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Digital video activism: Fan Popo's queer Asian diasporic politics

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ABSTRACT

This article examines queer Chinese filmmaker Fan Popo's fiction films and curatorial practices since he moved from Beijing to Berlin in 2017. It focuses on how Fan's subject position as queer Asian diaspora impacts on his filmmaking, identity and politics. In doing so, this article offers a critical insight into how people in the queer Asian diaspora use digital media and films to articulate their identity and politics. It also delineates the conditions and possibilities of the activist use of digital video and film in a transnational and diasporic context. By examining the continuities and discontinuities of Fan's digital filmmaking and screen activism, this article argues that Fan's recent adoption of the queer Asian diaspora identity has facilitated a context-specific, transnational, intersectional and transversal queer politics. It also showcases how digital video and film, situated in a transnational and diasporic context and used for political and activist purposes, can help articulate a more capacious understanding of Chineseness and queerness.

KEYWORDS

Fan Popo; queer; film; digital video; activism; diaspora

'Being Asian in Germany is quite similar to being queer in China,' the Berlin-based queer Asian filmmaker Fan Popo remarked in an interview, 'you stand out but at the same time there is very little representation in the media or films. You're not seen by society.' (Exberliner 2021) Fan was commenting on his identity as a member of both an ethnic and a sexual minority living in Europe, and he was also highlighting the importance of media representation for minority groups. What does Fan's subject position of being part of a queer Asian diaspora mean for his filmmaking and politics? How does he work with digital formats to increase minority representation in film and media? This article examines Fan Popo's recent films and curatorial practices since he moved from Beijing to Berlin in 2017. It focuses on how Fan's subject position of being queer Asian diaspora impacts on his filmmaking, identity and politics. In doing so, it offers a critical insight into how people in the queer Asian diaspora use digital media and films to articulate their identity and politics. It also delineates the conditions and possibilities of the activist use of digital video and film in a transnational and diasporic context.

Born in 1985, Fan Popo is one of the most prolific Chinese queer filmmakers today. Using a digital video camera, he has made a dozen films so far, most of which concern issues of queer identity, community and intimacy. Made during the heyday of Mainland China's

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queer activism around 2010, Fan's activist documentaries offer a unique insight into contemporary Chinese society and culture. Most of his early films (primarily made in Beijing and before 2017) are documentary films that function as a historical record of China's queer community, culture and activism. These films include *New Beijing*, *New Marriage* (新前门大街, 2009, co-directed by David Zheng), *Chinese Closet* (柜族, 2009), *Be A Woman* (舞娘, 2011), *Mama Rainbow* (彩虹伴我心, 2012), *The VaChina Monologues* (来自阴道, 2013) and *Papa Rainbow* (彩虹伴我行, 2016). As independent films, these works have not been shown officially on Chinese television or in Chinese cinemas, but they have been semi-publicly disseminated in queer community centers, at queer film festivals and on university campuses in China; they have also been shown in film festivals, academic conferences and universities internationally.

Fan is a versatile and productive filmmaker – often a screenwriter, filmmaker, editor, actor and producer in one person, a situation necessitated by a low-budget, independent mode of production. He works with digital video cameras on both documentary and fiction film genres. He turned to making fiction films after he moved from Beijing to Berlin in 2017. His recent films explore issues of queer intimacy and cross-cultural encounter, often in set in a transnational context. They include *The Hutong Vibe* (2017), *The Drum Tower* (鼓楼西, 2018), *Floss* (线, 2019), *Beer! Beer!* (喝一杯, 2019), *Hey, Siro* (2020), *Lerne Deutsch in meiner Küche* (2020) and *Wegen Hegel* (2022). To date, scholarship on Fan has largely focused on his documentary filmmaking and activism inside China (Bao 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Engebretsen 2018; Song 2021), with scant attention paid to his fiction films and curatorial practices outside China, including in Africa and Europe (Bao 2020c, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). This article fills this gap in literature. By examining the continuities and discontinuities of Fan's digital filmmaking and screen activism, this article argues that Fan's recent adoption of the queer Asian diaspora identity has facilitated a context-specific, transnational, intersectional and transversal queer politics. It also showcases how digital video and film, situated in a transnational and diasporic context and used for political and activist purposes, can help articulate a more capacious understanding of Chineseness and queerness.

