTQ activism in China. Many of the early LGBTQ activists were Beijing-based filmmakers, writers, performers, and artists, and they all saw the potential of DV films and participated in filmmaking and film festival organisation.[6] There is no better media form than films for safely conveying 'public secrets' to the public in public spaces (Donald 2000); and there is nothing like a film festival or screening event for bringing people together in a seemingly less political and non-confrontational manner to share their feelings and experiences, thus effectively constructing identities, communities, and politics. Beginning in 2001, the Beijing Queer Film Festival (BJQFF) has become one of the most symbolically significant expressions of LGBTQ activism in contemporary China (Bao 2017). The Queer Comrades team is one of the organisers of, and an active participant in, the BJQFF and the China Queer Film Festival Tour. Working closely together, China's LGBTQ Movement and the New Documentary Movement have had a significant impact on the politics and aesthetics of Queer Comrades and on the health activism in which it engages.

The politics of representation

The popularity of the Queer Comrades webcast site owes as much to what it excludes as to what it includes. It excludes stigmatised, negative, and 'othered' representations of homosexuality and celebrates positive and diverse self-representations of LGBTQ people in China, and this has to do with the politics of representation: that is, with who represents whom and in what ways. Chao Shi-Yan (2010) and Luke Robinson (2012, 2015) have identified a key shift in the representation of homosexuality in DV documentaries. As more and more LGBTQ people take up DV cameras to make their own films, the film aesthetics and the queer subjectivity they construct have also undergone significant changes; 'the result is the emergence of a queer subject whose sexuality is less performed and documented than incorporated and networked' (Robinson 2015: 294). Most of Queer Comrades' production crew are self-identified LGBTQ people deeply committed to the LGBTQ community. They speak for, to, and as members of the LGBTQ community, rather than trying to cater to the voyeuristic gaze of the public. This is bound to have a tremendous impact on how LGBTQ identity and community is represented.

Producer Deklerck and Director Wei stated the mission of Queer Comrades in the following way:
With our webcast, we show empowering LGBT images: our audience sees people who are not ashamed of their sexual orientation, people who are proud of who they are, people who talk openly about issues that our audience members might be struggling with themselves. We create a forum beyond taboos, a forum where people can gain positive insights into LGBT culture.
(Deklerck and Wei 2015: 19)
Indeed, most of the Queer Comrades videos present positive images of the LGBTQ community. Take the first season for example: eleven talk shows, from April to June 2007, interviewed a number of LGBTQ celebrities, Chinese and international, and covered a wide range of topics, including so-called 'fag hags', 'gaydar', LGBTQ magazines, queer racism, drag culture, queer film, gay websites, gay athletes, lesbian sex, gay Shanghai, and the pink economy. The hosts and guests appeared confident, happy, and LGBTQ identified; the queer life the shows portrayed was diverse, colourful, and dynamic (Figure 12.1). If we consider how homosexuality was stereotypically and negatively portrayed in mainstream media and perceived by the wider society at a time overshadowed by HIV/AIDS, such positive representations were revolutionary. The Chinese title of the show, *tongzhi yi fanren* 同志亦凡人 (literally Queers as Ordinary People) and the English title at the time, 'Queer as Folk Beijing' vividly capture the longing for the 'ordinariness' of queer life without stereotyping and spectacularising it.

Figure 12.1 Queer Comrades talk show hosts Xiaogang, Eva and Stijn, 2009
Source: (photo credit: Wei Xiaogangg)

Perhaps the queer life the shows represent is not so 'ordinary' after all. At a time when most LGBTQ people in China stay closeted and remain stigmatised, and many lead a precarious life affected by the stigma of being members of sexual minorities and by China's endorsement of neoliberal capitalism, such representations can only reflect a minority of queer lives, mostly those who are young, good-looking, urban, confident and middle-class, well-educated and widely travelled, multilingual, and cosmopolitan, partly because they were the ones who dared to 'come out' at the time. This is also evidenced by a large percentage of the production crew and interviewees being international expats or diaspora Chinese living in Chinese cities. In a city such as Beijing with a fast-developing pink economy, this is a niche market not to be missed and Queer Comrades has made a timely pitch for this market. As a result, some of the screening events and parties took place in relatively expensive

bars and clubs in Chaoyang District, where many foreign embassies and international businesses are located. But the cost of consumption and the language barriers (English was the main working language) effectively prevented some local LGBTQ people from attending these events. Nevertheless, most LGBTQ people in China who access the video through online streaming can reasonably imagine an urban and cosmopolitan queer culture for themselves through the video viewing and sharing experience.

