Queering international development: the "pleasure principle" in the participatory video *The Lucky One*

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This article focuses on the politics of representing HIV/AIDS in the 2011 documentary *The Lucky One* (宠儿), jointly made by Chinese filmmaker and queer activist He Xiaopei and Zhang Xi, a woman living with HIV/AIDS. The film was made using a participatory approach as Zhang took up the video camera to document her own life. By situating the film in the global development industry and by focusing on the political economy of the filmmaking process, this article examines the complex power relations embedded in how people living with HIV/AIDS are represented on screen and in the context of the development industry. Informed by critical scholarship in and a queer approach to development studies, this article identifies strengths and weaknesses of the participatory approach, together with the role of media and communication technologies, in international development. This article hopes to present a nuanced understanding of empowerment and agency through the use of participatory videos in development projects.

Keywords: documentary; development; He Xiaopei; queer; *The Lucky One*

Introduction

The 2011 documentary *The Lucky One* (宠儿) follows the life of a woman, Zhang Xi by name, in her last days of living with HIV/AIDS (Figure 1). Knowing that she did not have long to live and wishing to do something useful for the HIV positive community, Zhang accepted filmmaker and NGO (non-governmental organization) worker He Xiaopei's suggestion to document the last days of her own life with a digital voice recorder and a video camera. He Xiaopei frequently visited Zhang and a lot of their conversations revolved around the son whom Zhang loved dearly. Zhang talked about her son's life in great detail. She wished to see the son before her death, but the son never turned up. After Zhang had passed away, He Xiaopei learned from Zhang's husband that Zhang did not have a son; or to be precise, Zhang's son from her last relationship had been given away to other people soon after his birth many years before and she had not seen him ever since. It suddenly dawned on the filmmaker and the audience at the end of the film that all the stories that Zhang had told about the son were made up by herself; in fact, Zhang had told the filmmaker and everyone else a story based purely on her own fantasy.

[insert fig. 1 here]

Figure 1. the title screen featuring a laughing Zhang Xi (screen grab from *The Lucky One*)

Had Zhang been lying all the time? Why did she talk about her long-lost son as if he were just around her? These questions started to haunt the filmmaker after Zhang's death and the audience after watching the film. In the film's closing credits, Zhang is listed as a writer and director of the film (Figure 2).[1] Despite the fact that Zhang has

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[1] The word box surrounding Zhang Xi's name suggests that she is dead. In the Chinese-language context, it is a convention to put a dead person's name in a word box.

passed away, her specter lingers on. Zhang's voice and image are carried by *The Lucky One* which now circulates online.[2] If specters exist in this world and if they refuse to leave, what are they trying to tell the living? How can we put specters to rest, if this is at all possible? If, as Jacques Derrida (1994) suggests, specters linger on to request undelivered social justice, what kind of justice does Zhang demand?

[insert fig. 2 here]

Figure 2. Zhang is credited as the writer and director of the film (screen grab from *The Lucky One*)

This article examines the politics of representing HIV/AIDS in *The Lucky One*, jointly made by He Xiaopei and Zhang Xi. Departing from a text-based approach popular in media and screen studies, I focus instead on the context of the film; that is, the historical and social context of its production. My aim is to shed light on the global geopolitics embedded in the notion of development, understood here as an international industry that encompasses transnational capitalism, nation states, and marginalized social groups. Adopting a queer approach to development — that is, by paying meticulous attention to non-normative forms of gender, sexuality and desire, which are often neglected in the development discourse — I argue that this film, together with Zhang's storytelling, queers global geopolitics by making us rethink the politics of participation, power, and agency in international development.

This article is structured in the following order: first, I introduce the discussions surrounding the use of participatory videos in the development industry; second, I contextualize the representation of HIV/AIDS and sexual minorities in post-2000 China. I also highlight dominant and problematic forms of representation, from which *The*

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[2] The film is available on Youku, a Chinese-language video streaming website:

https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzQ0OTUwNjIw.html

Lucky One clearly departs. This is then followed by a discussion of the "pleasure principle"— that is, an emphasis on bodies and pleasures in empowering gender and sexual minorities.[3] Notably, the "pleasure principle" is a strategy that has been adopted by Pink Space, an NGO that He Xiaopei directs, in its work; it is also an ethos that *The Lucky One* exemplifies. I then analyze how people who live with HIV/AIDS are represented in the participatory documentary *The Lucky One*. I see the film as a collaborative work between the NGO workers-cum-filmmakers and their filmed subjects. The politics of representation in this film is therefore well worth critical interrogation. This article concludes by reflecting on key issues concerning empowerment and agency. I contend that, through the participation of people who live with HIV/AIDS in the filmmaking process and by paying meticulous attention to the politics of representation, *The Lucky One* represents people living with HIV/AIDS in a non-objectified, non-voyeuristic and thus more ethical manner; it also challenges dominant understandings of empowerment and agency in the context of international development. Indeed, *The Lucky One* should be seen as a queer feminist intervention in the development industry. If "queer" is seen as embodying the capacity of unsettling and challenging norms (Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick 1993), *The Lucky One* can be seen as a film that "queers" the development industry.

