Screening sexualities, identities and politics:

Queer cinema in contemporary China

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Since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997 and its depathologisation in 2001, more and more mainstream and commercial films in China have started to cover Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual and Queer (LGBTQ) issues. Meanwhile, with the growth of China's queer communities, an increasing number of independent films featuring LGBTQ issues have emerged. Despite the continuing existence of media censorship, films have contributed to, and participated in, how queer people construct their gender and sexual identities and build their communities.

In this chapter, I trace a brief history of queer cinema in the People's Republic of China in the post-Mao era.1 In so doing, I suggest that queer films do not simply represent LGBTQ identities; they also construct non-heteronormative identities, belongings and communities. Queer filmmaking has become an important part of China's ongoing LGBTQ activism; it has also contributed to a changing landscape in gender, sexuality and desires in China today.

Problematising queer cinema

In this chapter, I use the term "queer cinema" or "queer films" loosely to encompass a wide range of cinematic representations and media practices surrounding LGBTQ issues. I am aware of the potential problems in talking about a "queer cinema" in the Chinese context: after all, both "queer" and "cinema" are vague and elusive terms whose meanings are open to constant resignification. Questions such as how a "queer cinema" might be different from an "LGBTQ cinema" and what is so "queer" about "queer cinema" have also triggered heated debates in academia (Aaron 2004; Benshoff and Griffin 2004; Mennel 2012). However, if we acknowledge that films, both in their traditional celluloid form and in their current digital form, are dealing with LGBTQ issues in various ways, and that the term "queer" (*ku'er*), in its perpetual process of cultural translation, has a life in contemporary China, then it is still possible to talk about a "queer cinema" in the Chinese context.

Talking about "queer" and "cinema", as well as the combination of the two, often conjures up a post-Cold War imagination of China: with China's entry into the global neoliberal

1 Unless otherwise stated, 'China' in this chapter refers to the People's Republic of China, or mainland China. For discussions of queer cinema in Hong Kong, Taiwan and diasporic Chinese contexts, see Fran Martin (2000), Song Hwee Lim (2006) and Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2008).

economy, both sexuality and the media are also "opening up" to global practices despite their existing constraints under China's political system and cultural traditions. Such an imaginary predicts a complete "liberation" of the two and a fully-fledged development of queer representations in an unknown future, when China is fully incorporated into neoliberal capitalism. The "postsocialist allegory of modernity", in Lisa Rofel's (2007) words, puts gender, sexuality and desire at the core of its social imaginaries and ideological contestations, thus effectively legitimising the neoliberal present at the cost of a complete erasure of the socialist past and its related social concerns.

Writing about queer cinema in China is of necessity a Leftist and socialist project that recognises the legacy of the past, as well as the democratising, participatory and even utopian dimensions of media engagements at the present. My approach is informed by transnational movements of Third Cinema and New Queer Cinema in exploring modes of community life, counter-hegemonic struggles, and human emancipation in the Global South and among marginalised communities (Leung 2004). Such a project started from the "pre-queer" era of the 1980s and 90s.

"Celluloid comrades"

Although explicit depictions of homosexuality were banned in the PRC in the 1980s and '90s, LGBTQ-themed films from Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries and regions entered mainland China during this period mostly through pirated video cassettes, VCDs and DVDs. Furthermore, many mainstream films were watched by the LGBTQ audience for their homoerotic "subtexts" – for example, Sun Yu's 1934 film *The Big Road* (*Dalu*) and Cheng Kaige's 1986 film *The Big Parade* (*Da yuebing*). Starting in the early 1990s, gender and sexually ambiguous figures began to appear on the Chinese screen. Chen Kaige's 1993 film Farewell, My Concubine draws on the cross-dressing tradition in classical Chinese opera and depicts the emotional entanglements between two theatre actors in the midst of China's social turmoil in the twentieth century. The film was awarded the Cannes *Palme D'Or* in 1993. Although the adaptation from fiction to film erased many homoerotic narratives from the story, probably to meet the censor's requirement, the film has been seen as a gay-themed film among its audience. The lead actor Cheng Dieyi was played by Leslie Cheung, an "out" gay celebrity from Hong Kong. Independent filmmaker He Jianjun's 1996 film *Postman* (*Youchai*) and Kang Feng's 1998 film *Who Has Ever Seen the Wild Animal Day?* (*Shui jianuo yesheng dongwu de jieri*) both contain sexually ambiguous figures in the film narrative, but the LGBTQ identity issue was not raised as a central topic for the films.

The first feature-length film that explicitly dealt with the issue of homosexuality in the post-Mao era was Zhang Yuan's 1996 film *East Palace, West Palace*. Based on novelist Wang Xiaobo's screenplay, the film features an overnight interrogation of a self-identified gay man caught cruising in a park by a policeman. The film has often been read as an "allegory" for marginalised social groups to gain access to the public discourse (Berry 1998), or to explore the state's relationship with its homosexual subject and with its intellectuals (Lim 2006). Homosexuality becomes an over-burdened sign that mediates between an authoritarian state and its citizens that aspire to gain recognition and freedom. Many LGBTQ people approach the film as a historical account, with a certain degree of artistic licence, of the public gay cruising culture in Beijing in the 1980s and 90s. The film also features the "sad young man"

figure which was the dominant mode of representing homosexuality in East Asia at the time (Berry 2000).