Queer diaspora

In the past two decades, the term 'queer diaspora' has become an important intellectual paradigm both in diaspora studies and in queer studies (Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2000; Manalansan 2003; Gopinath 2005, 2018; La Fountain-Stokes 2009; Pecic 2013; Hayes 2016; Walcott 2016; Carbajal 2019; Sullivan 2021; Camminga and Marnell 2022). If the concept of the diaspora often conjures up an imagined 'homeland,' the term 'queer' positions itself in opposition to a dominant regime of heterosexuality. The hegemonic understandings of the nation demarcated by geopolitical boundaries and sexuality defined by reproductive heterosexuality are problematized by the notion of queer diaspora. For Gayatri Gopinath, queer diaspora 'unsettle[s] the ways in which the diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand, and processes of globalization on the other' (2005, 10). The study of queer diaspora, therefore, serves as a critique to the intertwined relationship between nationalism and heterosexuality under capitalist globalization; it also marks an intellectual endeavor to reimagine identities and belongings away from the strictures of national states and the compartmentalization of gender and sexual identities.

The term 'queer diaspora' is relevant to the Chinese context, especially today when a neotraditional discourse of queer Chinese identity characterized by 'coming home' (Chou

2000) and ‘neo-Confucian homonormativity’ (Luo, Tseng & Ma 2022) has a widespread purchase in the LGBTQ communities in the Chinese-speaking world. Such a discourse is problematic because it often relies on an essentialized notion of Chineseness and gayness, linking both to China’s historical past and an imagined cultural tradition; it also neglects the power relations that construct these hegemonic historical and cultural narratives. It is thus of vital importance to delink Chinese queer experience from the hegemonic notions of ‘Chineseness’ and ‘gayness.’

Shi-Yan Chao uses the term ‘diaspora’ to describe a Chinese queer experience that ‘has been rendered through a certain historical experience (though this historical experience is never fixed) and, crucially, a discursive practice that directly depicts *lisan* (“diaspora”) and metaphorically *liufang* (“exile”)’ (2020, 46). In other words, the ‘diaspora’ refers to the ‘homeless’ or the ‘exilic’ – not that a patrilineal or heteronormative home or homeland is needed, but that this ‘outside’ and marginalized position must be taken seriously to articulate an anti-hegemonic and anti-normative cultural politics. Writing about queer Chinese cinema, Chao comes up with the concept of ‘Chinese queer diasporic imaginary’ to highlight ‘the phenomenon of *liufan*[g], as part of *lisan*, in internal and external manifestations of the tensions between queer individuals and their family-based Chinese societies’ (p. 46). Chao’s theorization of the ‘Chinese queer diasporic imaginary’ inspires this article to articulate a diasporic Chinese queer politics.

This article joins Shu-mei Shih and other scholars’ efforts to ‘rethink the relationship between roots and routes by questioning the conception of routes as ancestral rather than place-based’ to create ‘not a theory of mobile citizens who disidentify from the local nation-state and disengage from local politics, but the politicization of that identity’ (Shih 2007, 189–190). As this article demonstrates, Fan’s filmmaking and activism speaks to local politics in Berlin as well as global geopolitics. He identifies, flexibly and contingently, with subject positions such as ‘Asian’, ‘queer Asian’ and ‘queer diaspora’. But this does not mean that the ‘Chinese’ identity is no longer relevant: instead, Fan reimagines and reworks the meanings of Chineseness and queerness in non-hegemonic ways. After all, as Sean Metzger suggests, there is no fixed meaning of Chineseness, and it ‘means very different things in different historical and spatial contexts’ and are ‘produced contingently in response to locations’ (Metzger 2020, 5). It is how that identity is politicized for democratic, anti-hegemonic and emancipatory politics that matters, and the queer diasporic subject position makes the articulation of that politics possible.

Chinese queer activism in exile

China’s queer identity, community and activism emerged in the 1990s in the context of China’s Reform and Open-Up and in the lead up to China’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001. The United Nations World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 introduced the global discourses of gender and Non-governmental Organization (NGO) to China. The international exchange also inspired a wave of feminist and queer activism. In the 2000s, facilitated by the national HIV/AIDS intervention campaigns and the international HIV/AIDS funds, queer community activism underwent a phase of rapid development. This was manifested by proliferating queer community groups, a blooming urban pink economy and the rapid development of queer digital media and culture (Bao 2018). In the mid-2010s, the Chinese government started to crack down on queer activism. In April 2016, China’s legislative body, the National People’s Congress, passed the ‘Overseas

NGO Law’ (short for ‘Law of the People’s Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas Non-governmental Organizations in Mainland China’), which signaled a tightened grip on China’s civil society. In the years that followed, LGBTQ community groups and activists have been strictly monitored and LGBTQ activism has been constantly banned. This culminated in the closure of ShanghaiPRIDE in August 2020 and Beijing LGBT Centre in May 2023.

