

Ways of Seeing Transgender in Independent Chinese Cinema

Hongwei Bao (University of Nottingham)

(*Feminist Media Studies*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2077798>)

Abstract

This article examines the history of representing transgender people in independent films produced in mainland China from the 1990s to present. Tracing a brief history of the transgender representation on Chinese screen, this article illustrates the multiplicity and porousness of transgender cinematic representations in postsocialist China. It identifies five ways of representing trans people on Chinese screen, roughly corresponding to five historical periods and modes of representation. These diverse representations result from a contingent assemblage of factors including the film genre, the filmmaker's subjectivity, the relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects, the discourses in which the representations are situated, and the development of the trans subjectivities and communities. Recognising the crucial role of films in identity construction and community formation, this article contends that these 'trans' films construct the Chinese transgender subject as contingent, flexible, marginalised, and nonetheless socially significant. In doing so, this article refutes an essentialised notion of trans identity; it also highlights the pivotal role of independent films in constructing marginalised identities, communities, and desires in postsocialist China.

Keywords:

Transgender, film, queer, representation, China

Although gender fluid and sexually ambiguous characters can be found throughout the history of Chinese cinema, transgender as a contemporary form of identification has only a relatively short history of three decades. Trans characters appear mostly in independent Chinese cinema, that is, films produced outside China's state film studio system by independent filmmakers with a self-conscious political stance. When filmmakers from the Sixth Generation and China's New Documentary Movement turned their attention to the forgotten corners of Chinese society in the 1990s, crossdressing performers working in urban bars were among the first groups of people they encountered; the glamour of these gender non-conforming people – despite their low socio-economic status in Chinese society – immediately captured the filmmakers' attention and imagination. Independent Chinese cinema therefore has a strong tradition of representing trans people. Trans characters and independent Chinese filmmakers share certain affinities with each other: both are subjects living at the margins of the Chinese society and neither are officially recognised by the state and the mainstream Chinese society.

In this article, I offer a brief genealogy and taxonomy of trans representations in mainland Chinese independent cinema since the 1990s. In doing so, I raise questions about identity and identification, subjectification and objectification, desire and affect in documentary filmmaking. Here I use the term transgender, or trans, broadly to refer to a wide range of gender-crossing embodiments and practices, related to but often beyond identity and identification. They include more recently invented terms such as *kuaxingbie* (transgender) or *kua'er* (trans); they also encompass indigenous, local, regional, and often medicalised, pathologised and stigmatised social categories such as *bianxingren* (transsexual), *yinyangren* (yin/yang person), *fanchuan* (crossdressing), *bianzhuang* (drag), *eryizi* ('leaning both ways'), *renyao* (human prodigy), *jiaxiaozi* ('fake boy'), and *jiaguinü* or *weiniang* ('fake girl'). These terms suggest the richness of the transgender heritage in the Chinese-speaking world; they

also point to a global history of gender non-conformity and social deviance that are messy and context specific. I hope to unsettle Western, identitarian modes of understanding and defining transgender, in particular vis-à-vis the common tendency of seeing gender, sexuality and class as completely separate categories. Instead of trying to define what transgender is, I ask what insights we can gain by applying a global, transgendered critical lens to reading film texts, a form of ‘trans reading’ so to speak. In particular, I identify five ways of representing trans people on the Chinese screen, roughly corresponding to five slightly overlapping historical periods and modes of representation. They are: (1) transgender as a homosexual prototype in early queer films of the 1990s; (2) transgender as socially marginalised subjects (e.g. crossdressing performers and sex workers) in independent Chinese cinema of the 2000s; (3) transgender as part of the LGBT community in queer activist documentaries from the 2000s to 2010s; (4) transgender as the quintessential and radical queer character in queer experimental films from the 2000s to 2010s; (5) transgender as a mode of identity and community in emerging trans community DIY videos in the 2010s. These five modes are not clearly cut; their time periods can overlap, and their boundaries are often porous. These diverse representations result from a contingent assemblage of factors including the film genre, the filmmaker’s subjectivity, the relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects, the discourses in which the representations are situated, and the development of the trans subjectivities and communities. Recognising the vital role of films in trans identity construction and community formation, I contend that these trans films construct the Chinese transgender subject as contingent, flexible, marginalised, and nonetheless socially significant. In doing so, I reject an essentialised notion of trans identity and highlight the pivotal role of independent films in constructing trans identities, communities, and desires in post-Mao China.

The 1990s to early 2000s marked the germination and early development of the independent Chinese cinema; this period also marked the ‘coming out’ of queer and trans characters on screen. Several landmark films about gender and sexual minorities were made, including the first explicitly gay identified feature film *East Palace, West Palace*, the first lesbian documentary *The Box* (dir. Echo Y. Wendy, 2001), the first lesbian feature *Fish and Elephant* (dir. Li Yu 2001), and the first documentary film explicitly depicting a trans character *Miss Jin Xing*. Many of these queer films can also be seen as trans films, because while they portray same-sex intimacy, they also feature gender non-conforming subjects such as effeminate gay men and butch lesbians. The film *East Palace, West Palace* portrays the gay protagonist Ah Lan as an effeminate young man with perverse desires; the film’s storyline even requires him to put on women’s clothes. Although this narrative speaks to the crossdressing tradition in Chinese opera, in which gender crossing and same-sex intimacy were often intertwined, it also manifests and reinforces the stereotype of homosexuality being a form of gender inversion, which often underpins a traditional understanding of transgender. Here, under the influence of transnational sexology and under the gaze of the independent Chinese filmmakers, the issues of homosexuality and transgender converge. The first gay explicit feature film thus became a trans film, and trans representation became an important part of the queer film canon.

