

**The ‘Queer Generation’:  
Queer Community Documentary in Contemporary China**

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**Abstract:**

In this article, I chart a brief history of the queer community documentary in the PRC since the 2000s by introducing its historical conditions of emergence and development. In doing so, I highlight the activist dimension of queer filmmaking and its transnational nature. I focus specifically on the aesthetics and politics, together with modes of production and circulation, of these queer community documentaries. I call the group of filmmakers working around the Beijing Queer Film Festival and the China Queer Film Festival Tour the ‘queer generation’. The ‘queer generation’ filmmakers use documentary films as a tool to engage in political and social activism. Their films and activist practices should be put in a transnational context and seen as part of the transnational cinema and international queer movements. As these filmmakers documented queer community histories, they also ‘queered’ Chinese documentaries and Chinese film industries at large. Their works represent grassroots, community-based and activist-oriented political engagements in contemporary China; these works also point to the political potential of queerness and documentary films in the world today.

**Key Words:**

queer, documentary, China, the ‘queer generation’, film festival, queer activism

In the past two decades, there has been a surge of queer-themed documentary films in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Equipped with digital video cameras, many queer-identified individuals have self-consciously documented their own lives and the lives of people in the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) communities. Most of these films deal with issue of gender, sexuality and identity. Many are made to share with other community members and often circulated online and in community spaces. They are documentaries made by, for and about China's LGBTQ communities. They are often referred to as 'queer activist documentary' (Shaw and Zhang 2017) or 'queer community documentary'. Following Zhang Zhen (2007), who calls a group of 'sixth-generation' filmmakers who make films on urban life the 'urban generation', and inspired by the tagline of 'Generation Q' (*Ku'er diedai*) from the Shanghai Queer Film Festival in 2018, I call this group of filmmakers who make films on queer issues the 'queer generation'.

Like 'urban generation', the term 'queer generation' is a new coinage in Chinese film studies and queer scholarship. In real life few people would know what this means although many may immediately recognise the term's reference to the tradition of naming groups of filmmakers in terms of 'generation' in Chinese film historiography. Even the filmmakers who happen to fall into this category may not readily identify with this label. It is, however, not difficult to list some of the characteristics shared among the 'queer generation' filmmakers: most of them are LGBTQ, or queer (*ku'er*), identified; their films primarily document the life of gender and sexual minorities in China. Most of the filmmakers lived in Beijing in the early 2000s and most were directly or indirectly connected to China's leading queer filmmaker and activist Cui Zi'en. Most were involved in the organisation of the Beijing Queer Film Festival (since 2011) and the China Queer Film Festival Tour (2008-2012). Around Cui Zi'en and the Beijing Queer Film Festival, the group formed a closely-knit queer film collective. Most of these filmmakers were born in the 1970s and 80s to one-child families. Many of them were

university educated and trained in creative arts (such as scriptwriting, painting and theatre) but very few directly in filmmaking. In other words, they are all self-taught filmmakers.

Despite all these similarities, it is these filmmakers' 'family resemblance' in terms of film aesthetics and politics, as well as their collective contributions to China's queer history, that unite them as a group of filmmakers and their works as a distinct body of works.

This article marks an effort to think of Chinese queer documentary, and in fact Chinese queer cinema, as beyond the national cinema paradigm and as a form of transnational cinema. As I will demonstrate in this article, growing up in a globalising China, the 'queer generation' filmmakers' filmmaking and activist practices are situated in a transnational context, and informed by international discourses about sexual identity and social movements. The aesthetics and politics of these films, together with their mode of production and circulation, are undeniably transnational. These films challenge an essentialised notion of 'Chineseness', which the concept of 'Hollywood' (Fu, Indelicato and Qiu 2016) also takes to task. They also open up discussions about what films are and can do. In their study of Western queer history and film history, Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (1997) suggest that as queer documentaries document queer histories, they also 'queer' documentaries. If that is true, then Chinese queer documentaries not only challenges 'Chineseness', but also queers film history and cinematic apparatuses. In this article, by documenting key filmmakers and works that fall into the category of queer community documentary in contemporary China since the 2000s, I hope to write these filmmakers and their works into transnational queer and film histories.