The year 2001 witnessed the production of two lesbian-themed films: *The Box* (*Hezi*, dir Echo Y. Windy, aka Ying Weiwei, 2001) and *Fish and Elephant* (*Jinnian xiatian*, dir Li Yu, 2001), often labelled respectively as China's first documentary and fiction film that featured lesbian subjects. Both films are motivated by a strong "feminist consciousness" (Chao 2010a: 79) and both feature lesbian couples' dilemmas in coping with family pressures for them to enter into heterosexual marriages. The two films present the family as the central problem to structure lesbian subjectivity in China. Indeed, *jia* (home/family) has proved crucial to Chinese LGBTQ identity formation and to queer Asian cinema (Berry 2001). The lesbian subject is represented as being trapped in the space between "coming out" to their families and society by openly declaring their sexual identities, and "going in", i.e. rejecting their homoerotic desires and compromising into a heterosexual marriage (Martin 2000).

Queer representations in Chinese cinema in this era manifest many common features: most of them were made by heterosexual-identified filmmakers with deep humanistic concerns or artistic pursuits; many were therefore "underground films", "avant-garde films" and "auteur films" at the same time, with the filmmakers' artistic styles and political stances strongly manifested in the narratives and the *mise-en-scène*.2 Most films were dark, slow and melancholic, which resulted from a number of factors including the technological and material conditions of underground filmmaking, the filmmakers' auteur style and the subject matter represented. They often featured the subject of "sad young man/woman", a homosexual character trapped in an overwhelmingly repressive social structure without hope for a future, a somewhat realistic depiction of the LGBTQ lives at the time (Berry 2000). Furthermore, many films drew on "Chinese traditions" such as cross-dressing in classical Chinese theatre to evoke a sense of "Chineseness", sometimes to the extent of essentialising and exoticising such cultural differences. In addition, many films were often read "allegorically" by the audience and the film critics: the film texts often narrated the relationship between individuals and the Chinese state or society. The lived experiences of sexual minorities remained at the margin of all political and artistic concerns: they were represented but they could not really speak for themselves.

Such early queer representations, however, should not be dismissed as counterproductive; after all, they made an otherwise unknown and unseen subject knowable and visible. Knowledge and visibility, despite their epistemological problems, brought marginalised subjects into existence. LGBTQ people began to identify with these representations through the mechanism of the "celluloid closet" (Russo 1995) and this had an impact on LGBTQ identity and community construction. Ah Lan, the homosexual character in East Palace, West Palace, spoke about his experiences and desires at the police station; it was a circumstance

2 Examples include PRC's first explicitly gay-identified feature *East Palace, West Palace* (dir. Zhang Yuan, 1996) and the first lesbian-themed feature *Fish and Elephant* (dir Li Yu, 2001) and documentary *The Box* (dir. Echo Y Windy, aka Ying Weiwei, 2001). Most of these films were made by heterosexual-identified filmmakers with experimental aesthetics and they formed part of China's "Sixth Generation" or "Urban Generation" Filmmaking Movement. Because of China's film censorship, most of these films were made outside of China's official studio system and were banned from commercial cinemas and state media. Most of them were circulated through bootleg DVDs and underground screenings at cafes, book clubs and on university campuses. For more information, see Berry, Lü and Rofel 2010; Robinson 2013; Zhang Zhen 2012.

fraught with tensions and power relations. However, he managed to enter the public record through the act of "confession". It is fair to say that the early "confessional" mode of queer representations through cinema has brought the homosexual subject into the public discourse in postsocialist China.

Transgender representations and the political economy of queer

The emergence of portable and affordable digital video cameras in the late 1990s ushered in 'China's New Documentary Movement' (Berry, Lü and Rofel 2010) and provided exciting opportunities for a new generation of filmmakers to explore ways to document the multiple facets of social realities in a transforming Chinese society. Inspired by the traditions of cinema verité and "direct cinema", these filmmakers often adopt an aesthetics of xianchang, or on-the-spot realism, to "objectively" capture the contingency of the social (Zhang 2002; Robinson 2013), while at the same time, paradoxically, distancing themselves from the filmed subjects.

