The Wedding Complex:

Chinese Queer Performance Art as Social Activism

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Abstract:

Through public, intentional and interventionist displays of the queer body, queer and Chinese identified artists have used performance art for identity expression, community building and social activism. This article focuses on some of these queer performance artworks, those that engage with the theme of weddings; that is, performance artworks that draw on and critique the social conventions of wedding ceremonies. Focusing on five case studies – the lesbian artist duo Shi Tou and Ming Ming's photography and installation about queer women's intimacy; queer filmmakers Fan Popo and David Zheng's 2009 film *New Beijing, New Marriage*, a documentary based on a same-sex wedding performance in central Beijing; queer feminist filmmaker He Xiaopei's performance artwork and films; the Young Feminist Activist Group's 2012 public performance 'Bloody Brides' to protest domestic violence against women; and the queer artist duo Cheng Yumo and Huang Ziwei's Grand Gay Wedding performance in Zurich in 2022 – this article demonstrates that weddings have been used by queer artists, performers and activists in creative, innovative and critical ways; they give new meanings to traditional wedding practices and help rethink how queerness can relate to established social institutions and conventions in a global context. This article extends existing scholarship on performance art in the 1980s and 90s which was predominantly male-dominated, heteronormative and elitist avant-garde art practice; it highlights the role of performance art in contemporary China's feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements and in articulating gender and sexual politics.

Following the fourth United Nations World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, the removal of 'hooliganism' from the Chinese Criminal Law in 1997 and the removal of 'ego-syntonic homosexuality' from the third edition of the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* in 2001, gender and sexual identities, communities and cultures have boomed in the PRC's urban and public spaces (Bao 2020). LGBTQ+ people have used various cultural forms to conduct social and political activism, one of which is through the use of performance art (Bao 2022). Through public, intentional and interventionist displays of the queer body, LGBTQ+-identified artists use performance art for identity expression, community building and social activism. This article focuses on some of these queer performance artworks, those that engage with the theme of weddings; that is, performance artworks that draw on and critique the social conventions of wedding ceremonies. Focusing on five case studies – the lesbian artist duo Shi Tou and Ming Ming's photography and installation about queer women's intimacy; queer filmmakers Fan Popo and David Zheng's 2009 film *New Beijing, New Marriage*, a documentary based on a same-sex wedding performance in central Beijing; queer feminist filmmaker He Xiaopei's performance artwork and films; the Young Feminist Activist Group's 2012 public performance 'Bloody Brides' to protest domestic violence against women; and the queer artist duo Cheng Yumo and Huang Ziwei's Grand Gay Wedding performance in Zurich in 2022 – this article will demonstrate that weddings are often used by queer artists, performers and activists in creative, innovative and critical ways; they give new meanings to traditional wedding practices and help rethink how queerness can relate to established social institutions and conventions in a global context.

This article understands performance art as a form of performance culture, that is, 'a particular behaviour with a communicative purpose and an explicit or implied audience' (Micu 2022: 1). According to Andreea Micu (2022), performance can include cultural performance (i.e., staged artistic practice) and social performance (i.e., non-explicitly staged social practice), although in common usage the emphasis is often given to the former. It is important to break the boundaries between the two and see cultural performance and social performance as mutually constitutive, especially when they are both used to address social and political issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and women's rights. The article therefore draws attention to the overlapping and often conflated categories such as art, film, activism and everyday life in contemporary, transmedia, transnational and transcultural contexts; that is, it focuses on performance outside the stage, art gallery or museum settings, in social and political milieu, and beyond the boundaries of the PRC. The artworks examined in this article include photography, installation, documentary film and social activism, and they articulate issues of identity, community and belonging in relation to queer and feminist politics. This article therefore uses performance art as a critical lens to examine the synergies between performance art, identity and social activism. It suggests that the queer use of performance art challenges the gender norms and social conventions that privilege the experience of the heterosexual coupledom; it also engages with other social and political issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, anti-racism, and the transnational regimes of immigration and border control.

As Andreea Micu argues: 'performance art is par excellence concerned with the relational aspects of identity; that is, how different identities exist in relation to each other' (2022: 23). Indeed, the history of performance art in the West has run parallel to the history of identity-based social movements such as feminist, queer, anti-racism, civil-rights and environmental

movements. When performance art first appeared in China in the 1980s and 90s as part of the contemporary Chinese art scene, it laid a solid foundation for how contemporary art is understood and practiced in China (Berghuis 2006). Chinese performance art in the 1990s was undoubtedly political but was not necessarily associated with identity-based social movements. Moreover, the performance art in the 1990s was predominantly male-dominated, heteronormative and elitist, divorced from identity politics and social movements. Today, the link between performance art and social activism has become unmistakably clear in contemporary China (Meiqin Wang 2019; Corlin 2020; Bao 2022). This article extends existing scholarship on Chinese performance art in the 1980s and 90s and highlights the role of performance art in contemporary China's feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements and in articulating gender and sexual politics.[1]

What is in a Wedding?

In recent years, same-sex wedding has become a prominent topic in queer Chinese communities. Living in a patriarchal and heteronormative Chinese society where young people are compelled to marry heterosexually when they reach adulthood, many queer people have been forced into heterosexual marriage; some must remain 'closeted' and others lead a double life (Kong 2011). For many, weddings – heterosexual by default in the Chinese context – have become an un-queer and even anti-queer social institution, imposing heterosexual and patriarchal norms onto the lives of gender and sexual minorities. In this process, straight, reproductive times, spaces and bodies have continued to dominate and threaten heterogeneous queer ones (Halberstam 2005).

[1] I thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for pinpointing the differences between the case studies discussed in this article and the performance art in the 1990s Chinese context, and thus highlighting the scholarly contribution of this article to the study of contemporary Chinese art.

