‘Communist international of queer films’

The radical culture of the Beijing Queer Film Festival

Hongwei Bao

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Founded in 2001, the Beijing Queer Film Festival (BJQFF) is one of the longest running identity-based film festivals in the contemporary People’s Republic of China (PRC).[1] Since its inception, the festival has undergone significant transformations: from being a student-led ‘homosexual’ film festival held on an elite university campus to now forming a part of China’s independent film movement, from fighting ‘guerrilla warfare’ against police intervention in urban Beijing to its current form of the ‘Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week’ held annually at the cultural centre of a foreign embassy in Beijing.[2] The BJQFF plays an important part in China’s queer movement; it also serves as a good example of how marginalised communities engage in media activism to contest illiberal neoliberalism in the Global South.

The BJQFF has been examined as a response to neoliberal governance in East Asia (Rhyne 2011) and cultural translation of sexual identities and politics in a transnational context (Bao 2017). So far it has not been studied in terms of its spatial politics, organisation forms,

[1] I wish to thank Steve Presence and Jack Newsinger from the Radical Film Network (RFN) for their feedback on the English version of this chapter. A German-language version appeared as ‘Guerilla-Taktiken. Das Beijing Queer Film Festival und radikale Filmkultur’ in *Montage AV* 28 (2) and I thank Chris Tedjasukmana and Stephen Lowry for their help and support. This chapter is the result of my long-term participation in and engagement with the Beijing Queer Film Festival and other forms of queer community culture in China. I am grateful to all the friendship, help and camaraderie I have received from the queer and radical film communities in China and transnationally. Special thanks go to Fan Popo for granting me permission to use the pictures from past BJQFFs to illustrate this chapter.

[2] This chapter primarily focuses on the first decade of the Beijing Queer Film Festival. Since 2015, the festival has been rebranded as the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week and hosted by the Institut Français of Beijing. Many old committee members have left Beijing since then, and the organising principles of the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week differ from those of the Beijing Queer Film Festival. Notably, the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week appears more urban and elitist in programming and audience participation, and it therefore deserves a separate analysis elsewhere. In this chapter, I have limited my analysis to the first seven iterations of the Beijing Queer Film Festival (from 2001 to 2014).

principles and practices, as well as how the festival can be seen as part of a broader, transnational radical film culture. In this chapter, I examine the history and organisation of the BJQFF, as well as the cinematic aesthetics and politics it advocates. In situating the BJQFF in China's historical transition from socialism to postsocialism, I interrogate how a postsocialist queer film event draws on socialist experiences to articulate a democratic, anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist Left cultural politics.

'Radical films', encompassing both political and avant-garde films, are usually understood as films aligning themselves with the ethos of the political left – socialist, anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, anti-colonial, feminist and queer – they celebrate political engagement as well as aesthetic innovation (Radical Film Network 2019). The radical film culture is not exclusively Western or intrinsically Eurocentric, but it is often represented by political and avant-garde film practices from the Global North.[3] The Western bias of the radical film culture is closely associated with unequal power relations in the world, where resources are distributed unevenly and information often fails to travel across linguistic and cultural borders.

This chapter addresses the Euro-American-centrism in the study of radical film cultures by examining cinematic and political practices in a non-Western context. It shifts radical film research's traditional emphasis on class to an intersectional approach that recognises complex interplays between different identities, including gender, sexual, class and national identities. I suggest that sexuality has an important role to play in radical politics, and that queer film festivals are important sites for radical film cultures to develop. Indeed, while neoliberal capitalism and the nation state often exert a powerful influence on queer film cultures transnationally, not all queer film festivals are radical, broadly understood as democratic, egalitarian, anti-capitalist and anti-normativity in this context (Richards 2016, 2017). If many queer film festivals in the Global North are seen as middle-class-serving, lifestyle-oriented and consumption-driven and have thus lost their critical edge, queer film festivals in many parts of the Global South are still charged with creative energies and radical potentials

[3] This represented a complaint from some Radical Film Network (RFN) members at the RFN Conference that took place in Dublin in 2018. The RFN meeting in Berlin and the Transnational Radical Film Cultures Conference in Nottingham in 2019 made special efforts to include more filmmakers, artists and scholars from the Global South. The author of this article was one of the co-organisers of the Transnational Radical Film Conference (with Danial Mutibwa). For more information about the RFN conferences, see https://radicalfilmnetwork.com/2019-conference/ (accessed July 22, 2019).

exactly because of state illiberalism and neoliberal governance, as my study of the BJQFF hopes to demonstrate.