### **Historicising Queer Films and Film Festivals**

The emergence of queer community documentary and other queer themed films in the early 2000s was not a coincidence. Homosexuality was only decriminalised in the PRC in 1997

and removed from the third edition of the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (CCMD-3) in 2001. The year 2001 marked a turning point for China's LGBTQ movements, witnessing a proliferation of queer representations on Chinese media. A notable example was the *Approaching Homosexuality* television programme aired on the Hunan Satellite Television, interviewing queer celebrities including sociologist Li Yinhe, queer writer Cui Zi'en and lesbian artist Shi Tou (whose films will be discussed later in this article). This programme marked the 'coming out' of the LGBTQ communities on Chinese media. In December 2001, the first 'China Homosexual Film Festival' (later known as the Beijing Queer Film Festival) was held on Peking University campus. The guest curator at the time, Cui Zi'en, curated five titles from the Chinese-speaking world, including China's first explicitly queer-themed feature film *East Palace, West Palace* (*Donggong xigong*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1996), Cui's own experimental feature *Old Testament* (*Jiuyue*, 2001), and the first lesbian-themed feature *Fish and Elephant* (*Jinnian xiatian*, dir. Li Yu, 2001) with lesbian artist Shi Tou playing the lead role in the film. Although the festival had to close earlier than planned because of pressures from the university authorities, it became a watershed moment in China's queer history.

Since the first Beijing Queer Film Festival, a group of young queer-identified filmmakers have been working with Cui Zi'en, professor of film theory and scriptwriting from the Beijing Film Academy, to make and screen queer-themed films. They lived in Beijing and socialised in a closely-knit community. Some were Cui's students such as Fan Popo who studied scriptwriting at the Beijing Film Academy. They mostly came from a creative art background: for example, Shi Tou trained as an artist and Wei Xiaogang was trained in stage drama. Although the term 'queer' was relatively new at the time, most of them were queer identified and supported queer politics instead of gay identity politics. They used documentary films as their major form of artistic expression and political engagement. Their

documentary films mostly spoke to community concerns such as ‘coming out’, parent-children relationship, marriage and kinship. They worked closely with each other, often sharing ideas, expertise and resources with each other. In the process, the aesthetic styles and political stances of their films cross-fertilised each other. They shared their films at private parties and community events. They worked together to put on the Beijing Queer Film Festival and the China Queer Film Festival Tour. In this context, Cui compared the Beijing Queer Film Festival to like-minded friends getting together and having a party (Cui in Fan 2015: 256). Because of the publicness of the film festivals and other screening events, their films and the film events they put on should not be seen as merely personal and apolitical; they increasingly became an important part of China’s burgeoning LGBTQ movement. It is under these historical conditions that the filmmakers worked together as a group, which I call ‘the queer generation’.

Despite the decriminalisation and depathologisation of homosexuality, queer rights are far from being guaranteed in the PRC. China’s media regulator, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), consistently bans queer films from being legally produced and sponsored. Therefore, most queer-themed films are made independently or semi-underground, without recourse to government support and public funding, and with no hope of being released on television or at commercial cinemas. Unauthorised events such as a queer film festival challenge the government regulation on public event, assembly, protest and mass mobilisation, and are therefore seen as politically sensitive. This has led to the Beijing Queer Film Festival being frequently raided by the police, shut down or having to change screening venues.

The single most important reason for the proliferation of queer films has been the emergence and development of queer identities and communities in urban China. Starting in the 1990s, lesbians and gay people have gathered in queer public spaces such as parks and commercial

venues including bars, clubs and saunas. The Internet, with mushrooming queer websites and online chatrooms, has also created a public space for sexual minorities to meet and to share information. Increasingly, community groups and NGOs (non-governmental organisations) brought sexual minorities together and a LGBTQ rights discourse started to emerge. As these identities and communities took shape, there was also an increasing demand for representation and rights (Chiang 2019). Films has become an important means for queer individual and group representation.

The need for increasing and positive queer representation has been ignored by mainstream and commercial media. Representations of queer issues on mainstream media are strictly limited and they have evolved slowly. The sense of openness created by the HIV/AIDS discourse in the 2000s has gradually been replaced by tight regulation of queer representations on mainstream media in the 2010s. Commercial and international media have offered more space and greater freedom for queer representation, but they also have to tread carefully over the red tape of China's opaque and idiosyncratic media policies. The Internet and social media have enjoyed more freedom of expression, but they are also subject to constantly changing policies of regulation and censorship. Even within the limited queer representation on media, a large majority are negative and stereotyped representations. In this context, there is an urgent need for queer people to represent their own lives. Queer film and queer film festivals represent such community efforts of self-representation.