At the same time, following China's re-entry into the globalised world at the turn of the century, the global 'same-sex marriage' discourse has entered China and gained considerable popularity within the LGBTQ+ communities. Against the common rhetoric of 'Chinese cultural exceptionalism' often used by those against same-sex marriage, the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan in 2019 has inspired LGBTQ+ communities in Asia and made a strong argument for the possible compatibility between same-sex marriage and 'Chinese cultural values' (Hollingsworth 2019), but the inspiring news has made little difference to China's state policy or ordinary queer people's lives. Since 2000, China's leading sexologist Li Yinhe has made repeated appeals to China's legislative body to legalise same-sex marriage, and Chinese gay activists have even taken China's Ministry of Civil Affairs to court for its lack of recognition of same-sex marriage rights, all to no avail (Phillips 2016). But all of these have not stopped LGBTQ+ people's enthusiasm for same-sex marriage. Some queer couples have self-conducted wedding ceremonies within the community and with friends and families, others travel abroad to marry in countries where same-sex marriage rights are recognised, and yet others choose to get married online in a marriage registration office based in Utah, USA, where virtual same-sex weddings are conducted (Free 2022). None of these same-sex weddings are recognised by the Chinese law, but this fact has not stopped queer people from being financially and emotionally invested in these wedding rituals. The affective dimension of the wedding ceremonies manifests queer people's longing for belonging and acceptance by the community and mainstream society, and to become 'as normal as possible' (Yau 2010, 3) after decades of marginalisation and stigmatisation.

Not everyone is passionate about same-sex marriage. Leading Chinese queer feminist filmmaker and activist He Xiaopei vehemently speaks against same-sex marriage, and against marriage as a social institution overall. He Xiaopei sees marriage as a regulatory mechanism and a repressive regime for straight and queer people alike. 'The institution of marriage not only legitimises heterosexual and monogamous relations, but also regulates desire and pleasure' (He 2010, 194). Her argument concurs with many Western queer theorists' critiques of same-sex marriage (e.g. Bell and Binne 2000; Duggan 2004). How do we understand queer community's complex and ambivalent attitudes toward weddings and marriages? How do queer people relate to social norms and conventions such as family, marriage and kinship? What are some of the cultural specificities for the Chinese context?

Chinese queer studies scholars have offered various responses to these questions. For example, Yau Ching (2010) argues that in Chinese societies, LGBTQ+ people desire to be live a 'normal', respectable life as their heterosexual counterparts; this results from the strong pressure for people to conform to gender and familial norms in Chinese societies as well as queer people's survival strategies to survive within these social norms. Yau (2010, 4) proposes the notion of 'different normativities', contending that there are varying social norms and that people in different sociocultural contexts react to different norms. Lucetta Kam (2013, 89) suggests understanding queer urban women's experience as enacting the 'politics of public correctness', through which these women spare no effort to maintain the façade of appearing 'normal' while they pursue their private lifestyles and desires at the same time. The queer Chinese women in Elisabeth Engebretsen's (2014) study choose to conform to certain social norms as they reject others; a simplistic 'pro-normative' versus 'anti-normative' binary opposition can be equally problematic to describe the heterogeneous queer Chinese experiences. Lin Song (2021) proposes the concept of 'queering Chinese kinship'

and suggests that queer reworking of family and marriage has the potential of transforming traditional and heteronormative Chinese family structure and kinship practices.

The above scholarly discussions exemplify the richness and diversity of opinions with regard to family, marriage and queer experience. Queer weddings have surfaced as an important anchor point for these discussions. Heterosexual marriage has been seen by some feminist scholars as a form of patriarchal and state oppression, a 'traffic in women' in Gayle Rubin (1975, 157)'s words. Kath Weston (1997) draws on her fieldwork in American queer communities and argues that queer people actively form their own families and kinship outside their heterosexual families. Elizabeth Freeman (2002) suggests separating wedding ceremonies from the marriage institution, and that weddings can be seen as performances, fantasies and rituals of transformation; they are sites for imagining and enacting forms of social intimacy other than monogamous heterosexuality. In other words, weddings do not have be heteronormative, homonormative or even patriarchal. They can be reworked by queer people to celebrate queer identity, community and intimacy. Freeman's shifting focus from the marriage institution to the wedding ceremony and her open interpretation of the multiple functionalities of weddings are important inspirations for this article. By examining various artistic, public and activist use of weddings by queer Chinese artists, filmmakers and activists (these identity categories often overlap in the contemporary Chinese context) since 2000, I contend that these queer weddings rework the scripts and meanings of family, kinship and intimacy, opening them up for queer use, appropriation and subversion. They also open up an understanding of Chinese performance art from its conventional museum and art gallery contexts to everyday contexts, from elite, male and heterosexual identified artists to queer and feminist artists and activists, from elite art practices to ordinary social practices and identity-based social movements.

From Performing Same-Sex Intimacy to Advocating Same-Sex Marriage

In the 1990s and 2000s, queer artist, filmmaker and activist Shi Tou (b. 1969) created a series of artworks including photography, painting, installation and film with her partner Ming Ming (b.1974). Their aim was to imagine a queer world where queer women can live together happily. This is exemplified by their 2006 artwork 'Commemoration' (*Jinian*) (Figure 1), among others. The form of this artwork resembles a Republican-era, old-Shanghai style New Year calendar, with spring couplets, adverts of commercial products and miniature photos dotting around the frame of an oval-shaped photo. In the photo, a short-haired Ming Ming (right) holds a shaved-head Shi Tou (left) in her arms. Both wear pink cheongsams and both stand sideways. Their faces are slightly turned towards the viewers; their eyes carry an earnest longing for happiness. In the background of the oval-shaped photo is a busy street lined with shops and full of pedestrians. The background looks significantly smaller than the standing figures of Ming Ming and Shi Tou, as if to magnify the centrality of same-sex intimacy. What is striking about the background is the cosmopolitan cityscape (e.g., a Western-style architecture with the clocktower on the top) and the commercial adverts installed on the buildings and painted on the tram (e.g., the Canon and KFC signs), showing a city in its dramatic processes of economic boom and urban transformation in China's Reform and Opening-up era (1978-present) and also referencing China's pop art movement in the 1990s, including 'political pop and 'gaudy art'. The colour scheme of the artwork consists primarily of purple, pink and red, conveying a sense of happiness, romance and, indeed, queerness.