The use of participatory videos in the development industry

The world we live in is saturated with unequal economic development and power relations. Colonialist expansion, capitalist exploitation, nation states, war, and conflicts,

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[3] My use of the term "the pleasure principle" in this article draws on Michel Foucault's (1990) discussion of the "use of pleasure", instead of Sigmund Freud's (2003) use of the term, the latter which refers to an indistinctive seeking of pleasure and avoiding of pain to satisfy biological and psychological needs.

environmental degradation and natural disasters all play a role in shaping the global geopolitics today. In recent decades, there has been a rapid expansion in the number of international donors in addressing development issues. Most of these donors are situated in the Global North and they invest money and expertise on development projects in the Global South. They constitute and consolidate the post-war Bretton Woods system and a word order dominated by the Washington Consensus. These international donors, together with the NGOs and people involved in these projects, constitute the global "development industry" (Susie Jolly 2006; Andrea Cornwall, Sonia Correa and Susie Jolly 2008; and Cornwall and Jolly 2009). Whilst the charitable and humanitarian aspect of the development industry is well known, the economic, political, and even ideological aspects of the industry often go unacknowledged. It is apt to call international development an "industry." Like many other industries, the development industry has its own logics, rules, and *modus operandi*, all of which are loaded with explicit and implicit values, biases, and ideologies. Through loans and international aid, the development industry imports neoliberalism as an economic model and a political ideology worldwide (David Harvey 2007). The development industry does not have to use military force; it often creates consensus, or 'hegemony' (Gramsci 1971), through financial means and ideological persuasion. In recent years, the development industry has increasingly used a participatory approach, i.e. involving ordinary people in development projects, to get its messages across. Participatory video is one of the most popular methods in participatory communication.

The participatory approach has been widely used in the development industry since the 1990s. This method had its origin in Paulo Freire's (1997) "pedagogy of the oppressed," which emphasizes the agency of ordinary people who, through collective work, dialogue, and critical reflection, come to critical revolutionary consciousness and

are thus able to come up with decisions that have an impact on their own lives. Informed by this pedagogy, many participatory forms of communication methods — including photovoice, participatory video, and community art programs — have been developed in education, social work, and international development. The participatory approach believes that instead of providing people with a solution, or imposing a specific agenda on marginalized communities, it is more productive to involve them in development projects from the very start, from diagnosing a problem to finding a solution. As Thomas Tufte and Paolo Mefalopulos argue in their widely circulated handbook for participatory communication, commissioned by the World Bank:

> From the outset the focus of participatory communication was on dialogical communication rather than linear communication. The emphasis was on participatory and collective processes in research, problem-identification, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation of change. (2009, 2)

The participatory approach can prove to be empowering for marginalized communities. Indeed, in recognizing ordinary people's agency and by inspiring their creativity and imagination, development interventions tend to be effective and sustainable in their implementations. However, this approach also raises serious questions including equal access to and technical barriers of participation. Also, as the approach has been increasingly used in the development industry including the World Bank since the 1990s, often as a funding requirement, it can lead to "compulsory participation" or even "tyranny of participation" (Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari 2001); that is, participation for the sake of participation simply to meet the funder's requirement. Ironically, designed to embody democratic principles, the participatory approach can be anti-democratic as well. It can be seen as a top-down process for the donors to impose their own agenda, often neoliberal by nature, on developing countries and marginalized communities. As Tony Robert and Chris Lunch caution us, "the appropriation of participatory methods

by multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and multilateral corporations is evidence that participatory methods are perfectly compatible with top-down planning systems and neoliberal agenda" (2015, 5).

Media and communication technologies such as photography, camera and geographic information system (GIS) are widely used in participatory communication. Among them, video camera is one of the most popular technologies. According to PV-NET, a network of participatory video practitioners, the concept of participatory video refers to "a collaborative approach to working with a group or community in shaping and creating their own film, in order to open spaces for learning and communication and to enable positive change and transformation" (PV-NET 2008). According to this definition, central to the participatory video concept is the screening of the rough footage and the final film to those who have participated in making the film, so that they can make editing decisions about the film by themselves. In this way, the filmmaking process can raise people's critical consciousness of specific issues and encourage them to actively seek solutions. However, the empowerment aspect has often been downplayed in many development projects due to reasons of time, money, and practicality. Many funding projects end in having the film completed by professional filmmakers without consulting the project participants and subsequently submitted to funders to mark the conclusion of projects. Another round of project funding is often unlikely due to the "project" nature of the funding schemes: once a project has been completed, a problem is seen to have been solved or addressed; or at least participants are seen to have been "empowered" enough to come up with their own solutions to the problems. Needless to say, the identified issues remain unresolved; and without further financial, logistical, and intellectual support, local communities can remain marginalized after the conclusion of development projects. The use of participatory

video in international development projects is thus seen as a technical and quick fix to complex problems. Such a solution is neither effective nor sustainable. The technocratic approach to problem-solving speaks to the bureaucratic nature of the development industry. In its *modus operandi*, the development industry seldom addresses real structural issues; participatory videos are often there to create media fads and boost the donors' egos. In this context, the power of media and communication technologies are valorized, while the agency of ordinary people are often devalued in the process.