Film and film festivals play a significant role in China's LGBTQ activism. In fact, many of the leading queer activists including Cui Zi'en and Shi Tou are filmmakers, or they turned to filmmaking as a way to engage in activism. Many queer public events involve films such as film festivals, film clubs and film screening tours. From an early stage, Chinese queer activists have found that cultural activism, represented by queer films and film festivals, is one of the most viable, sustainable and culturally sensitive ways to conduct activism in the

context of China where political activism represented by a pride march is politically sensitive and potentially risky. Film screening events are inclusive and less intimidating to attract new community members. People can attend a film screening event regardless of their identities and identifications; and they can participate in a film festival in a more engaged or distanced manner. In other words, everyone can participate in the film events in a way with which they feel most comfortable, and this facilitates community building. Films created by community members often address issues of identity and community; they bring people together to discuss common issues and concerns. Post-screening Q&As and discussions can often help frame some of the key issues pertaining to identities, communities and rights. As such, films are situated at the ambiguous and yet critical juncture of culture and politics, public and private, personal and political, local, national and transnational. Films and film festivals may look apolitical. However, the affective power of watching films together with like-minded people and its impact for community building and political mobilisation cannot be overlooked (Bao 2010a; Schroeder 2012).

### **Cui Zi'en and the 'New Queer Chinese Cinema'**

Film critic 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 since gained popularity in film festival programming and in Chinese film studies. Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2012) identifies the term's root in 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: 518-19)

Although Leung's descriptions are apt for many Chinese queer films produced in the last two decades, the term 'new queer cinema' seems a misnomer in the PRC context. In fact, it is hard to locate an 'old' queer Chinese cinema before the advent of the 'new'. This is also complicated by the fact that 'queer cinema' in China may have appeared earlier than 'gay and lesbian cinema', in the same way that queer politics may have proceeded gay identity politics in the PRC context. Situating Chinese queer cinema in a US and Euro-centric queer film historiography can bring a sense of disjuncture and mismatch. We should treat 'new queer Chinese cinema' as an emerging and performative discourse, insofar as it acknowledges the interactions between academic knowledge and artistic practices in a transnational context, as well as 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, a filmmaker, film scholar, literary critic, playwright, writer, film festival organiser and queer activist in one person. Cui has only made three documentaries to date: *Night Scene (Yeijing, 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 Beijing Olympics. It does not feature queer issues, but the narrative has parallels with the forced closure of the Beijing Queer Film Festival that Cui experienced at the time of making the film. The film also shows the filmmaker's concerns for marginalised social groups and his participation in China's New Documentary Movement. The film *Night Scene* is a docudrama that features crossdressing

sex workers' lives at 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). The film 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 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 lost voices of the queer communities and to construct an indigenous LGBTQ history (Bao 2015; Robinson 2015; de Villiers 2017).

Cui usually makes films on a shoestring budget. He introduced in an interview that he could finish a film within a few days or weeks for only a few thousand RMB (Cui in Fan, 2015: 253). This was largely true, but such an accomplishment was only possible with many resources that Cui has recourse to, including being able to use free editing facilities at the Beijing Film Academy where he taught and rely on the generosity, good will and free labour of his friends. Cui compares the filmmaking process as friends getting together and having a party:

I see myself more as an organiser than a director. Forming a film crew is almost like having a party with my friends. My role is to gather people for a big twenty-day party, like a party host. Everyone brings cheese and wine. Of course, in our party they bring a DV camera, tapes and costumes. (Cui in dGenerate Films 2010)

The process of Cui's filmmaking is often spontaneous, *ad hoc* and collaborative:

I've always thought of my creations as doing and thinking at the same time. I couldn't complete a script and go shoot it. Since I started making moving images, none of them have been made with a completed screenplay in advance. They were all made on site with

a script and a rough outline, according to the resources we had available and the composition of the crew. So, for example, whether we shot in three days or five, what sort of location we used, all was *ad hoc*, and the dialogue was improvised. Or on a morning I would write an approximation for the daytime actors and then send them off to find their own method of dialogue and shoot it that way. No piece I've shot has relied mechanically on a script. (Cui in Fan 2015: 252)

Although Cui was primarily talking about fiction filmmaking in this context, this description also largely applies to his documentaries, especially the docudramas that blurred the boundaries between fiction and reality, as in the film *Night Scene*. Cui practises a prefigurative politics in his filmmaking: he transforms a traditional hierarchical director-cast/crew relationship into a horizontal one, in which decisions are made collectively and everyone's individuality and creativity is respected. In doing so, he not only challenges the central role of capital in commercial cinema, but the hierarchical and exploitative production system in the film industry.