Figure 1. Shi Tou and Ming Ming, 'Commemoration', photography and installation, 2006 (Courtesy of the artist)

In my interview with Shi Tou (25 May 2021), she explained that the artwork is in fact an installation, rather than a computer-generated image as many contemporary viewers would have thought.[2] The picture frame is a cut-out from a piece of giant cardboard two metres high, with coloured patterns and assorted images painted on it. The design of the cardboard takes its inspiration from the Republican-era, old-Shanghai style New Year calendar (*yuefen pai*). The background of the main picture (i.e., the street scene) is the photo of a city street

[2] These installations resemble pictures taken in green screen photo studios still existing in many parts of China, where people can stand against their desired landscapes and create memories. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this important insight.

printed on a large canvas. The main characters are life-size and real: Shi Tou and Ming Ming stand between the cardboard framework placed in front of them and the street-scene canvas hanging behind them. Shi Tou also reminisced that the process of creating the artwork was very enjoyable: the artwork was a collaborative process between them and their female friends. The work therefore captured a beautiful moment of queer creative work and female same-sex intimacy beyond the surface of lesbian coupledom. The title 'Commemoration' suggests an effort to remember the beautiful moment using the art forms of photography and installation.

The form and style of the artwork are distinctively Chinese and modern. The format is a tribute to the historical forms and cultural traditions of queer Chinese visual culture, often captured in Republican-era lunar New Year calendar, where images denoting female same-sex intimacy abounded and were widely circulated in urban China at the beginning of the twentieth century (Sang 2003). The cityscape and the commodity culture displayed in the background acknowledges the importance of the contemporary, everyday life in which consumerism and commodity culture plays a vital role. In this picture, queerness is not seen as a 'Western import', as some would claim (Economist 2021); rather, it is situated in the context of China's modern, urban, cosmopolitan and everyday culture and as an integral part of the queer Chinese history and culture.

If the 2006 installation 'Commemoration' transforms a moment of same-sex intimacy, possibly a wedding scene (as suggested by the pictures of the artist couple dressed in wedding gowns printed on the top of the picture frame), into a permanent queer community memory, Shi Tou's documentary *We Want to Get Married* (*Women yao jiehun*, 2007), made

in the following year, clearly expresses the queer longing for their intimacy to be recognised by society. The five-minute short film documents a same-sex wedding advocacy campaign that took place on Valentine's Day in Beijing's Sanlitun area, where volunteers distributed roses, wrapped up in paper with a same-sex marriage message printed on it, to passers-by. The film shows the volunteers wishing the passers-by a happy Valentine's Day and asking them about their attitudes toward LGBTQ+ issues and same-sex marriage, to which people gave various responses. This was a case of 'flash mob' (*kuaishan*) activism where a group of people gather in a public space, perform for a short time and then disperse quickly for artistic and activist purposes. The aim was to raise the public awareness of queer rights and same-sex marriage. Shi Tou's short film captures the liveliness of the scene at a fast pace, accompanied by cheerful music and colourful, and even cartoonish, intertitles. It begins with a rainbow-coloured television test card, with the following words – displayed bilingually in both Chinese and English and in rainbow colours – superimposed on the screen: 'It's about love. No matter she and she, or he and he. We need your support for true love, for same-sex marriage in China' (CIFA 2021). The film was subsequently shown in community centres and film festivals, received positively and articulating a strong queer longing for recognition and happiness. In this piece of combined film, performance artwork and street activism, the imagination of a happy queer life has been transformed into concrete actions of same-sex advocacy.

Queer Rights Advocacy on Valentine's Day

Carrying out queer rights advocacy in the disguise of a wedding ceremony on Valentine's Day continued to be an activist strategy used by queer Chinese artists and activists in the early 2010s. This was for good reasons. A wedding is usually seen as a happy and auspicious

event; it is celebratory, intimate, affective and less likely to be seen as socially confrontational or politically sensitive. Old Chinese sayings such as *ningchai shizuo miao, buhui yizhuang qin* (rather dismantle ten temples than destroy one marriage) warn against the extremely bad karma resulting from the act of disrupting wedding ceremonies and destroying marriages. This popular, folk religious belief gives wedding ceremonies a certain degree of sanctuary from political intervention. In this way, the heteronormative marriage form can offer the participants involved a sense of safety. In a Chinese society where gender norms are deeply entrenched and marriage is often seen as a privileged way of social existence for adults, queer people's call for getting married seems to announce to the public that queer people are also ordinary people, and that they also deserve a happy life. This strategy can help destigmatise queerness in a society where the historical memories of homosexuality being pathologised and criminalised are still fresh in people's mind. The universalist notion of love and marriage, together with the photogenic images of beautiful lesbians and handsome gay men, in no small part encouraged by the popular *danmei*/Boys Love culture in transnational Asia, thus represents both opportunities and challenges for queer Chinese communities.