In the early 2000s, with the emergence of LGBTQ commercial venues such as bars, clubs and saunas in major Chinese cities, gender and sexual non-conformists in urban bars and clubs, in particular the "drag queen", came under the gaze of a group of young filmmakers. Digital video cameras made it possible for these filmmakers to work independently and somewhat discreetly in these semi-legal venues. Particularly between 2000 and 2009, a number of films that document transgender characters emerged: Zhang Yuan's *Miss Jinxing* (*Jinxing xiaojie*, 2000), Michelle Chen's *The Snake Boy* (*Shanghai nanhai*, 2002), Zhang Hanzi's *Tangtang* (2004), Han Tao's *Baobao* (2004), Gao Tian's *Meimei* (2005), Jiangzhi's *Xiang Pingli* (2005), Du Haibin's *Beautiful Men* (*Renmian taohua*, 2005), Wang Yiren's film *From Chrysalis to Butterfly* (*Diebian*, 2005), and Qiu Jiongjiong's *Madame* (*Gunainai*, 2009). There are many reasons why the *fanchuan*, or cross-dressing, character became the privileged subject for queer representations at this time. Shi-Yan Chao (2010b) and Luke Robinson (2015) have identified two important reasons: apart from the subjects' relative ease in coming out as a performing artist, the voyeuristic gaze of the heterosexual-identified filmmakers and audience often play a role in representing the "other" as exotic and erotic. I suggest that this type of representation also situates itself in, and along with, the translation and popularisation of some poststructural gender theories, represented by Judith Butler's (1990) notion of "gender performativity", in China's academic and filmmaking circles. Although the rendering from "gender performativity" into *xingbie biaoyan* ("gender performance") may initially look like an incomplete understanding of the poststructural gender and queer scholarship, the process of cultural translation suggests intricate links between Chinese and Western queer activism, and glocalised forms of knowledge production.

In his analysis of the film *Meimei*, Chao draws attention to the material conditions of transgender performance by tracing the life trajectory of the main character Meimei. Meimei's high-pitched operatic falsetto voice was a recognised art form in China's socialist collective culture but he was also seen as a sexual dissident in a small town in northeast China. At the backdrop of China's rapid urbanisation and privatisation, Meimei migrated to the capital city Beijing in order to gain more economic freedom and sexual autonomy. Having few other choices in the job market, he had to earn a precarious living at gay bars and night clubs by being a drag singer and was eventually seen as a "queer figure". It was at this

moment that he was "discovered" by the director of this film and his story was subsequently made into a film. Being "queer", in this case, becomes a way for marginalised subjects to achieve social mobility and to survive in a competitive market economy. The film Meimei reminds us of the material conditions of those who choose to, or have to, be "queer" in the reform-era China, and the political economy of the "gender performance".

There is a danger in dismissing the "cross-dressing" representations as stereotyping and effeminising gay characters, or on the grounds that the filmmakers are mostly heterosexual-identified people who cast their voyeuristic gaze on the theatrical and spectacular aspects of the LGBTQ culture (Chao 2010b). At the same time, we should also caution against pushing queer representations to another extreme: the urban, middle-class, and socially respectable masculine gay men and the feminine lesbians with better "qualities" (suzhi) and more comfortable self-identifications (Rofel 2007). Both representations risk consolidating the gender binaries that queer politics strives to dismantle. Whilst queer representations in today's China increasingly feature young, urban, cosmopolitan and middle-class subjects, it is well worth going back to the transgender representations to be reminded of the political economy of being queer.

"New queer Chinese cinema"

Ever since Tony Rayns claimed in a film festival catalogue that Cui Zi'en's 2002 film Enter the Clowns "inaugurates a new Queer Chinese cinema" (Leung 2012: 518), the term "new queer Chinese cinema" has become popularised in film festival programming and in film studies. Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2012) identifies the term's link with the international movement of "New Queer Cinema" and locates the "queerness" in the following aspects:

> because they portray lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender characters, but more often because they unsettle the parameters of heterosexuality and its kinship structure; confound expectations of coherence between gender identity, gender expression, and the sexed body; expand the possible configurations of sexual and emotional bonds; and subvert the aesthetic conventions and heterocentric presuppositions of mainstream media. (Leung 2012: 518–519)

The term "new queer cinema" seems a misnomer in the mainland Chinese context, as it is hard to locate an "old" queer Chinese cinema before the advent of the "new". This is also complicated by the understanding that "queer cinema" in China may have appeared earlier than the "gay and lesbian cinema" in the same way that queer politics may have emerged prior to, if not at the same time as, gay and lesbian identity politics. Situating queer Chinese cinema in an Americans and Euro-centric film historiography can sometimes conjure up a sense of disjuncture and uneasiness. We can still use the term "new queer Chinese cinema" by treating it as an emerging and performative discourse, insofar as it acknowledges the complex interactions between academic knowledges and artistic practices in a transnational context, as well as the unequal power relations between China and the West in the process of translating ideas and artistic practices.

The leading figure of the 'new queer Chinese cinema' in mainland China is Cui Zi'en, associate professor at the Film Research Institute of the Beijing Film Academy and a filmmaker, film scholar, literary critic, playwright, writer, film festival organiser and queer

activist in one. Born in 1958 in northeast China to a Catholic family, Cui's religious belief has an impact on many of his works. His feature films often draw on religious themes and yet he interprets Christianity in an innovative and non-conforming way. In 1999, Cui was playwright and actor in China's first gay-identified feature film, *Man Woman Woman* (*Nannan nünü*). After he was interviewed in a talk show programme on Hunan Satellite Television in 2001, Cui became one of mainland China's first "out" gay celebrities. Cui has since played an important role in the LGBTQ Movement in China, particularly through organising the Beijing Queer Film Festival.

