# "Gently Change the World with Singing": Queer Audibility and Soft Activism in China

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On 9 June 2018, the first national queer choir concert, *The Journey of Light*, was held in the concert hall at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. For the first time, seven LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) choirs from across the country were brought together to perform on the same stage.[1] The event was publicized on Chinese social media (primarily WeChat, also known as Weixin, and Weibo) and live-streamed on Chinese-language music and video streaming websites (including Netease cloud music, Douban, Bilibili and TikTok), Chinese-language lesbian and gay dating apps (including Blued, Aloha, Rela, Lespark and Lesdo) and international social media (including Facebook, YouTube and Instagram). Although the offline event publicity in China was relatively low key and the organizers were careful not to brand the event as 'China's first national queer choir concert', possibly to avoid attracting unnecessary attention from the Chinese authorities, the concert was still celebrated in mainland China's LGBTQ communities as a landmark event.

This concert also marked part of the tenth anniversary celebration of the Shanghai Pride, which consisted of a film festival, a choir concert, a photography and art exhibition as well as other public events. What was missing from the annual Shanghai Pride was a parade

[1] I thank members of Beijing Queer Chorus for accepting my interviews, and they include: Simon, Claire, Laurence and Teal. I have used pseudonyms for these interviewees to protect their identity. The pictures used in this article are courtesy of Beijing Queer Chorus.

where queer people march along the streets, as is commonly seen in LGBTQ prides in other parts of the world. This is hardly surprising. Although homosexuality was decriminalized in the People's Republic of China (PRC, China hereafter) in 1997 and removed from China's *Classification of Mental Disorders* in 2001, homosexuality is still a taboo subject in Chinese society. This coincides with the Chinese government's highly unpredictable media censorship as well as its constant ban of unsanctioned public events. To hold a pride event consisting merely of cultural activities was already a considerable risk to take, let alone to hold a pride parade with people marching along the streets. In this context, having a pride week without a pride parade, and more precisely in this case, with a choir concert, serves as a culturally sensitive form of queer activism in the China, but how then do we interpret this type of activism?

This chapter focuses on LGBTQ choirs in China, using the Beijing Queer Chorus (*Beijing ku'er hechangtuan*, BQC hereafter) as a case study. I attended some of the choir's rehearsals when I lived in Beijing several years ago. Since I left Beijing, I have primarily followed their websites and social media accounts. To write this article, I interviewed some choir members by Email or on social media and they offered me valuable insights. By examining how LGBTQ choirs such as BQC construct queer identities and communities and how they engage in political and social activism through live performances and online streaming, I highlight the importance of using music, sound and digital media to communicate identity, community and social movements. Developing the critical framework of 'queer audibility' (Bao 2015), I interrogate the cultural specificity of queer activism in the Chinese context and argue for a "soft" type of activism through performing arts, culture and media. This type of queer activism departs from a sole emphasis on visibility, confrontation and direct intervention into politics that characterizes many LGBTQ pride parades in many parts of the world. I also consider the role of the Internet and social media in broadcasting

queer voices to LGBTQ communities and the public across China and the Chinese diaspora. In doing so, I examine how the production and dissemination of musical cultures function as a "soft", culturally sensitive, and context specific form of political and social activism that empowers socially marginalized groups in the Asia Pacific.

**Queer Activism in Contemporary China**

Although China has a long history of homoeroticism, the public emergence of homosexuality, and furthermore, gay identity, is a recent phenomenon. Homosexuality was introduced to China as a medical and psychiatric category at the beginning of the twentieth century (Sang 2003; Kang 2009; Chiang 2010). Gay identity, as a product of the global LGBTQ movement, emerged in urban areas as part of post-socialist China's "opening-up" drive in the late-twentieth century. As Howard Chiang points out, the rise of urban queer communities in China can be attributed to three factors: the pursuit of civil rights, the claiming of cultural citizenship and the political maneuvering of social space (2019: 187). All of these factors are set in the context of globalization.