There has been criticism about the 'mainstreaming' of the programme, in that the show resembles a homonormative, middle-class, consumer culture in the West (Deklerck 2017; Robinson 2015). Addressing the use of traditional broadcasting techniques (the TV talk show format in this case) in some LGBTQ documentaries, Robinson (2015: 293) points out the complexity and ambiguity of the term 'mainstream' in the Chinese context. Queer Comrades, a video streaming website independent of the state, addresses politically sensitive issues; besides, the show is primarily funded by its producers and by NGOs, and made available online to the community for free. Seen in this light, Queer Comrades is far from being part of the 'mainstream'. Deklerck (2017) identifies some 'queer moments' in Queer Comrades, and comments on the specificity of queer politics in China, which cannot be reduced to the binary of gay identity politics (which advocates a 'coming out' strategy based on an essentialised notion of gay identity) and queer politics (which advocates a coalition politics for all gender and sexual minorities outside of mainstream gender and sexual norms), and which can best be described as 'nomadic activism', in the words of Lisa Rofel (2013). Both Robinson and Deklerck raise valid points, but they also risk romanticising LGBTQ activism in China as markedly Chinese and intrinsically subversive. I recognise the urban, middle-class and even consumerist and lifestyle bias of some Queer Comrades programmes, especially in the first season. However, starting from the second season, Queer Comrades has begun to pay more attention to the diversity of LGBTQ lives and experiences, including those from rural, working-class, and ethnic minority backgrounds.

It is useful to situate Queer Comrades in the context of a neoliberal 'desiring China' (Rofel 2007), which produces legitimate desires and desiring subjects demanded by the market economy promoted by the Chinese state. In legitimising some specific modes of queer desires, Queer Comrades excludes others. This is a type of 'homonormativity', understood as the gentrification of queer desires and the alignment of queer desires with the needs of the state and the market (Duggan 2004). In challenging heteronormativity, Queer Comrades also participates in, and contributes to, a transnational neoliberal hegemonic formation in which China takes part.

Having said this, the 'utopian' nature of Queer Comrades should not be overlooked. Even if these shows only represent a small LGBTQ minority in China, most of whom live sheltered lives largely free from real social problems, and thus seem utopian to many, they still break the monotony of the present and conjure up aspirational imaginations for many. As Jose Munoz comments on the importance of imagination for a queer future, 'queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present'; it is 'essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (Munoz 2009: 1). Writing about lesbian activism in China, Anna Huang (2017: 226) also argues against 'pragmatic reformist politics' and for 'a queer politics of imagination'. Seen in this light, the representation of queer lifestyles in Queer Comrades can also be read as a strategy of activism that gives LGBTQ people in China hope and imagination, although such optimism can be 'cruel': insofar as it inspires aspirations for a good life, it also defines and sometimes confines such aspirations (Berlant 2011).

The 'technical quality' of Queer Comrades is worth noting. On the one hand, the format and aesthetics of Queer Comrades resemble the news, talk shows, and documentaries on mainstream television in China. For example, its talk show programmes 'blend elements of the chat show – studio shoots, the use of the host, and informal discussion with guests – with more classic *vérité* sequences and even elements of the music video' (Robinson 2015: 297). Its news programme uses voiceover which tries to imitate a state television newscaster but has traces of amateurism which can be easily discerned by the audience. LGBTQ identified journalists and newscasters report in the studio or on the street. Ordinary people are interviewed spontaneously and often without preparation. These programmes are reminiscent of the TV journalism influenced by China's New Documentary Movement (Berry *et al*. 2010) and its associated on-the-spot realist aesthetics of *xianchang* 现场 (Robinson 2012). The 'mainstreaming' of Queer Comrades in terms of programme format and aesthetics can be interpreted as reflecting LGBTQ people's wish to become normalised and accepted by mainstream Chinese society. But 'mainstreaming' can also be read as a subversive