Cui's films can be divided into two categories: feature films and documentaries. Since his first film *Enter the Clowns* (*Choujue dengchang*, 2002), Cui has directed more than a dozen feature films. His films are often low-cost, independent, experimental films made with digital video cameras and with a distinct auteur style. Film scholar Chris Berry compares Cui's films to the pre-Stonewall films of Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith and summarises the motifs of his films as an "unholy trinity of themes: the sacred, the profane and the domestic" (Berry 2004: 196). Cui has been compared to Western queer filmmakers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pedro Almodóvar and Andy Warhol (Fan 2015: 259). His films often feature nude queer bodies with fluid genders, sexualities and social relations, through which he aims to deconstruct the moral (*daode*) and the kinship (*lunli*) often highly valued in the Chinese society (Leung 2012: 530).

Cui has only made three documentaries to date: *Night Scene* (*Yejing*, 2003), *We Are the ... of Communism* (*Women shi shehui zhuyi ...*, 2007), and *Queer China, 'Comrade' China* (*Zhi tongzhi*, 2008). *We are the ...of Communism* documents the forced closure of a school for migrant children before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The film does not feature queer issues, but its narrative has parallels with the forced closure of the Beijing Queer Film Festival that Cui experienced. The film also shows the filmmaker's concerns for marginalised social groups and his active participation in China's New Documentary Movement. *Night Scene* is a docudrama that features cross-dressing sex workers' lives in a night club. It at once highlights and defies the construction of gay culture in China by "evading official, Western, and academic manipulation and through strategic self-abandonment into marginal positions" (Zhang Jie 2012: 88). *Night Scene* also diverges from the Weismanisque observational documentary tradition widely used in China's New Documentary Movement and signals "a performative and embodied turn in independent Chinese documentary" (Wang 2013: 661). Cui's most recent film *Queer China, "Comrade" China* documents China's LGBTQ history from the 1990s to around 2008. The film uses the traditional "talking heads" technique to recover the voice of the queer communities and to construct an indigenous LGBTQ history (Bao 2015; Robinson 2015). Cui's documentaries have been better received in China's LGBTQ communities than his feature films because of the more direct messages and less experimental aesthetics that the former conveys.

Cui's experimental aesthetics reflects his Leftist political stance: his innovations in cinematic style aim to deconstruct traditions in filmmaking in the same way as "demolishing the temple" and "changing blood", largely due to the cinema's close relationship with capital (Cui cited in Fan 2015: 248–249). For Cui, making films and organising queer film festivals are like social gatherings, or shared community activities based on the spirit of friendship, camaraderie, and mutual help, an idea close to the notion of "utopianism, or communism" (253). Cui often chooses "the situation of poverty, or bare, stark nudity" to present his

understandings of the world (254) and the main characters of his films are often portrayed as lumpenproletariat. He compares the exchange of ideas through unofficial and underground channels (such as watching bootleg film DVDs and attending international film festivals) to building a "communist international of queer films" (Cui and Liu 2010: 422). As a queer auteur and LGBTQ activist with coherent and innovative political ideas, Cui is a unique voice in the polyphony of queer film cultures both domestically and internationally. His "queer Marxism" (Liu 2015), articulated in a world dominated by queer liberalism, has yet to receive much critical attention.

Cui is not the only queer voice in mainland China today; Andrew Yusu Cheng is another director with a distinct auteur style. Cheng's 2013 film *Zero Thousand Li Under the Clouds and Moon* (*Fuyun*), with its exquisite "cloud road film" (*yunlu dianying*) style (Cui 2014: 36), manifests radically different aesthetics from his first two films, *Shanghai Panic* (*Women haipa*, 2002) and *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* (*Mudidi Shanghai*, 2003). The latter two films are known for their portrayal of urban youth cultures in Shanghai and for their Digital Video (DV) avant-gardism. All his films push the boundaries of what digital video as a medium can achieve in terms of cinematic representations; they also expand the purview of queer Chinese films.

In recent years, a group of young, queer-identified and independent filmmakers began to emerge, including Kokoka (pseudonym of Xue Jianqiang), Yang Pingdao and Zheng Guo. Born in the 1970s and 80s and currently living in Beijing, they make feature films to express their own personal feelings and subjective realities. They do not strive to use films as objective documentation; rather, films are used as "a form of direct corporeal engagement that puts into question the viewers' subjectival position and sense certainty" (Fan 2016). Kokoka's *Martian Syndrome* (*Huoxing zonghezheng*, 2013) and *Deformity Sci-fi* (*Canfei kehuan*, 2013) expose "both the state power and heteronormative social values that render the LGBTQ community invisible and reducing them as bare lives"; they also critique "the conflicting senses of fear, alienation, nihilism, anxiety, self-hate, and sadomasochism of those queer subjects under state violence and surveillance" (Fan 2016).