Participatory videos can also be problematic due to their content and aesthetics. Videos made in participatory projects usually follow a particular logframe (logical framework) in order to showcase achievements and justify investments. As a result, these videos often display a "NGO aesthetic", which is characterized by:

> (1) an intervention logic based on the need to solve an existing social problem; (2) the proposal of an indicator of development (i.e. democratic participation); (3) the introduction of trustworthy sources of information (e.g. informants) for verification of process; and (4) the highlighting of specific, external conditions necessary for successful intervention. (Matthew D. Johnson 2014, 260)

Johnson uses Wu Wenguang's "China village documentary project" as an example to illustrate the concept of "NGO aesthetic." In this project, Wu put video cameras in the hands of ordinary villagers and asked them to document the village election processes. The documentary films that the villagers made may seem a manifestation of the ordinary people's agency in participating in and advancing the grassroots democracy in rural China. Johnson reminds us that the project was funded by the EU-China Training Program on Village Governance (EUCTP), and the videos can thus be seen as a communication strategy to document the funded project, and to justify the validity and success of the program. Johnson remarks:

9

both the making of the film and their dissemination seemed to reflect an assumption that

democratization's success depended not only on the program, but also on a

transformation of villager consciousness effected by placing cameras in the hands of

villagers and by providing media platforms for sharing results. (2014, 264)

Johnson's insight is useful here, as it not only points to the political economy of the

participatory video by foregrounding its political agenda and funding sources; it also

critiques the popular obsession with media and communication technologies in the

development industry, as if the use of digital video technology alone can bring about

change in human consciousness and behavior. More importantly, the videos often

conceal the complex power relations embedded in the development industry involving

international donors, national and local governments, and documentary filmmakers.

They also manifest ideological complicity of these development programs with state-

sponsored neoliberal capitalism and the global governance of civil society. In steering

away from real issues, such as China's political reform and structural inequalities,

participatory videos serve to consolidate the hegemony of, and even complicity

between, transnational capital and the Chinese state.

If we consider the popularity of participatory methods used in development

projects in China today, we can be both encouraged by the promises of this approach

and at the same time concerned about its potential limitations. In the case of rural China,

institutions such as the Asia Foundation, Carter Centre, Ford Foundation, International

Republican Institute (US), the Canadian government, the Finnish government, other

European organizations and the United Nations Development Program, have all

supported China's rural reforms in self-governance (Johnson 2014, 261). As the Ford

Foundation President Darren Walker remarks, "there is no better defender of the

vulnerable than civil society: committed, compassionate, engaged citizens organizing

themselves — and mobilizing others — to work on behalf of others" (Cynthia M.

Gibson 2017, 3). Walker's words highlight the importance of the participatory approach to the donor-driven model of international development. Through participation, marginalized people and communities are gradually placed under the "global governance" (Josephine Chuen-juei Ho 2010) of transnational capital. This is also the case with HIV/AIDS and sexual minority related development projects in China.

HIV/AIDS and sexual minorities in China

As in many other countries, HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) have posed serious threats to the lives and health of many people in China. The specificity of China lies in the simultaneity, and even overlap, of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) and HIV/AIDS issues. Gay identity, not long after it emerged in China's public discourse, became pathologized and stigmatized because of its close association with HIV/AIDS. This is hardly surprising because LGBTQ issues can only be legitimately discussed in relation to HIV/AIDS prevention in China's government discourses. 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 (Haiqing Yu 2012, 3). Despite this shift, gay people are still referred to as Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSMs) and are considered a high-risk group for HIV/AIDS infection in the public health discourse. In 2006, the Ministry of Health pledged to send AIDS prevention volunteers to LGBTQ groups; it also included MSMs in its Five-Year Plan. By 2008, the Chinese government had launched the first national program devoted to the prevention of HIV/AIDS among MSMs (Timothy 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. MSMs are estimated to represent over a quarter of newly reported infections each year (UNAID 2013). The association of HIV with homosexuality has seriously stigmatized LGBTQ people, but it has also produced some unintended consequences of encouraging LGBTQ community building and promoting queer activism.

