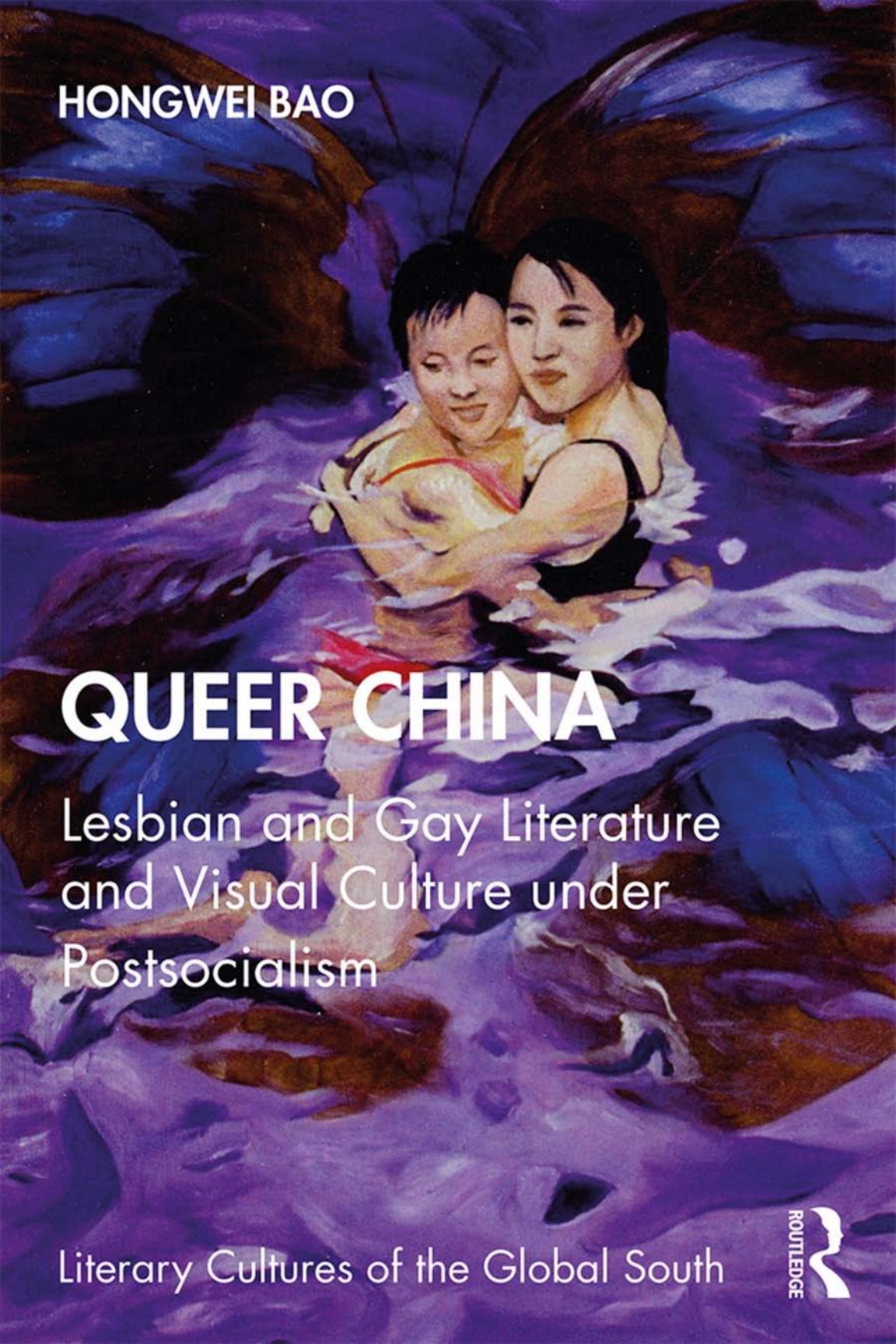
HONGWEI BAO
QUEER CHINA
Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism
Literary Cultures of the Global South
ROUTLEDGE

QUEER CHINA

This book analyses queer cultural production in contemporary China to map the broad social transformations in gender, sexuality and desire. It examines queer literature and visual cultures in China's post-Mao and postsocialist era to show how these diverse cultural forms and practices not only function as context-specific and culturally sensitive forms of social activism but also produce distinct types of gender and sexual subjectivities unique to China's postsocialist conditions.

From poetry to papercutting art, from 'comrade/gay literature' to girls' love fan fiction, from lesbian films to activist documentaries, and from a drag show in Shanghai to a public performance of a same-sex wedding in Beijing, the book reveals a queer China in all its ideological complexity and creative energy. Empirically rich and methodologically eclectic, *Queer China* skilfully weaves together historical and archival research, textual and discourse analysis, along with interviews and ethnography.

Breaking new ground and bringing a non-Western perspective to the fore, this transdisciplinary work contributes to multiple academic fields including literary and cultural studies, media and communication studies, film and screen studies, contemporary art, theatre and performance studies, gender and sexuality studies, China/Asia and Global South studies, cultural history and cultural geography, political theory and the study of social movements.

Hongwei Bao is an associate professor of media and cultural studies at the University of Nottingham, UK. He is the author of *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and* Tongzhi *Activism in Postsocialist China*.

Literary Cultures of the Global South

Recent years have seen challenging new formulations of the flows of influence in transnational cultural configurations and developments. In the wake of the end of the Cold War, the notion of the 'Global South' has arguably succeeded the demise of the tripartite conceptual division of the First, Second and Third Worlds. This notion is a flexible one referring to the developing nations of the once-colonized sections of the globe. The concept does not merely indicate shifts in geopolitics and in the respective affiliations of nations, and the economic transformations that have occurred, but also registers an emergent perception of a new set of relationships between nations of the Global South as their respective connections to nations of the north (either USA/USSR or the old colonial powers) diminish in significance. New social and cultural connections have become evident. This book series explores the literary manifestations (in their often intermedial, networked forms) of those south – south cultural connections together with academic leaders from those societies and cultures concerned.

Queer China
Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism
Hongwei Bao

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Literary-Cultures-of-the-Global-South/book-series/LCGS

QUEER CHINA

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Hongwei Bao

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In Support of
Queer Communities in China and the Sinophone World

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

The 'Global South' is a descriptive and analytical term that has recently come to the fore across a broad range of social sciences disciplines. It takes on different inflections in varying disciplinary contexts – as a mere geographical descriptor, denoting a network of geopolitical regions, primarily in the southern hemisphere, with a common history of colonisation; driven by processes of transformation (the Global South has and continues to be the site of an ongoing neo-colonial economic legacy as also of a number of emergent global economies such as India, China, Brazil and South Africa); as an index of a condition of economic and social precarity which, though primarily manifest in the 'Global *South*', is also increasingly visible in the North (thus producing a '*Global* South'); and, finally, as a utopian marker, signifying a fabric of economic exchanges that are beginning to bypass the Northern economies, and, gradually, a framework for political cooperations, especially from 'below', which may offer alternatives to the hegemony of the Euro-American 'North'.

Literary cultures are a particularly pregnant site of south-south cultural analysis as they represent the intersection of traditional and modern cultural forms, of south – south (and north – south) cultural exchange, particularly via modes of translation and interlingual hybridisation, and refract various discourses of knowledge in a highly self-reflexive and critical fashion, thereby demanding and enabling an interdisciplinary dialogue with literary studies at its core. Hallowed connections between literary production and the postcolonial *nation* notwithstanding, *transnational* south-south literary connections have usually marked the (anti-)colonial, postcolonial and indeed contemporary digital epochs. Thus, literary cultures form one of the central historical and contemporary networked sites of intercultural self-articulation in the Global South.

This series intervenes in the process and pre-empts the sort of bland institutionalisation which has forestalled much of the intellectual force of postcolonial studies or the more recent world literature studies. It proposes wide-ranging interventions

into the study of the literary cultures of the Global South that will establish an innovative paradigm for literary studies on the disciplinary terrain up until now occupied by the increasingly problematised areas of postcolonial studies or non-European national literary studies.

The series contributes to the re-writing of cultural and literary history in the specific domain of the literary cultures of the Global South. It attempts to fill in the many gaps left by Euro-American-dominated but ultimately 'provincial' Northern cultural histories. The study of the literary cultures of the Global South 'swivels' the axis of literary interrelations from the coloniser-colonised interface which, for instance, has preoccupied postcolonial literary studies since its inception (and which inevitably informed the 'national' compartmentalisation of postcolonial literary study even when it averted its gaze from the colonier). Instead, the series explores a set of 'lateral' relationships which have always existed but until now largely ignored – and which, in an age of digital communication and online cultural production have begun to emerge, once again, into their properly prominent position.