In her discussion of the "new queer Chinese cinema", Leung notes, "While it is debatable whether a 'gay cinema' actually exists in the Chinese language; there should be much less doubt that a 'queer cinema' clearly does" (Leung 2012: 519). Leung was referring to the gay/queer distinction in intellectual debates and social movements, in which "gay" usually signifies an understanding of oneself and politics based on an innate and essentialised sexual identity; whereas "queer", as an umbrella term for all gender and sexuality minorities, refuses to be pinned down by a fixed identity and political stance. Against this definition, Cui's films are undoubtedly queer, in their openness to, and experiment with, multiple modes of human and non-human existence that cannot be reduced to gender and sexual binaries. Cui Zi'en's and other queer Chinese directors' works not only challenge the embedded heteronormativity and even homonormativity in Chinese society; they also experiment with the techniques and aesthetics of filmmaking to open up a new understanding of the political. The digital video camera, in this context, has become an important medium not only for queer auteurs to explore individual artistic expressions, but also for the LGBTQ communities in China to build a shared community culture and to envision an alternative way of life.

LGBTQ community documentary

Cui Zi'en distinguishes between two types of LGBTQ related cinema in China: "comrade films" (*tongzhi dianying*) and "queer films" (*ku'er dianying*). "Comrade" (tongzhi) is the Chinese term for gender and sexual minorities.3 For Cui, "Queer films" refer mostly to independent films informed by a post-identitarian politics and a cinematic avant-gardism; whereas "comrade films" denote films that are predominantly informed by an LGBTQ identity politics and that actively participate in LGBTQ activism (Cui cited in Fan 2015: 246–247). While it is often hard to discern the boundary between LGBTQ politics and queer politics in today's China due to the simultaneous contemporaneity of the cultural translations of queer knowledge and practice, community engagement seems to be a more distinct marker for "comrade films". As most of the "comrade films" are made by and for the LGBTQ community, and most take the form of documentaries, this group of films is usually referred to as "LGBTQ community documentaries" (Shaw and Zhang 2017; Bao 2019a).

The LGBTQ community documentaries are primarily made by a group of young independent filmmakers based in Beijing. The leading figures include Fan Popo, He Xiaopei, Wei Xiaogang, Shi Tou and Ming Ming. All of them are gay and lesbian celebrities in China's LGBTQ community because of their experiences of "coming out" in China's public media, together with their filmmaking practices and community activism. All of them have been organisers of and active participants in the Beijing Queer Film Festival and China Queer Film Festival Tour. More importantly, all of them identify themselves as being queer, and their documentaries are made about, by, and for the LGBTQ communities in China.

The 1985-born Fan Popo was inspired by Cui Zi'en while he was studying at the Beijing Film Academy. Fan has been an active queer filmmaker and LGBTQ activist ever since. His works feature different aspects of the queer community life: *New Beijing, New Marriage* (*Xin qianmen dajie*, 2009) is a film documenting a same-sex wedding on Valentine's Day; the filmmaking process is also part of the 'flash mob' type of queer activism designed by Tongyu, a LGBTQ NGO based in Beijing. *Chinese Closet* (*Guizu*, 2010) narrates young people's "coming out" stories; *Be A Woman* (*Wuniang*, 2011) documents the lives of drag queens in South-West China; *The VaChina Monologues* (*Laizi yindao*, 2013) traces the rehearsal and performance of the feminist play *Vagina Monologues* in three different cities in China; *Mama Rainbow* (*Caihong ban woxin*, 2012) and *Papa Rainbow* (*Caihong ban woxing*, 2016) are about experiences of queer children's parents in reconciling with their children's sexualities. While most of his films use the "talking head" method to allow the filmed subjects to talk about their own experiences, *Papa Rainbow* also involves the fathers in a stage play to allow the characters to speak free from the inhibitions of their perceived "fatherly" authority. The conflation of genres between documentary film and stage play also broadens the purview of xianchang in queer Chinese documentaries.

A queer filmmaker and LGBTQ NGO leader, Wei Xiaogang co-founded the LGBTQ community webcast *Queer Comrades* (*Tongzhi yi fanren*) in 2007. The webcast aims to pluralise LGBTQ representations and present "positive" images about LGBTQ people (Deklerck and Wei 2005: 19). Three seasons have been produced so far: the first season, broadcast biweekly between April and June 2007, featured episodes of talk show

3 For a genealogy of the term "comrade" and its queer appropriation in the Chinese context, see Bao 2012.

programmes by inviting guests to the studio to talk about LGBTQ related issues; the second season, broadcast biweekly between March 2008 and February 2009, featured 24 talk show programmes; the still ongoing third season, beginning in April 2009, shifted its form from talk show to documentaries and short community news videos clips ("Queer Comrades" 2016). Many videos primarily focus on young queer people's lives in urban and transnational settings; they document an emerging urban and cosmopolitan queer culture in its making. While this shows some signs of "queer mainstreaming" in the Western context, in a country where queer representations are far from being "mainstream", the programme plays an important role in pluralising queer representations and in community building (Robinson 2015; Deklerck 2017; Bao 2019b).