In this chapter, I first trace a brief genealogy of the BJQFF with a focus on changing festival venues in order to see how the festival uses 'guerrilla tactics' to fight government intervention and contest neoliberal capitalism. Following this, I examine the various names that the festival has used, as well as the organising strategies of the festival, including organising principles, audience engagement and film dissemination. To conclude the chapter, I consider the political implications of the BJQFF in a transnational context by linking radical film culture to postsocialist cultural politics. I argue that radical film cultures represented by the BJQFF help us appreciate the value of some ideas and practices from socialist histories in the neoliberal, postsocialist present.

'Guerrilla warfare': the spatial politics of BJQFF

Yang Yang, one of the organisers of the BJQFF, made a documentary film in 2011 about the decade-long history of the BJQFF. The film featured a location map of the constantly changing screening venues, which were spread all over the city (Figure 16.1).[4] Yang named the film *Our Story: Ten-Year 'Guerrilla Warfare' of the Beijing Queer Film Festival*. The first-person plural pronoun ('our') and the rather militarist term 'guerrilla warfare' in the title capture what had happened in ten years – the unrelenting effort to build a queer community and the continuous struggles for survival – and ominously predict what would continue to be the case in the years to follow. Indeed, the BJQFF has been waging 'guerrilla warfare' on several fronts: against the authorities, a capitalist system, as well as middle-class dominated homonormative social values (Duggan 2003). This is not conventional warfare in which the fight is carried out in the open and on equal terms. Rather, it is a cultural-political war in which queer film activists are heavily outnumbered and outgunned, and therefore special tactics are required. That the BJQFF does not have a fixed event venue is one facet in this war; police intervention makes any commitment to a fixed venue difficult or even impossible.

[4] Most of the names I use in this chapter are real unless otherwise specified. The queer filmmakers and activists I mentioned in this chapter have consented to the use of their real names in media and academic publications. I use the *hanyu pinyin* form of transliteration and follow the Chinese convention in presenting names: surname first, followed by first names.

How the BJQFF organisers deploy a flexible spatial tactic to survive therefore makes a significant subject for analysis.

Figure 16.1 A DIY map of the BJQFF screening venues, 2001–2011. Courtesy of Fan Popo.

Figure 16.2 The Fifth Beijing Queer Film Festival panel discussion. Courtesy of Fan Popo.

Figure 16.3 A screening venue for the Fifth Beijing Queer Film Festival. Courtesy of Fan Popo.

After the 'Jasmine Revolution' in 2011, Songzhuang, where the third and fourth iterations of the BJQFF took place, was no longer a safe haven for independent films. A young generation of film festival organisers – most of whom are queer-identified filmmakers – brought the festival back to the city centre. From the fifth year on, the BJQFF has been held at different venues – bars, clubs, bookshops, foreign embassies, community centres – in or near the city centre (Figures 16.2 and 16.3). The organisers have devised ingenious guerrilla tactics to deal with police intervention, including working with queer-friendly businesses such as foreign embassies and international cultural centres, minimum publicity before and during the event, multiple screening locations and alternative screening plans.[5] Different screening formats were used, including the onboard screening on a rented bus in 2013 and on a train in 2014. As Jenny Man Wu, co-director of the seventh BJQFF in 2014, recalls:

> On the morning of 18 September, we boarded a train from Beijing to Huairou from Beijing Railway Station. There were not many passengers on the train. The forty of us, including filmmakers, guests and volunteers, packed into a train carriage. We divided people into groups of two or three. Each group shared a laptop computer. We gave each group a USB stick with Yang Yang's film *Our Story*, a documentary about the history of BJQFF, on it. After arriving in Huairou, we travelled to a pre-booked venue by bus and held a Q&A there.
>
> (Wu 2014)

[5] The BJQFF events are mostly financially supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These events do not sell tickets, and most are open to the public free of charge.