"Global gays" (Altman 1997), that is, the globalization of LGBTQ identity and politics worldwide, marks an important feature in queer cultures from many parts of the world. In the context of China, scholars have suggested that sexual identities and queer activism in China today were neither entirely "borrowed" from the West, nor purely derived from local historical and cultural traditions; rather, we are witnessing a new hybrid form of queer identity (Bao 2018a; Engebretsen 2014; Engebretsen and Schroeder 2015; Ho 2010; Kam 2013; Kong 2010; Martin et al. 2008; Rofel 2007). Most queer activists in China dismiss the possibility of a confrontational type of queer politics modelled on Stonewall — that is, a type of political activism primarily based on open confrontation with the authorities

and the general public — and represented by pride parades on city streets.[2] They instead advocate a culturally sensitive style of 'soft' activism using media, culture, and "nomadic activism" (Rofel 2013) to construct identities and build communities (Bao 2011; Liu 2019). Elisabeth Engebretsen (2015) juxtaposes three landmark queer activist events in China: a Stonewall anniversary celebration in the form of a birthday party in Beijing in 1996, the Shanghai Pride in 2009 and a pride parade in Changsha in 2013. It is tempting to see these three events in a linear, teleological manner and thus imagine that the Western type of pride parade might be the future for China. After all, China is becoming more accepting of homosexuality and younger generations of LGBTQ people are becoming more confident and conscious of their own sexuality and rights. However, Engebretsen observes, on closer examination, even the 2013 pride parade in Changsha did not simply emulate the Western model. The organizers took careful consideration of the local contexts and devised many temporal, spatial and publicity tactics to reduce risks. It is thus more appropriate to see the three events as contingent, and the organizers as experienced enough to understand and make use of the contingent social contexts in open, flexible and creative ways. As Engebretsen argues:

> activists use nuanced modes of articulation and develop meaningful ways to further their political agendas while minimising the risk of censorship and violence. The communicative strategies convey messages of sameness and difference, or of transgression and compliance, depending on the perspectives of the audiences. In this way, they contribute toward creating powerful, and complex, and yet paradoxical

[2] The Stonewall Riots, also known as the Stonewall Uprising or the Stonewall Rebellion, refers to a series of spontaneous and violent demonstrations by LGBTQ communities against a police raid that began in the early morning of 28 June 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in New York. The event was often celebrated as the beginning of the modern LGBTQ movement.

> discourses of what it means to be Chinese *and* queer, in a comparative, geopolitical perspective. (2015: 106, original emphasis)

Indeed, Chinese queer activism is characterized by its contingency, as it is dependent upon multiple factors including state policy, geographical location, and interactions between organizers and participants. It is therefore difficult to come up with a generic statement of what type of activism suits China or will take place in China in the future. However, with the strengthening of political control under the rule of the current Chinese president Xi Jinping, the pride parade type of activism has become increasingly difficult in China. Based on these circumstances, I suggest that the following three types may become dominant forms of queer activism in the years to come:

The first lies within the area of litigation. Although homosexuality is not legally protected in China, an increasing number of queer individuals have taken respective public institutions and government ministries to court for their discriminatory policies and practices against gender and sexual minorities. This was exemplified by queer filmmaker Fan Popo's 2013 case against the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television over the online censorship of his film *Mama Rainbow* in 2013, queer activist Peng Yanhui's 2014 case against the Xinyu Piaoxiang Psychiatric Clinic over gay conversion therapy, and Qiu Bai's 2016 case against the Ministry of Education over the negative depiction of homosexuality in university textbooks (Parkin 2018). Although most of these court cases did not achieve the results the plaintiffs had hoped for, the fact that government ministries and public institutions can be held to account for their wrong-doing serves as an inspiration for sexual minorities and other marginalized social groups in China.