In this context, many queer activists chose to go abroad, either to study or to work or simply live in exile. They carried out their activism outside China. Because of the overall queer-friendly environment in Europe and North America, facilitated by the deterritorializing potential of the digital media, these activists are able to make connections and forge solidarity with activists in China and from other parts of the world. They have also gained important insights on Western society, culture and activist experience; in doing so, they adjust their visions, strategies and identities. Today’s Chinese queer activism must therefore be thought of as transnational, located both inside and outside China. What creative and political strategies have these Chinese queer activists come up with? This article offers a glimpse of this by examining the digital media activism of the Berlin-based Chinese queer filmmaker Fan Popo. Through this case study, I hope to demonstrate that Chinese queer activists are making intersectional and transversal connections; they are also creatively devising activist strategies in a transnational and diasporic context. Their activism speaks to the issues in China and in the host society where they reside. This broadens the purview of Chinese queer culture, activism and politics.

Digital video activism

Fan Popo developed an awareness of his sexuality as a schoolboy but did not come out until his university days (Fan and Bao 2019). When he was an undergraduate student majoring in screen writing at the Beijing Film Academy, China’s film lyceum, he watched many Western queer films and realized the importance of films for public education and community building. He published *Happy Together: A Complete Record of a Hundred Queer Films* (Fan 2007) when he was still a university student. This is the first book specifically dedicated to the topic of queer cinema published in Mainland China. After graduation, Fan lived in Beijing as an independent filmmaker and queer activist. He was surrounded by a group of like-minded people which I call ‘the queer generation’ (Bao 2019), young, creative and hoping to change society through their activism. He is a board member of the Beijing LGBT Centre, a founder of the Queer University Video Training Camp, an organizer of the Beijing Queer Film Festival and the China Queer Film Festival Tour. (Fan 2015)

Fan once expressed that his dream is to ‘change society with the camera’ (Walter 2019). Interviewed about why he makes films and what part films play in Chinese queer activism, Fan Popo responded:

When you see queer people on screen and how they live their lives, you also see a possibility to live in a way that is not so difficult. You can have a similar life, and this is what I try to emphasize through my films. Showing and watching films is a very good way to get all the people together to discuss things, whether it is offline or online. Because of films, we get together and get to know each other better, become part of the community, or even go outside of the community and let people see us. (Fan quoted in Fan and Bao 2019, 804)

Together with other queer Chinese filmmakers, Fan uses filmmaking and film screening events as a form of activism – ‘digital video activism’ (Bao 2019) as Chinese queer filmmaker Cui Zi’en calls it: ‘we advocate acting with digital images and changing the world with digital images’ (Cui quoted in Bao 2018, 145). Digital video activism is a creative and practical strategy in a country where explicit forms of activism are shunned and in a time when digital media provide new affordances to queer activism. In Fan’s words: ‘As we can’t hold demonstrations on the streets, we rely on some smaller ways of demonstrations. Making and showing films are some of these ways.’ (Fan quoted in Fan and Bao 2019, 804)

On international media, Fan is best known as the first person who took China’s media regulator, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), to court in 2015 because of the latter’s censorship of his film *Mama Rainbow*. After Fan’s failed lawsuit, all the production and screening opportunities in China closed their doors to him. Fortunately, just at that time, he got an international scholarship for a screenwriting residence, which took him to Berlin in 2017. He has lived in the city ever since, making queer films, organizing film events and continuing his queer activism.

Like other diasporic Chinese artists who are either forced to or voluntarily choose to reside abroad, Fan has found considerable political, artistic and sexual freedom in Berlin. Berlin has afforded international artists not only with special talent visa schemes and relatively affordable housing, but also with a vibrant and supportive atmosphere for creativity (Chan 2019). Fan has become a member of the queer Chinese diaspora, and, moreover, he has also actively embraced the ‘Asian’ identity (Korientation 2021). Although the term ‘Asia’ was originally a Western invention that imagines people from other countries and regions in a homogeneous way and often in an orientalist manner (Wang and Hale 2007), the term has also been used by people who self-identify as Asian to articulate intergroup solidarity among minority groups living in transnational and diasporic contexts. The subject position of queer Asian diaspora has a profound impact on Fan’s queer filmmaking and politics, as the following account of Fan’s creative career will demonstrate.