Cui's experimental style of filmmaking has much to do with his Left political stance: his innovations in cinematic style serve to deconstruct some established traditions in filmmaking. Cui uses phrases such as 'demolishing the temple' and 'changing blood' to subvert the film's close relationship with the capital (Cui in Fan 2015: 248-9). For Cui, making films and holding 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 'utopianism, or communism' (p. 253). He often chooses 'the situation of poverty, or bare, stark nudity' to present his understanding of the world (p. 254). The main characters of his films are often portrayed as *lumpenproletariat*. Cui compares the exchange of ideas through unofficial and underground channels (such as watching bootleg film DVDs and attending international film festivals) to the 'communist international of queer films' (Cui and Liu 2010: 422). As a queer

auteur and activist with coherent and innovative political ideas, Cui is a unique voice in the polyphony of the queer film culture both domestically and internationally. Audrey Yue (2012) sees Cui's works as a fine exemplar of 'queer Sinophone films' and Petrus Liu (2015) uses Cui to develop his theory of 'queer Marxism'. As China's leading queer filmmaker and activist, Cui's aesthetics and politics have had a strong impact on other members of the 'queer generation'.

### **'Queer Generation' Filmmakers and Their Films**

The 1985-born Fan Popo was inspired by Cui Zi'en while he was studying at the Beijing Film Academy. He has been an active queer filmmaker and activist ever since. His works feature different aspects of the community life: *New Beijing, New Marriage* (*Xin qianmen dajie*, dir. Fan Popo and David Cheng, 2009) is a film documenting a same-sex wedding photoshoot event on Valentine's Day. The event was a form of queer activism organised by Tongyu, a queer NGO based in Beijing, to advocate same-sex marriage, and Fan documented the whole process. *Chinese Closet* (*Guizu*, 2010) features young people's 'coming out' stories. *Be A Woman* (*Wuniang*, 2011) portrays the lives of drag performers at a drag club in southwest China. *The VaChina Monologues* (*Laizi yindao*, 2013) traces the rehearsals and performances of the feminist play *Vagina Monologues* in three Chinese cities. *Mama Rainbow* (*Caihong ban woxin*, 2012) and *Papa Rainbow* (*Caihong laoba*, 2016) are about experiences of queer children's parents in reconciling with their children's sexualities. While most of Fan's films use the 'talking head' technique to allow the filmed subjects to speak for themselves, *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* (on-the-spot realism) (Robinson 2013) in independent Chinese documentaries.

A queer filmmaker and NGO leader, Wei Xiaogang founded the queer community webcast *Queer Comrades (Tongzhi yi fanren)* in 2007. The webcast aims to pluralise queer representations and present positive images about queer people (Deklerck and Wei 2015: 19). Three seasons have been produced so far: the first season, broadcast biweekly between April and June 2007, consists of episodes of talk show programmes with invited guests, mostly queer identified, about queer communities, cultures and everyday life. The second season, broadcast biweekly between March 2008 and February 2009, comprises 24 talk show programmes. The still ongoing third season, beginning in April 2009, shifts its format from talk shows to documentaries and short community news videos clips ('Queer Comrades' 2016). Many videos primarily focus on young people's lives in urban and transnational settings; they unfold a burgeoning urban and cosmopolitan queer culture in its making. While Queer Comrades programmes display some signs of 'queer mainstreaming' common to gay identity politics, in a country where queer representations are far from being 'mainstream', the programme plays an important role in building communities and pluralising queer representations (Deklerck, 2017).

He Xiaopei is a veteran queer activist. She is director of a Beijing-based queer NGO, Pink Space, dedicated to the promotion of sexual rights and gender equality. In the 1990s, she organised community parties and discussion salons, and operated community hotlines in Beijing, which were among some of the earliest forms of queer activism in China (Bao 2019). Her films include *The Lucky One (Chong'er, 2012)*, *Lesbians Marry Gay Men: Our Marriages (yisheng qi yuan, 2013)* and *Yvo and Chrissy (ruci shenghuo, 2017)*. *The Lucky One* follows the last days of a HIV/AIDS patient Zhang Xi, narrated in the protagonist's own recorded words and self-made video footages. In the film, He not only challenges the

boundary between fiction and reality; she also raises the question about the politics of representation and the agency of ordinary people. The film draws attention to the paradox that queer and human rights activists often claim to represent, or ‘speak for’, marginalised individuals and groups, sometimes only to silence these subjects’ own voices. He’s film *Lesbians Marry Gay Men: Our Marriages* complicates the understanding of the ‘pro forma marriages’ (*xingshi hunyin*) between gay men and lesbians in China. Arguing against the common conception of such marriages as being ‘inauthentic’ and therefore harmful to queer identities and communities, He draws attention to the innovative forms of affective liaisons and intimate relations that such new social forms engender. He is arguably one of the most ‘queer’, understood in the sense of anti-normativity, filmmakers in China today.