He Xiaopei is a veteran queer activist. She is currently director of a Beijing-based LGBTQ NGO named "Pinkspace", which dedicates itself to the promotion of sexual rights and gender equality for women. In the 1990s, she organised community parties and discussion salons and operated community hotlines in Beijing, which were among the earliest forms of LGBTQ activism in China. Her films include *The Lucky One* (*Chong'er*, 2012), *Lesbians Marry Gay Men: Our Marriages* (*Yisheng qiyuan*, 2013) and *Yvo and Chrissy* (*Ruci shenghuo*, 2017). *The Lucky One* documents the last days of an HIV/AIDS patient, Zhang Xi by name, narrated in the protagonist's own words and her own self-made video footages. In the film, He Xiaopei not only challenges the boundary between fiction and reality; she also raises the question about the politics of representation and the agency of the ordinary people: queer and human rights activists often claim to represent, or "speak for", marginalised groups, sometimes only to silence these subjects' own voices. The film *Lesbians Marry Gay Men: Our Marriages* complicates people's understanding of the "pro forma marriages" (*xingshi hunyin*) between gay men and lesbians in China. Arguing against the common conception of dismissing such marriages as being "inauthentic" and, therefore, harmful to gay identity and community, the director draws attention to the innovative forms of affective liaisons and intimate relations that such new social forms engender. He Xiaopei is arguably one of the most "queer", understood in the sense of anti-normativity in terms of gender, sexuality and desire, filmmakers in China today.

As a lesbian couple, Shi Tou and Ming Ming have made a few documentaries together including *Dyke March* (*Nütongzhi youxingri*, 2005) and *Women 50 Minutes* (*Nüren wushi fenzhong*, 2006). *Dyke March* documents a dyke march in San Francisco. Shi Tou spontaneously enacts a "coming out" in front of the video camera, thus crossing the boundary between filmmaker and the filmed subjects (Chao 2010a: 81). *Women 50 Minutes* is not only concerned with feminist and queer issues, but with broader political and social issues such as China's regional differences, environmental and ecological ramifications of economic development, as well as the loss of natural and cultural heritages in the process of modernisation (Bao 2010a). Shi Tou is China's first "out" lesbian public persona and she was cast in the leading role in Li Yu's 2001 film *Fish and Elephant*. She trained as an artist; her artworks and artistic styles often feature prominently in the films. Both Shi Tou and Ming Ming come from ethnic minority families in South-West China's Guizhou Province; their lesbian and ethnic minority identities also have a strong impact on their works.

Despite the differences in terms of topics and styles of representation, these young filmmakers all share an identification with and a commitment to the LGBTQ identity and community. Many of their films can be considered as "participatory documentaries", in

which filmmaking actively participates in, and consciously shapes, the filmed event. The filmmakers no longer assume a distanced stance from the filmed subjects; rather, they identify and interact with the filmed subjects. Furthermore, their filmmaking activities and the circulation of these films constitute a "mediating environment" that involves "an interactive and intersubjective socio-political and critical discourse" around the films (Fan 2016); they can also be seen as "public culture" that contributes to an emerging queer public space in China (Bao 2010b; Robinson 2014).

"Digital video activism"

Queer films do not exist on their own; they are part of an assemblage that connects state regulation, producers, the audience, the market, various distribution channels and screening opportunities. The production of queer Chinese films should be seen in tandem with its distribution and consumption in the context of China's film industry and the LGBTQ movement. A large part of the distribution and consumption of queer Chinese films takes place through community events such as queer film festivals.

In 2001, a group of Beijing-based university students and filmmakers organised China's first Homosexual Film Festival (*Zhongguo tongxinglian dianyingjie*), later renamed as Beijing Queer Film Festival (BJQFF) (*Beijing ku'er yingzhan*).4 With the goal of public education and social enlightenment in mind, the organisers chose Peking University as the film festival venue. The forced early closure of the first edition and the complete cancellation of the second edition right before its opening night made the organisers aware of the risks and pressures that they had to face in organising such a politically sensitive public event. The organisers changed strategies by incorporating the third and fourth iterations of the festival into the Songzhuang-based Beijing Independent Film Festival and by positioning queer filmmaking as "avant-garde" and "non-political" artistic expressions. This subsequently raised the question of community engagement. In later years, the organisers tried to address the audience question by striking a balance between community building and public education, often running the risk of forced closure by the police.