From documentary to fiction film

After his court case with China’s media regulator and coinciding with his relocation to Berlin, Fan stopped making activist documentaries and started making fiction films. This was partly because of the censorship of activist films and the ban of queer activism in China in the mid-2010s. The shift was also inspired by Fan’s change of personal interest and career trajectory as he moved from Beijing to Berlin in 2017, and as his audiences shifted from a domestic, community audience to an international audience. Fan commented on the change in his filmmaking style as such:

In the last ten years I always felt that something is missing. I think now I need to make more films in my own way. [...] I can see that in China more and more young people are interested in experimental films. They want to see more diverse ways of representing the society. LGBTQ people in China also deserve to be represented in more diverse ways [...] As a filmmaker I want to explore new ways of filmmaking. (Fan quoted in Fan and Bao 2019, 806)

Fan further reflected on the difference between fiction film and documentary, and explained that turning to fiction films may be more liberating and empowering for himself as a filmmaker:

My fiction films are different from my documentaries. In documentaries, although the stories are familiar to me, such as the coming out experiences, they are still other people's stories. When I write fiction films, the stories are usually closer to my own life. I feel that they can be closer to the realities. This is why I want to make more fiction films. Also, for documentaries, when you interview and film other people, you are never a fly on the wall, and the camera could definitely change the way how people act. But for fiction films, you can present the reality in your eyes, especially when you write a story close to your own life. (Fan quoted in Fan and Bao 2019, 806)

Contrary to the common belief that the documentary is more 'realistic' and 'true to life', Fan understands the documentary manipulation of image and the dynamic tension between objectivity and subjectivity. He sees the fiction film genre as facilitating the expression of artistic freedom, because it can be better attuned to personal feelings and experiences and is therefore better suited for personal, aesthetic expression. Most of Fan's fiction films are loosely based on his own experiences. The semi-autobiographic nature of these narratives allows him more creative freedom in terms of personal and artistic expressions, especially given that he is often the screenwriter, film director and sometimes editor of these films.

A cinema of desire

The fiction films that Fan has completed since he moved to Berlin are mostly short films ranging from a few minutes to an hour. They include: *The Hutong Vibe* (2017), *The Drum Tower* (2018), *Floss* (2019), *Beer! Beer!* (2019), *Hey, Siro* (2020) and *Wegen Hegel* (2022). In these films, he deals primarily with queer and sex positive topics. He uses these films to explore issues of gender, sexuality and intimacy. They depict and celebrate queer desire and, in doing so, challenge both heteronormativity, homonormativity and identity politics. In these films, instead of clearly demarcating people and their desires with established identity categories, Fan complicates and challenges these identity categories. His subjectivity as a queer filmmaker is clearly manifested on screen. Fan's fiction films, saturated with his personal feelings and experiences, can be best described by what Félix Guattari (1996) and Patricia MacCormack (2005) call a 'cinema of desire': they are polymorphous, perverse, humorous and full of political potential.

Depicting a hot sex encounter between two lesbians in an old neighborhood in downtown Beijing, *The Hutong Vibe* is hailed as China's 'first feminist queer porn' (CGiii 2017). With its unabashed celebration of lesbian sexuality, the film challenges the sex-negative strand of Chinese feminism. The film editor Sun Yao, a self-identifying feminist, describes her shock when watching the film footage for the first time:

I was baffled by how difficult it was for me, a woman, to watch and process authentic female bodies in action. My identification as a feminist had no effect on my honest reaction to what I saw. Real human bodies and unpretentious libido are not immediately pleasing to the eyes. We have grown accustomed to a culture in which images of nudity are often affected and fake. In real life, sex is grittier, more hormonal and more about the everyday. It has nothing to do with being pretty (Sun 2017).

Although the bold depiction of human flesh and sex is a distinct feature of pornography as a cultural genre, Fan's use of pornography can be seen as a queer intervention into Chinese gender and sexual politics. Many feminists and queer activists in China hesitate to talk about sex in the hope to establish a respectable image in society and also because of China's

ensorship of pornography. *The Hutong Vibe* challenges this taboo by celebrating sex, desire and pleasure in an unconstrained way. It injects an uncompromising queer ethos into the discourse of Chinese feminism.