It should be noted that China's HIV/AIDS prevention schemes and numerous LGBTQ non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were made possible with the funding provided by many international HIV/AIDS related donors, including the Global Fund, the Gates Foundation, and the Barry-Martin Foundation. A 2010 report shows that China was one of the largest recipients of the Global Fund funding in terms of HIV/AIDS prevention: Since the inception of the Global Fund in 2002, China had received fourteen grants totaling 941 million US dollars (Anand Reddi and Michael Weinstein 2011). The Chinese government appointed the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) as the default recipient of these grants. As a funding requirement, different HIV/AIDS NGOs were set up across China to work with HIV/AIDS affected communities, LGBTQ people included. The compulsory NGO-based participatory approach for HIV/AIDS prevention gave birth to numerous HIV/AIDS-focused and MSM-serving NGOs, and some of them later became LGBTQ NGOs as HIV/AIDS funding shrank around 2012.

Despite their ambiguous legal status and the difficulty of getting official registration as legitimate organizations in China, NGOs have played a vital role in LGBTQ activism in China, especially in relation to HIV/AIDS prevention (Hildebrandt 2013; Tiantian Zheng 2015) and LGBTQ rights (Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen 2014). China's HIV/AIDS crisis has provided numerous political as well as economic opportunities for the existence and development of LGBTQ NGOs. Since international HIV/AIDS funding began to enter China in the early 2000s, LGBTQ NGOs started to

mushroom throughout the country. By 2012, more than one hundred LGBTQ

organizations had been established in various parts of China (Holly Lixian Hou 2014).

It was estimated in 2014 that there was some semblance of an organized LGBTQ group

in every major Chinese city (UNDP and USAID 2014). Because of the specific way in

which HIV/AIDS funds are distributed (i.e. international funds have to be channeled

through the Chinese government, specifically the National Centre for Disease Control,

and then trickled down to local governments and NGOs), HIV/AIDS NGOs in China

have become increasingly dependent, financially and politically, on various levels of the

Chinese government. Over time, different arrangements with the Chinese government

have helped to shape NGOs in divergent ways. Some become partners of the state and

subsequently shun gay advocacy, eventually becoming "de-pinked" HIV/AIDS NGOs;

others act in partnership with the state but maintain a focus on gay advocacy; and yet

others focus on gay advocacy and neither partner with nor challenge the state. Among

them, very few NGOs challenge the state and focus on gay advocacy (Lynette J. Chua

and Hildebrandt 2013, 1597–9). These complex configurations of power relations

between transnational capital, the state and civil society groups have shaped the agenda

and scope of health activism for LGBTQ NGOs.

Representing HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is usually represented negatively on Chinese media, if at all. For a long time,

China's official media kept silent about China's HIV/AIDS crisis. Independent

documentarian and activist Ai Xiaoming's 2006 film *The Epic of the Central Plains* (中

原纪事, codirected with Hu Jie) and her 2007 film *The House of Care and Love* (关爱

之家) are among the best-known films about HIV infections in rural China. These films

are usually banned from public screening or dissemination in China. On Chinese

television, the faces of people living with HIV/AIDS are often blurred. This type of

technical treatment is often designed to protect the interviewees' anonymity, but it also makes people living with HIV/AIDS further invisible to the public, thus intensifying their status of stigmatization and marginalization. As He Xiaopei recalls,

> I remember when I was doing fieldwork for my PhD research, I interviewed a gay man who told me: "I hate the public representation of HIV-positive people. Our faces are always blurred, and they make us look like ghosts." That really shocked me, because how can you blur a person's face? That's a person! (He in Xiaopei He, Séagh Kehoe, and Hongwei Bao 2019, 816)

"Ghost" is an interesting metaphor through which to think about visibility, presence, and subjectivity. In a modern episteme where visibility is linked to the right to representation, having a physical face (脸) is often linked to the possession of a public face (面) in society. A face demands recognition and respect; an erasure of the face also suggests the "symbolic annihilation" (George Gerbner and Larry Gross 1976) of one's identity and existence. Representation is therefore a vital issue for minority groups and marginalized identities.

When He Xiaopei made *The Lucky One*, a film about a woman living with HIV/AIDS, she insisted that the film editor cut all the scenes of the protagonist Zhang lying on her hospital bed with tubes on her face or body. In other words, the film only shows Zhang in her best physical condition, smiling and being positive about her life, which is exactly the way how Zhang would have liked others to see her, as He Xiaopei learned from her conversations with Zhang when Zhang was alive. Here we can see a shift in the power relation between the filmmaker and the filmed subject. The filmed person, together with the filmmaker, participates in decision-making about the filming and editing. The purpose is to change people's stereotypes about HIV positive people and see their lives in a positive way. He Xiaopei explains her political and ethical position in adopting such a representational strategy:

14

I didn't want that image because HIV-positive people told me that they are either

represented in mainstream media as ghosts or as sick or dying, and they didn't want to

be represented like that. I knew they didn't want that kind of representation and I knew

that the mainstream media represented them as ghosts. I wanted to produce different

images. I wanted to tell positive stories to give face and voice to the people living with