The onboard screening on a moving train showcases the rich imagination of the film festival organisers; it also pushes the limit of what a film festival can be like. While the Chinese government can censor queer films and ban queer film festivals, it cannot stop people from watching queer films on their own laptops in a public space. Watching *Our Story* under such an unusual circumstance undoubtedly inspired the participants, and this shared experience effectively bound the communities. Notably, a train carriage is not a typical queer space; it is owned by a state hostile to queers and run commercially. Although queers did not claim ownership of the train, they could still appropriate the train carriage at a particular time and make it a queer space. Like the poachers in Michel de Certeau's (1984) account, the BJQFF 'poaches' on the land it does not own and thrives on it. Indeed, flexible use of space is significant for such tactics. A tactic, according to de Certeau (1984),

> insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalise on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances.
>
> (xix)

Space, in this context, becomes an important site of contestation where the weak can fight against the powerful. The BJQFF's appropriation of public spaces as contingent festival venues has transformed these spaces into queer spaces; 'guerrilla warfare' is key to such a transformation.

Homosexuals, comrades and queers: what's in a name?

In a country where the state tries to regulate the use of language through linguistic and cultural policies as well as media censorship, how the BJQFF names itself is significant. The BJQFF has used many names for itself in the past, and the name has been constantly changing. What terms to use for queer, film and festival respectively corresponds to the gender, sexual and cultural politics that the festival advocates.

The BJQFF started as ‘China Homosexual Film Festival’ in its inaugural year, although the project proposal that the student organisers submitted to the Youth League, the youth branch of the Chinese Communist Party, for approval called the event a ‘Comrade Cultural Festival’. ‘Comrade’ (*tongzhi*) was an honorific for revolutionary subjects in the Mao era, and it has come to be used by sexual minorities in the Chinese-speaking world for self-identification in the post-Mao era (Bao 2018). As the sexual connotation of the term ‘comrade’ was little known outside the queer communities at the time, the event was able to gain official approval from the university authorities. This was only possible once and its experience could not be replicated in the following years. Indeed, as is true with many tactical challenges, tactics cannot develop in a more linear fashion and must keep innovating as the state adapts its own strategies. After the event proposal had been approved, the BJQFF changed the term ‘comrade’ to ‘homosexual’ (*tongxinglian*) to gain more media and public attention. This unfortunately led to state intervention and early closure of the festival, and the young organisers thus learned an important lesson about the use of language in a politically sensitive environment. The term ‘homosexual’ was soon discarded after the second iteration of the festival due to the political sensitivity of the term in the eyes of the authorities, as well as its negative connotations associated with histories of criminalisation and pathologisation. ‘Queer’ (*ku’er*) has been used in the name of the BJQFF since the third edition (2008) onward. A transliteration of the English term ‘queer’, *ku’er* was a term little known to the public and therefore could successfully bypass political sensitivity. Devoid of its stigmatised connotation in the Western context, *ku’er* (literally ‘a cool kid’) celebrates youth and difference and invites identification from the younger generation. Perhaps more importantly, *ku’er* rejects a homonormative gay identity politics and celebrates an inclusive and intersectional non-identitarian politics. Admittedly, the BJQFF was one of the first advocates to use the term *ku’er* in mainland China’s queer communities, and the concept has significant implications for the aesthetics and politics of the festival programming (Bao 2017).