Russell West-Pavlov
Makarand R. Paranjape

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Australia, the Tübingen Interdisciplinary Centre for Global South Studies, Minor Cosmopolitanisms RTG at the University of Potsdam, the Nanjing-Brown Joint Programme in Gender Studies and Humanities, Nordic Institite of Asian Studies at the University of Copenhagen, and Queer@Kings Research Group at Kings College London. The Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney where I did my PhD has always been my intellectual home. These institutions and research groups have provided me with ideal platforms for stimulating intellectual conversations. I also wish to thank the wonderful student organisers of and participants in LSE's Bridging Mind Symposium, Warwick's China Development Society, King's College's CMCI Emerging Voices Conference, Oxford China Forum, Queer Asia Conference at SOAS, and UK-China Media and Cultural Studies Association (UCMeCSA) for their interest in and enthusiasm for Chinese queer research. At Nottingham, I feel privileged to work with a cohort of fantastic colleagues from the Department of Cultural, Media and Visual Studies (CMVS) and the CLAS. I have benefitted enormously from the vibrant intellectual atomosphere at the Centre for Contemporary East Asian Cultural Studies (CEACS), Centre for Critical Theory (CCT) and Institute for Screen Industries Research (ISIR). I am also grateful to my colleagues from the University of Nottngham's Ningbo and Malaysia Campuses for their hospitality and kind support. My sincere thanks also go to all the students I have taught and supervised over the years for pushing me hard in explaining my ideas and for providing me with timely feedback on ideas covered in this book.

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those in China. Phil has encouraged me and supported this project all the way through; he has also managed to put up with all the stress and idiosyncrasies of an academic. Besides proofreading every draft of this book, he has supplied critical feedback on the manuscript from the perspective of a non-academic reader. This has made the book all the more readable and relevant.

This book reworks materials and arguments from some of my previously published articles and book chapters. An earlier version of Chapter 2 was published as 'Queer Eye for Chinese Women: Locating Queer Spaces in Shitou's Film *Women Fifty Minutes'*. *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 6(1): 77–96, 2019; Chapter 3, 'Haunted Gay Identity: Sexuality, Masculinity and Class in *Beijing Story*' in Derek Hird and Geng Song (eds) *The Cosmopolitan Dream: Transnational Chinese Masculinities in a Global Age*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018, pp. 73–86; Chapter 5, 'Same-Sex Wedding, Queer Performance and Spatial Tactics in Beijing', in Xiaodong Lin, Chris Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (eds) *East Asian Men: Masculinity, Sexuality and Desire*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 107–21; Chapter 6, 'Queering the Global South: Mu Cao and His Poetry', in Russell West-Pavlov (ed.) *The Global South and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 185–97, 2018; Chapter 7, '"Shanghai is Burning": *Extravaganza*, Transgender Representation and Transnational Cinema', in *Global Media and China*, 3(4): 233–55, 2018; Chapter 8, 'Metamorphosis of a Butterfly: Neoliberal Subjectivation and Queer Autonomy in Xiyadie's Papercutting Art', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 6(2–3): 243–63, 2019. I am grateful to all the editors, reviewers and readers of these articles for their insightful comments and suggestions. I thank all the editors and publishers for giving permission to reproduce these materials. I would also like to thank Yang Ling for her valuable input on Chapter 4 of this book, and for introducing me to the fascinating field of queer fandom studies.

ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
BL	Boys' Love
CCMD	*Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders*
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDC	Centre for Disease Control
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GL	Girls' Love
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IDAHOT	International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
LGBT/Q	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (and Queer)
MSM	Men Who Have Sex with Men
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PFLAG	Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
PRC	People's Republic of China
SARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film and Television
TOFEL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNWCW	United Nations World Conference on Women
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organisation

NOTES ON TRANSLATION, TRANSLITERATION AND NAMES

All the translations from Chinese to English in this book are mine unless otherwise stated.

I use the *hanyu pinyin* system of transliteration for Chinese words, names and places, except in cases where a different convention or preferred spelling or pronunciation exists.

The ordering of Mandarin-language names usually follows their conventional forms; that is, family names first, followed by given names.

In presenting people's names, I use the names my interlocutors chose for themselves, some of which are pseudonyms, to protect their identity.

INTRODUCTION

Queer China, postsocialist metamorphosis

> Neoliberalism was constructed in and through cultural and identity politics and cannot be undone by a movement without constituencies and analyses that respond directly to that fact. Nor will it be possible to build a new social movement that might be strong, creative, and diverse enough to engage the work of reinventing global politics for the new millennium as long as cultural and identity issues are separated, analytically and organisationally, from the political economy in which they are embedded.
>
> *Lisa Duggan,* The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy

As a scholar of media and cultural studies, I consider my work as contributing to grassroots community histories by documenting contemporary queer culture in the People's Republic of China (PRC).[1] I pursue participatory action research; that is, I work with people from China's queer communities and conduct research on community history, culture and activism in the hope that my research will have a positive impact on the communities with which I identify. Over the past ten years, I have made frequent visits to China, combining research fieldtrips with visits to friends and family. Although I am pleased with the fast development of queer culture in urban China, I am also concerned about the tightening government control over LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) issues in recent years. Homosexuality is not illegal in the PRC, but queer people still face a lot of pressure from a heteronormative society and a government that hesitates to recognise LGBTQ rights.

In summer 2019, I was in China. I was a bit frustrated because my talk at a Chinese university had been cancelled at the last minute. Students from the university's LGBTQ society had invited me to give a talk on my research. After the event information had been publicised, the university authorities ordered the organisers

to cancel the event, as queer issues are still considered sensitive in many parts of Chinese society, including at schools and on university campuses. But the cancellation of this event unexpectedly freed up my time and enabled me to attend the Rainbow Law School in Beijing, a summer school which provides legal and gender/sexuality diversity training to law school students from around the country. It was an exciting time to be in Beijing. During that summer, China's legislative body, the National People's Congress, was soliciting expert advice and public opinion on the amendment of China's civil code. Many legal professionals and queer activists saw this as a good opportunity to campaign for LGBTQ rights. Despite all the efforts, in August, a National People's Congress spokesperson said at a press conference that marriage would still be defined as the union between a man and a woman in the newly drafted civil code due to China's social and cultural traditions. But this did not stop the momentum of queer activism from continuing. At the Rainbow Law School, participants celebrated a gay couple's recent success in obtaining the right of legal guardianship, which enabled them to take care of each other in times of emergency, critical illness or death and make important legal, medical and financial decisions for each other. Although same-sex marriage is not legal in China, LGBTQ people are gaining more and more rights. On the last day of the Rainbow Law School, many people planned to visit Des, short for Destination, in the evening.

Destination is one of the most famous and longest running gay clubs in Beijing. I anticipated that the club would be busy at night, so I went there in the afternoon instead. The club is located directly opposite the west entrance of the Beijing Workers' Stadium in East Beijing. It used to rent a floor in a four-storey residential building, but it has now managed to purchase the whole building, which is a sign of its commercial success. But the club also functions as a LGBTQ community centre and champions a social enterprise. The ground floor has a restaurant and café; the first floor is used as a bar and nightclub; the second floor is an art gallery and exhibition space; the top floor is used as a community centre. The community centre hosts a choir, a book club, a film club, a sports club, a dance class, an art class, a yoga class, a language class, a wine tasting club, a coffee appreciation club, a tea appreciation club . . . you name it. I was quite impressed with its busy events schedule. While I was there, a reading group was discussing a book, and a coffee appreciation group were chatting in the café. Downstairs in the art gallery, some staff were preparing a queer art exhibition. Outside the building, a huge rainbow coloured poster was advertising the club's fifteenth anniversary celebration, a weeklong list of events including a drag show, a bear night, a foam party, a glitter party, and a huge carnival with some of the world's best DJs.

During my visit to Beijing, I also met up with some of my queer friends and they were all incredibly busy. Xiaogang, director of a queer NGO (non-governmental organisation), was organising another round of the Queer University Videomaking Workshop, training queer community members to use digital video cameras to make their own short films. Zhao Ke, editor of *Gayspot*, a community magazine, was recruiting participants for his queer non-fiction writing workshop. Naying and John from the Beijing LGBT Centre were busy offering gender and sexual diversity

training workshops to people in the business world. Yanzi from a Guangzhou-based NGO, LGBT Advocacy in China, was organising LGBTQ rights workshops to lawyers and legal professionals from around China. At the time of my visit, many of my queer activist friends were preparing for their trips to Seoul, South Korea, to attend the ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Trans and Intersex Association) Asian regional conference to be held in mid-August. Some of my queer academic friends were busy writing their conference papers for the International Conference of Sexuality in China, to be held in Harbin, a city in Northeast China, in late August. As I walked past a multiplex cinema in a shopping mall, a big poster of Freddie Mercury caught my eye: the film *Bohemian Rhapsody* had passed censorship and was permitted to be shown in the PRC, albeit with some significant cuts to gay scenes, which had triggered a lot of online debates and opposition from queer communities and Queen fans. Freddie Mercury never visited China in his lifetime; but from the poster I could imagine that he would be very pleased to act as a queer ambassador for gender and sexual minorities in China.

