



Queer History, Culture, and Activism in China

A Conversation with He Xiaopei

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He Xiaopei is a leading queer feminist filmmaker, activist, and director of *Pink Space* (粉色空间), a Beijing-based NGO dedicated to promoting sexual rights and gender equality. Her films include *The Lucky One* (宠儿, 2012), *Our Marriages: Lesbians Marry Gay Men* (奇缘一生, 2013), *Yvo and Chrissy* (如此生活, 2017), and *Playmates* (玩伴, 2019). As one of China's leading feminist and queer activists since the 1990s, He's experiences and perspectives are valuable for understanding the formation of queer identities, communities, and activism in the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the past three decades.

Bao Hongwei: You have been an active participant in China's feminist and queer movements since the 1990s. How did you get involved in China's queer activism at that time? Was there a queer community back then?

He Xiaopei: Yes, there was. It started with Gary (Wu Chunsheng, a gay activist from Hong Kong) and Susie (a queer activist from the United Kingdom), organising gay and lesbian meetings in Beijing's Sanlitun Bar Street in the early 1990s. There were usually ten guys who regularly attended these meetings. Susie also invited people to her flat for breakfasts and parties. There were not many female participants at the time.

These were mostly private gatherings. Things were very different in public. In the early 1990s there were no gay bars. Then City Bar opened in Sanlitun—a place where foreigners often hooked up with sex workers. Gay men also regularly met at the bar on Wednesday evenings. When the bar owner realised who they were, he was not particularly welcoming to these 'weird-looking' guys. So we had to keep changing meeting places.

We then organised a Stonewall celebration party in Beijing, but I was away in Tibet climbing the Himalayas. When I called Susie, she said that there would be eight lesbians coming to the party. I said that I did not believe it. Eight was an astronomical number at the time; I had never heard of eight lesbians gathering in one place in Beijing. So I cut my trip short, left the mountain climbing team and returned to Beijing. Gary had found an artist bar in a small alley. It was quite empty. The bar



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question was how to promote the hotline number. Cui Zi'en (a queer writer, filmmaker, and activist) found a magazine. It was called *Life*, I think. They put the advert for the gay pager hotline in the advert column between the pages, so it was well hidden. As soon as the hotline number was publicised, the pager got so busy that it didn't stop beeping.

BH: Did the advert actually say that it was a gay and lesbian pager hotline?

HX: They used the term homosexual (同性恋), I think.

BH: How did you call people back without having a landline?

HX: A number of us worked as volunteers for the hotline. We took turns carrying the pager for a few days or a week. I made phone calls using Susie's landline and others called from home phones. We received lots of calls from people. One day a young man called the pager hotline. He was a policeman but was discovered to be gay, so he had been forced to leave the police force. He was very upset and called the pager hotline quite a few times. I listened quietly without giving him much advice. A few years later, we ran into each other at a meeting and he recognised my name. He is Geng Le, CEO of the gay dating app company Blued.

BH: I guess the pager probably only ran for a few years before it was taken over by mobile phones, or *dageda* (大哥大, a bulky type of mobile phone).

HX: No, mobile phones were used at the same time. I remember one gay guy worked for the hotline and he called people back with his *dageda*. At a weekly debriefing meeting, he told us that his phone bill was as high as 600 yuan per week and that he could not afford it. People then began to discuss what to do and what else we could do. We usually went to bars in the evenings for fun. We wanted to have community meetings and cultural activities in the afternoons. We therefore organised weekly gatherings and discussions at a teahouse called the Lemon Tree. Chou Wah-shan, a gay activist from Hong Kong, was a very active organiser at the time. At first there were only gay guys; later more and more lesbians joined in. We organised parties, discussions, sightseeing tours, sports, and evening gatherings. We even had weekly discussion sessions for lesbians. Some gay men said: 'You lesbians are very united; I wish we gay men could be as united as you are.' Lesbians were indeed quite organised at the time and we did a lot of interesting things together. Then I left China to study in the United Kingdom. Shortly afterwards, the group got some funding. They rented



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Health Organisation (WHO) removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders. Later that year, some Chinese doctors were sent to gay bars to disseminate questionnaires. The doctors asked gay people to complete surveys. Some survey questions were: 'Do you like partying?' or 'What colour is your stool?' These were stupid questions. But this was the way they worked: they thought they were experts, and you had to follow their instructions and work with them. The depathologisation was more a top-down process rather than taking place at the grassroots level. The psychiatrists came and met gay people because the authority wanted to follow the WHO guidelines. Dr Zhang Beichuan (a medical doctor with expertise in homosexuality) also did similar surveys.