The second dominant form of queer activism engages with the Internet and social media. With the rapid development of the Internet and social media in China, along with its widespread use among sexual minorities, online and social media activism has become an important means of queer activism in China today. Such examples include the community response online to Lü Liping and Sun Haiying's homophobic remarks in 2011 and Sina Weibo's reversal of the ban on gay content in 2018 (Bao 2018b). It is important to note that online activism often works in tandem with offline activism, and is usually facilitated by LGBTQ organizations, media companies, celebrities and the Chinese government. Online activism alone without offline support and community mobilization is therefore insufficient.

The third type of queer activism is associated with organized cultural activities and events. This can take various forms, including film festivals, art and photography exhibitions, cultural festivals, and sporting events. Examples include the Beijing Queer Film Festival, Shanghai Queer Film Festival, PFLAG (Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meetings, and the Shanghai Pride. The choir concert described at the beginning of this article falls under this category too. These cultural activities also include dinners, karaoke, sports, and what William Schroeder (2015) describes as the affective forms of having fun. These activities may not look political, but they play a significant role in constructing identities and communities and raising awareness of minority rights—as works on community music therapy in other contexts demonstrate (Stige 2000). More importantly, these cultural events and activities can effectively circumvent government censorship and are therefore likely to be sustainable for community building.

These three types of queer activism coexist in contemporary China, and they play different roles. Activists usually combine them for rights advocacy and community building, while selecting the most appropriate form according to their needs and specific contexts. It is difficult to predict whether the confrontational type of queer politics represented by pride

parades will take place in China. As litigation can only be used in a few selected cases, the 'soft' activism represented by organized cultural events including film screenings and choir rehearsals may dominate China's queer activism for a long time to come, given the consistency of a rigid government policy of "no support, no opposition, and no advocacy" (Q. Wang 2015: 174) with regard to homosexuality. By combining offline public musical performance and active online engagement with the community and the general public, queer choirs in China epitomize such a 'soft' activist approach. In the following section, I shall conduct a case study of how the Beijing Queer Chorus engages with community building and cultural activism before I go on to discuss its wider implications for understanding the role of music and digital media for queer activism in China today.

**"Sing for a Better World": Beijing Queer Chorus**

Founded in 2008 and originally named Shining Jazzy Chorus (*Sanlengjianyi hechangtuan*), BQC was the first major LGBTQ choir that performed publicly in China. It is a member of the Asian LGBT Choir Network and is also one of the first Asian members of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses. The choir has around 170 members in total, however a smaller group of about 50 people meet regularly every weekend for rehearsals (interview with Laurence (WeChat interview, 13 September 2019)). Most choir members are in their twenties and thirties, and most self-identify as LGBTQ, but there are straight and queer-friendly people as well. BQC has a presence on WeChat, Weibo, Douban, TikTok, Bilibili, YouTube, Facebook and other social media and video streaming sites (Figures 1).


Figure 1. Screenshot of the Beijing Queer Chorus webpage on Weibo, 10 February 2019

BQC's English slogan is "sing for a better world", but its Chinese slogan sounds more interesting: "gently change the world with singing (*Yong gesheng weirou gaibian shijie*)." If to "change the world" conveys an activist ambition—that is, the choir is not simply there for fun or to achieve musical excellence; it has a social purpose as well— "gently with singing" conveys an approach different from the commonly perceived 'hard' and "direct" forms of queer political activism mentioned earlier. After sending a straight-identified male journalist to a BQC rehearsal, global news media outlet *Vice* observed: "They do not seem eager to work hard to fight for equal rights or push boundaries. They just want to dress beautifully and sing nice songs elegantly" (Vice 2018). BQC has its own way of engaging politically. As choir member Ling Yu put it: "Chorus is a gentle form of expression. In this community, when dozens of people stand on the same stage and sing the same song, it is the softest way for rights advocacy. Its power cannot be underestimated" (The Paper 2019).