As a queer couple, Shi Tou and Ming Ming have made a few documentaries together including *Dyke March* (*Nü tongzhi youxing ri*, 2005), *Women 50 Minutes* (*Nüren wushi fenzhong*, 2006) and *We Are Here* (*women zai zheli*, co-directed with Jing Zhao, 2015). Shi Tou was 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 came from ethnic minority backgrounds in southwest China’s Guizhou Province. Their lesbian and ethnic identities have often left a strong imprint on their works. *Dyke March* documents a pride march in San Francisco. In the film, Shi Tou spontaneously enacts a ‘coming out’ in front of the video camera, thus crossing the boundary between filmmaker and filmed subjects (Chao 2010: 81). *Women 50 Minutes* is not only concerned with feminist and queer issues, but also with broader political and social issues such as China’s regional differences and unequal development, environmental and ecological degradation, as well as the loss of natural and cultural heritages in the process of China’s urbanisation (Bao 2010b). *We Are Here* documents twenty years of queer and feminist activism in Beijing since the Fourth World

Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. The film also unravels the complex relationship between feminist and queer activism and explores the possibility of a queer feminist politics in the PRC context.

A younger generation of queer activists have also joined the list of ‘queer generation’ filmmakers. They include Qiu Bai, Wan Qing and Wei Tingting. What they have in common is that they are all self-identified feminist and queer activists, and making films is only a small part of their activist engagements. Qiu Bai, a Sun Yat-sen University graduate who took China’s Ministry of Education to court because of stigmatised representation of homosexuality in university psychology textbooks, has made a few short documentary films about queer issues in education. *When Teachers Meet Queers* (*Dang laoshi yujian tongzhi*, dir. Qiu Bai 2015) invites queer-friendly teachers to talk about their attitudes towards LGBTQ issues. Qiu Bai also appeared as the lead character in a documentary titled *Kill the Gay* (*Shasi nazhi tongxinglian*, 2016) made by Wan Qing, also a graduate from Sun Yat-sen University. Wei Tingting, one of China’s ‘feminist five’, women who were arrested on the International Women’s Day in 2013 for their feminist activism, made a documentary titled *BiChina* (*Shuang*, dir. Wei Tingting, 2017) exploring her own bisexuality and desires. Wei’s film is marked by a clear sense of female authorship and gendered subjectivity. These filmmakers are familiar with Cui and the Beijing Queer Film Festival collective, but they belong to a younger generation of feminist and queer activists. They often self-identify as feminists and their gendered subjectivity often features prominently in their films. They are not shy of embedding themselves in the film narratives, either in the form of voiceover or appearing physically as a main character in the film.

Despite the differences in terms of topics and styles, these young filmmakers all share an identification with and a commitment to queer identities and communities. Many of their films can be seen as ‘participatory documentaries’ (Nichols 1992), 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 (Robinson 2015; Bao 2010a).

Most queer community documentaries are made on a shoe-string budget without much financial support. They are often produced by amateur or semi-professional filmmakers who have not gone through rigorous academic training in filmmaking. Although purchasing or renting digital video cameras are costly, it is seen as a worthwhile investment for many filmmakers. The production cost can be flexible: from low-budget productions that resemble home videos to more sophisticated productions when funds, technical facilities and crew expertise are available. Many *Queer Comrades* webcasts, for example, are funded by foreign embassies or non-governmental organisations. Some queer documentaries are crowdfunded by community members, or by a few economically better off individuals and groups in the communities. For example, Fan Popo was successful in getting his film *Papa Rainbow* crowdfunded. While touring with his films around China, Fan Popo received an invitation from the owner of the Chun’ai Bar, one of the biggest drag bars in Nanjing, to make a documentary about the drag scene there. Fan lived with the performers there for half a year, supported by the bar, and completed the documentary *Be A Woman*.

For films made under these circumstances, commercial success is often not a major concern and even impossible to think about. A filmmaker’s job is to make films for the communities they come from and document the community history that they have experienced. Their values as ‘testimony’ and ‘historical archive’ are more important, and this is why many



documentaries rely heavily on ‘talking heads’ to document oral histories narrated by interviewees. These filmmakers, however, do have to think about the community audience when they make films, as most of these films are shown in community screenings and at queer film festivals. For example, after shooting *Mama Rainbow*, Fan Popo shot *Papa Rainbow*, in response to the audience question of ‘where have all the dads gone?’. In this way, these queer filmmakers and the communities they come from are mutually supportive. As queer communities offer these filmmakers research materials, and support and even reward them with honours and opportunities, the ‘queer generation’ filmmakers repay the communities with their hard, creative and affective labour. While filmmakers do not necessarily have to represent communities in any rigid or dogmatic manner, they do identify strongly and work closely with queer communities to make their works socially relevant and meaningful.