If *The Hutong Vibe* boldly celebrates queer women's desire, Fan's next film *Floss* depicts the repression of queer desire in the gay male community. In many ways, *Floss* marks Fan's departure from the gay world and his critique to gay identity politics. *Floss* dramatizes the homonormative relationship of a gay couple living a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle in a nicely decorated, yuppie urban flat. They live together in a stable relationship, which seems a perfect life desired by many LGBTQ people. They may have been married to each other, and their world seems free from discrimination. However, something bizarre lies in their relationship: one person has a sexual fetish for the other person's teeth, but he cannot talk about this secret with his intimate partner. The film seems to suggest that even in the LGBTQ community, there are hierarchies of desire: some desires are seen to be more legitimate than others. The 'coming out' activist strategy and the goal of same-sex marriage mapped out by many LGBTQ activists may end up creating more sexual and moral hierarchies and suppress hidden, polymorphous desires. This film suggests that the dominant rhetoric of recognition and respectability should be problematized as a form of sexual politics due to their classed and exclusive nature.

Produced in the same year as *Floss*, *The Drum Tower* is Fan's farewell present to Beijing, a city where he lived for many years but ended up having to leave. *The Drum Tower* is celebrated as the 'first film in China where all the leading performers are transgender' (Fan n.d.); this pathbreaking film even features a trans person cast in a cisgender character. In the film, a high school student, Kacchan, meets a trans women, Mi, and feels attracted to her (Figure 1). He soon learns about the discrimination that Mi experiences as a trans woman and about the forced eviction of her and her boutique shop under the city's gentrification plan. The two soon develop an unexpected friendship, despite the differences in their social backgrounds. Kacchan's sexuality is unknown from the film, but this does not seem to matter. It is the ambiguity of gender and sexuality that is at stake here, and that can form a basis for mutual



Figure 1. Kacchan and Mi hold hands at the end of the film (*The Drum Tower* screen shot).

understanding and solidarity between people from different social backgrounds. The film can be seen as Fan's efforts to bring together queer topics with other social issues. Fan explained the connection between trans issues and migrant workers' rights in contemporary China, which lies at the center of the story:

In the script development process, I witness everything that has happened in Beijing – shops being forced to close, and workers being forced outside, which is another marginalized topic and group, the same as transgender. This line becomes more important while I was writing, and it can be seen as an echo to the characters' relationship – how to break the communication wall between us? (Fan n.d.)

Fan uses the film to critically reflect on China's social change and its LGBTQ movement, and to consider the possibility of a coalitional and transversal queer politics beyond the conventional identity politics solely based on a shared identify category. In the film, the boundaries between cis and trans start to collapse; and the connection between an urban, high-school student and a migrant worker becomes possible because of the shared understanding of their precarious position in society. The film demonstrates that a queer politics can be articulated not only from the vantage point of gender or sexuality, but from the shared experiences of marginalization and dislocation. This is a theme that Fan will continue to grapple with in his later films set in Berlin.

Accented and cosmopolitan cinema

After *Floss* and *The Drum Tower*, whose stories are set in China and narrated in Mandarin Chinese with English subtitles, Fan's next set of films shifted its setting to Germany and its language to English and German. They are no longer Chinese-language or Sinophone films; they can be seen as part of an Anglophone or German-language cinema. They are what Hamid Naficy (2001) calls an 'accented cinema' – films made by diasporic and exilic filmmakers – and what Felicia Chan (2017) calls 'cosmopolitan cinema', films engaging with multiple languages and cultures and displaying a cosmopolitan outlook. For example, *Beer! Beer!* depicts an overnight encounter between a gay man from China and a gay man from Germany, primarily made in English but with a few German phrases. *Lerne Deutsch in meiner Küche* is primarily made in German, with a few Chinese and English phrases. Also crucially, these films are characterized by a cosmopolitan disposition about cultural difference and crosscultural encounter. All these films continue to engage with the issue of identity and strive to challenge deeply rooted cultural stereotype, bias and Eurocentrism.