While BQC's supposedly apolitical nature may be a survival strategy in China, where politicized groups are often more prone to state intervention, there is ample evidence that the

choir members are thinking of activist strategies differently. Although there is no strong political or religious opposition to homosexuality in China, sexual minorities nevertheless face enormous pressure from the traditional ideas of family and posterity, as well as the public's general lack of knowledge regarding homosexuality. In this context, building queer communities and raising public awareness about LGBTQ issues become paramount. Visibility and positive representations are starting points. As the choir states on its Weibo account (a microblogging social media platform): "We are doing our best to contribute to China's queer movement, by presenting positive images of queer communities, by combating prejudice with beautiful tunes, and by performing in public to showcase diversity" (Lei 2013). Choir member Laurence remarked: "We need people to stand in front of the public and let them know that LGBTQ are ordinary people and are not different from others." (WeChat interview, 13 September 2019) Another choir member nicknamed Bamboo agreed: "We adopt a gentle approach to the world, and we hope that the world can also treat gay people gently" (Vice 2018).

Being part of an inclusive community reflects a lot of choir members' experiences in the choir. In my interview, choir member Simon reflected:

> The critical things which made me feel really involved in the BQC are the people here, and what they do, or what we do […] In BQC, people just gently sing here, and do what they can to make the community better. The singers, the non-singing volunteers, everyone creates a place like home where nobody needs to hide or to pretend anymore. Thus, I'm willing to stay here, not only to enjoy this place, but also to make this place better and benefit more people. (Email interview, 13 September 2019)

Indeed, for its members, the choir has become a "heterotopia" (Foucault 1986), or an "other space" different from the mainstream society, in which queer identities are imagined, communities are formed, and solidarity is felt. Choir members are experimenting with new forms of social relations and queer kinship that are not possible elsewhere in a heteronormative society.

On 22 December 2018, BQC held a concert titled *Sing, and the Hills Will Echo* (*Qunshan huixiang*) to mark its tenth anniversary. The concert program contained three parts and included a wide repertoire of music that the choir engages with: Part One consists of eight classic songs including Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria" and Wang Luobin's "The Crescent Moon Rises (*Ban'ge yueliang pashanglai*)"; Part Two presented a suite of eight songs from Hayao Miyazaki's films, sung in Japanese; Part Three showcased five original songs or adaptions with queer themes, including "Li Lei and Han Meimei are Thirty Years Old (*Li Lei he Han Meimei sanshisui le*)", which satirizes gender stereotypes in society, and "The End of the Chou Year and Beginning of the Yin Year" (*Choumo yinchu*) , a piece adapted from the traditional musical form of story-telling in Beijing dialect with drum accompaniment (*jingyun dagu*). One of the choir's favorite songs is "I Am What I Am (*Wo*)", a piece inspired by the late Hong Kong queer singer Leslie Cheung's performance. The choir have specially composed new lyrics for the song while maintaining the existing music. These lyrics serve as a tribute to the queer icon Leslie Cheung who committed suicide in 2003; they also demonstrate the choir members' confidence in their own sexualities:

Without hiding, live the life I love.

Without a mask, stand right in the light.

I am what I am.

I am a firework of my own color.

Under sky and above the sea,

I would never be a bubble that bursts easily.

I love who I am.

I grow the rose to another form of beauty.

In the lonesome desert,

fully bloom without shyness. (BQC 2018, their translation)

Figure 2. BQC at the *So Far So Long* concert, Beijing, January 2018 (Courtesy of Beijing Queer Chorus)

To contribute to queer community building in China, BQC also actively engages with popular issues in the LGBTQ communities. The relationship between parents and their queer children becomes particularly pronounced in the lead up to the Chinese New Year, when young people working or studying away from home have to return home to spend the festive

season with their parents. For many queer people, this is a difficult time of the year, as they have to confront generation gaps and deal with pressures from families and relatives for them to get into heterosexual marriages. In January 2018, BQC held a concert before the Chinese New Year (Figure 2). The concert was titled *So Far, So Long* in English; the Chinese title *Yuanxing yu Guxiang* literally means "Travelling and Homecoming." Conductor Yuan Ye explained the rationale for the title as follows: "Hometown has a particular meaning to queers ... it is an embarrassing and even heavy topic for sexual minorities during the Chinese New Year" (Vice 2018).