Although the English term ‘film festival’ remains in the BJQFF’s title, the translation of the term in Chinese varies. The first two years used the most literal translation *dianying jie* (‘film festival’) and learned a hard lesson: in China, only the government has the right and authority to host a *dianying jie*; any individual’s or NGO’s use of the term immediately poses a potential challenge to the Party state. This partly accounted for the direct police intervention in the first two years of the festival. From the third BJQFF on, *dianying* (‘film’) becomes

yingxiang (‘moving image’) to reflect the use of digital technologies in video and film production; and *jie* (‘festival’) becomes *danyuan* (‘unit’), *zhan* (‘exhibition’) or even *zhou* (‘week’), effectively making the event seem less ambitious and politically sensitive. The most common name for BJQFF in Chinese therefore translates literally as the Beijing Queer Moving Image Exhibition (*Beijing ku’er ying zhan*). This tactic has proven effective. It also signifies a more pragmatic attitude to festival organisation by focusing more on community building and less on fame and publicity.

Digital video activism: the prefigurative politics of the BJQFF organisation

We should not dismiss the festival’s name change as simply a ‘language game’; that is, playing with words to circumvent government censorship. The use of language also reflects on the profound change of the festival’s organisational forms and politics. If a *dianying jie* (‘film festival’) is often characterised by glamour, prestige and hierarchical modes of organisation, *yingzhan* (‘moving image exhibition’) celebrates difference, diversity, and experience sharing. The BJQFF does not give awards to films and filmmakers; nor does it privilege one style over others. As BJQFF organising committee member Cui Zi’en remarks:

> I have come to a new understanding in the last couple of years. I don’t think art is superior; nor can art be separated from politics. I think that the most important artworks are all politically oriented, and they are created to liberate or suppress certain groups of people. The boundary between politics and art is rather blurred. The best artworks are not those exhibited in museums or art galleries for the privileged few, who have time and money to enjoy these artworks; they are the ones that can have an impact on, or even liberate, repressed people at a particular time and place.
>
> (Cui in Zhao 2009)

Cui’s philosophy of art is undoubtedly rooted in China’s historical experience: it echoes Mao Zedong’s Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art delivered in 1942 and articulates a strong grassroots-based socialist politics. To encourage local and grassroots production, the BJQFF has lowered technical and aesthetic barriers significantly: any submission from mainland China will be screened at the festival, regardless of its length, format, technical and artistic

qualities. I have seen some rather long and tedious films made by amateur filmmakers at the BJQFF, some of which lasted several hours. The sacrifice of technical and artistic qualities for more diverse queer representations has been under constant scrutiny and debate among the BJQFF organisers, but the principle of encouraging diversity has been relentlessly upheld. As committee member Yang Yang states, 'Every film, every director, every audience member, every member of the festival organization committee has their own viewpoint. The only thing the film festival stands for is that everybody who participates can freely voice their opinion' (Yang 2011: 7).

In terms of its organisational structure, the BJQFF practises a prefigurative politics common in anarchism and the alterglobalisation movement. Carl Boggs (1977) identifies prefigurative politics as the desire to embody 'within the ongoing political practice of a movement […] those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (100). The BJQFF has a loosely structured organising committee made up of about eight core members. Most important decisions are made collectively, either by in-person voting or expression of opinion in group emails. The festival does not have a lifelong director; committee members take turns in directing different editions of the festival. As old members drop out, new members join in and they inject new energies and ideas into the group. While most of the core members are queer-identified filmmakers themselves, many are not: some are NGO workers, others are cinephiles, and not everyone identifies as gay or lesbian. It is a shared mission that has brought all the people together: to keep the BJQFF running despite all the obstacles.

University students, young professionals and queer community members make up a large majority of the film festival audience and volunteers. In 2009, I attended the 4th BJQFF as a researcher, a community member and a volunteer. In the remote and rural Songzhuang village, organisers and volunteers lived, ate and slept together for a week. People watched the films together and had lengthy post-screening discussions about queer identities, communities and activism in China. There was a strong sense of friendship, camaraderie and solidarity during and even in the aftermath of the festival. In these unforgettable moments, the two meanings of *tongzhi*, both as 'comrade' and as queer, converged and conflated, and a socialist, egalitarian and democratic political culture emerged at the grassroots level.