On 14 February 2009, a wedding photoshoot event took place on the newly renovated Qianmen Street in central Beijing. A lesbian couple and a gay couple – performed by four volunteers who were not couples in real life – posed various gestures of intimacy such as hugs and kisses in front of a digital video camera (Figure 2 and Figure 3). They crew were surrounded by a curious viewing public. Volunteers from Tongyu, a local queer women's organisation, distributed flowers to the audience. Two filmmakers, Fan Popo (b. 1985) and David Zheng, carried digital video cameras around and interviewed the onlookers about their attitudes towards queer people and same-sex marriage. The whole event unwrapped quickly

within half an hour. Many onlookers were shown on the camera to have been taken by surprise, wondering what was going on and whether this was for real or not. A local security guard was caught off-guard on the camera smiling embarrassingly, not knowing how to react. The film also shows that as soon as the photoshoot was over, the crew promptly packed their equipment and left the scene before the potential arrival of the police.

Figure 2. a lesbian wedding photoshoot in Beijing, 2009 (Courtesy of Fan Popo)

Figure 3. a gay wedding photoshoot in Beijing, 2009 (Courtesy of Fan Popo)

After having been reported by domestic and international media, and after having been made into an 18-minute short film titled *New Beijing, New Marriage* (*Xin qianmen dajie*, dir. Fan Popo and David Zheng, 2009), this event became a milestone event in the history of Chinese queer activism (Robinson 2015; Bao 2020). The eye-catching and newsworthy public event exemplifies a culturally sensitive and context specific approach to queer activism in the Chinese-speaking world: gentle, aesthetic and non-confrontational (Engebretsen 2015; Bao 2020). It is worth noting the multiple layers of mediation and dissemination of the event – through the film camera, screening events, news reports and online discussions – which have significantly extended the life course and the public reach of the event. Although designed initially as a form of 'flash mob' activism, this event can also be seen as a work of performance art. The two brides and the two grooms did not know each other before the event, and their performance of the wedding ritual had a clear social and activist aim. Their embodied performance of intimacy in public disrupted the social norms of gender, sexuality and intimacy, however temporary it might have been.

In the ensuing years, activism centring on same-sex weddings continued in urban China. For example, two women walked into a Marriage Registration Office in Beijing in 2012 to request official registration of their relationship, clearly knowing their request would be rejected by the authorities (Figure 4). This was again an act of social activism aiming at disrupting the established social and social norms. Queer people's embodied presence in a public institution that sanctions marriage brought to light queer people's existence and their needs to the authorities who might not be aware of them, functioning as a type of public advocacy and pedagogy.

Figure 4. two women walk into a Marriage Registration Office, Beijing, 2012 (Courtesy of Fan Popo)

Such a mode of same-sex marriage appeal had its strengths and weaknesses. In creating a public event like this, a gentle, non-confrontational approach was adopted to ensure the activists' safety. Such actions should ideally look like a random and ordinary event out of goodwill and pretended ignorance instead of a carefully orchestrated form of social activism. The gentle engagement with the public and the mobilisation of queer-friendly media in event publicity were also essential to the success of such events.

Despite the attraction and wide purchase of the idea of same-sex marriage, not everyone in the queer community was in favour of such an approach that valorises the coupledom and a monogamous relationship. One might ask: Must queer people look photogenic and respectable to qualify for a marriage? Can relationship and intimacy involve more than two people? Must relationship and intimacy be sanctioned by the state? What is

queer about queer relationships and intimacies if they are the same as their heterosexual counterparts? This is a question that queer feminist artist and filmmaker He Xiaopei has continued to engage with through her performance artwork and films.

Performing Polygamy and Polyamory as a Queer Feminist Statement

In 2003, a wedding ceremony took place in a queer-friendly restaurant in Beijing (He 2009). Queer feminist artist, filmmaker and activist He Xiaopei married a man and a woman at the same time on the occasion (Figure 5 and Figure 6). The man was a long-term friend, and the woman was a new acquaintance. The wedding invited over sixty guests, most of whom were from the local queer community (He 2010). He Xiaopei used the event to draw attention to issues of heteronormativity in Chinese society as well as homonormativity in the LGBTQ+ community, raising people's awareness of the existence of bisexual people. In her words: 'The idea was to challenge the normative marriage, monogamy and monosexuality. Our wedding ceremony was to claim that bisexuality is not a crime' (He 2010, 105). The wedding therefore not only challenges the marriage institution but also celebrates polymorphous and polygamous forms of queer sexuality and desire. He Xiaopei described the event in this way:

> My 'father', a lesbian woman and close friend, wore leather trousers and a tight black jacket. She also brought a leather whip and kept whipping me in the wedding, which made me sexually over-excited. […] One of my mothers-in-law was a gay community organiser. He called me a slut and said the marriage should be stopped. The other mother-in-law was a gay bar manager from Beijing who told dirty jokes and kept making our guests burst into laughter (p. 107).

Figure 5. He Xiaopei and her lesbian ‘father’ at the wedding, Beijing, 2003 (Courtesy of He Xiaopei)

Figure 6. The funny question and answer session at He Xiaopei’s wedding, Beijing, 2003 (Courtesy of He Xiaopei)

The fun, light-hearted atmosphere at the wedding imagines queer relationships outside the norms of conventional heterosexual (and also gay) coupledom. It imagines relationships to be multiple, contingent and open-ended, and families to be ones that queer people can actively

'choose' (Weston 1997, 38) to belong to rather than simply get born into. Such a *ménage à trois* wedding challenges and subverts the marriage institution which traditionally privileges the coupledom, be it heterosexual or gay. It also celebrates a sex-positive, and indeed queer, approach to identity, community and politics. He Xiaopei's performance of an unconventional, polygamous wedding best illustrates her queer feminist politics. As He Xiaopei commented: 'Our wedding ceremony was also a call for social recognition of homosexual, non-monogamous, and other non-conforming relationships' (p. 105).