Branded as a "music salon," *So Far, So Long* was a combination of performance art and a traditional choir concert. A female singer stood in the middle of the platform, wearing a face mask, symbolizing the masked life one leads as a closeted queer person. Video footage was shown between songs, showing a gay man making a Skype call to his mother, telling her that he missed home but could not go home because of his own sexuality. This conversation spoke to many queer people's experiences and thus created a touching effect among the queer audience. By addressing issues specific to queer people, BQC constructs an affective community through the sharing of choral music and performance.

Starting as a small choir with only a few members and no audience at all, BQC has become an increasingly successful choir in recent years. Although very few concert halls accept them because of their amateur status and their queer identity, they have managed to perform in different venues in Beijing including small theatres, music salons, art spaces and community centers. While a few venues are queer friendly, often BQC has to conceal its queer identity when hiring venues and making event publicity. As Simon explained:

> We face a lot of pressure from society. For example, when we look for a concert venue, we may be refused simply because of our queer identity. Also, we need to avoid using

some key words when posting on social media due to China's media censorship. But our identity can also be a strength to some degree, just like a point of differentiation. It's easier for us to get support from those who support gender and sexual equality. (Email interview, 13 September 2019)

Despite continuing discrimination, queer identity can also bring the choir performance opportunities. For example, the choir was invited to sing the song "Season of Love", a song from the Broadway musical *Rent*, on stage when the musical toured Beijing in 2018. It has also been invited to attend music festivals in different parts of the world, including Various Voices Dublin 2014, the GALA Choruses Festival held in Denver in 2016, and the Hand in Hand Asian Queer Choral Festival in Seoul in 2017. Choir member Liu Xiao was fully aware of the pros and cons of using the queer "label": "Starting with the 'label' and ending with nice vocal music: that's the nature of the choir" (Vice 2018). As choir members are brought together by their shared gender and sexual identities and have benefitted from the empowering experience of sharing in the communal expression of these identities, they also have to work very hard to improve their singing and performance skills. For BQC, the queer identity therefore functions as both an obstacle to and an opportunity for its sustainable development.

**Online Streaming and Social Media Communication**

To publicize themselves and their events, queer community groups including BQC constantly have to navigate China's opaque censorship system and complex media landscape and learn to work with different types of media. LGBTQ cultures are sensitive issues on Chinese media. Queer content has been persistently banned on China's state media and frequently censored in cyberspace. Despite the continuing existence of media censorship in China, the

degree of censorship varies for different forms of media. In general, state media institutions such as the *People's Daily* and China Central Television enforce stricter censorship rules than commercial media or media companies run at provincial and municipal levels; online and social media platforms usually enjoy more freedom than print media (Yang 2011); English-language media including China Global Television Network often have more press freedom than their Chinese counterparts as a result of the Chinese government's 'media going out' strategy in which English-language media play a part in the Chinese government's public diplomacy (Thussu et al 2018). In recent years, an increasing number of LGBTQ friendly media content have emerged, demonstrated by the increasing number of nominations and prize-winners at the annual Rainbow Media Awards, organized by Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, a Beijing-based LGBTQ non-governmental organization and media watchdog.