BH: Dr Zhang Beichuan also played a significant role in China's LGBT history. Recently he has made some controversial remarks in the media about how gay dating apps spread HIV/AIDS. Could you talk about his role in the queer communities?

HX: In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were no hotlines or the Internet. As a medical doctor, Zhang Beichuan appeared on the midnight radio programme. He talked about homosexuality on the radio, so he got a lot of letters from gay listeners. That was how he got involved in queer communities as a straight-identified medical doctor. He is against gay sex and is very moralistic about it. He is a caring person and tries to do the things he considers right. But he is from that generation and he was never able to get over a conservative sexual morality.

Zhang was also the one who introduced the homowife (同妻, wife of a gay man) issue to the community and the public. At a Pink Space meeting, I also invited Li Yinhe, a sociologist and translator of queer theory, and Meng Lin, a gay activist, to our homowives meetings. I suggested that they write about the phenomenon to raise public awareness of the issue, and they both blogged about the topic. The homowife subsequently became an identity, and a huge topic in the community and across society. It was reported on by several English and Chinese newspapers. It was in this way that the homowife identity emerged. Although no official media could mention homosexuality (because of media censorship), journalists could however talk about the lives of homowives. So, in a way, the word homosexuality could appear in public.

BH: Some people blamed the media construction of the homowife identity for giving people the impression that this was the fault of gay men instead of the fault of the society.

BH: I know a lot of queer activists who cannot come out as gay or lesbian in front of their parents. This is very different from what PFLAG China advocates.

HX: People have different ways of thinking and engaging in advocacy. The PFLAG's way of coming out is very successful, but it should not be the only way. People live in different ways—and each parent is different—so they should be allowed to explore their own family relationships. I used this film to open up discussions about family, marriage, and different types of social relations in China's queer communities. Those lesbians who married gay men spent the Spring Festival together. They travelled together as a big family, including their same sex partners, their parents and grandparents. It was an alternative family. The lesbians and gay men still regularly call each other's parents and wish them happy New Year. As long as they are happy, why can't they get married to each other?

BH: What other queer organisations are active in China? What is queer activism in China like today?

HX: Although most organisations use the term LGBTQ, they primarily work on lesbian and gay issues. Queer activism in China is still largely lesbian- and gay-led. However, transgender issues, as well as intersex and asexual issues, have been picked up recently. The Beijing LGBT Centre and Tongyu both work on transgender issues now.

BH: Another form of queer activism is litigation; that is, taking government ministries to court, such as Fan Popo's legal case against the State Administration of Radio Film and Television over censorship of gay films, and Yanzi (aka Peng Yanhui)'s case against hospitals over gay conversion therapy. Is this an effective form of queer activism?

HX: Yes, it is. Without these cases the issues would not be in the public domain, and the government could just do whatever it wants to do. It is quite effective to present the issues to the public by using the law, although I also think that the process is very stressful for the individuals involved, as they have to face all the pressures themselves. I wish there were more community and organisational support given to these activists.

BH: Are there any other ways of engaging in queer activism?

HX: I think that there is space for queer activism in modern art. Films send very direct messages, but modern art can be very subtle, conceptual, and creative. There are so many things we can do with modern art. Also, modern artists can think deeply and critically about social issues. No one can stop a person from thinking and experimenting. One can use different art forms to

she could not tell him the truth because of the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS and to death itself. She had to sacrifice herself to protect her son.

After she had passed away, I found out that she did not have a son. I did not know what to do with her life story, or how to treat the footage she left. So I went to an independent film school and worked on the material. This was my first film—*The Lucky One* (2012)—and it was well received. It went to independent film festivals and even entered a competition for the best documentary film. The film also went online and had more than 100,000 hits. This gave me the idea that film is a great way to convey my ideas and to tell people something. After that, I couldn't stop making films. I carried on doing it. Luckily there were so many queer film festivals and universities that are happy to show my films. Films can reach a wide audience. I also like communicating with the audience through post-screening Q&As, and I can learn a lot from audience feedback. ■