Each iteration of the Beijing Queer Film Festival features predominantly PRC-produced feature films, documentaries and shorts. It also showcases queer films from other parts of the Sinophone sphere, Asia and the world. The film festival programme often looks transnational and cosmopolitan, without losing its cultural specificity and political stance. The festival adopted a "guerrilla" type of organising strategy by selecting multiple screening venues and designing contingent screening plans: when one screening venue is shut down by the police, the festival can continue at another venue. In recent years, the festival has experimented with online streaming of films and with on-board screenings on a travelling bus or train (Bao 2017). New technologies and changing material conditions have contributed to the development of context-specific and culturally sensitive forms of queer activism. Since 2015, the Beijing Queer Film Festival has been rebranded as the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week, primarily hosted by Institut Français Beijing.

4 The Beijing Queer Film Festival website www.bjqff.com/ (accessed 1 November 2018)

The Chinese term for the "film festival" (yingzhan, literally "film exhibition") articulates a particular type of cultural politics: instead of embracing a vertical and hierarchical cultural form, the festival celebrates a horizontal and egalitarian cultural politics. Cui Zi'en summarises the organising principle of the Beijing Queer Film Festival in the following ways:

> (1) Rotating chairperson-on-duty system: there is no permanent chairperson; members of the organising committee take turns to be the chairperson of the BJQFF. The organising committee is open to new committee members.
>
> (2) Democratic selection of films: festival programmes are decided by voting from committee members.
>
> (3) Inclusivity in festival programming: films of different genres, topics and styles are selected, with the technical quality playing a less crucial role. (Wang and Fan 2010: 188)

The Beijing Queer Film Festival champions a type of social activism and radical cultural practice: as it broadens the definitions and practices of film festivals, it also initiates an open, democratic and egalitarian form of public culture (Bao 2017).

As part of its outreach programme, the Beijing Queer Film Festival has sponsored audience members from small cities and remote regions in China to attend the festival. The Beijing-based queer filmmakers have also organised the China Queer Film Festival Tour (*Zhongguo ku'er yingxiang xunhuizhan*) and screened queer films all over China through their connections with local LGBTQ NGOs, bars, clubs and university campuses (Bao 2019a). Queer film festivals and screenings are no longer limited to Beijing, Shanghai and other big cities. As young queer filmmakers gain more opportunities to screen their films, the topics and the styles of their films have also undergone changes, often from urban and cosmopolitan-centrism to more diversified queer representations, and from a sole emphasis on gender and sexuality to an intersectional approach that attends to multiple coexistent and interacting social relations and identities, as well as the political economy of queer.

Since 2015, the Beijing Queer Film Festival has been rebranded as the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week (*Beijing aiku dianyiong zhou*), partly to mitigate the political sensitivity of the festival and partly to reflect its changes in organisational structures. The Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week has been hosted by the Institut Français of Beijing, a Beijing-based foreign cultural centre. The support for queer films from international governments and embassies raises questions about the political and ideological complicity of queer cinema in cultural diplomacy and international relations.

The Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, a LGBTQ NGO, organised the Queer University (*ku'er daxue*) programme, which trains LGBTQ community members to use digital video and make their own films. The films made in this programme include *Brothers* (*Xiongdi*, dir. Yao, 2013) and *Comrade Yue* (*Xiaoyue tongzhi*, dir. Yue Jianbo, 2013). They cast their attention to the marginalised transgender populations and the rural queer in the LGBTQ community and manifest 'aesthetics of queer becoming' (Tan 2016). The Rainbow Villager Project and the China Queer Digital Storytelling Workshop have organised digital video training workshops for LGBTQ people all over China. With such community initiatives, an increasing number of LGBTQ people have started to pick up digital video cameras to explore their own identities and to build their communities.

The Shanghai Pride has hosted the ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival (ShPFF) as part of the Pride programme since 2015.5 The 2019 ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival took place on 8-16 June 2019 and it included workshops, Q&A sessions and panel discussions with queer filmmakers. Although the festival's short films competition attracted some Chinese-language LGBTQ submissions, the festival programme was overwhelmingly dominated by non-Chinese-language queer films. This partly reflects the interests and concerns of the international organising team in making the ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival an international and cosmopolitan event. A homonormative gay identity politics, characterised by the "coming out" and gay "pride" strategies of LGBTQ organising, is strongly manifested in festival programming. The ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival has received little intervention from the local police in the past few years, partly because of Shanghai's special geopolitical status in China (as international and non-political), and partly because of the organiser's strategy of not politicising the event. However, the Shanghai Pride manifests a strong sense of commercialisation, a sign of the burgeoning "pink economy" in an international metropolis.

Also contributing to Shanghai's queer film scene is the CINEMQ, a queer film collective founded in 2015 which organises regular film screenings.6 Combining film screenings with parties, the CINEMQ advocates gender and sexual diversity in a less commercial and more entertaining way, targeting an international and cosmopolitan audience in Shanghai. The organiser Matthew Baren also made a documentary film *Extravaganza* (2018), documenting Shanghai's flourishing drag scene (Bao 2018b).