HIV. (He in He, Kehoe and Bao 2019, 816)

He Xiaopei's positive approach to filmmaking and NGO work is informed by her keen

awareness of the problems in the development industry as well as critical insights from

the field of development studies, demonstrated in her 2013 article in the anthology

Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure and her 2016 article in *The*

Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development (He 2013, 2016). Both articles use

Pink Space as an example to demonstrate feminist and queer interventions into the

development discourse. Andrea Cornwall and Susie Jolly (2009), both associated with

the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, point out that

the development industry often neglects the issue of sex and sexuality, considering them

as insignificant in comparison to poverty reduction and economic growth. They further

suggest that a lot of development policies and practices are heteronormative, turning a

blind eye to non-mainstream and marginalized sexualities. Furthermore, sex and

sexuality are often associated with negative terms such as risk, hazard, and disease

(such as HIV/AIDS and other STIs). As a result, a sexually conservative policing

attitude and a "savior" mentality pervade the field of development studies: "Funding has

shaped the field, focusing engagement with sexuality on regulation and risk

management. Sexuality comes to be framed as a problem by an industry driven by the

search for technical fixes and magic bullets" (Cornwall and Jolly 2009, 6). Is a different

approach, a more sex-positive and queer-friendly one, possible for international

development?

Pink Space and the pleasure principle

He Xiaopei and the queer organization she leads, Pink Space, offers a different approach to development, one that focuses on the often-neglected issues of gender, sex and sexuality. Introducing her life story helps us better understand her feminist and queer politics. She worked for the State Council, China's central government, for fourteen years planning China's healthcare reform before she quit her job and pursued her MA and PhD study in the UK. She completed her first MA in Gender and Development at the IDS, then another MA in Sexual Dissidence at the University of Sussex before she undertook PhD study on the topic of HIV/AIDS in China at the University of Westminster. All these study experiences have proved significant for her intellectual development: IDS championed a sex-positive approach to international development; the Sexual Dissidence program introduced her to queer theory; and her doctoral research which involved interviewing people living with HIV/AIDS in China gave her a keen insight into the lived experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS. After completing her PhD research in 2007, she went back to Beijing. There she observed that although gay and lesbian people had their organizations and advocacy groups at the time, other marginalized sexual groups such as sex workers, gay men's wives, people living with HIV/ADS, and people living with disability lacked support networks. He Xiaopei therefore co-founded an NGO, Pink Space Sexuality Research Centre (Pink Space for short). She explains the work that Pink Space does as: "Pink Space believes that sexual rights are for everyone, whether you are poor, gay or living with disabilities. Much of our work is with marginalized people who are oppressed due to their gender and sexuality." (He 2016, 561).

Leading an NGO in the development industry, He Xiaopei sees many blind spots in the development discourse, including its negligence of issues concerning gender, sex,

and sexuality, relating them with disease (such as HIV/AIDS) or seeing them as hazards from which people should stay away. She advocates a sex-positive and pleasure-focused approach to development instead:

> We do not focus only on discrimination and violence faced by those who break sexuality norms or negotiate the power dynamics of relationships. We also take a positive approach to sexuality, and create opportunities for sharing experiences of pleasure, to enable people to find affirmation in their sexual feelings and interactions. (He 2019, 107)

He Xiaopei's words reminds us of Michel Foucault's (1990) discussion of pleasure. Rejecting the conventional term "desire" which Foucault sees contaminated by the psychoanalytic discourse and thus deeply problematic, Foucault suggests thinking of sexuality or desire in terms of pleasure. Foucault's discussion of pleasure in an interview is illuminating and is worth quoting here:

> I am advancing this term [pleasure] because it seems to me that it escapes the medical and naturalistic connotations inherent in the notion of desire. [...] The term "pleasure" on the other hand is virgin territory, almost devoid of meaning. There is no pathology of pleasure, no "abnormal" pleasure. It is an event "outside the subject" or on the edge of the subject, within something that is neither body nor soul, which is neither inside nor outside, in short, a notion which is neither ascribed nor ascribable. (Cited in David Macey, 1993, 365)

Pleasure for Foucault encompasses a wide range of embodied, affective and sensational experiences which cannot be reduced to an oedipal origin. It is desubjectivating. Indeed, if desire often serves to subjectivize a person to a fixed gender, sexual, and identitarian regime, and to the "truth" of oneself, pleasure challenges the naturalness and the rigid boundary of identity categories. In a largely sex-negative development industry, pleasure functions to disrupt the gay/straight, man/woman, China/West, and Global

North/Global South boundaries. Since pleasure is found in everyone, at all times and in all places, the difference is therefore not about completeness and lack, but degrees and intensities. Pleasure is positive, productive, and generative; it embraces a "non-fascist" way of thinking and living (Foucault 2004).