After Beijing, I went to my hometown Xianyang. By contrast, I found very few queer-related events and activities in the city. Located in Northwest China and with an urban population of around seven million (Demographia 2019), Xianyang is by no means a big city in China. It does not have a gay bar or club. The only way to meet other queer people is to visit the nearest big city Xi'an or turn on the gay dating app Blued. Most of the queer people on Blued are from Xi'an or other big cities, and many people do not put face pictures on their online profiles, primarily for the sake of anonymity and safety. I can imagine how lonely it must be for a queer person to live in the city, and that explains why many of them move to big cities such as Xi'an or Beijing as soon as they can. This also reminds me of the vast disparity within China's queer communities, and within Chinese society overall. Whilst queer people in big cities have more access to queer-friendly resources, those from small cities, towns or even the countryside lack resources and support networks. The intersection between queerness and urban/rural divide is symptomatic of how neoliberalism works in China: as it crafts desires, it also creates inequalities, distinctions and hierarchies in society.

In Xianyang, I walked past a street named Rainbow Road and could not stop feeling amused: at the entrance of the street stands a rainbow-coloured arch. Despite knowing that few people in the city would associate rainbow with sexual minorities, I was still pleased that queerness has already been part of the city's architecture, and that Western queerness can lose its meaning and significance in the Global South.

I use my own experience to give readers a glimpse of what was happening in urban China in the summer of 2019. When I described these experiences to my British friends, many of them were surprised at how much is going on in China now, and some were impressed by the dynamism and vitality of queer culture there. Yet all these are largely unknown to the rest of the world. Western media are often full of reports about China's lack of human rights, or sexual minorities' suffering in the PRC from a heteronormative society and an authoritarian government. All these reports are likely to be true, but a narrow focus on the political system and human

rights misses the point about what is happening on the ground, in the communities and in people's everyday lives. It is true that LGBTQ rights are far from being guaranteed by China's legal and political systems. Public events such as a queer film festival or a talk on queer issues on a university campus often risk being closed down by the authorities. Films and television programmes containing queer content can be ruthlessly cut or banned. In small cities, towns or the countryside, queer existence can be very precarious because of the lack of resources and support networks. All these obstacles, however, do not stop queer people from getting together and queer public events from taking place. With a bit of online search or some personal communication, queer people in urban China can find plenty of opportunities to engage in LGBTQ activities, hosted by community centres, NGOs, commercial venues, and often organised by queer people themselves. In real life, most queer people are trying to strike a balance between life and work, and negotiate complex relationships with their family, friends and colleagues. For many, LGBTQ political rights and gay prides are desirable but not indispensable. Everyday life matters more. Literature, art, film, performance, dinners, karaoke and other creative and cultural activities play an important part in China's queer life.

Perhaps one of the most exciting developments in China in the past four decades was the emergence of LGBTQ identities, together with a queer culture that has gradually gone public. Although lesbian and gay people are still fighting marginalisation, discrimination, media censorship and heteronormative social norms, a vibrant queer culture, in tandem with a visible queer movement, has undoubtedly transformed the lives of gender and sexual minorities in major Chinese cities. Queer literature, film, art and performance have mushroomed in this process. These cultural forms and practices not only shape queer identities and communities; they also serve as culturally specific forms of social and political activism in urban China. In a country where public demands for political rights are constrained, cultural activism – that is, awareness raising and community building through cultural production and consumption – becomes one of the most culturally sensitive and context-specific forms of queer struggle for representation and existence. The central tenet of this book is, therefore, that queer communities' engagement with cultural production functions as a crucial form of social and political activism in China today.

This is a book about queer cultural production – including literature, film, art, performance, and other creative and cultural practices – in the PRC in the postsocialist era (1978 to the present).[2] Literature and visual culture offer important insights into the process of what I call 'postsocialist metamorphosis' – the transformation of subjectivity, desire and sense of belonging in the postsocialist era. It is widely known that these creative and cultural forms can reflect social realities; but such a mimetic mode of representation needs to be complemented, if not replaced, by a performative mode of representation; that is, these creative forms and texts can shape social realities and construct social identities as well. This book will demonstrate how these creative and cultural practices participate in the transformation of queer culture, and even Chinese society at large, by shaping its contours

and trajectories and instilling it with energy and dynamism; they also offer ample opportunities for modes of desubjectivation and creative resistance.

Postsocialist metamorphosis

In this book, 'postsocialist metamorphosis' is used as critical term to describe the transformations of identity, community and politics during China's post-Mao and postsocialist era, often known inside China as the 'reform and opening up' era.[3] Such transformations have touched upon virtually every aspect of people's lives including their affective and intimate spheres. They are often impacted on, but not dictated by, neoliberal capitalism. After all, other modes of governmentality, including Confucian and socialist governmentalities, coexist and play important roles as well. These different modes of governmentality shape subjectivities, bodies and desires in China in significant ways. 'Postsocialist metamorphosis' is thus a historical process, simultaneously and yet contradictorily producing and unmaking gendered, sexed and desiring subjects. This process of transformation manifests varying degrees of autonomy, agency and resistance; it also attests to the openness of the social and the contingency of identities in a non-deterministic way. Indeed, it is the ambivalence of this process that lends agency to ordinary people and offers hope for creative resistance under the global neoliberal hegemony.

I use the term 'metamorphosis' to describe a simultaneous and yet contradictory process of becoming and unbecoming in terms of identity and politics. All the people studied in this book have experienced transformation of identity in one way or another, and sexuality becomes an important identity marker at some point in their lives. However, these processes of subject formation and identity transformation are also deeply embedded in China's postsocialist context, where the Chinese state collaborates closely with transnational capitalism to produce new modes of subjectivation. Metamorphosis is queer, insofar as it refuses a clear definition, a single trajectory and a definitive goal. It promises potentiality, something yet to be actualised. Although metamorphosis is also subject to complex social conditions and historical processes, it is the potentiality that matters, and that gives people hope. Literature, art, film, performance and other forms of cultural production provide a unique lens into these contradictory and complex processes of transformation. They offer us hope for a queer future.

'Postsocialist metamorphosis' presents various modes of neoliberal subjectivation and desubjectivation. As the case studies in this book will illustrate, although there are plenty of instances for becoming gay or lesbian, there are also abundant signs of queer becoming and unbecoming. Indeed, processes of becoming and unbecoming are closely intertwined. Identification often gets entangled with disidentification; that is, lack of or only partial identification with the global LGBTQ discourse (Muñoz 1999). In other words, it is perfectly possible to talk about identities without subscribing to an identity politics. In the same way, we can also talk about lesbian, gay, *tongzhi* (literally 'comrade', a Chinese term for gay or queer) and *ku'er*/queer at the same time, and they are sometimes even found in the same person or

practice, because these different modes of identities coexist and become entangled in the postsocialist Chinese context, on which a linear trajectory of queer historiography does not neatly map.[4]

Throughout this book, I focus on literature, art, film, performance and other forms of queer cultural production in the PRC; I also introduce various modes of queer subjectivation and desubjectivation in the postsocialist era. From discursive constellation and cinematic representation of homosexuality, to processes of becoming gay or lesbian in 'comrade literature' (*tongzhi wenxue*, meaning queer literature) and fan fiction; from rural and migrant queers' literary and artistic engagements, to different types of queer performances in urban spaces, I hope these examples can shed light on the complex processes of queer identity construction and social formation in the postsocialist era. My thesis is that queer culture in contemporary China is never completely identitarian; instead, it embodies identitarian and anti-identitarian aspects at the same time, and the two aspects are mutually constitutive and transformative. I suggest that the best place to observe this identitarian and anti-identitarian entanglement is the realm of literature and visual culture, which shapes queer identity, community and culture in specific and yet contradictory ways. This entanglement also speaks to China's postsocialist condition and its ambivalent relationship to neoliberal capitalism.

This book explores the life stories and shares the experiences of different creative queer individuals and groups. They have identified themselves as lesbian, gay, *tongzhi* or queer in the past few decades. However, their endorsement to these identity labels is never without hesitation or condition. Like the queers of colour who refuse to fully identify with the white, Western and middle class gay culture in José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) study of queer performance culture in the United States, the Chinese queers studied in this book also identify and disidentify with the 'global gay' (Altman 1997) culture at the same time, looking at it with ambivalence and scepticism. Indeed, their queer subjectivation is not, and perhaps never will be, complete due to China's historical condition of postsocialism and its ambivalent relationship to neoliberal capitalism. In the postsocialist context, socialist memories, experiences and longings often find their way into the postsocialist present to disrupt the gleaming dreams of the neoliberal hegemony. LGBTQ people in China are not alone in this picture; many people in the Global South often hold ambivalent attitudes towards neoliberal discourses led by the West. 'Postsocialist metamorphosis' is therefore a critical framework that can be used to describe transformation of individuals, groups, societies and even nation states in a transnational and postsocialist context, with an emphasis on their incomplete subjectivation as a neoliberal subject and their refusal to be fully incorporated into the global neoliberal economy.