The 2000s witnessed the rapid development of independent Chinese cinema. As independent Chinese filmmakers turned their attention to socially marginalised subjects, crossdressing performers and sex workers captured their attention. As a result, this period witnessed a proliferation of documentaries featuring the lives of crossdressing performers and sex workers, two distinct and yet sometimes related identity categories. Simply put, many gender and sexual minority subjects had to make a living in entertainment venues and through sex work, two of the very few employment opportunities for working-class queer and

trans people. The documentary films that depict crossdressing, or *fanchuan*, characters include Michelle Chen's *The Snake Boy* (2002), Zhang Hanzi's *Tangtang* (2004), Han Tao's *Baobao* (2004), Gao Tian's *Meimei* (2005), Jiangzhi's *Xiang Pingli* (2005), Du Haibin's *Beautiful Men* (2005), Wang Yiren's film *From Chrysalis to Butterfly* (2005), and Qiu Jiongjiong's *Madame* (2009). This list went on into the 2010s and included recent films such as *The Two Lives of Ermao* (dir. Jia Yuchuan, 2019). Most of these films follow the poor and often-tragic lives of crossdressing performers, portraying them as not only struggling against gender norms but also struggling for a living at the edge of Chinese society. Some of these films follow an observational mode of direct cinema tradition but many are influenced by a performative mode of documentary making, bringing together experiments in theatrical performance and documentary realism with gender performativity, a cinematic technique also observed in *Miss Jin Xing*.

The third mode of trans representation is transgender as part of the LGBT community in queer activist documentaries from the 2000s to 2010s. After the removal of homosexuality from China's criminal codes in 1997 and the classification of mental disorder in 2001, there has been a proliferation of gender and sexual identities and communities in urban China. The term LGBT entered China through global queer activism and the universal human rights discourse. In this process, transgender, or *kua xingbie* or *kua'er*, became a subject of gender oppression and queer activism and part of the gender and sexual minority community. We therefore see the appearance of gender ambiguous people in several community documentaries, including Cui Zi'en's 2008 film *Queer China*, 'Comrade' China and Fan Popo's 2016 film *Papa Rainbow*. The *Queer Comrades* webcast series also include an episode on drag (*Life's A Drag*) and a talk show with a trans woman (*Sister's Quan's Xidan Adventure*). In these queer community documentaries, transgender becomes an important

component of the global LGBT/queer imagination that affirms gender and sexual diversity as part of a coalitional and intersectional gender and sexual politics.

Transgender is often used as form of gender identity in queer community and activist documentaries, primarily because the public and popular address of these documentaries makes them less conducive to ambiguity and experimentation. In queer fiction films produced in the same period, the picture was different. Trans is used as a form of radical aesthetics and politics. Cui Zi'en's films often feature gender and sexually ambiguous characters. In *Enter the Clown* (dir Cui Zi'en, 2002), for example, Xiaobo's father changes gender and demands the son to address him as mother and even offers to feed the son with his sperm. There is no explanation in the story of how and why this happens; and trans characters do not even have to be dressed in the clothes traditionally designed for women or act in a gender stereotypical way. Using his imagination, Cui creates a fantastic queer world in which gender, sexuality and desire flow freely and without social constraints. Fan Popo's 2018 film *The Drum Tower* portrays an intimate encounter between a young gay man and a trans woman. Their strange relationship complicates clear boundaries between gender, sexuality and desire. In these queer fiction films, trans people are seen to embody quintessential queerness and are therefore more radical than their LGBT counterparts in community documentaries produced in the same period. This type of fictional, dramatic and even docudramatic trans representation can be seen as a minor mode, or undercurrent, that avoids the visual spectacle sometimes associated with trans representation by non-trans filmmakers.

The last mode of representation has only emerged very recently. Transgender is represented as a mode of identity and community in trans community digital videos in the 2010s. These digital videos are often documentaries made in a DIY style, with a digital video camera (and sometimes on a smart phone), on a low budget and circulated among friends or in community videomaking workshops. The Queer University filmmaking project, for

example, has sponsored several of these films including *Brothers* (dir. Yao Yao, 2013), a rare film about trans men's lives, and *Magic* (dir. Michael Liu, 2015), a film about trans women. A recent film that belongs to this category is *Xiaodi* (Dir. Chen Junmi and Gao Guo, 2021), based on the life of a trans person breaking away from the confines of a disciplinary school and later gaining reconciliation with their parents. These films are often made by trans identified people or their friends and allies. They mostly portray the mundane lives of trans people, including their self-medication, hanging out with friends and dealing with their families. There is less voyeurism and spectacle in these trans representations. Through cinematic representation and even screening events, the audience are invited to see the lives of trans characters and imagine how they live and feel.

From the above genealogy and taxonomy of trans representation on Chinese screen, we can see the emergence of transgender as a historical and social subject in post-Mao Chinese society. This supports the constructivist view on social identities; that is, identities are historically specific and socially constructed. We can also conclude that filmmakers have shaped trans identities in different ways through the cinematic apparatus, and that cinematic representations of transgender constitute part of the processes of constructing trans identity, community and politics in post-Mao China.

Bio:

Hongwei Bao is an Associate Professor in Media Studies at the University of Nottingham, UK, where he also directs the Centre for Contemporary East Asian Cultural Studies. He holds a PhD in Gender and Cultural Studies from the University of Sydney, Australia. His research primarily focuses on queer cultures in contemporary China. He is the author of *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China* (NIAS Press, 2018),

Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism

(Routledge, 2020), and *Queer Media in China* (Routledge, forthcoming in 2021).

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1905-7926