Family and marriage remain important themes in He Xiaopei's documentary films. Her 2010 documentary *Polyamorous Family* (*Duoxinglian jiating*) uses the first-person perspective to introduce her own queer family of five people from different cultural backgrounds and the concept of polyamory. In 2013, He Xiaopei completed a 42-minute documentary titled *Our Marriages: When Lesbians Marry Gay Men* (*Qiyuan yisheng*, dir. He Xiaopei, 2013) (Figure 7). The film documented the lives of four lesbians who married five gay men through 'contract marriage' (*xingshi hunyin*) or 'cooperative marriage' (*huzhu hunyin*); that is, marriage of convenience on both sides to cope with pressures to marry heterosexually from their natal families and society.

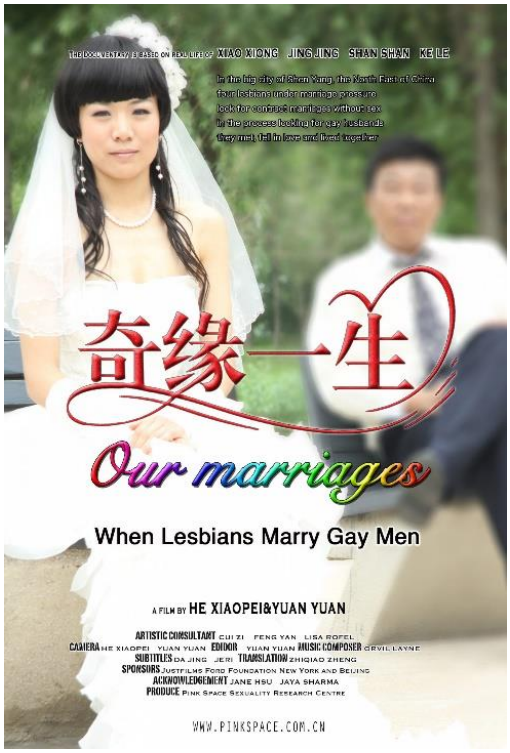

Figure 7. *Our Marriages: When Lesbians Marry Gay Men* film poster (Courtesy of He Xiaopei)

'Contract marriage' is seen as a controversial topic in China's LGBTQ+ communities. While some see it as a practical and creative individual solution to a difficult societal, structural problem, people who endorse gay identity politics see this as a serious betrayal of an authentic lesbian and gay identity. Feminists see this as the retrenchment of a heteronormative and patriarchal system, a system that also produces homowives (*tongqi*) and homohusbands (*tongfu*); that is, heterosexual-identified people who are knowingly or unknowingly married to gay men or lesbians. *Our Marriages* proposes a new interpretation on the issue. It sees 'contract marriage' as potentially indexing a new type of queer relationship, kinship and intimacy, a new form of community culture that reworks traditional heteronormative scripts (Stephanie Wang 2019). In the film, married lesbians and gay men become friends; they form a closely-knit community. They visit each other's families and

help each other when in need. Their families have also come to accept their relationship, a type of queer Chinese 'coming home' (Chou 2000, 263) strategy, i.e., incorporating same-sex partners into one's close kinship and as part of the extended family. He Xiaopei explained her ideas behind the film:

> We felt that contract marriage was the best marriage, as all marriages are a kind of contract and performativity, including straight marriages. In this case, contract marriage is the best marriage because women can have a voice, can declare and claim their desires, and can say before marriage 'I don't want to have sex with you; I don't want to share finances; I don't sleep with you; and I don't want to have children with you.' What a feminist arrangement and statement! (He in He, Kehoe and Bao 2019: 817)

He Xiaopei not only sees 'contract marriage' as a performative act to subvert the patriarchal and heteronormative institution of marriage; she also sees it as a queer celebration of open relationship and an opportunity for innovative queer kinship and intimacy. The film, together with its sequel *Happily Ever After* (*Xinghun zhihou*, dir. He Xiaopei, 2019), not only engages with the queer community debate about the 'contract marriage'; it also reveals a facet of queer Chinese community life unfamiliar to both Chinese and Western audiences. If international media often portrays queer people in China as victims of a political system and a patriarchal society, suffering from multiple forms of repression (Westcott and Jiang 2021), He Xiaopei's performance artworks and films unveil a queer Chinese culture full of pleasure, energy and creativity, and queer Chinese people having their own agency: 'These four lesbians are really articulate. They can play jokes and tell their stories. The audience can see they are not just some "poor" Chinese lesbians. We are choosing our way of living and our way of being lesbians in China.' (He in He, Kehoe and Bao 2019, 818).

Women's Rage and Feminist Politics

The examples above showcase that the performance of weddings is often used to articulate positive affects such as pleasure and joy and also to parody gender and sexual norms, a perfect illustration of Judith Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory. These weddings primarily function as a gentle, non-confrontational way of rights advocacy. But the performance of weddings can also be sad, angry and even confrontational, as is the case with the feminist 'action art' (*xingwei yishu*) (Wei 2014) performed by a group of feminist activists known as the Yong Feminist Activist Group (YFAG, *qingnian nüquan xingdong pai*). The group members used the wedding format to raise the public awareness of domestic violence against women and to promote women's rights.