### **The Politics and Aesthetics of Queer Documentary**

Most of these filmmakers self-identify as ‘queer’, or *ku'er*, a transliteration of the English word ‘queer’ in Chinese. Fan Popo, male by birth, often uses the person pronoun ‘she/her’ and self-identify as *lala* (lesbian) on social media to combat patriarchy in gay communities. Wei Xiaogang’s *Queer Comrades* documentaries explore different sexualities and lifestyles including kink. Cui Zi’en and He Xiaopei’s queer stances are most pronounced: Cui refuses to accept any norm in gender, sexuality and filmmaking; he often remarks that he is against the concept of sex and ‘every single person might have a sexuality or his or her own’ (Cui and Wang 2004: 184). In *Queer China, Comrade China*, through interviews, Cui speaks against gay identity politics and homonormativity in the LGBTQ movement. For example, when it comes to the topic of same-sex marriage, as he shows the community support for

same-sex marriage campaigns, he also interviews queer scholars and activists including Guo Xiaofei, Lisa Rofel and Li Yinhe, all of whom challenge the heteronormative institution of marriage. From these interviews, it is clear that he is not an advocate for same-sex marriages. He Xiaopei celebrates sexual pleasure in her AIDS documentary *The Lucky One*; her autobiography film (*Duoxinglian jiating*, 2010) explores polyamory and human relationships. He also argues against the PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) type of gay identity politics in *Our Marriages* as she celebrates alternative families and queer kinship formed by lesbians and gay men through ‘cooperative marriages’ (*xingshi hunyin*). Recently He has casted her attention on intersectional issues with gender, sexuality, class, disability and race, through her film *Evo and Chrissy* (*Ruci shenghuo*, 2017), *Love You Too* (2017) and *The Playmates* (*Wanban*, 2018).

The ‘queer generation’ films also manifest distinct aesthetics, which distinguish themselves from other types of independent documentary in China. Chinese film studies scholars have observed the popular obsession with the ‘direct cinema’ aesthetics among China’s independent documentarians (Berry, Lü and Rofel 2010; Robinson 2013). Heavily influenced by American director Frederick Wiseman and Japanese director Ogawa Shinsuke, most Chinese independent documentarians adopt a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach to document the social realities as they observe ‘objectively’, meanwhile trying their best to erase the filmmakers’ subjectivity in front of the camera. Most documentarians in the ‘queer generation’, in contrast, do not shy away from the camera; some even intentionally embed their voices or bodies in the film and in the social realities of which they play a part. Shi Tou and Ming Ming’s films explicitly foreground the filmmaker’s subjectivity. In *Women 50 Minutes*, for example, the two filmmakers not only make their social commentaries in the form of film subtitles, but physically appear in the film, making their own lives an integral part of the women’s experiences they document (Bao 2010b). Observing Shi Tou’s

participatory approach in *Dyke March*, Chao Shi-Yan (2010: 93) comments: ‘Shi Tou’s presence in front of the camera is especially meaningful, for her participatory performance exerts a strong impact on the audience that is informed by a shared sense of wish-fulfilment and queer performativity’. Indeed, the ‘queer generation’ documentaries are performative not simply because they involve gendered performances; but more importantly, they bring gendered and sexual subjectivities into existence through the production, circulation and conception of films.

In his analysis of Fan Popo and David Cheng’s 2009 documentary *New Beijing, New Marriage*, Luke Robinson (2014) observes a trend in independent Chinese documentary: from a more experimental aesthetic to a more mainstream aesthetic through adopting traditional broadcasting techniques such as talking heads. Robinson points out that this signifies the shifting focus ‘from the more exotic elements of the gay community onto the everyday lives of gay men and women’ (p. 71). In other words, the more ‘mainstream’ type of aesthetics speaks to an activist strategy of making queer identities visible through filmic representations: representing sexual minorities not in a voyeuristic and exploitative way but treating them as ordinary people. Acknowledging the possible ‘homonormativity’ in some *Queer Comrades* documentaries, Deklerck (2017) identifies some ‘queer moments’ in *Queer Comrades*, and comments on the specificity of queer politics in China: queer politics in China cannot be reduced to the binary of gay identity politics (which advocates a ‘coming out’ strategy based on an essentialised notion of male gay identity) and queer politics (which advocates a coalition politics for all gender and sexual minorities outside of mainstream gender and sexual norms); it can best be described as ‘nomadic activism’, in the words of Lisa Rofel (2013), oscillating and negotiating between various modes of political articulations often given new meanings in the contemporary Chinese context.