Foucault's positive approach to sexuality and the focus on pleasure have inspired the work undertaken at IDS, to which He Xiaopei is affiliated. The IDS Sexuality and Development Programme championed a "pleasure-based development" approach: "One lens through which development can be re-envisioned is that of a focus on pleasure, rather than on misery and harm […] it seems obvious that pleasure should be at the heart of making sex safer" (Cornwall and Jolly 2009, 9). He Xiaopei suggests paying attention to "how pleasure approaches could empower people who are deprived and help to build understanding and solidarity for a united sexual rights movement" (He 2013, 95). Pink Space is thus identified as a part of "a movement which includes pleasure as a means as well as a goal, which makes people happier along the way as well as happier in the end" (He 2013, 95).

To put the "pleasure principle" to work, Pink Space organized workshops, bringing together marginalized sexual minorities to discuss the pleasure of sex. Many people were too shy to talk about sex in front of strangers. But once they overcame the initial inhibition and started to relax, the workshop became fun and pleasurable. He Xiaopei recalls her experience of organizing Pink Space events:

> At our very first Pink Space meeting, HIV-positive women, lesbians, and bisexual women were sitting in one room and talking about positive sexual experiences. At the beginning, people didn't know how to start. I asked everyone to ask each other questions straightforwardly. One HIV-positive woman asked the lesbian and bisexual women how two women could have sex. The lesbian and bisexual women asked the HIV-positive women if people with HIV could have sexual desire. That was how we

started. People shared lots of stories and sex jokes. I remember one woman with HIV

told me that it was a very special meeting for her because, before that, all the meetings

she had attended focused on sadness and the difficulties they faced; everyone would end

up crying and weeping. At the Pink Space meeting, they could have a space to laugh

and that was really important. (He in He, Kehoe and Bao 2019, 814)

Pink Space workshops resemble the "consciousness raising" sessions in feminist and

queer activism (Nilan Yu 2018): by talking about sex in a friendly and supportive

environment, people start to see sex, and indeed, life in a positive way. The participants

of the workshop also form a support network, sharing stories and comparing notes with

each other. Indeed, through bringing marginalized groups and people together, Pink

Space champions a collective and intersectional approach to empowerment rather than

seeing different identities as distinct from each other and various hegemonic social

structures as unrelated to one another. At the same time, Pink Space recognizes the

overlapping of these identities and social structures, which combine to impact the lives

of marginalized people and communities. Indeed, only by joining hands and working

together to form coalitions and fight against hegemonic forces can human emancipation

be truly achieved. This also requires an individual to see beyond the confines of one's

own life and the limits of one's own identity so as to imagine the world differently,

often through a collective and intersectional lens.

He Xiaopei met Zhang Xi at one of the workshops organized by Pink Space in

2008. Zhang went to the Pink Space workshops regularly and identified herself as HIV

positive (Figure 3). She was the first HIV positive women who came out to the public in

Mainland China at the time (Nüquan zaixian 2012). Zhang was also diagnosed with

late-stage liver cancer and the doctor said that she only had three months to live. Despite

this, Zhang was a very optimistic person and always described herself as "the lucky

one" (hence the title of the film). Knowing that she did not have long to live, Zhang

volunteered to do some work for the HIV/AIDS community. He Xiaopei had just learned participatory video as an approach in empowering marginalized communities and was eager to try out the method. She gave Zhang an audio recorder and a video camera. With this equipment, Zhang started to keep an audio-visual diary, documenting her life stories and feelings. Zhang's monologues made frequent mention of her son who she loved very much but who never came to visit her. He Xiaopei also visited Zhang regularly in the last days of her life, chatting about things in life and at the same time trying to persuade Zhang to contact her son, which Zhang hesitated to do (Figure 4). After Zhang passed away, He Xiaopei collected all the audio and visual recordings that Zhang had made and, with film editor Yuan Yuan, was ready to edit the footage into a film. To their surprise, they learned from Zhang's husband that Zhang did not have a son at the time of her death, because the son from her last relationship had been given away soon after his birth many years before and Zhang had never seen him since (Figure 5). This meant that Zhang had been making up stories about her son's schooling, girlfriend, and life habits as if he was still around her. Zhang and Yuan immediately fell into confusion: how could they edit the footage of a woman who had been telling lies all along, if Zhang's narratives were so unreliable? More importantly, what does this tell us about the work that NGO workers do in the development industry, the participatory approach that they employ and the concept of empowerment in which they firmly believe?