Queer histories and memories

When future historians look back at this era, they will probably be surprised at how much a new form of global governance known as neoliberalism has transformed

the world in as little as half a century; they might equally be amazed by the seemingly endless creative energy of queer culture in the Global South. They would surely be curious about why this was the case and what happened, not only from the perspective of a *longue durée*, but also the nitty-gritty of what happened on the ground and in ordinary people's lives. This book tries to provide a lens into these questions. By looking at what happens in the communities and what lesbians and gay people do in relation to culture, I unfold a dynamic picture of what a queer China is like, or might be like, from the multiple, often intertwined and highly subjective perspective of a community member and academic observer. In doing so, I critically interrogate the relationship between structure and agency, between urban/rural/national/international geopolitics and gender/sexual/identity politics, and between political economy and the study of culture, in understanding LGBTQ identity, queer desire and community culture in China today.

This book attempts to construct a historical archive for the future by documenting and analysing the ongoing present. At the time of writing this book, neoliberalism has unevenly penetrated almost every corner of the world; it has shaped ordinary people's dreams and desires, as well as their public and private lives, in significant but differentiated ways. Throughout the world, people are looking for hope, escape and alternatives. While I cannot propose a solution, I can at least share some stories with which I am familiar to inspire imagination, hope and strength for creative resistance.

This book draws on public histories, collective memories as well as my own personal experiences in China's post-Mao and postsocialist era. I write about this period because I lived through this historical era and was a witness to and participant in the queer histories I document. But this does not mean that I knew the significance of those events at the time they were taking place. In the years gone by, I have forgotten a lot of the moments when personal history intersected with national or even global histories; or perhaps I failed to realise the importance of such moments when they occurred. Born in 1977, I was not aware of the fact that Mao Zedong had died just a year before and Deng Xiaoping was about to take power a year later, two events that have shaped modern Chinese history in significant ways. One evening in my childhood, after school and at the dinner table, I overheard fragments of my parents' conversation about a group of students demonstrating and protesting at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and that was in 1989. The Kosovo War was experienced on campus when I was at university as there was a student demonstration to protest against the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. On 11 September 2001, I was woken up from deep sleep by loud noises from people outside the university dormitory: news spread that there had been a terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. Personal histories like these were unwittingly entangled with world geopolitics. There are many things I wish I could remember and others I would rather forget.

But there is something I cannot forget: a growing awareness of my own sexuality. In 2000, I completed my first undergraduate degree at a small university in Northwest China and moved to Beijing to study for my second degree. It was then and

there that I realised I was gay. I have no intention of going into the 'nature-nurture' debate in relation to human sexuality; I also cannot explain why I only came to realise my sexuality in my twenties. But it was in Beijing and on Peking University campus that I started to realise, and acknowledge, that I was different from many others. It was also then and there that I learned how to use the Internet and to keyword search the Chinese term for homosexuality, *tongxinglian*. Whilst I could only find pathologised descriptions of homosexuality in medical and psychological textbooks (including one titled *Psychology of Perversion*) in the university library, the Internet provided a much more diverse range of information about homosexuality. I discovered gay websites, queer NGOs and online dating chatrooms. A brave new world began to unfold in front of my eyes.

My 'coming out' took place at a very optimistic moment in China's queer history. In 1997, the term 'hooliganism' (*liumang zui*), once used to prosecute gay men, was removed from China's Criminal Law, thus signalling the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the People's Republic.[5] In 2001, the newly published third edition of the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (CCMD-3) clearly stated that the ego-syntonic (*ziwo hexie*) type of homosexuality needs no medical treatment, thus symbolising the partial depathologisation of homosexuality in the PRC.[6] In the same year, Hunan Satellite Television broadcast a live talk show, *Youhua Haoshuo*, in which three celebrities were invited to the television studio to discuss issues regarding homosexuality. The names of these celebrities are well known in China's queer communities today: sociologist and sexologist Li Yinhe, queer writer and filmmaker Cui Zi'en, and lesbian artist and filmmaker Shi Tou. This marked the queer communities' first 'coming out' on Chinese television. In December 2001, the first Beijing Queer Film Festival, then advertised as 'China Homosexual Film Festival', took place on the Peking University campus where I was a student. The festival featured several queer films, including Cui Zi'en's *Ten Commandments*, Liu Bingjian's *Men and Women*, Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant*, Stanley Kan's *Lan Yu*, and Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace*, together with Q&As with these filmmakers. The publicity blurb of 'China's first homosexual film festival' and the award-winning film *Lan Yu* gave the event unanticipated media publicity, and this led to pressure being put on the organisers from the university authorities and eventually caused the early closure of the festival.

I was fortunate to be in Beijing and on the Peking University campus at the time, observing a burgeoning queer culture in real time. There was unprecedented optimism in the queer communities at the time about what it meant to be gay and whether sexual minorities would ever be accepted by Chinese society. This coincided with the widespread enthusiasm in Chinese society at the turn of the millennium following China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

China was undergoing a rapid transformation at the time. In 1978, Chinese society bade farewell to decades of socialism under Mao and started its 'reform and opening up' under Deng's administration. In the 1980s, there were heated discussions among Chinese intellectuals about where China would be going, and this was known as the 'high culture fever' (*wenhua gaore*) (Wang 1996). The 'culture fever'

came to a sudden halt in 1989 when the government cracked down on the student protests at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The party-state strengthened its ideological control over cultural production in the 1990s. Meanwhile, there was a boom in consumerism and popular culture as China accelerated its economic reforms. In urban China, a thriving commercial culture pushed the expressions of gender and sexuality to the public sphere (Lavin, Yang and Zhao 2017). Queer commercial venues started to crop up in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, and this was accompanied by sporadic forms of queer activism initiated by transnational queer activists. Anxieties and excitements coexisted in the *fin de siècle* China.

It was China's entry into the WTO in 2001 that injected hope into Chinese society. Overall there was a widespread optimism among people, brought about by the anticipation of a 'lucky millennium' (*qianxi nian*), following China's eventual entry into the WTO after decades of diplomatic talks. In the midst of optimism and under the government's strict media control, many social problems including the loss of social welfare, widening social gaps, mass unemployment and forced internal labour migration found little coverage in China's domestic and mainstream media. Although China's WTO-entry agreement made no mention of gender and sexuality, there was widespread belief in Chinese society that there would be more free expressions of gender, sexuality and identity as China 'connected track' (*jiegui*) with the rest of the world. Like their heterosexual counterparts, queer people in China also had every reason to imagine themselves as a world citizen in a country that openly embraced the world.

What China has been going through is a process of a gradual adaptation to neoliberalism. Measures including economic liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and marketisation were in effect neoliberal strategies being adopted all over the world at the time. Socialism, although still an official rhetoric in China, has largely been seen as obsolete, irrelevant and even harmful to Chinese society. As the Chinese economy slowly gets liberalised, and as the market forces start to exert a strong influence upon the economy, cultural production also follows the trend. Literature, art and other forms of cultural production have come to reflect the desire to 'liberate' human beings. Gender, sexuality and desires are widely seen as repressed 'human nature' that needs to be liberated in a 'desiring China' (Rofel 2007). Homosexuality happens to be situated at this historical juncture that connects economic and political liberalisation with 'human nature', hence the surfacing of queer issues in the public discourse.

In the 1980s and 90s, there were also dramatic events taking place around the world. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. Decades of the Cold War suddenly came to an end. A new world was yet unknown. There used to be two conflicting power blocks: the liberal West represented by the United States and its allies, and the illiberal East represented by the Soviet Union and its allies. Two confronting ideologies, or visions of what a society should be, i.e. communism and capitalism, used to co-exist with and contest each other. After 1989, it seemed that capitalism has triumphed, and there is no alternative. History has come to an end (Fukuyama 1992). After a long and disastrous twentieth

century, how will world politics develop in the new millennium? With the changing position of China in world geopolitics, what is the role of gender and sexuality in the context of 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' (Harvey 2005)?

The new millennium

Queer communities and cultures have developed rapidly in the new millennium. With the depathologisation of homosexuality in 2001, an increasing number of queer venues, organisations, sources of funding support and overt and covert forms of political and social activism have transformed urban China. The HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) epidemic has proven to be a double-edged sword for China's queer communities. Huge sums of international HIV/AIDS funding, mediated by the Chinese government, flooded into China and supported the founding of numerous grassroots queer organisations all over the country. They also helped to build a national activist network and basic community infrastructures. At the same time, HIV/AIDS further stigmatised queer people and even gave birth to the MSM (Men Who Have Sex with Men) identity, a stigmatised sexual identity born out of global biomedical governance (Zheng 2015). Moreover, the uneven distribution of HIV/AIDS funding led to the separation of lesbian groups from gay groups (Hildebrandt 2012), and queer politics from gay identity politics (Bao 2018). The gradual withdrawal of international HIV/AIDS funding after 2010 and China's draconian 'Foreign NGO Law' passed in 2016 effectively deprived grassroots community groups from gaining international funding support. Many queer organisations in the PRC had to turn to commercial means, including crowdfunding and running commercial events, in order to survive. As market forces join hands with the Chinese state to eliminate smaller civil society groups, a few big organisations have grown quickly because of their capacity to make money and generate profits.