On 14 February 2012, in response to a high-profile domestic violence case and to support the victim, three young Chinese feminist activists, Li Maizi (b.1989), Xiao Meili (b.1989) and Wei Tingting (b.1989), marched on Beijing's Qianmen Street in wedding gowns with bloodstains, holding signs which read: 'Beating is intimacy, swearing is not love, say no to violence and yes to love.'; 'Are you still silent when violence is around you?'; and 'Love is not an excuse for violence.' (Figure 8)

Figure 8. The *Bloody Brid*es performance in Beijing, 2012 (Courtesy of Wei Tingting)

This performance is called *Bloody Brides* (*Shoushang de xinniang*), suggesting that violence takes place within intimate relationships as a result of patriarchal social and familial structures and the unequal power relations between women and men. The 'flash mob' form of 'action art' is seen as a useful strategy to attract public and media attention to the issue. Wei Tingting, one of the participants of the performance, reflected:

> The ambiguity that exists between 'protest' and 'non-protest' meets the needs of feminist activism. On the one hand, this ambiguity can amplify demands for justice. On the other hand, it protects the activists from political strife. As the photos of the 'Bloody Brides' performance spread on social media and across the Internet, the media began to report our campaign. The event invoked a soaring interest in women's rights in both online and offline spheres. (Wei 2023, 100)

As can be seen from Wei's account, in-person witnesses to the protest on Qianmen Street may have been limited in number; the power of the protest lies in its aftermath. That is, when the event photos and reports were widely disseminated in the cyberspace, they triggered a widespread media interest and public debate, thus raising the public awareness of the issue and functioning as a type of public pedagogy. It was for this reason that Jia Tan (2016, 38) calls this activist strategy a type of 'digital masquerade', emphasising the productive role of digital media in feminist and queer activism.

Bloody Brides was not the only performance artwork that engaged with the wedding theme and feminist politics. There has indeed been an abundance of artworks performed by women and queer identified artists. Examples include: feminist artist Li Xinmo's (b.1976) 2008 photography series *Wedding Night* (*Xinhun zhiye*) in which Li was shown to have sex with her own image reflected in a mirror; feminist artist Xiao Lu's (b.1962) 2009 performance

artwork *Wedding* (*Hun*) in which Xiao got married to herself; queer feminist artist Zeng Burong's 2015 performance in Beijing titled *Happening at the Very Moment* (*Zhengzai fasheng)*, in which the audience were invited to experience the symbolic dimension of the marriage as a social institution (Bao, Mergenthaler and Zhao 2023, 84-85; 186-187). All these artworks expose the constraints of the marriage institution on women's lives and individual freedom, as well as creative ways to transgress and subvert them.

Performing Chinoiserie in the Chinese Diaspora

On 13 July 2022, two queer and Chinese identified artists, Cheng Yumo (b.1998) and Huang Ziwei put on a performance titled 'Grand Gay Wedding' (*Daxing tongzhu hunli*) in Material, an art space in Zurich, Switzerland.[3] Same-sex marriage had just been legalised in Switzerland earlier that month. However, the new law benefitted neither Cheng nor Huang, as both were international students from China studying at Swiss universities and both were new migrants to a white-dominated European society. Cheng is a filmmaker, performance artist, writer and a self-confessed dominatrix. Huang is a photographer and art historian. The two met at a ballroom in Zurich's drag and ball scene. They soon became best friends and formed a performance artist duo. Cheng was born female and Hang male, both identify as queer. In their project pitch written for curators and venue providers, Cheng and Huang state:

> Both of us quickly noticed how our queer Chinese bodies are perceived in Switzerland. It has everything to do with our Chinese appearance, gender identities, and sexuality. It is a kind of violent gaze beyond our control. Under their violent gaze, we become overly hard-working immigrant workers, stealing jobs from the native Europeans; we become gold-diggers, scheming on European passports and wealth; we become an exotic race, an object of fascination; we become a good mother and wives – born to fulfil our wifely duty. Our queer, Asian bodies are disciplined, reshaped, bent, and fit into a violent cast-like sardine fish in a tin can. We also felt excluded from many of our Chinese compatriots, who

[3] The 'Grand Gay Wedding' also toured to other European cities, including a performance in Frankfurt, Germany on 24 February 2023 and another in Berlin, Germany, on 26 March 2023. Each iteration of the performance only had slight differences.

> perceive our queerness and sexual identities as perversions and abnormality (Cheng and Huang 2023)

It was the two artists' shared experience of 'double marginalisation' (Abdellatif 2021) – marginalised because of their Chinese identity in a white-dominated European society and also marginalised because of their queer identity by the heteronormative Chinese communities – resulted from the two artists' intersected racial and sexual identities that brought the two artists together. Another important backdrop of the event was a global coronavirus pandemic when people of Chinese heritage were discriminated worldwide as a result of rising Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism globally (Bao 2021). It is worth noting that neither Sinophobia nor anti-Asian racism was new, and the recent pandemic racism was situated in the long history of exoticisation and othering of the Chinese in the West. Edward Said (1978) calls this 'orientalism', the way how non-Western cultures are often represented in the West as primitive, exotic and often eroticised. Cheng's other works and Cheng and Huang's wedding performance aimed to subvert the orientalist discourse and create an opportunity for the non-Western 'other' to speak.

Prior to the wedding, Cheng created two other work that explored the issue of interracial intimacy in a Eurocentric context where Asian women's bodies were often commodified for the white male gaze and seen as a utilitarian shortcut to transnational migration and European citizenship. Cheng's 2022 photo installation 'Chinese Love Hotel' presents a Chinese woman's erotic fantasies of white men, what Cheng calls the 'colonial complex' (Cheng and Huang 2023, 1). In Cheng's performance artwork called 'Waiting for My Man', she dressed up as a bride and waited in front of the Zurich town hall for 21 days in answer to the anonymous marriage proposals she had received online. The public performance was

livestreamed to an online audience. Not one of those who had written her marriage proposals online dared to show up, demonstrating the vulnerability of Asian women's bodies being used as 'commodity brides' as well as the unreliability of such erotic fetishism. The artwork also dramatised many Asian women's daily experience of sexual objectification in a Eurocentric and racist context.