Although queer issues cannot be covered by the Chinese-language state media because of censorship, BQC has been working with Chinese-language commercial and English-language international media to promote themselves and publicize their events. In my interview, Simon, who is in charge of the choir's international publicity, introduced his publicity strategy:

> Each platform may have its unique style, so we need to think about the most suitable words, and how to interact with the audience. WeChat and Weibo are two major platforms, and we need to carefully think about the contents and the time to post, quite like a marketing department of a real company. For the social media platforms overseas, things are easier because BQC's main audience are within China. The followers of our overseas social media are mainly friends that we met from previous international events, such as Portland Gay Men's Chorus, GALA Choruses Festival, Hand in Hand Asian LGBT Choral Festival. These social media platforms are places to maintain old friendships. But

> easy to maintain doesn't mean we can treat these platforms like a deserted place. Keeping overseas accounts up to date is very important. These platforms are usually the first windows for some potential audience to get to know us, and then some collaboration opportunities may arise. (Email interview, 13 September 2019)

Most BQC members are "born digital natives", meaning they are social media savvy. They not only use a wide range of social media platforms but have devised platform-specific publicity strategies including inventing bespoke taglines to target specific user groups. Some of these taglines include:

Bilibili: "Take Control of the Bullet Screen"

Douban: "Tailor-Made for the Art-Loving Youth"

Facebook: "We Are with the World"

Instagram: "Smiling Faces Under the Rainbow"

Netease Cloud Music: "Hear the Harmonious Voice from the Sky"

TikTok: "Unruly Singers"

Weibo: "Tease These Cute Queers"

YouTube: "Gentle Voices from the Orient"

These context-specific taglines demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the technological and cultural specificity of each social media platform; they also showcase sophisticated skills in niche marketing and "narrow-casting" (Naficy 1993), a communication

strategy often used by, in and for minority groups. For example, the Bilibili blurb ("Take Control of the Bullet Screen") highlights the interactive feature of the video streaming website (where the audience can leave superimposed textual comments on screen, a phenomenon known as *danmu*); the TikTok blurb ("Unruly Singers") targets rebellious youth who often use the short video streaming website for self-expression, identity performance and fun; and the Douban blurb ("Tailor-Made for the Art-Loving Youth") attracts a predominantly young, well-educated and middle-class user group. Although international social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are officially banned in China and require the use of Virtual Private Networks for access, BQC loses no opportunity to engage with its international audience. Their Facebook blurb ("We Are with the World") emphasizes the cosmopolitan disposition of Facebook and the choir, whereas the YouTube blurb ("Gentle Voices from the Orient") deliberately conjures up a sense of Orientalized cultural alterity to attract an international audience who are interested in finding more about China.

Publicity on each social media site requires specific strategies for audience engagement and the recognition of key features, major user groups and technological affordances. For video streaming websites such as Bilibili, TikTok and YouTube, uploading video clips of rehearsals and performances usually suffice, often with English or bilingual subtitles to facilitate international social media users. For microblogging sites such as Weibo and Facebook, news updates and contextual information about the videos are frequently added because of the interactive nature of these social media sites. To give visitors a better sense of the choir's social purpose, BQC often includes China's queer community news in their Weibo news update.

BQC's most labour-intensive social media engagements take place on WeChat, the biggest social media platform in the Chinese-speaking world (Wang 2016). BQC's 2019 tour

to Japan showcases their sustained and strategic engagements with audiences and fans through WeChat. BQC attended the Hand in Hand Queer Choral Festival in Tokyo on 12-15 April 2019 (Figure 3). Its online publicity on WeChat started a month prior to the festival on 19 March. Besides announcing the news of BQC's plan to attend the choral festival, the choir also advertised a "Friend of BQC" vacancy, inviting a fan to travel with the group to Tokyo to experience the festival, although the chosen fan would have to cover their own expenses for the trip. The next article posted on WeChat on 10 April announced that a young woman had been selected by the group as the "Friend of BQC" for this trip: this young woman is straight-identified but queer friendly; she loves music and has a Vlog (video blog) account with a decent number of followers, so she will be a perfect person to help the group with video-recording and online publicity. In the same article, BQC also invited audience members and fans to post in the comment section questions they wished to ask queer people in Japan and promised that BQC would ask their Japanese friends these questions during the festival. This interactive strategy worked: a few fans posted their questions online about queer life in Japan. During the festival, pictures were posted online showing the choir members' life in Japan participating in the festival and visiting different parts of the country. Immediately after the festival, interviews with choir members and with Japanese queers were published on WeChat, together with an announcement that there would soon be an "experience sharing session (*fenxianghui*)". The session took place at Destination, a LGBTQ club and cultural center in Beijing, on 27 April, where choir members met their audience and fans and shared stories about their trip to Japan.