The China-based gay dating app Blued is an example in case. Launched in 2012, the app now counts 40 million users and boasts of being the largest gay social network app in the world (Blued 2019). The app was valued at 600 million US dollars in 2016 (Hernández 2016). Blued not only gains profits from its live streaming functionality but from its lucrative gay surrogacy service as well. Trapped between a commercial market and a surveillance state, the community service remit of Blued seems to have been compromised (Wang 2020). The story of Blued manifests the dilemma of China's queer enterprises under 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics'.

Despite the continuing existence of media censorship and the lack of political rights, queer people in China have more space now to live their identities and form their communities. At the same time, a burgeoning pink economy in Chinese cities has given birth to a growing sense of 'homonormativity' (Duggan 2004). Queer people are increasingly following a heterosexual way of life in their wish to become patriotic, law-abiding, affluent and respectable citizens; that is, to become 'as normal as possible' (Yau 2010). Although social norms should be understood in their historical and cultural contexts and there are different normativities in these

specific contexts (Engebretsen 2014), an originally underground, grassroots and anti-normative queer culture seems to be losing its radical critical edge as queer urbanites strive to conform to nationalist ideologies and middle class values. The annual Shanghai Pride's queer cosmopolitanism (Bao 2012) and PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) China's queer sentimental familism both manifest varying degrees of homonormativity.

A growing sense of homonormativity, in tandem with a fast-developing pink economy, results from the transformation of the Chinese economy and society following China's official entry into the WTO. As China becomes a qualified participant in the global capitalist economy, Chinese queers can also imagine themselves to be full members of the 'global gay' (Altman 1997) community. China's economic and political position within the world has shifted in the past two decades. As one of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries and the world's biggest emerging economies, China is challenging the hegemony of the United States and reshaping the global geopolitics after *Pax Americana*. Increasingly, China is becoming a global superpower. Its power and ambition should be understood as those of an 'empire' (Hardt and Negri 2000) rather than an ordinary nation state. Domestically, China advocates a nationalistic 'Chinese dream'; it spares no effort to suppress political dissidents and curb social unrests. Internationally, it keeps expanding its power and hegemony through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in order to extract and exploit resources from Southeast Asia, Africa and other countries in the Global South. Here we can see a reconfigured notion of the Global South. Instead of signalling the formation of a homogeneous version of a counter-hegemonic Global South, the rise of China reminds us that there are unequal power relations and neo-colonialist hegemony among countries in the Global South.

In the context of China's growing economic and political power, the lives of ordinary people in China are not necessarily better off. The growing national GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has not translated into the narrowing down of social gaps and inequalities. The strengthening political power has not given ordinary people more political rights. The country's 'Chinese dream' offers little hope for marginalised social groups. LGBTQ rights continue to be ignored; feminist and queer activism is frequently met with state repression. Increasingly, the state has been crafting a heteronormative image of hypermasculinity, embodied in the figure of the 'wolf warrior' (Liu and Rofel 2018). Commenting on the representation of masculinity in the Chinese blockbuster *Wolf Warrior II*, Petrus Liu (2018) argues:

> The jingoistic fantasies about China's rise require a policing of gender, which operates through a complex and subtle mechanism. These complexities demonstrate that gender and sexual lives are not exterior to the story of China's rise, but constitutive of it.
>
> *(Liu 2018)*

Indeed, China's rise depends on, and at the same time encourages, a patriarchal and hypermasculine male image, complete with a heteronormative and

reproductive family. In this context, the shaming of single women as 'left-over' (Hong Fincher 2016), the purge of feminist activists and the marginalisation of sexual minorities all effectively serve the state's political and ideological agenda. If gay identity is seen as a 'postsocialist allegory of modernity' (Rofel 1999), what kind of postsocialist world are we living in? What are the new characteristics specific to the twenty-first century? How are gender, sexuality and identities articulated in the reconfigured geopolitics? What are some of the creative resistances to, and lines of flight in, transnational neoliberalism, if any? This book hopes to provide some critical perspectives into these questions.

China and postsocialism

I have probably left out a lot of details, complexities and contradictions in my very subjective and broad brushstroke account of global history centred on the Chinese experience in the past few decades. With the postsocialist and post-Cold War historical context in mind, the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century are the historical backdrop of my narrative about queer China. Without jamming the introductory chapter of the book with too much detail, suffice it to say that the world has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War, and this change has had a huge impact on people's subjectivities and lived experiences. Individual and collective experiences are often intertwined with national and even global histories; personal desires and intimate spheres frequently reflect political and social upheavals. Against this historical backdrop, gender, sexuality and desire are often cited as perfect examples that testify to the change. After all, if we were to ask sexual minorities in China about their lives before and after 1989, is there anything better than their own testimony to demonstrate which world they would prefer to live in, and which political system is superior to the other? In this sense, gay identity has become a 'postsocialist allegory of modernity' (Rofel 1999) that attests to the inevitability of socialism's demise and capitalism's triumph.

The term 'postsocialism' is key to understanding the historical experience of China and many other countries in the world. Scholars disagree on the political and ideological nature of contemporary China: some see it as 'socialism from afar' (Zhang and Ong 2008) and others diagnose it as 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' (Harvey 2005). 'Postsocialism' represents one of the most popular – albeit also with great controversy – understandings of China's historical condition among scholars working in the Western academia (Dirlik 1989; Rofel 1999, 2007; Litzinger 2002; Berry 2004; Kipnis 2008; McGrath 2008; Zhang 2008; Rojas and Litzinger 2016; Bao 2018). The term 'postsocialism' offers valuable insights into the understanding of contemporary Chinese society. According to Arif Dirlik (1989: 231), postsocialism describes

> a historical situation where (a) socialism has lost its coherence as a metahistory of politics because of the attenuation of the socialist vision in its

> historical unfolding . . . (b) the articulation of socialism to capitalism is conditioned by the structure of 'actually existing socialism' in any given historical context which is the historical premise of all such articulations; and (c) this premise stands guard over the process of articulation to ensure that it does not result in the restoration of capitalism. Postsocialism is of necessity also postcapitalist, not in the classical Marxist sense of socialism as a phase in historical development that is anterior to capitalism, but in the sense of a socialism that represents a response to the experience of capitalism and an attempt to overcome the deficiencies of capitalist development. Its own deficiencies and efforts to correct them by resorting to capitalist methods of development are conditioned by this awareness of the deficiencies of capitalism in history.

For Dirlik, postsocialism represents an alternative to capitalism. It is a global condition in late modernity and is thus not unique to China. From today's perspective, his view seems optimistic, when the incorporation of China into global neoliberal capitalism does not seem to represent a genuine alternative. However, if we recognise the continuing existence of socialist ideas, experiences and aspirations in contemporary Chinese society, China can still be seen as neither entirely socialist nor capitalist; rather, it is characterised by the simultaneous non-contemporaneity of hybrid economies and politics, which can be described as 'postsocialist'. Indeed, although China has adopted state-led capitalism, and neoliberalism has exerted a powerful influence on Chinese society, the state still owns a large part of its major industries and infrastructure, which still nominally fall under the ownership of all the people in China. What is more, socialist histories, memories and experiences still linger on in today's China and they structure people's lives, embodiments and emotions in significant ways. They provide legitimacy and support for citizen rights and grassroots activism. As my previous book *Queer Comrades* demonstrates, socialist modes of 'comrade' subjectivity and politics still inspire postsocialist queer identity formation and LGBTQ social movements. It is therefore important to recognise the socialist traces, memories and aspirations in the postsocialist era to articulate modes of resistance to global neoliberalism.

The queer Global South

The Global South perspective marks an important feature of this book. In recent decades, the term 'Global South' has largely supplanted 'the Third World' in development studies and in literary and cultural studies (West-Pavlov 2018). The term often has a geographical connotation and is often talked about in relation to the industrialised and post-industrialised world in the Global North, where neoliberal capitalism was invented and subsequently took a strong hold. The term has sometimes been understood as an effect of the capitalist globalisation emanating from the Global North and extending its hegemonic power to the southern part of the world. At other times, it is seen as forms of discontent shared by the world's subaltern populations and transnational alliances of counterhegemonic struggles

against neoliberal modernity (López 2007). It is 'a sliding signifier forever in pursuit of a changing signified in a dynamic of supplementation dictated by where the North deterritorialises and the South reterritorialises' (Mishra 2018: 54). Even if the imagination of the Global South is an 'illusion' that risks concealing internal differences and power relations within the seemingly coherent and yet fragmentary Global South, such an imagination can still serve as a 'mobilisation myth' (Dirlik 1994: 136) that enables and empowers individuals and groups at a critical historical juncture (West-Pavlov 2018: 19). The key, therefore, is how and for what purpose the term is used.