strategy. If we recall how LGBTQ people are usually portrayed as deviant, abnormal, and anonymous in mainstream Chinese television, Queer Comrades certainly turns against such representations: LGBTQ people's faces are not covered by mosaic; their voices are not disguised; their names are not hidden. They are mostly healthy, happy, articulate, and confident in front of the camera. They are, as the Chinese title of the video streaming website suggests, 'ordinary people'. In this sense, the use of 'mainstream' formats and aesthetics serves to 'queer' the mainstream.
In a parody of a news programme entitled *Breaking News from a Homosexual China*, Queer Comrades reports the discovery of a 'disease' called 'heterosexuality' in a hypothetically queer world. 'Ordinary citizens' interviewed expressed their lack of understanding of and even voiced their disgust against the 'abnormality' of heterosexuality. A 'medical expert' named Sun Haiyin 孙嗨淫 (a spoof of the name of the homophobic media celebrity Sun Haiying 孙海英), performed by queer activist Fan Popo 范坡坡, explained ways to prevent and to cure the 'disease'. This video is obviously a spoof of a mainstream television report on homosexuality. By replacing 'homosexuality' with 'heterosexuality' in news reporting, the video reveals the unconscious bias of a heteronormative society under the assumed scientific and journalistic 'objectivity'.
To avoid censorship, Queer Comrades used to adopt a non-confrontational political strategy by avoiding politically sensitive issues such as LGBTQ political rights. But after experiencing the forced closure of several editions of the Beijing Queer Film Festivals and the ILGA–Asia conference in Surabaya, Queer Comrades has now become more daring in clearly articulating a human rights agenda. However, such a political stance is quite rare and often ambiguous because survival is paramount.

Community participation and social engagement
Health communication is most effective when community participation is involved (Dutta 2011). Strategies created by communities for themselves can best address community health needs by forming a support network among community members and devising community-based strategies to solve these problems. Through actively participating in the process of health communication and activism, community members are empowered as responsible citizens and active agents in social changes. In the words of Deklerck and Wei, 'Queer Comrades aims to empower people to stand up for themselves and actively find solutions to the issues and problems they are dealing with in their lives' (Deklerck and Wei 2015: 32).
Queer Comrades does not avoid issues such as HIV/AIDS. In contrast to mainstream media which often take a condemnatory and moralising tone when reporting HIV/AIDS in the LGBTQ community, or regard LGBTQ identity solely as a pathologised and stigmatised MSM identity, Queer Comrades reports HIV/AIDS news in a positive light by focusing on community strength, tenacity, and solidarity in combatting HIV/AIDS. In the first season, Queer Comrades invited Professor Zhang Beichuan 张北川, a LGBTQ-friendly medical expert from Qingdao Medical University, to give tips about HIV/AIDS prevention. It also invited Dawei 大伟 (pseudonym), a gay man living with HIV/AIDS, to talk about his experience of fighting against HIV/AIDS. These individuals were celebrated in the programme as 'community heroes'. By placing individuals at the centre of the picture, while celebrating community strength and solidarity, Queer Comrades successfully communicates HIV/AIDs–related knowledge to the queer community.
In 2011, Queer Comrades made a documentary entitled *Cures That Kill* (*Shenlai tongzhi* 生来同志), which deals with the issue of LGBTQ mental health and 'conversion therapy'. Recognising that the root of conversion therapy lies in people's misunderstanding of homosexuality, both in and out of the community, Queer Comrades invites community members and mental health professionals to talk about their changing understandings of homosexuality. In interviews, several mental health professionals confessed their lack of understanding of, or even bias against, LGBTQ people before they met anyone from the community. A counsellor specifically mentioned her changing attitude from 'being able to tolerate in order to help these people' to eventually realising her deeply rooted prejudice and assumed moral high ground, thus being able to treat LGBTQ people as friends and learn from them. Two gay men, one Chinese and the other Dutch, narrated their experiences of receiving conversion therapy. Their experiences reveal the violence of medical, psychiatric, and religious institutions in forcing LGBTQ people to undergo conversion therapy; they also reveal that LGBTQ mental health is associated with complex social and cultural issues, such as loneliness and lack of emotional support, school bullying, family pressure for gay people to enter into heterosexual marriages, lack of access to correct information about sexuality, and lack of tolerance in evangelical

religious communities. Queer Comrades suggests that these are social problems that require institutional or societal efforts to tackle, rather than individual psychological or psychiatric problems. This documentary has not only been shown inside the LGBTQ community, but also to mental health professionals in various parts of China and used as a tool for professional development and public education (Deklerck and Wei 2015: 25).

Most documentaries produced by Queer Comrades use mainstream TV documentary conventions such as interviews and talking heads. This is represented by *The Cream of the Queer Crop* (dir. Wei Xiaogang 2010), *Strong* (dir. Wei Xiaogang 2012), and *Chinese Closet* (dir. Fan Popo 范坡坡 2009). The significance of these documentaries lies in their unambiguous presentation of queer bodies and voices. 'Our refusal to use masking tools stems from the fact that the Chinese mainstream media often utilise these tools when interviewing LGBT people', Deklerck and Wei explain, 'it is for this reason that Queer Comrades has always promoted a very "out" LGBT identity'. (Deklerck and Wei 2015: 30). This serves as a strategy for 'digitally coming out': some LGBTQ people may not have the courage to come out to their parents, but they can come out to the community through DV films. These films, archived online and in DVDs, form part of China's ongoing LGBTQ history. In this sense, Queer Comrades is more than a video streaming website; it enables China's LGBTQ community to take shape, to present itself, and to make its own history.