## **Transnational Circulation of Queer Documentary**

Queer documentaries are usually circulated through home DVDs and public screening events such as queer film festivals, although filmmakers sometimes make these films available online for free to reach more audiences. For example, the *Queer Comrades* website hosts many community documentaries. To reach out to the public, filmmakers have also uploaded some of their films to mainstream video streaming websites. Fan Popo uploaded his film *Mama Rainbow* to several Chinese video streaming websites including Youku, Tudou, and 56.com until these videos were taken down by the censorship authorities. This triggered Fan's lawsuit against China's media censor, the SARFT, in 2015.

Film festivals at different levels – local, national, regional and global - play an important role in disseminating queer documentaries. Although primarily made for people in Chinese queer communities, some of these films also target international queer film festivals. That is why many of these films have English subtitles from the outset. Chinese queer filmmakers are often invited by universities and film festivals overseas to give talks and screen their films. Cui describes this as the 'communist international of queer films' (Cui and Liu 2010), by which he refers to two historical processes of transnational queer cultural exchange: the pirated queer DVDs circulating in the PRC in the 1990s and the 'going out' of Chinese queer films overseas in the 2000s. Cui celebrates the international, non-commercial and reciprocal exchange of queer films between China and the rest of the world, based on the principle of a 'gift economy' rather than a 'market economy'. These unofficial, grassroots, people-to-people exchanges constitute a 'minor transnationalism' (Lionnet and Shih 2005), a type of transnationalism between ordinary people at the grassroots level that challenges the logic of neoliberal globalisation dominated by nation states and capital.

Perhaps one of the most distinctive features of queer community documentaries in China is its international address (Robinson 2015). Most of these films are made with an international audience in mind (with English subtitles) and sometimes featuring an international cast. A documentary about China's queer history, *Queer China, 'Comrade' China* not only includes interviews with queer activists and academics from Hong Kong, Taiwan and other parts of the Sinophobe sphere; it also features interviews with Western queer scholars and activists including Lisa Rofel and Susie Jolly. *Queer Comrades* is run by a transnational production team and many episodes are jointly produced by Wei Xiaogang and Stijn Deklerck. These documentaries are often screened for an international audience at urban bars and clubs in Beijing and other global cities. The contents of the *Queer Comrades* documentaries also reflect international and cosmopolitan tastes as they showcase queer cultures from different parts of the world. The international address of the queer documentaries serves, on the one hand, to recognise the contributions these 'international friends' have made to China's queer communities; on the other, it also attests to the transnational nature of China's queer movements. Indeed, queer activism in China, from the outset, has been led by cosmopolitan urban individuals and groups, and influenced by international discourses; it has also formed part of the transnational LGBTQ movements. By working with their international allies, queer activists in China circumvent government censorship, as international events are less likely to be closed down by the Chinese government. Urban queer cultures in China, as such, are often characterised by a 'double consciousness': queer identities are national and global at the same time, hence the strong rhetoric of universalism and internationalism. Admittedly, queer cultures in China have been constantly shaped by an entanglement of global, regional, national and local discourses: as these discourses shape queer cultures, queer cultures also redefine these geographic and cultural categories.

## **Queer Online Documentary, and What Next?**

As demonstrated in this article, the ‘queer generation’ is not a social movement with a set of coherent political agendas and activist strategies, although many ‘queer generation’ filmmakers have been actively involved in the PRC’s queer movements; they also contribute to China’s ‘new documentary movement’ and the continuous shaping of China’s film industries. Similarly, the documentaries produced by the ‘queer generation’ do not represent a homogeneous body of works; each filmmaker and each work carries its own distinct features. However, they do manifest some shared aesthetics and politics. This is because these works cross-fertilise each other as the filmmakers work closely with each other in a closely-knit community. Seen in this light, it is still possible to talk about the emergence, development and even decline of the group.