Inspired by Ang Lee's 1993 film, *The Wedding Banquet*, in which a gay Chinese man hosted an artificial heterosexual wedding to make his parents happy, Cheng and Huang performance of the 'grand gay wedding' also centres on the event of a wedding banquet. It is queer because both artists identify as queer, and the wedding parodies heterosexual gender norms and heterosexual relationship; it is artificial because the two are not genuine couples and the marriage was not officially registered or legally recognised. The 2022 Zurich performance took place in an art space and was made as a piece of performance artwork. The wedding invitation (Figure 9), printed in English on a traditional Chinese wedding invitation card, was sent to local queer and artist communities as well as randomly handed out to people on the street. The invitation made it clear that the event was a celebration of queer love and kinship, a celebration of 'uncanny Chineseness' – alluding to the 'inscrutable Chinese' (Chow 2001) stereotype prevalent in Western society and culture – as well as the two artists' 'state of homelessness and exile'. The language used in the invitation was humorous and parodic, highlighting the subversive and performative nature of the event.

黄子威
Ziwei Huang

成禹墨
Cheng Yumo

Dearly Beloved,

We invite you to our grand gay wedding on July 13th, Wednesday evening at @material_ch, Klingenstrasse 23, Zürich. You will witness the blossoming and maturation of Ziwei and Yumo's relationship.

This wedding is not about the shackle of heterosexual marriage that bind people for genetic reproduction and social capital contract, especially not the kind our parents did.

It is a celebration of queer love and sisterhood. It is a celebration of our uncanny Chineseness, which brings us both joy and suffering. It is a celebration of the fact that we are here alive in a state of homelessness and exile. We party for our dreams and your dreams.

Our wedding will present you with a gorgeous evening of splendour, ritual, and chinoiserie fantasy. Join us for a glass of Baijiu (Chinese wine), Chinese braised beef, super HOT Sichuan chilli oil, and odd erotic games which you are welcome to play with us.

.We are looking forward to your presence,

Yours,
Ziwei & Yumo

ITZIWEI YUMOMYCIN

Figure 9. The Grand Gay Wedding invitation (Courtesy of Cheng Yumo and Huang Ziwei)

Figure 10. Cheng and Huang get married, Material, Zurich, 13 July 2022 (Courtesy of Cheng Yumo and Huang Ziwei)

Figure 11. Cheng and Huang dances to the music of ‘Tian mi mi’, Material, Zurich, 13 July 2022 (Courtesy of Cheng Yumo and Huang Ziwei)

The wedding performance resembled a parody of traditional wedding rituals, hybridising both Chinese and Western wedding customs. The male-identified Huang was dressed in a white, wedding gown traditionally designed for brides, and the female-identified Cheng in a black, business suit, a deliberate subversion of gender roles (Figure 10). Both artists were addressed as ‘brides’ by the master of ceremony (MC). It was made clear in the couple’s oaths that both were queer-identified, and neither was in a romantic or erotic relationship with the other, suggesting this event should not be taken for real life. A woman wearing a traditional Chinese cheongsam acted as MC for the event. She conducted the wedding ceremony behind a Japanese beckoning cat, a potent and yet clichéd sign of Asianness which not only mixed

Chinese culture up with Japanese culture but also intensified the comic effect of the event. Taped temporarily on the wall was a double happiness sign and a red cross made up of the couple's *kinbaku* photos, nude, erotic but at the same time appearing inappropriate for the wedding occasion. This not only brought sex and sexuality to the public space but also satirised the Western male fantasy of Asian women as submissive and even sexually perverse. The wedding ceremony brought together various stereotypical cultural references such as offering red envelopes, exchanging wedding vows and rings, bowing and kowtowing, couple's dance, complete with serving braised beef and hot chilli oil to entertain the guests. It is important to note that although these cultural symbols are often associated with Chineseness, they are also anachronic: many contemporary Chinese weddings have done away with ancient practices such as kowtowing; paper envelopes have also been reinvented digitally in recent years; home cooked dishes such as braised beef and hot chilli oil are often seen as less than sufficient for a wedding banquet. The performance therefore appears clichéd, tacky, out of time and place, and intentionally speaking to the Western, orientalist gaze. By trying very hard to recreate an authentic Chineseness, the performance in effect lays bare the inauthenticity of Chineseness and the superficiality of the wedding format.

During the performance. there were many funny moments including a scene when Cheng and Huang danced to the music of the 'Tian mi mi' (As Sweet as Honey), a 1979 song by Teresa Teng (Figure 11). While they were dancing together in opposite gender roles and neither was familiar with the social dance routine, they frequently made mistakes and stepped on each other's feet, creating a comic effect. There was also a scene in which both raised their fists to make a collective oath following the MC's words, repeating parodic lines from the Communist Party membership oath, thus subverting the communist ideology.

It is my will to join this sacred marriage,
uphold the Party's program,
observe the provisions of the Party Constitution,
fulfil a Party member's duties,
carry out the Party's decisions,
strictly observe Party discipline,
guard Party secrets,
be loyal to the Party,
work hard, fight for our marriage throughout my life,
be ready at all times to sacrifice my entire self
for my marriage and never betray this marriage.
(Text courtesy of Cheng Yumo and Huang Ziwei)

Cheng's individual oath quoted Chairman Mao to a comedic effect. Huang's oath, composed in a poetic form, was not only addressed to Cheng, but also to the viewing audience, most of whom were white and European:

Your endless search for Eros and the *erotique* makes me feel so hot.
Looking at your sexy Instagram photos make me realise that we are, in truth, the chinoiserie fantasy.
For some people, we are the cockroaches and rats,
Polluting the pristine landscape of the Zurich area.
For some, we are overly hardworking third-country national workers,
Stealing jobs from the European Free Trade Association.
But for others, we are good mothers and good wives.
We make good chilli oil and cute mix-race babies.
But there are actually a lot of huge fans of Asia out there.
They are searching for us,
the chinoiserie fantasy.
For them,
We are the Qi, the Yin Yang, the energy, the Jacky Chan.
We are the soft, the tender, we are the fondue chinois.
We are the girlish boy and the boyish girl,
The sweet, the polite, the innocent.
We are hunting for a husband.
We are hunting for you, and you, and you,
And for your Swiss pass. (Text courtesy of Cheng Yumo)

Cheng and Huang's oath not only subverts China's communist ideology, but also makes fun of the orientalist discourse and the chinoiserie fantasy popular in the West. It points out that Chinese men are often seen as 'girlish boys' and Chinese women 'boyish girls' according to

dominant Western gender norms. The gender and race intersection creates a sense of queerness, understood here as challenging gender and sexual norms. It also decentres the Eurocentrism of mainstream queerness, which tend to reinforce gender and sexual norms. The oath critiques the nationalist and racist regimes of border control which makes it extremely difficult for people from non-European countries to obtain an EU visa and a European passport. Cheng and Huang addressed the white audience on the spot when they said: 'We are hunting for you, and you, and you, /And for your Swiss pass.' This line satirises the biased European imagination of all Asians want to marry the white for immigration and citizenship purposes. By including the live and imagined audience in its mode of address, The work not only subverts the Western bias towards and orientalist fantasies of China and Chineseness, but also lays bare the hypocrisy of the institution of marriage in assisting the transnational regime of controlling borders, genders, sexualities and intimacies. In a context where transnational migration from outside the European Union is strictly regulated and cross-cultural intimacy is highly racialised, Cheng and Huang's work shows the contemporary relevance and social critique of queer performance art.

Conclusion

The above five case studies of the wedding performance conducted in the queer Chinese community since 2000 showcase the various creative and artistic strategies through which queer people use weddings to engage with heteronormative institutions such as family, marriage and kinship; they also critically engage with issues such as LGBTQ+ and women's rights, racism, Eurocentrism, transnational immigration and border control. In these artworks, films and activist practices, weddings are used by queer artists and activists in creative, innovative and critical ways; they give new meanings to wedding practices and also help

rethink how queerness can help highlight, challenge and subvert established social institutions and conventions in a global context.

This article has demonstrated the community and activist use of performance art in China's queer social movements since 2000. It has showcased that queer Chinese communities have actively incorporated performance art in their social and political activism. This has been both inspired by international queer art practices and also necessitated by China's distinct social and political context. The long-standing political censorship has made a confrontational mode of social activism such as mass public protests almost impossible (Jing Wang 2019). In contrast, 'soft', non-confrontational, and seemingly apolitical individual or small group art practices can still offer a way for queer people to gain access to the public space and to articulate their concerns and demands.

It is worth noting that the case studies discussed in this chapter were mostly from the 2010s historical juncture, when there was a relative relaxation of political control over civil society and art freedom in China and when the urban queer communities were in rapid development. With the current administration's strengthening of control over civil society and crackdown on feminist and queer activism in recent years (Westcott and Jiang 2021), the prospects of using such performance art as a queer activist strategy seem unclear and even pessimistic.

This article extends the discussion of Chinese performance art – and contemporary Chinese art overall – from an individual practice legitimised by art academies, museums and art galleries to a social, community and activist practice. The previous art practices produced within the system of contemporary Chinese art has invariably been male-centred,

heteronormative and elitist. The performance artworks examined in this article are practiced by ordinary queer people. Their performances are mostly conducted one-off, contingent, and primarily for social, activist purposes rather than individual artistic achievement. These art practices should be seen as community art or socially engaged art practices. They challenge the patriarchal, heteronormative and elitist structure of contemporary Chinese art.

Glossary

Cheng Yumo (b.1998) 成禹墨

danmei (Boys Love) 耽美

David Zheng 郑凯贵

Daxing tongzhu hunli (Grand Gay Wedding) 大型同志婚礼

Duoxinglian jiating (Polyamorous Family) 多性恋家庭

Fan Popo (b. 1985) 范坡坡

He Xiaopei 何小培

Huang Ziwei 黄子威

Hun (Wedding) 婚

huzhu hunyin (cooperative marriage) 互助婚姻

Jinian (Commemoration) 纪念

kuaishan (flash mob) 快闪

Li Xinmo (b.1976) 李心沫

Lai Maizi (b.1989) 李麦子

Ming Ming (b.1974) 明明

Ningchai shizuo miao, buhui yizhuang qin. (Rather dismantle ten temples than destroy one marriage) 宁拆十座庙，不毁一桩婚。

qingnian nüquan xingdong pai (Young Feminist Activist Group) 青年女权行动派

Qiyuan yisheng (Our Marriages: When Lesbians Marry Gay Men) 奇缘一生

Shi Tou (b. 1969) 石头

Shoushang de xinniang (Bloody Brides) 受伤的新娘

Tian mi mi (As Sweet as Honey) 甜蜜蜜

tongfu (homohusbands) 同夫

tongqi (homowives) 同妻

Wei Tingting (b. 1989) 韦婷婷

Women yao jiehun (We Want to Get Married) 我们要结婚

Xiao Lu (b.1962) 肖鲁

Xiao Meili (b.1989) 肖美丽

Xinhun zhiye (Wedding Night) 新婚之夜

Xin qianmen dajie (New Beijing, New Marriage) 新前门大街

Xinghun zhihou (Happily Ever After) 形婚之后

xingshi hunyin (contract marriage) 形式婚姻

xingwei yishu (action art) 行为艺术

yuefen pai (New Year Calendar) 月份牌

Zeng Burong 曾不容

Zhengzai fasheng (Happening at the Very Moment) 正在发生

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