Apart from community building, Queer Comrades also makes a positive impact on mainstream Chinese society. Since 2011, the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, in collaboration with Queer Comrades and other LGBTQ organisations, has been holding the China Media Rainbow Award Ceremony every year. At the ceremony, awards are given to journalists and media organisations which have given positive representations to LGBTQ issues, as well as individuals who have made significant contributions to China's LGBTQ community. The 2016 winners included *Vista* (*Kan tianxia* 看天下), Netease News (*Wangyi xinwen* 网易新闻), Phoenix Television (*Fenghuang weishi* 凤凰卫视), and *Global Times* (*Huanqiu shibao* 环球时报). Qiu Qiming 邱启明, a China Central Television (CCTV) (*Zhongyang dianshi tai* 中央电视台) newsreader, was given a Special Contribution Award for publicly supporting LGBTQ issues. By acting as a media watchdog and by encouraging mainstream media to pay attention to LGBTQ issues, the China Rainbow Award has become an important way in which the LGBTQ community influences mainstream media production and Chinese society.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how LGBTQ community media such as Queer Comrades use documentaries and digital media platforms to engage in health activism. By producing DV films, and by using the digital platform to engage the community and the public, Queer Comrades has gone beyond a community NGO and has started to have an impact on China's media ecology and society. Also, by focusing on social, cultural, and community issues, and by encouraging community participation and involvement, Queer Comrades successfully communicates health issues to the LGBTQ community. If anything can be learned from Queer Comrades, it is that health issues are not simply individual problems that can be solved by medical, psychological, and psychiatric interventions; they are political and social issues that involve citizenship rights and societal support. In the recent past, immediately after homosexuality had been depathologised as a mental disorder, it was repathologised as an HIV/AIDS–related MSM identity in China. The process of depathogisation is a long, ongoing process that requires concerted efforts from the government, the society, and the community. Media, in particular community media, are playing a significant role in facilitating this process. After all, representation, by whom and in what way, matters significantly when it comes to identity, community, and health rights.

Filmography

Breaking News from a Homosexual China (*Shendu baodao* 深度报道), dir. Queer Comrades 同志亦凡人, 2014.

Chinese Closet (*Guizu* 柜族), dir. Fan Popo 范坡坡, 2009.

Cures That Kill (*Shenglai tongzhi* 生来同志), dir. Wei Xiaogang 魏小刚, 2011.

The Cream of the Queer Crop (*Tongzhi tatata tatata* 同志他他他她她她), dir. Wei Xiaogang **魏**小刚, 2010.

In the Name of Life (*Yi shengming de mingyi* 以生命的名义), China Central Television, 2005.

Strong (*Ni ruci jianqiang* 你如此坚强), dir. Wei Xiaogang 魏小刚, 2012.

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Notes

[1] The Queer Comrades video streaming website: www.queercomrades.com, accessed 1 August 2017. Although the webcast programme was founded in 2007, its official website went online only on 1 January 2010. Prior to the establishment of its official website, the webcast programmes were mostly made available on mainstream websites, LGBT websites and video streaming websites.

[2] This figure has been contested. A 2015 study in 11 major Chinese cities of more than 8,900 men who have sex with men shows the average prevalence of HIV infection to be 9.9%, with average incidence of 5.5 per 100 people, higher than the official figure (Shang and Zhang 2015).

[3] The Chinese title (*tongzhi yi fanren* 同志亦凡人, literally meaning 'comrades as ordinary people') of the programme remains unchanged. The English title changed from *Queer as Folk Beijing* to *Queer Comrades* from the beginning of the third season in April 2009. *Tongzhi* 同志 (comrade) a term widely used in China's LGBT community to refer to themselves. For a discussion of the cultural politics of translating *tongzhi* and *tongzhi yi fanren*, see Bao (2011). For a history of the Queer Comrades video streaming website, see Deklerck and Wei (2015).

[4] The webcast operated on its own in its first season from April to June 2007. In its second season, running from March 2008 to February, 2008, and third season onward starting in April 2009, the webcast operates as a project under the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute (Deklerck and Wei 2015).

[5] Wei Xiaogang is also known as Wei Jiangang. Wei uses the name Xiaogang in most of his Queer Comrades productions and Jiangang primarily as director of the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute.

[6] The names I have in mind include Cui Zi'en, Fan Popo, He Xiaopei, Wei Xiaogang, Shitou, and Mingming. For a brief account of the queer filmmaking scenes in contemporary China, see Bao (2018).