The Global South has significant implications for understanding and imagining globalisation. Globalisation is often understood in terms of Western hegemony, cultural imperialism, and the homogenisation of culture (Said 1994; Tomlinson 1999; Ritzer 2000). In such an imagination, the West dominates the world and the Global North becomes the epicentre of all transnational processes. Such an understanding is useful, because it points to deeply entrenched unequal power relations in the world as a result of Western colonialism and capitalist expansion. However, it neglects what happens in large parts of the world, that is, the dynamics and the tensions in the non-Western world and in the Global South. It is important to remember that the hegemony of the Global North has not gone unchallenged. In fact, anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic struggles and South-South alliances have constituted an important part of the world's history. One such historical moment was represented by the Bandung Conference, the first large-scale Asian-African conference that took place in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. The Bandung Conference initiated a series of South-South collaborations against the Global North hegemony. The memory of the Bandung conference, sometimes referred to as the 'Banding nostalgia' (Yoon 2018), is still cherished by many people who experienced that era today, and it becomes the inspiration for an increasing number of transnational projects led by governments, individuals and grassroots organisations in the Global South.

The Global South is ambivalently situated in relation to issues of gender and sexuality, as a Western understanding of modernity is key to the process of the (de) gendering and (de)sexualising of the Global South. The Global South in the premodern era is often cast under the orientalist gaze and imagined as a land of sexual abundance, decadence, primitivism and sometimes infant innocence (Said 1991); Michel Foucault's (1990) description of *ars erotica* vividly captures such a fascination. In the modern era, with the expansion of Western colonialism and industrial capitalism, a liberal and 'primitive' understanding of sexuality was believed to have given way to a discourse of sexual repression, religious fundamentalism, communist asceticism and human rights abuse in the Global South. Queer people in the Global South become powerless victims that passively await salvation by their liberated brothers and sisters from the Global North. In priding itself on gender and sexual diversity and in seeing the Global North as the epitome of human civilisation, the sexually liberalised Global North versus the sexually illiberal Global South dichotomy has often been reinforced, and this further consolidates the unequal

power relations between the North and the South. Furthermore, a sense of nationalism, pride and cultural superiority based on an assumed belief in sexual liberation is often used to legitimise a series of military, political, economic and cultural interventions in other parts of the world. Joseph Massad (2007) has examined the negative Western influences on sexual cultures in the Arab world, represented by Gay International's interventionist strategies which impose a Western type of sexual development and social movement agenda irrespective of local cultural traditions. Far from being apolitical, gender and sexuality in the Global South have become battlefields where complex power relations converge and where intricate international politics is played out in the most intimate sphere.

This book imagines and maps a 'queer Global South' by using contemporary queer Chinese culture as an example. In documenting China's queer history and culture in the last four decades, and through close reading of queer cultural texts and an ethnography of contemporary queer public culture, I hope to demonstrate the critical potential of the imagination of the 'queer Global South', by not treating it as yet another overarching 'grand theory' but seeing it as one of the critical lens through which we can yield important insights. Using a combination of research methods including historical and archival research, textual analysis, discourse analysis, interview and ethnography, I hope to reveal the dynamics of a queer Global South in its complexities and contradictions. In queering the Global South and imagining a queer Global South, I also hope to open up alternative imaginaries of sexuality, communication and culture full of creative energies and liberating potentials.

Queer comrades

This book grows out of my frustration with many concurrent journalistic and academic writings on queer globalisation. These writings tend to cast the Global North in a positive light and the Global South in a negative light in terms of queer rights. According to this discourse, the economic and political system in the Global North, i.e. neoliberalism, is seen as intrinsically better for queer people as they have more rights under this system. This discourse further suggests that countries in the Global South should liberalise themselves faster and integrate themselves more deeply into the global neoliberal political economy so that the queer people living (or 'suffering') in these countries may enjoy more rights and freedom one day. In the light of this homonationalistic and Euro-American-centric logic, sexual freedom is framed as a necessary outcome of neoliberalism and is often used to justify the existing global geopolitical system and power relations (Puar 2007). This line of argument often turns a blind eye to the fact that neoliberalism has been built on the erosion of welfare states and the mass dispossession of poor people worldwide. It also does not hide its white, middle class, male privilege, as well as its geopolitical rootedness in the Global North. It seems a cruel paradox that the acquisition of political rights for sexual minorities parallels the loss of welfare rights for many people in various parts of the world. This is not to suggest that queer people are

directly responsible for social inequalities and injustices in a world infiltrated by neoliberal capitalism. Rather, it is a timely reminder of the ideological ambivalence of some uncritical international discourses on queer rights and gay liberation. These discourses can function as a form of 'pinkwashing' (Puar 2010): that is, using queer rights to disguise hidden and often insidious political and ideological agendas. Under these agendas, the evocation of queer rights effectively serves to renounce socialism and the welfare state, as well as their associated principles such as democracy, egalitarianism and social justice.

This book will demonstrate that sexuality is never an individual, private and personal matter; it is always already intertwined with complex power relations and world geopolitics (Foucault 1990). Indeed, sexuality is a battlefield for ideological struggles between neoliberalism, socialism and other forms of social imaginaries. If neoliberalism has tried to define human sexuality and dominate the intimate sphere through individualisation, consumerism and private property rights, such attempts have not gone unchallenged. Queer people all over the world have articulated their resistance to the hegemony of neoliberalism through individual and collective struggles, and through imagining alternative ways of being, feeling and engaging with politics. Using contemporary China as an example, I hope to unravel the political and ideological ambivalences of gay identities and queer desires in the Global South. In many parts of the world, gay identities and queer desires have emerged in the historical and transnational processes of departure from socialism and entry into neoliberalism. However, it must be remembered that socialist imaginaries, aspirations and practices have not dissipated. They still exist on the ground level and in ordinary people's minds and memories; they continue to inspire radical subject formation and novel forms of political engagement.

This book builds on and develops the argument from my last book *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and* Tongzhi *Activism in Postsocialist China* (Bao 2018). In *Queer Comrades*, I focused on the term *tongzhi*, one of the most popular terms for queer identification in the Chinese-speaking world today. Using a deconstructive approach in tracing a genealogy of the term *tongzhi*, I reconstructed a history of the term and highlighted the socialist visions and aspirations embedded within the history. In doing so, I unravelled the progressive potential of queer subjectivity and sexual activism in China today. The 'queer comrade' assemblage embodies the potential of challenging the neoliberal gay identity born out of global capitalism; the 'queer comrade' activism holds the promise of developing a radical, progressive, Left and socialist politics by building on socialist ideals of egalitarianism and justice as well as revolutionary experiences of mass mobilisation.

If *Queer Comrades* focuses primarily on political activism and social movements, this book examines diverse forms of queer community culture, with meticulous attention paid to queer people's lives, feelings and intimate experiences. In doing so, I hope to identify the 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1961) in China's queer communities in the past four decades. I also hope to demonstrate that literature and visual culture are not apolitical forms of representation and self-expression.

Although they are frequently manipulated by hegemonic forms of power to manufacture consent, they can also be used by marginalised groups to construct their identities and communities, fight for rights and social justice, and imagine an alternative future. In a part of the world where citizens' rights are often constrained by political regimes and neoliberal governmentality, literature, art, film, performance and other forms of community culture and creative practices have vital roles to play in empowering individuals and social groups. This book rejects the Euro-centric idea that there is no queer activism in China – understood in the sense of pride parades and LGBTQ political rights – and suggests that cultural production serves as an important form of queer activism in contemporary China.

'Queer China' assemblage

I use the term 'queer' (*ku'er* in Chinese) to refer to all gender and sexual minorities. 'Queer' usually describes the 'gestures or analytical tools which dramatise incoherences in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire' (Jagose 1996: 3). The word has been used broadly to refer to all the non-normative identities and practices. Eve Sedgwick (1993: 9) observes that 'queer' has been spun outward along dimensions that cannot be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all; the term has come to signify the ways in which race, ethnicity and postcolonial nationality crisscross with each other, together with other identity-constituting and identity-fracturing discourses. In this sense, 'queer' recognises the convergence and divergence in subject formation worldwide under capitalist globalisation. Meanwhile, the term also denotes a post-identitarian stance by suggesting that the complexity of human gender, sexuality and desire cannot be reduced to fixed identity categories. Such is my standpoint in relation to gender, sexuality and identity, and this a post-identitarian stance will be emphasised throughout this book. In the transnational Chinese context, 'queer' encompasses all gender and sexual identities and identifications, including LGBTQ, *tongzhi* ('comrade'), *tongxinglian* ('homosexual'), *lala* ('lesbian') and gay.[7] As I recognise the cultural specificity of the terms including LGBTQ, *tongzhi*, *tongxinglian*, *lala* and gay, I use them selectively in my writing based on the context. But for the purpose of clarity and consistency, 'queer' is the umbrella term I opt to use throughout the book to refer to all the gendered and sexual subjectivities. This is because I acknowledge the transnational nature of the term 'queer', paying meticulous attention to how queer theories and political practices are circulated in China. I understand 'queer' not as a fixed entity, but as an ongoing process of cultural translation, pointing to unpredictable directions. In this process, new meanings and possibilities are produced, and they have the potential to defy the mythical origin of the term, along with the power relations that underpin such origins. I will engage with the issues of identity politics and cultural translation in the various chapters of this book.