Figure 3. Beijing Queer Chorus in Japan, April 2019 (Courtesy of Beijing Queer Chorus)

From the above example, we can see that throughout the process — before, during and after the trip — BQC members are fully aware of their celebrity status and they strategically keep their audience and fans engaged: from online (posting questions) to offline participation (recruiting a fan to join the group on tour and holding a debriefing meeting to share with fans their experiences in Japan). Recruiting a straight-identified but queer friendly fan showcases the choir's deliberate efforts to engage with people outside the queer communities and this conveys a positive message of inclusivity to the public. Their regular debriefing meetings also act as good opportunities to publicize the group's upcoming concerts and recruit new choir members. Regular events like these also contribute to queer community building by bringing together LGBTQ people in a local queer venue.

The publicity strategy adopted by BQC — making effective use of social media and interacting frequently with audience members and fans offline and online — is not new and is by no means unique. However, we should bear in mind that BQC is a self-organized and a not-for-profit grassroots organization where every member works for the choir for free and in

their spare time; income from performances is primarily used for the logistics of renting rehearsal and performance venues, as well as touring and attending music festivals. All of their social media activities are carried out by choir members and volunteers out of their love for the choir and the community. The creative, affective and digital labor involved in these social media engagements showcases enthusiasm and creative energies in China's urban queer communities, as well as collective efforts of queer community building at the grassroots level.

**Queer Audibility and Soft Activism**

BQC's ways of engaging with music and social media may seem ordinary and mundane. They rehearse, perform, and regularly engage with audiences and fans online and offline. Choir members easily become friends and often hang out together, forming a close-knit community and support network for each other. They seldom feel that they are engaging in political or social activism. A sense of activism is often felt as an afterthought when they meet journalists for media interviews. It is the sense of finding a community that they feel a part of, making friends and having fun that binds the choir members. Yet all this takes place in an environment where homosexuality is not widely accepted in society and LGBTQ rights are far from being guaranteed by law. The choir members are predominantly young, urban, cosmopolitan, middle-class and sometimes manifest a sense of 'homonormativity' — that is, following the scripts and norms of a heterosexual society (Duggan 2004), but they have nonetheless empowered many people living at the margins of society who are troubled by their sexualities.

BQC's soft approach to activism is exemplary of most queer activist strategies in China today, ranging from reading clubs to film festivals, and from sports clubs to dinner

groups. Most of these strategies involve bringing people together and doing things as a collective. These collectives do not look political from the outside, and many are not motivated by political ambitions, but their activities are fundamental to the formation of queer communities and identities. Many queer people feel isolated due to the lack of support from their families and friends. Encouraging them to leave the online space and private homes to meet other queer people is often the first step to identity construction and community building. Only when queer people feel more comfortable with and among themselves can they stand up to pressures from family and society, and demand more rights, respect and recognition. At critical moments, such energies can even be galvanized for political action and rights advocacy. For example, in March 2018, as soon as Weibo banned gay content on its social media platform, many individuals and groups began using the hashtag #Iamgay to protest the ban. This eventually led to a reversal of the ban (Bao 2018b). In discussing everyday queer politics in China, Schroeder writes: "In *tongzhi* China, this politics of the everyday is frequently characterized by an emphasis on fun and does not seek to effect immediate structural change. Rather, it opens up an affective space in which change is potentiated or felt" (2015: 76).