Beer! Beer! explores the complex issue of interracial relationship and queer desire. Two gay men (Tao and Sebastian) meet outside a gay nightclub in Berlin and agree to walk together to Tao's flat. They seem attracted to each other, and the German guy apparently has a sexual fetish for Asian men. On the way, they share their own life experiences and have some emotional and heart-harming moments (Figure 2). They stop over at a doner kebab shop and later pick up a discarded bed mattress. When they arrive at Tao's flat with the mattress, Tao has lost interest in sex and even kicks Sebastian out of the flat. The two men's conversation on the way has exposed too many unbridgeable gaps between the two men in terms of social attitudes, cultural values and political ideologies. Neither person is to blame, but both have their deeply rooted biases and weaknesses. Their cultural difference is so vast that it is almost impossible for a transcultural understanding and sexual



Figure 2. Tao and Sebastian share personal stories with each other (*Beer! Beer!* film still).

relationship to develop between them. It seems that simply being gay and attracted to another culture does not constitute a sufficient ground for an interracial relationship and intercultural understanding. *Beer! Beer!* not only critiques explicit and implicit forms of racism within the queer community but also satirizes an uncritical use of the ‘universal values’ such as freedom and democracy that creates bias and exclusion.

Lerne Deutsch in meiner Küche (Learn German in My Kitchen, 2020) is a two-minute short video and a product of its own time. Commissioned by Radio Berlin and Brandenburg (RBB 2020) as part of an art project, the short video was made inside Fan’s Berlin flat during the pandemic lockdown. It mixes a YouTube type of foreign language learning with cooking skill sharing. Fan uses a humorous language and a light-hearted visual style to make fun of some ‘pandemic myths’ such as the Chinese are a bat-eating nation and Wuhan is a purgatory on earth. He even includes a video clip of a racist abuse incident he experienced himself. Using a German public broadcaster as a platform of dissemination and YouTube video as a format, Fan engages with contemporary debates about pandemic racism and explores the possibility of intercultural understanding (Bao 2021a, 2021b).

In both films, Fan explores the topic of cultural difference and intercultural understanding. He also satirizes cultural stereotypes and Eurocentrism. The theme of ‘universal values’ is further explored in Fan’s 2022 film *Wegen Hegel* (Because of Hegel), a film that dramatises a queer Chinese-German crosscultural encounter set in Berlin during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. In this sexy, humorous and quirky film, queer desire traverses the orientalist/occidental fantasy; queer intimacy parodies the excessively rational, queer-unfriendly public health policies; narcotic experience subverts both the sex-negative Buddhist philosophy and the body-blind Hegelian philosophy.

Importantly, in many of Fan’s films, food and sex become ways for Fan to engage with serious political and social issues such as racism and Eurocentrism in a personal, intimate and light-hearted way. While food and sex are related to identity, they are about more than identity and often embody the potential to transgress rigid identity categories and boundaries. As Naficy suggests, diasporic and exilic filmmakers often use an ‘accented cinema’ to

negotiate with issues of identity, belonging and politics. For queer diasporic subjects such as Fan, the issue of identity and visibility is particularly relevant. Instead of consolidating identities, Fan satirizes, challenges and does away with them.

Queer curation

In Berlin, Fan Popo curated a series of film events, most notably the 2020 *How Can We See (Each Other)?* film program and the 2021 *Imagining Queer Bandung* filmmaking and podcasting workshops, both at bi'bak, a multicultural art space in Berlin and both working with queer filmmakers and activists from other parts of the non-Western world. These screening events signify Fan's gesture of looking away from the West and facilitating non-Western cultures to communicate with each other. Fan attributes this cultural politics to his diaspora experience in Berlin, and especially his experience of racism at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic:

I live in Berlin Neukölln, people joke that there are more Arabic speakers than German speakers here. I shop almost every day at a Turkish supermarket [...] But what really inspired me to curate this series is that, within a year, I had two racial insult experiences, both from people of Middle Eastern or Northern African descent. One of them called me 'corona' and spit at me in the U-Bahn [...] Meanwhile, when my Chinese friend heard about this, many of them reacted with Islamophobic comments. These experiences are not only traumatizing, but also made me wonder why? And what can we do? After a few months, this series was born. My biggest wish is to extend this mode of bilateral/multilateral relations, because the world eagerly needs more understanding and communication based on the awareness of intersectionality (Fan quoted in Korbecka 2020).