‘Go to the people’ and the ‘Communist hypothesis’

The film festival organisers have drawn upon slogans and tactics from China’s revolutionary era to justify their practices: the Maoist slogan ‘go to the countryside’ was used when the BJQFF had to shift its screening venue from the Peking University campus to the Songzhuang Artist Village. At Songzhuang, ‘surrounding the city with the countryside’ became the slogan. These catchphrases, originating from China’s socialist era, at once capture a sense of exile, a determination to continue fighting against all obstacles, and are a humble gesture from filmmakers to leave the academic ‘ivory tower’ and learn from the people. The brief experience at Songzhuang has made BJQFF organisers reflect critically on their own middle-class and intellectual privileges and consider how gender and sexuality intersect with other social issues, such as class, poverty, uneven regional development and social injustice. Apart from gender and sexual minorities, queer filmmakers have also cast their eyes on other marginalised social groups including migrant workers, homeless children and people living with disability.[6] Here, ‘queer’ ceases to be a term denoting the sexual orientation of a minority group – of which the most visible are often middle-class – and becomes the basis for an intersectional and coalition politics for all the people in a society. As Yang Yang describes in the preface to the fifth BJQFF catalogue:

> A queer film festival is not an event only open to the ‘marginalised people’ who come to escape the darkness of mainstream society. A queer film festival is a platform devoid of prejudice, a place where people can freely express, show, explore themselves and where they can enter into meaningful dialogues […] This has a huge significance not only for the queer communities, but for the whole society as well.
>
> (Yang 2011: 7)

These statements deliberately avoid making explicit political demands for human rights; they use the humanistic rhetoric of cultural diversity instead. They also demonstrate that most BJQFF organisers see the festival as a part of the collective struggle for democracy in China

[6] For instance, Cui Zi’en made two documentaries, *We are the … of Communism* and *Night Scene* – one about migrant workers’ children and the other about sex workers – during this period.

and as an experiment of a more inclusive form of grassroots-based political culture. As such, the political implication of the BJQFF is evident:

> Although this is a cultural event originated within the sexual minority community, it's hard to overlook the political connotations of the queer film festival. The festival lives in Beijing, the political and cultural centre of China – it explores freedom and plurality in human relations and lifestyles amidst a red climate drenched in Communist ideology […] Our greatest value and our ultimate goal as a queer film festival is to challenge and oppose these mainstream ideologies.
>
> (Yang 2011: 7)

Here, communism is seen as a state bureaucracy that stifles human freedom and creativity. However, the 'communist hypothesis' (Badiou 2010), understood as a different way of collective organisation that liberates human potentials, underpins many of the BJQFF's organising principles and practices. Values such as egalitarianism, direct democracy, social justice, freedom and anti-authoritarianism certainly are featured both in anarchist and communist philosophies; they also characterise the BJQFF organisation. Situated in a postsocialist context, the BJQFF serves as a type of postsocialist cultural politics that at once recognises the relevance of socialism to the neoliberal present and a critical reflection on the distinction between communism and socialism, and between communist bureaucracy and communist hypothesis.

Travelling queer film festivals

Apart from the Beijing-based and now-annual festival itself, the core members of the BJQFF organising committee have also made efforts to engage a diverse audience as they took films to different parts of the country. In past years, the BJQFF has sponsored audience members from smaller cities and remote regions in China to travel to Beijing to attend the BJQFF. Core members of the BJQFF have also brought queer films to different parts of the country in a project called the China Queer Film Festival Tour (CQFFT) (Figures 16.4 and 16.5). Between 2008 and 2011, the CQFFT visited two dozen cities and hosted over ninety screenings before a combined audience of 7,000 people (Fan 2015: 81). The move aimed to

address the urban-centrism of queer activism, and to take film-focused queer activism to less developed parts of the country. In the process, the BJQFF collective collaborated with local queer organisations, community centres and queer friendly businesses and built a national network for queer films and activism.

Figure 16.4 A screening venue during the China Queer Film Festival Tour. Courtesy of Fan Popo.

Figure 16.5 A university campus screening during the China Queer Film Festival Tour. Courtesy of Fan Popo.