Similarly, although my project primarily focuses on queer cultural production in the PRC context, what is 'China' or 'Chineseness' cannot be taken for granted.

Travis Kong's (2010) ground-breaking work on transnational Chinese male homosexualities in various geographical locations points to the multiplicity of Chineseness and queerness. Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich (2014) draw on Shu-mei Shih's (2007) term 'the Sinophone' as a critical tool and decolonising strategy to critique the PRC-centrism in Chinese queer studies. The Sinophone critique brings to light the role of world geopolitics in shaping gender, sexuality and intimacy by drawing attention to issues of marginalisation, a task to which this book is also committed. Although the subject matter of this book is queer culture in the PRC, the queer Sinophone critique informs much of the book's analysis. Throughout this book, I will demonstrate the instability of the signifier 'Chineseness' by challenging fixed identity categories and undoing cultural essentialism. Furthermore, by situating 'China' and 'Chineseness' in a transnational context, I will consider how 'China' and 'Chineseness' are produced as a result of complex global geopolitics unevenly shaped by postsocialism, postcolonialism and cultural translation.

This book can be seen as an effort to construct a 'queer China' assemblage that undoes identity politics, unsettles conventional ways of thinking and creates spaces for critical reflection and autonomous living. Assemblage usually refers to a collection of things or concepts that have been temporarily put together. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest that the different parts that constitute an assemblage are not stable and fixed; rather, they can be displaced and replaced with other parts, and that this is a constantly changing and never-ending process. The concept 'assemblage' thus gestures towards a flexible and contingent relationship between things. If the different parts that make up 'queer' and 'China' are unstable, fluid and contingent, the 'queer China' assemblage put together in this book is even more unstable and fluid, and subject to constant mutation and transformation. 'Queer China', together with its associated categories and concepts, thus epitomises a post-identitarian trajectory of thinking.

As nation states and neoliberal capitalism continue to reify bodies, desires and identities worldwide, 'queer China' takes a 'disidentification' (Muñoz 1999) approach by identifying with dominant ideologies and discourses partially, contingently, conditionally and sometimes subversively. This is not to romanticise 'queer China' as a utopian space of resistance and defiance, but to recognise that identification for minority cultures and marginalised communities is never complete, uncompromising and without failure throughout the world. Only in this way can we imagine 'homotopias' and lines of flight in a world dominated by state violence and neoliberal hegemony.[8] Indeed, while 'China' may conjure up memories of a socialist past and remind people of the continuing existence of a communist regime, 'queer' rejects possible nostalgic, romantic and even authoritarian associations by situating itself in relation to sexuality and desire in the context of a post-Cold War world order. 'Queer China' is thus about complicity as well as alterity. As I will demonstrate in this book, 'queer China' encompasses bodies, desires and identities reified in global capitalism; it also articulates their resilience, defiance and modes of creative existence.

Queer cultural production: an encounter

This book's focus on cultural production reflects the crucial role that queer culture – including literature, film, art and performance – play in constructing identities, communities and politics in the PRC. It is true that the rights-based, overtly political and antagonistic type of queer politics such as protests and pride parades are uncommon in China, but this does not mean that queer activism does not exist in mainland China, as contributors to the edited book *Queer Tongzhi China* convincingly demonstrate (Engebretsen, Schroeder and Bao 2015). Through representing queerness in cultural texts and creative art forms, queer identities and desires are made visible. Such a representation is itself political in a country where representation is often dictated by opaque and yet idiocyncratic government directives. Through producing and consuming these cultural texts, queer people can gain a sense of their identity, community and politics through engaging with queer issues in a relatively safe and supportive environment.

Perhaps we should part with the rigid view that a version of the Stonewall riot will take place in China one day, and that this magic moment would usher in an age of queer liberation. While disruptive historical events like Stonewall or a sudden policy change from the Chinese government may still be possible, it is not everything that Chinese queers should aim for. Rather, we should appreciate what is happening here and now, and their potentialities in pointing to a there and then. Indeed, these queer community cultural practices should be regarded as effective and affective ways of articulating identity, community and rights. In other words, instead of expecting historical ruptures and landmark events, let us appreciate what we have now and the minute changes literature and visual culture make to queer people's lives and Chinese society. By focusing on the affective dimension of these minute changes, this book hopes to shed light on the political potential of queer culture via a cultural approach to queer politics.

I choose to focus on the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century because this is a historical period through which I have lived, and with which I am familiar. Having spent a large part of my youth in this era, first in China and then outside China, I do not pretend that I am objective and unbiased about this history. My account of queer history does not claim to be comprehensive or representative. Every step of the account, from the selection of case studies to the choice of interpretive framework, has been inevitably mediated by my own preoccupation, politics, idiosyncrasy and affective experiences. I acknowledge the subjective nature of such an account, but I also wish to demonstrate that such an account is still valid and useful, because it sheds important light on our understanding of China's queer culture in its complexities and contradictions.

This book focuses on the analysis of queer cultural texts and practices. It challenges the boundaries between various cultural forms including literature, film, art and performance, often artificially demarcated by academic fields, disciplines and institutions. To write a book encompassing a wide range of creative and

cultural forms is an ambitious, and even risky, undertaking for an author. I am aware that without specific academic training in many of these fields, I may risk losing some of the disciplinary specificities for each cultural form. But it is a risk that I am prepared to take. Indeed, it is important to look at the similarities and commonalities amongst all these artworks and cultural forms on top of their perceived differences. After all, these literary and artistic works are invariably situated in a specific historical context and they manifest 'structures of feeling' of a society and an era. My general approach is a media and cultural studies one: that is, to situate cultural forms and texts in their historical, social and cultural contexts and to look at the discourses in which they are situated and the power relations that shape them.

Recognising the textual mediation of society and the narrative feature of social practices, this book disrupts the rigid boundaries between cultural texts and social practices, and between humanities and social sciences. In this book, queer texts are also social and cultural practices in their processes of production, circulation and consumption, and in their situatedness in social contexts and relation to and impact on society. Queer social practices are often informed and represented by cultural texts. Bringing together queer texts and practices, this book examines queer culture in its mediated and lived complexity.

A recurring theme of this book is the relationship between queer culture and political economy. I will dedicate the book to exploring the connections between queer culture and the postsocialist Chinese and global geopolitics. Queer culture in postsocialist China has been, and will continue to be, shaped by a global neoliberal political economy in which China plays a part. Meanwhile, Chinese queer culture can serve as important sites of contestation for global neoliberalism.

Identity is an important theme for the book: in charting the emergence and formation of queer identities, I also reveal their contingency, instability and even deconstruction and possible demise. In delineating the processes of sexual and neoliberal subjectivation, I also seek modes of desubjectivation, or moments when ideological interpellation fails, and places where agency and autonomy can be located. Overall, I hope that this book depicts various forms of 'postsocialist metamorphosis' without giving them a fixed shape, contour or trajectory. The flexibility of 'postsocialist metamorphosis' also points to the openness of the social and the contingency of identities in a postsocialist context.

This book does not aim to offer a comprehensive history of queer cultural production in postsocialist China. I have encountered many queer individuals, texts and events in the past ten years while I was researching on queer China. Their names are largely unknown outside, and even inside, China's queer communities, let alone being recognised by literary scholars and art historians based in academic and art institutions. However, these people's lives, stories and artworks have all touched me in one way or the other. I therefore decided to write about them, as a research diary for myself, as a memoir for the queer community with which I identify, and as an archive for those who are interested in issues pertaining to queer China. I understand my research and writing process as a continuing process of encounters: random, idiosyncratic but nonetheless meaningful. These encounters are personal and

affective and yet they are deeply reflective of and closely connected to the collective and the social. They may look random and even idiocyncratic, and yet they are subject to historical and structural influences. They can reveal as much as they can conceal things. But who is to say that such encounters do not have their own validity and value? In my research and writing, I have certainly benefited from my encounters with these people, texts and practices and they have changed me in ways I could not have anticipated. I hope that you will enjoy these encounters too. Get prepared to be touched, shouted at and even bored by them; take delight in being taken away to their worlds, the small cosmoses that make up the imagination of a queer China.