[insert fig. 3 here]

Figure 3. Zhang Xi introduces herself at a Pink Space workshop (screen grab from *The Lucky One*)

[insert fig. 4 here]

Figure 4. He Xiaopei visits Zhang Xi in hospital (screen grab from *The Lucky One*)

[insert fig. 5 here]

Figure 5. Intertitle at the end of the film (screen grab from *The Lucky One*)

On representation and empowerment

Much work in the development industry is premised on a specific belief in empowerment, i.e. giving power and agency to marginalized people and communities. The participatory approach assumes that by involving marginalized people and communities in decision-making, they are given power and confidence, thus able to perform to the best of their ability and thereby change their lives. Media and communication technologies — video cameras in this case — are seen as critical tools to empower people because of their technological affordances. That is to say, by putting video cameras in ordinary people's hands, they are able to make themselves "visible" to the public and thereby "represent" themselves. Visibility and self-representation are thus seen as key elements to empowerment. However, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) reminds us, representation can be fraught with power relations and epistemic violence. In her classic essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak deconstructs the term "representation" in Karl Marx's (2007 [1852]) famous sentence (and by extension, the epistemology of the development industry): "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." Spivak points out that the English word "represent" has two forms and meanings in German: *vertreten*, to speak for and to stand in for someone, often understood as political representation; and *darstellen*, to re-present someone or something, often in an artistic and aesthetic sense. Spivak argues that "the substantive concern for the politics of the oppressed […] can hide a privileging of the intellectual and of the "concrete" subject of oppression" (1988, 292). In the article, Spivak talks about Western intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze who claim to represent the oppressed people through their writing; she also points out that these male

intellectuals' representational practices in effect prevent subalterns' voices from being heard.

In *The Lucky One*, Zhang's self-representation through voice recording and video footage is a type of artistic representation (*Darstellung*), but this does not necessarily constitute political representation (*Vertretung*) or invoking political agency. By placing a strong emphasis on artistic representation, i.e. the production of participatory videos, the development industry downplays the role of political representation, i.e. how to give true political and economic power to marginalized communities, or subalterns, in Spivak's (1988) words. What is worse, by concealing power relations through the act of artistic representation, the filmmaker or artist can risk erasing the voices of marginalized communities and reinforcing their subordinate position in society.

Spivak's insight is useful for the analysis of the development industry. It reminds us of the epistemic violence of the development industry, represented by donors and NGO workers. The industry tends to imagine marginalized people and communities as powerless and in need of help. They often "speak for" these people, to such an extent that they risk depriving these people of the opportunities to speak for themselves. In the case of participatory video, although ordinary people are given video cameras to speak out, they are usually expected to say things to meet the expectations of the development industry, within a logframe and "NGO aesthetic." If they were allowed to articulate whatever they want to say with the help of media and communication technologies, this might help; unfortunately, the final editing decision usually lies with professional filmmakers and NGO workers.

Feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff (1991) aptly problematizes the notion of self-representation. She points out that the idea that one can only speak for oneself is deeply

problematic, as it is premised on a highly individualistic subjectivity; we live in a social world where people relate to each other in different ways. She suggests that the act of "speaking" should be situated not as an individual behavior but as situated in complex discursive contexts. "Speaking for others" is therefore possible and it requires an appreciation for the intention and effect of speaking:

> [t]he attempt to avoid the problematic of speaking for by retreating into an individual realm is based on an illusion, well-supported in the individualist ideology of the West, that a self is not constituted by multiple intersecting discourses but consists in a unified whole capable of autonomy from others. (21)

Alcoff advocates that, rather than evading social responsibilities, intellectuals should strive to "create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others" (1991, 23). Here "speaking with" and "speaking to" suggest a humble attitude on the part of the intellectuals and an ethical relationship between those who are engaged in a conversation. With conversations and engagements, collective identities can be forged, and coalition strategies can be devised. Seen in this light, He Xiaopei's participatory documentary is doing exactly that: by "speaking with" and "speaking to" marginalized communities, she is building alliances and solidarity between activists and marginalized communities to effect social changes.

Despite the power relations that shape participatory communication, *The Lucky One* still shows a critical awareness of the power relations in participatory video and marks a deliberate effort to give voice to Zhang and let her speak for herself. In the process of editing the film, He Xiaopei and Yuan Yuan disagreed with each other on how the film should be edited. Originally, He Xiaopei had wanted to make a film about a brave woman who, after participating in NGO activities, raised her critical consciousness and showed no fear of death. Zhang was seen as an ideal heroic subaltern

subject with access to agency commonly depicted in NGO films, often to showcase the transformative role of the development programs. Yuan cautioned against making a "NGO propaganda film" and suggested editing the film in a different way (Nüquan zaixian 2012). Neither the filmmaker nor the editor could convince each other of their methods of editing, they both went to a film workshop organized by a Chinese NGO dedicated to promoting independent films. Through their discussions with other people and based on their understanding of Zhang's intention, they decided to focus on Zhang's desire and use it as a theme to narrate the story. In this way, it does not matter much whether Zhang's stories were true or not; her desire for happiness, her longing for a better life and her dream to see her long-lost son were undeniably real. Yuan reflects:

> It goes without saying that participating in NGO activities had an impact on Zhang Xi. However, this may not be the case to others: not everyone works at a NGO or participates in NGO work. However, everyone has desires. Zhang Xi may be an exceptional case, but her story is not a spectacle. Her identity as an HIV-positive person does not matter significantly in the film. What is really at stake is her stories: through storytelling, she weaved a web of desire laced with truth and fiction. Perhaps everyone can learn something from this web. (Yuan cited in Nüquan zaixian 2012)

As a film editor, Yuan was keenly aware of the power of filmmaking and editing, together with the pitfalls of using an NGO aesthetic. Yuan and He Xiaopei did their best not to reproduce the NGO aesthetic and the victim subjectivity commonly seem in the development industry. The finished film thus presents Zhang's story as a story about a woman's desire, both fulfilled and unfulfilled. Through the film, Zhang is speaking with and to the filmmakers — He Xiaopei and Yuan in this case — and people involved in the development industry. In doing so, Zhang displays agency in her storytelling: aware of the kind of story that the audience wanted to hear, she made up a story about her son and supplied all the details and necessary ingredients to make it sound convincing. The

moment when the filmmakers and the audience discover the fictitiousness of Zhang's story becomes the moment when Zhang's agency is manifested. Perhaps Zhang had her agency all the time, except that the filmmakers and NGO workers who were involved in the development industry did not notice it because of their conventional ways of working and thinking, which do not pay sufficient attention to listening to marginalized voices. This understanding of agency, power, and empowerment effectively challenges conventional wisdom in the development industry.

Conclusion

In the development industry, marginalized people and communities are often seen as lacking in agency and in need of empowerment, and such an empowerment is often achieved through development programs using participatory approaches. This understanding fails to recognize ordinary people's agency; it also risks reproducing hierarchies in social relations and global geopolitics. Through working with participatory approaches, He Xiaopei and Yuan Yuan have learned an important lesson: filmmakers and NGO workers should recognize the agency within ordinary people and be self-reflexive. In He Xiaopei's later films, she explores the agency of ordinary people: from the lesbians who marry gay men to cope with pressures from family and society in her 2013 film *Our Marriages: When Lesbians Marry Gay Men* (奇缘一生, codirected with Yuan Yuan), to the children living with mental disability and confined to a hospital in her 2017 film *I Love You Too*; from the gender non-conforming British queers who chose to leave their middle-class families and live a poor and nomadic life in her 2017 film *Yvo and Chrissy* (如此生活), to the children from different racial and cultural backgrounds who learn to live and play together with each other without social bias in her 2019 film *Playmates* (玩伴). All these films are characterized by He Xiaopei's signature "pleasure principle" — a commitment to excavating sexuality and

pleasure from the mundane everyday life. In sharing joys and laughter with each other, the audience of these films come to realize the agency of the protagonists, reflect on their own capacity to affect others and to be affected, and find strength to live their lives with a positive attitude. Empowerment must therefore come with a critical awareness of one's position in society and a firm belief in the power of individuals and communities to determine their own lives.

Is He Xiaopei's "pleasure principle" effective and sufficient in helping marginalized people and communities? Could an over-emphasis on fun, pleasure and individual agency conceal deeply rooted structural problems? Does the "pleasure principle" risk becoming another sign of the "happy" neoliberalism (Binkley 2015)? Do alternatives exist, if any? Can subaltern speak, and, if they do, can their speech be heard? Although not able to provide answers to these questions, *The Lucky One* nonetheless opens up a critical space to reflect on these questions. In many ways, *The Lucky One* queers the development industry by bringing queer desire and pleasure to the fore. It queers the concept and practices of development in a transnational context.

Through intertitles, the closing sequence of *The Lucky One* presents an unresolved mystery of why Zhang made up all her story and why the filmmaker still wanted to complete this film. As the audience walk away from the film, wondering about all these mysteries, the afterlife of this film starts. This afterlife is certainly more interesting and significant than the film itself, as it inspires critical reflection and encourages people to challenge conventional wisdoms in our understanding of development and empowerment. Behind all this lies Zhang's haunting spectral presence, which refuses to rest in a world characterized by complex world geopolitics and unequal power relations. Avery Gordon (2008) suggests that haunting produces a "something-to-be-done." Although what needs to be done is not clear from the film, at

least Zhang had her moment of victory and her laugh: she successfully manipulated all our expectations and eventually exerted her agency; she demanded us to get rid of our deeply-rooted biases and prejudices about marginalized people and communities in our academic and social work; she demanded that we listen to their voices and recognize their agency. In comparison to many other voiceless and faceless people, Zhang is indeed "the lucky one", as she describes herself. If we could see her spectral apparition now, she must be grinning at us.

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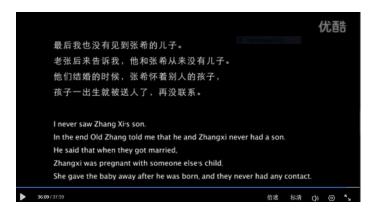
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5