The film program is titled *How Can We See (Each Other)?* which showcases queer films from East Asia, the Middle East and East Africa in a curatorial method which Fan calls 'East-East referencing' (Kororientation 2020). The purpose of such a curatorial strategy is to encourage filmmakers and film audiences to discover queer film cultures from these regions, instead of simply looking to the West. The film program states:

By pairing filmmakers from different areas, we hope to create a form of transnational dialogue between artists and filmmakers. From Hong Kong to Cairo, Urumchi to Kobanê, and Beijing to a small village in Morocco, the films performatively cross gender boundaries and national affiliations. Through 'cultural drag', re-enactments and other transgressive strategies, the films open up a space in which cultural identity can be conceptualized in new ways, beyond questions of potential differences and commonalities. The program contributes to an understanding of a political resistance that equally reflects the power of cultural, national, ethnic and gender categories and imagines their dissolution. (Kororientation 2020)

'East-East referencing', as such, serves as a de-Westernizing and decolonizing curatorial strategy. Using film screening as a type of activism to imagine a queer world that is not demarcated by nation states and that does not treat Western queer culture as its center, Fan inspires the audience to seek different ways of using identity politically.

In 2021, Fan co-organized another series of film events titled *Imagining Queer Bandung*, which included film screenings and filmmaking and podcasting workshops for queer and trans people of color (Figure 3). Referencing the historic Bandung conference, the first large-scale Asian-African Conference that took place in Indonesia in 1955 and that brought together many people from Third World countries to explore issues of anti-colonialism and



Figure 3. *Imagining Queer Bandung* opening event (left to right: Popo Fan, Sarnt Utamachote and Ragil Huda) (credit: Marvin Girbig).

Third World solidarity, *Imagining Queer Bandung* inserts queer voices into the previously heteronormative Bandung narrative:

Imagining Queer Bandung aims to draw a bridge between this ‘unity in desire’ and LGBTQ+ social activism, decolonial knowledge, and cinematic imagination. How can we imagine alternative approaches in which queer bodies – across Asian, African, and Caribbean contexts – participate in, produce and reclaim these larger discourses for themselves, their communities, and their liberation, as neither national nor sexual objects? (Queer Asia 2021).

By working with queer and trans people of color from other non-Western cultures, Fan reimagines his identity as queer Asian, queer of color and even queer Bandung. He also explores creative ways to articulate his own identity for political and activist purposes. Identity – if it is useful at all – must be thought of as an open and contingent process subject to transformation and political use. Fan’s rearticulation of identity and politics in a transnational and diasporic context testify to the capaciousness of identity-inflected art, media and politics.

Conclusion

This article has focused on queer Chinese filmmaker Fan Popo’s filmmaking and curatorial practices since he moved to Berlin. It suggests that Fan’s geographical dislocation has also coincided with the rearticulation of his identity and politics. Notably, Fan has embraced the identity of queer Asian diaspora and articulated the subject position through his films and screen activism. His films and curatorial practices often go beyond rigid identity categories of being gay and Chinese; they embrace more open and flexible articulations of

being queer and Asian to express solidarity with other gender, sexual and ethnic minority groups in a transnational context.

Like Fan, there are many queer Chinese artists, filmmakers and activists who live outside China, either voluntarily or involuntarily, because of the queer-unfriendly and politically debilitating environment in China at the current historical juncture (in the early 2020s). As a result, there has also been a proliferation of queer Chinese cultural festivals and organizations outside China, including the Queering Now Arts Festival held in London, Queer Chinese Arts Festival held in Nottingham and online, the London-based Queer China UK, the Edinburgh-based Queer East and Southeast Asian Society and the Frankfurt-based Queer Squad. All these events and organizations have all been set up by queer and Chinese identifying individuals living in the West during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although their primary focus is on gender equality and sexual diversity, the remit of their activism is often expanded to other areas such as anti-racism, anti-capitalism, decolonization and intergroup solidarity. They actively make connections with other queer organizations in China and outside China. For example, Queer China UK participated in the UK Stop Asian Hate protest, the Reclaiming the Pride march, and the East and Southeast Asian Heritage Month in 2021. Their activism can be seen as examples of grassroots-led ‘minor transnationalism’ (Lionnet and Shih 2005; Bao 2020c), which departs from the nation state and global capital-led ‘major transnationalism’. These grassroots-led, horizontal and ‘minor’ forms of transnationalism reimagine the world differently from the hegemonic mapping of global political economy. These individuals, groups and grassroots initiatives help imagine a world where fixed identity categories such as Chineseness and queerness are challenged and where ordinary people act as active agents of social change. Digital media and films serve as a conduit in the process: as they open up definition of Asianness and queerness, they also articulate a queer Asian diaspora cultural politics that is transnational, intersectional and transversal.

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