In 2017, another volunteer-run queer film festival, the Shanghai Queer Film Festival (ShQFF), emerged in competition with the ShanghaiPRIDE film festival.7 From 21–26 September 2018, the second iteration of the Shanghai Queer Film Festival took place, featuring a week's film screenings, panel discussions and cultural events. Festival director Shi Tingting observes that most of Shanghai's queer scenes are tailored to a Western sensibility, the Shanghai Queer Festival hopes to "engage audiences in more community activities that allow them to feel at home" and "let emerging filmmakers, especially those from Asia and China, have more opportunities to showcase their works" (Cao 2018). As a result, the Shanghai Queer Film Festival explicitly celebrates a queer political stance and it puts a strong emphasis on promoting Asian queer films.

In a country where independent filmmaking and public expressions of homosexuality are considered problematic, the mushrooming of queer films and queer film festivals demonstrates strong potentials for LGBTQ communities and cultures in China. Films and filmmaking do not have to be political, but in a social context where queer representations and sexual rights are limited, queer filmmaking often carries a political edge. Sitting together to watch a queer film becomes an important way to construct identities and build communities; organising a queer film screening despite the state ban may have the same political significance as organising a pride march. The Fifth Beijing Queer Film Festival

5 The Shanghai Pride website (including the ShanghaiPRIDE film Festival programmes) www.shpride.com (accessed 1 November 2018)

6 The CINEMQ website: www.cinemq.com/ (accessed 1 November 2018)

7 The Shanghai Queer Film Festival website: http://shqff.org/en/ (accessed 1 November 2018)

Organiser Yang Yang identifies the "greatest value and ultimate goal of holding a queer film festival" as "challenging and opposing this mainstream ideology" (Yang 2011: 7). Mathew Baren and Alvin Li, coordinators of the first ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival, locate the significance of the queer film festival in the intimate experience of viewing and sharing films:

> There is no shared experience like sitting in the dark room of a cinema ...Watching in the darkness, those who gather are not merely an audience, but performers. They reach out and touch, feeling and sharing every fibre of their experience ...a film festival demands engagement, collaboration and intimacy. (Baren and Li 2015: 2)

The Beijing Queer Film Festival's politicised approach and the ShanghaiPRIDE film festival's apolitical and intimate touch represent different types of queer politics in China today, both with historical and geographical specificities. Cui Zi'en calls the active involvement of queer films in LGBTQ politics "digital video activism" (yingxiang xingdong), which he explains as an anti-elitist stance and as a commitment to praxis: "We do not think that we should advocate and promote those so-called standard, artistically refined and excellent films. We call for acting with digital videos and changing the world" (cited in Wang and Fan 2010: 188). Cui also comments on the role of the Beijing Queer Film Festival:

> It is convenient and straightforward to connect films with the hard times and to change the society. The Beijing Queer Film Festival was founded before the digital video era. The festival has since taken an active part in China's development. The festival has set agendas on LGBTQ issues and has impacted on media representations and public opinions. Indeed, the festival has already changed the times and effected social changes. (cited in Wang and Fan 2010: 189).

Cui's words echo those of many filmmakers from China's Sixth Generation Filmmakers and the New Documentary Movement in emphasising the importance of the digital media in representing new subjectivities and effecting social changes. The digital video, with its portability and affordability, embodies the potential to break the monopoly of the state media censorship and commercial media and celebrates a democratic way of artistic and political expressions.

A queer future?

Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality in China in 1997 and its depathologisation in 2001, China's official media administration, the SARFT (the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) still considers LGBTQ issues sensitive topics for public representation. According to Article Three of the film censorship standards issued by the SARFT in March 2008, contents containing "homosexuality" should be "cut or modified" (USAID and UNDP 2015: 44). Although the article was later removed in 2010, LGBTQ-themed films and television programmes are subject to constant ban and censorship in China. At film festivals and other screening events, queer filmmakers sometimes wear T-shirts with the line "we want to see queer films" (*Women yaokan tongxinglian dianying*) printed on them to protest against the policy. In 2015, Fan Popo sued the SARFT for banning his film Mama Rainbow from streaming websites. Although the court verdict was ambiguous, the event was still hailed by the LGBTQ community as a victory (Lin 2015).

Since 2011, the LGBTQ NGO Beijing Gender Health Education Institute has organised the annual China Rainbow Media Awards (*Zhongguo caihong meiti jiang*) to give awards to LGBTQ friendly journalists and media institutions, as well as to people who have made special contributions to China's LGBTQ communities. Mainstream media institutions such as *China Daily*, *Southern Weekend* and *China Central Television* have received awards for their positive representations of LGBTQ issues. This marked a significant change in LGBTQ representations: instead of waiting passively to be represented by the mainstream media, China's LGBTQ communities have started to influence mainstream media representations in their own ways, however long this process may take.

The history of queer cinema in China is unfolding. Through my brief account of queer cinema in China, which is of necessity selective, non-linear and un-teleological, I hope that I have shed light on the struggles of LGBTQ communities in China in fighting for free and pluralistic expressions of gender, sexuality, art and politics. Such struggles are challenging but they open up unpredictable and exciting opportunities for a queer future.

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