BQC's queer activism points to the importance of sound and voice in grassroots politics and social movements. Queer activism has long emphasized the importance of sight and visibility: "Coming out", after all, is a strategy based on visuality, with the assumption that visibility underpins truth and authenticity, and therefore sexual minorities exist and deserve recognition. This activist strategy is widely acknowledged and practiced in many parts of the world. But sights and visibility do not have to be the only means of political engagement; sound and audibility can be equally potent but have so far been under-theorized in queer studies and media politics. Nick Couldry (2010), in his book *Why Voice Matters*, argues for the importance of voice, understood as the effective opportunity for people to

speak and be heard on what affects their lives in contemporary politics. In discussing queer filmmaker Cui Zi'en's queer politics, I highlighted Cui's activist strategy of 'making sounds' to disrupt the silence about sexual minorities in China by coming up with a critical term "queer audibility" (Bao 2015). As Cui puts it poetically and metaphorically vis-a-vis queer filmmaking in China:

> This is called 'making sounds' (*fasheng*). Echoes (*huixiang*) always follow sounds. The effects of sounds differ on walls. Walls in China are particularly good at absorbing sounds. However, there are still echoes and there are still people who can hear the echoes. Sounds act like sparks of fire. They make burning flames as they accumulate. Sounds do not disappear completely as if they were in a complete vacuum. (quoted in Bao 2015: 50)

The phrase "making sounds" or "making oneself heard" has also been frequently used by BQC members to describe the purpose of their musical performances and media activities, succinctly captured by the title of a song they sing, "Can You Hear Me?". BQC member Ruan Ruan made her point by using the metaphor of "voice":

> Whatever your sexual orientation, your role in society is a kind of voice. It is reasonable for any kind of voice to exist in society. It should not be abandoned. The real harmony and tolerance should be that each person can play a role. We shouldn't just accept a single voice ... If we don't do anything, if we don't voice our support for sexual minorities to get equal rights, they will never be recognized. Every one of us needs to take one more step forward to speak out and take action to support them. (quoted in CGTN 2018)

Ruan's words are informed by a more direct mode of political engagement: she encourages people to stand out to support LGBTQ rights. However, she was not talking about

gay pride parades or Stonewall types of direct confrontation with the police and the public, and her proposed action points seem rather mundane: coming to queer public events to support queer people and speaking against gender and sexual identity-based discriminations. As Charlie Liu (2019), organizer of the Shanghai Pride, remarked:

> In China, there are no parades. Perhaps we don't really need it. That's why we have different cultural events such as film festivals and theatre. Sports events like the bike ride and the run are the closest we can get to a parade. You know, obstacles are not there to help you stumble; they are there to help you overcome them.

Liu's optimism points to the multiple and flexible forms of queer activism, as well as creative ways of doing politics, in contemporary China. This type of activism can take place offline or online, including leaving encouraging comments on social media platforms and condemning homophobic remarks online. Engebretsen characterizes this form of activism as 'mobile, transformative, multilingual and based on a multimedia platform' which 'feeds off the most unlimited speech and reach of new media technologies' (2015: 105). She also highlights the significance of recognizing this type of soft activism as a de-Westernizing and de-colonial strategy in queer studies, which tends to be Euro-American centric:

> a 'queer China' perspective complicates simplistic theories and politics of queer pride and liberation more generally. In turn, the emergent catalogue of queer activist world-making – the fractions, instances, *ad hoc* organising alongside digital archiving and story-telling of transnational reach – are likely to be better situated to organize meaningfully for justice and equality in lasting ways. (2015: 106)

Indeed, it is important to think along with, away from and even outside of the queer politics of pride, visibility and "coming out" in transnational queer activism. It is also necessary to attend to the cultural specificity of each context. The growing number and increasing popularity of queer choirs in China, along with many other forms of cultural activism, reminds us of the importance of voice, sound and queer audibility in the Global South. These groups help us understand how the production and dissemination of musical cultures can be used politically to empower minority groups and marginalized people in the Asia Pacific. As musical cultures make audible the voices of gender and sexual minorities, they also help us rethink queer subjectivities and activist strategies outside the more dominant European and American frameworks. As the BQC slogan suggests, these musical cultures can help to "gently change the world with singing".

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