For Beijing-based filmmakers, this was a precious opportunity: in bringing their films to the communities, they obtained first-hand feedback from the audience; experiencing the life outside metropolitan cities also widened these filmmakers' horizons and enriched their understanding of Chinese society. These experiences and knowledge fed back into their filmmaking practice and generated more socially relevant films. As queer filmmaker Fan Popo reflects:

> Some audience members complained that some films were 'too arty' for their taste; they tended to relate more to documentary films that depicted the lives of Chinese LGBT people. Feedback of this kind generated immediate adjustments back in Beijing, including revising which films would be recommended and revising descriptions of the films so that future local organisers would have a clear idea about what to expect.
>
> (Fan 2015: 84)

Apart from the adjustment of screening programmes based on the audience feedback, community responses have also impacted on the content, style and aesthetics of the films the filmmakers make, as they continue to explore what types of films would best speak to their queer politics and to the needs of the communities. This is not an anti-intellectual position; nor does it compromise the experimental style and critical edge of the films produced. It is, rather, a recognition of the entwined relationship between films and society, and between

community filmmakers and the communities they work with. During the tour, Fan collaborated with the queer organisation PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) China and made several documentaries featuring queer people and their parents, including *Chinese Closet*, *Mama Rainbow* and *Papa Rainbow*. These films display diverse styles and distinct experimental features. As 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci 1982), these community-based filmmakers have worked closely with the communities to create stylistically innovative and politically engaged films.

The 'communist international of queer films'

Both Ragan Rhyne (2011) and Luke Robinson (2015) note the extremely cosmopolitan nature of Chinese queer films and film festivals; that is, these films and festivals draw on a wide repertory of contents, styles and aesthetics from different parts of the world; as a result, they appear intrinsically international and cosmopolitan. The festival also has a strong emphasis on Asian and Sinophone queer films. For example, the fourth and fifth BJQFFs featured panel discussions on queer cinema in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other parts of Asia, and Genya Fukunaga from the Kansai Queer Film Festival guest curated the Japanese section of the 6th BJQFF. This suggests the BJQFF's acute awareness of constructing its cultural identity based on a decolonial approach informed by 'Asian as method' (Chen 2010), 'queer Asia as critique' (Chiang and Wong 2017) and 'queer Sinophone cultures' (Chiang and Heinrich 2014). With an international perspective and a specific focus on Asia, the BJQFF articulates a strong sense of queer internationalism based on people-led cultural exchanges at the grassroots level, a form of 'minor transnationalism' (Lionnet and Shih 2005) that goes beyond the hegemonic mapping of the nation state and transnational capital.

In a public speech, Cui uses the phrase 'communist international of queer films' to describe the circulation of queer films through piracy, gift-giving and grassroots cultural exchanges across national borders (Cui and Liu 2010). Cui juxtaposes this type of transnationalism with two other forms of state-led transnationalism: first, the spread of Communist bureaucracy after the Second World War; and, second, the 'strategic promotion of Americanism' worldwide (Cui and Liu 2010: 418). While the latter are hegemonic forms of transnationalism that often reinforce power relations across the world, the queer-led and film-centred transnationalism on the grassroots level is more liberating. 'I rejoice at this kind of globalisation' (423), Cui concludes. Indeed, the BJQFF participates actively in and

contributes significantly to the minor transnationalism of queer cultures and radical film cultures.

At this point, it should be clear that the first decade of the BJQFF should be seen as an integral part of the radical film cultures and media activism in a transnational context. It reminds us of the transnational nature of the queer struggles and the importance of international solidarity. It also suggests the significance of gender and sexuality to radical film culture and media activism. Many queers and queer film festivals in the Global North may have lost some of their radical edge via the capitalist incorporation of a 'pink economy' and neoliberalism's homonormative identity politics. Yet in the Global South, exciting struggles are going on right now. They articulate queer intersectional and coalition politics, manifest a strong geopolitical consciousness, and deploy ingenious guerrilla tactics. Socialist comrades may have disappeared in the post-Cold War era, but postsocialist queers have kept up their good work by drawing on experiences from the socialist past and by giving socialism new meanings. Radical film cultures are an important part of this picture.

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