If the emergence of the group was marked by the first Beijing Queer Film Festival in 2001, the group was most active in the first decade of the 2000s, from the first to fourth editions of the Beijing Queer Film Festival. The decline of the group was associated with strengthening political control in the PRC in the early 2010s, when the Beijing Queer Film Festival had to go underground and adopt ‘guerrilla’ tactics with the government which tried very hard to close down the festival (Bao 2017). In 2011, the festival venue, the Dongjien Book Club, was closed down three days before the festival opening. The festival organisers had to make emergency plans by contacting other venues at the last minute. Although the festival organiser eventually held the festival with low-key publicity and under contingent plans, it became obvious that the city of Beijing was not a welcoming place for the festival. The festival organisers managed to hold another two iterations of the festival in 2013 and 2014 before the festival eventually went underground. Since 2015, the festival has been rebranded as the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week and has taken refuge in the Institut Français Beijing, a cultural centre supported by the French government, thus successfully circumventing

intervention from the Chinese government. The Institut Français has adopted a different approach to film festival organisation and audience participation. The Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week has since become more international and arthouse film oriented, as it primarily targets an international expatriate community and foreign language speaking Chinese living in Beijing, thus gradually distancing itself from the local queer communities. As watching queer films becomes safer in this context, the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week seems to have lost its radical political edge and community spirit. Most of the former Beijing Queer Film Festival organisers did not participate in the Beijing Love Queer Cinema Week organisation. At the same time, we see the emergence of a more homonormative ShanghaiPRIDE film Festival (since 2015) and a slightly elitist Shanghai Queer Film Festival (since 2017) coexisting in the city of Shanghai. Shanghai slowly replaces Beijing to become a symbolic queer capital of China. With the demise of the Beijing Queer Film Festival, it became clear that the ‘guerrilla war’ years of the Beijing Queer Film Festival led by the ‘queer generation’ filmmakers were over.

The ‘queer generation’ filmmakers’ individual lives and career trajectories have also changed. As they grow older and face more challenges in life, many of them have moved on to other professions and followed different career paths. Cui Zi’en moved to the USA and remains a resident there. Fan Popo moved to Berlin and started making experimental features. After devoting himself to directing a queer NGO, the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute for many years, Wei Xiaogang is prepared to relocate to Taipei with his partner and start a new life there. Shi Tou and Ming Ming have now retreated to their hometown in Southwest China and led a secluded lifestyle. At the time of writing, He Xiaopei is the only person who still actively makes documentary films while she lives between China and the UK.

China's queer communities have also transformed dramatically in the past two decades. In the 2000s, there was a proliferation of queer NGOs, partly facilitated by international HIV/AIDS funding and a relatively relaxed political atmosphere. As foreign NGO funding shrank in the late 2000s and foreign NGOs have been subject to stricter control under the Chinese government's NGO law since 2016, many queer NGOs have disintegrated and eventually disappeared. Meanwhile, a burgeoning pink economy has emerged in Chinese cities, represented by queer commercial venues and the Shanghai Pride. Queer documentaries exist for the LGBTQ communities; however, as the communities become more fragmented, commercialised and less political, queer community documentaries seem to have lost its target audience and political goals.

However, this is not the end of queer community documentary in China. As long as there are queer people and communities, there will be a need for queer community documentary.

Today, an increasing number of queer individuals have used their video cameras and smart phones to make films about their own lives. They then upload these videos to video streaming websites or share them on smart phone apps (Shaw and Zhang 2017). There has indeed been a proliferation of queer online shorts (*ku'er wangluo wei dianying*). As these young, queer-identified individuals explore identities and lifestyles, they sometimes also articulate communitarian and political concerns. Perhaps what we see is not the disappearance of a 'queer generation', but a changing or expanding definition of the 'queer generations' who are less obsessed with traditional forms of filmmaking and modes of exhibition and instead are more flexible with video-making technologies and digital forms of dissemination. Whether their online videos can effectively articulate community concerns about rights and justice, and how much these online videos can contribute to queer identity and community building in China, only time can tell.



In this article, I have charted a brief history of queer community documentary in the PRC since the 2000s by introducing its historical conditions of emergence, development and decline. In doing so, I have highlighted the transnational nature of queer filmmaking in China. In particular, I have focused on the aesthetics and politics, together with modes of production and circulation, of these queer community documentaries. I call the group of filmmakers working around the Beijing Queer Film Festival and the China Queer Film Festival Tour the ‘queer generation’. The ‘queer generation’ filmmakers turned to production and circulation of queer documentary films to engage in political and social activism. Their films and activist practices should be put in a transnational context and seen as part of the transnational cinema and international queer movements. As these filmmakers have documented queer community histories, they have also ‘queered’ Chinese documentaries and Chinese film industries at large. Their works represent grassroots, community-based and activist-oriented political articulations in contemporary Chinese society; they also point to the political potential of queerness and documentary films in the world today.

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