A user's manual

Books in queer studies are often notoriously abstruse. It is my hope to make this book more reader friendly. I have intended that the book be read in open and flexible ways. Each chapter stands on its own by dealing with a separate case study and a different set of theoretical concerns. Readers can therefore start with any chapter and read in any order they prefer. In doing so, readers can construct their own versions of the book and build various human-book assemblages. I call this section 'a user's manual' to convey the constructed nature of the book. Here I am thinking of a user's manual for Lego instead of for a piece of furniture. With Lego, one can follow instructions to put bits and pieces together to build something, although one does not have to do so; following one's own creativity and idiosyncrasy usually leads to more pleasant surprises. Similarly, one can read the book in any way and in any order by ignoring the following structure designed by the author.

This book is divided into four parts. They constitute various types of queer Chinese constellations. Part I traces the emergence of homosexuality and queer desires through discursive formation and cinematic representation in China's post-socialist era. Part II narrates two stories of 'becoming queer' in online literature. I choose online literature because print publication is strictly censored in the PRC; the Internet, loosely censored in comparison, offers more space for creative writing, identity formation and author-reader interaction. The online platform also creates novel literary forms and innovative reader-writer engagements, such as the case of girls' love fan fiction. Part III looks at two instances of how queer people engage with urban spaces: one is a 'flash mob' type of queer activism disguised as a same-sex wedding event in central Beijing, and the other features a working class queer's physical and literary engagements with Beijing's queer spaces. By juxtaposing the two case studies, I hope to highlight the social disparities and class differences in queer urban spaces and identities. Part IV interrogates possibilities and modes of desubjectivation from the perspective of migration: transnational migration, as in the case of an international cohort of drag queens in Shanghai; and domestic migration from the countryside to the city, as in the case of Xiyadie. My goal in this part is to demonstrate how migration can deterritorialise identities, and how performance, documentary film and papercutting as art forms and modes of

self-expression can offer spaces for queer agency and autonomy. Running through all these chapters is a post-identitarian way of thinking. As discourses and power relations construct queer identities, identities are also deconstructed through the convergences of people, media, technology, urban space, as well as creative and cultural engagements.

The book chapters roughly follow a chronological order, spanning the period of postsocialist Chinese history from the 1980s to the present. They also cover a range of cultural and creative forms, including literature, film, art and performance. Apart from Chapter 1, which historicises and contextualises homosexuality in the PRC in the postsocialist era, all the other chapters deal with a specific case study – be it a novel, a film, a poet, an artist or a public performance. In choosing these case studies, I have paid specific attention to people and groups who have previously been under-represented in Chinese queer studies: queer women, ethnic minorities, rural, migrant and working class queers, drag performers and international expatriates working in China. I have also given special place to China's development issues, rural-urban migration, burgeoning drag communities in Chinese cities, as well as the fast-developing reading and writing communities of 'comrade literature' and fan fiction.

Chapter 1 offers a historical background for the book by tracing a genealogy of the emergence of gay identities and queer desires in postsocialist China. I look at multiple and intersecting discourses including medical, legal, academic and journalistic constructions of homosexuality. Refuting the 'repressive hypothesis' common in Chinese queer historiography, I understand the emergence of gay identities and queer desires as a result of discursive formations closely associated with the Chinese intellectuals' and ordinary people's imagination of a postsocialist modernity. Such an imagination is situated in the post-Cold War and postsocialist context, when modernity and gay identity are imagined in specific ways that are both national and transnational, both collectivising and individualising. Such an imagination is underpinned by a gradual erasure of socialism and an endorsement of neoliberalism in China and worldwide.

Chapter 2 brings together lesbian artist, filmmaker and activist Shi Tou's life and artworks through an analysis of her film *Women Fifty Minutes*. With an emphasis on space and place, this chapter examines the construction of queer women's identities and spaces through representational practices. In doing so, I delineate the emergence of queer women's identities and spaces through film, artworks and activism in contemporary China. I also unravel the complex relationship between feminism and queer movements, and between the representation of Chinese women and the representation of queerness. Shi Tou's films and artworks can be seen as an effort to bring queer women into existence through an examination of the heterogeneity of Chinese women, and to bring queer issues into feminist discussions. They also remind us of the gendered dimensions of China's economic development under neoliberalism.

Chapter 3 interrogates the political and ideological underpinnings of the emergence of gay identity by focusing on the protagonists' 'becoming gay' narratives in an online queer fiction *Beijing Story*. Perhaps one of the best-known queer stories

in the Sinophone sphere, *Beijing Story* foregrounds the emergence of gay identity in postsocialist China's restructuring of its political economy and social relations. Drawing on the Derridian notion of 'hauntology', this chapter argues for a reconsideration of class and socialism in understanding postsocialist China's historical transformation and queer culture.

Chapter 4 examines the production and consumption of a *Super Girl* fan fiction in an online community. Fan cultures in China have been strongly influenced by popular cultural flows in East Asia and the Sinophone spheres; they also manifest a strong sense of queerness that cannot be neatly captured by identity politics. Through textual analysis of a lesbian-themed online fan fiction *Pink Affairs*, I delineate how this text depicts middle class dream, transnational imagination and queer desires. Meanwhile, by considering the text as symptomatic of the 'structures of feeling' in contemporary Chinese society, I also explore the postsocialist historical and social contexts in which such cultural practices and queer desires become possible. In addition, by describing the author-reader interaction in co-creating the text, I draw attention to the importance of consumption – or 'prosumption' (Toffler 1980), a combination of production and consumption – in shaping contemporary queer popular culture.

Chapter 5 analyses a same-sex wedding event that took place in Beijing in 2009, which turned out to be a queer rights advocacy campaign carried out by some queer activists in the form of shooting wedding photos. I use this case study to showcase how Chinese queer communities have been devising culturally sensitive and context-specific activist strategies. These strategies make creative use of public spaces and incorporate the use of embodied performance and digital media. They depart from the 'pride' and 'coming out' model of queer politics and suggest innovative modes of political and social engagements.

Chapter 6 introduces working class poet Mu Cao and analyses his poetry to show how neoliberalism has transformed the life of an ordinary person, and who might have been lost in China's neoliberal transformation. Mu Cao's poems, evocative of the critical realist literary tradition, remind us of the dark side of neoliberal capitalism and those who are further marginalised in the global picture of neoliberal governance.

Chapter 7 looks at a documentary film about a drag show that took place in Shanghai in 2017. If queer Shanghai represents how transnational capitalism shapes queer identities in a global city, drag culture in Shanghai seems to confirm this assumption. But the subculture also offers a more nuanced picture by pointing to the grassroots queer connections in non-hegemonic forms of 'minor transnationalism' (Lionnet and Shih 2005). If cinema is an apparatus to produce and shape queer images and imaginations, the 2018 documentary *Extravaganza*, made by British filmmaker Matthew Baren, gestures towards new forms of queerness and cinema, together with a queer-cinema assemblage which is not confined to national boundaries, identity categories, and the logic of the global capital.

Chapter 8 focuses on queer artist Xiyadie's life story and his papercutting works. Using a critical biographical approach, in tandem with an analysis of his artworks,

I examine the transformation of Xiyadie's identity from a folk artist to a queer artist and ask what types of power relations have made this transformation possible. In doing so, I consider the role of queerness in mediating his identity and in facilitating his social mobility; I also pinpoint the role of art and creative practices as possible means of desubjectivation. Conscious of the transformation and reification of human subjectivity and creativity under global capitalism, I hope to seek possible ways of desubjectivation, human agency and queer autonomy.

This book marks a modest start on the topic of queer literature and visual culture in contemporary China. It hopes to encourage more people to pay attention to the fast-developing and vibrant scenes of queer cultural production in China. I am aware that these people, history and creative forms would probably be soon forgotten if they were not documented in a timely manner, and that these stories are important assets for China's queer communities. Indeed, in compiling a chronology of queer history in the PRC (see the appendix of this book), I was alarmed to find out how much community history has been lost, forgotten or even erased because of political censorship, technological takeover and human negligence despite the fact that they only happened not so long ago. I do not know how long it will take for China to recognise LGBTQ rights; nor can I predict whether China will follow the Western model of LGBTQ political rights and same-sex marriage. But I am keenly aware that if we refuse to look at what is happening in China's queer communities now, and if we miss the development of these fascinating creative and cultural practices, our understandings of China, Chineseness and queerness would be incomplete, if not flawed.

This is the first scholarly monograph devoted specifically to the study of queer literature and visual culture in the PRC context, written from the perspective of a community historian and critical scholar. The case studies of Mu Cao's queer poetry, Xiyadie's papercutting art, Shi Tou's film *Women Fifty Minutes* and Matthew Baren's film *Extravaganza* are among the first scholarly efforts to study these artists and artworks in both English and Chinese languages. Weaving together historical and archival research, textual and discourse analysis, along with interview and ethnography, this transdisciplinary work contributes to multiple subject areas and academic fields including literary and cultural studies, media and communication studies, film and screen studies, contemporary art, theatre and performance studies, gender and sexuality studies, China/Asia and Global South studies, cultural history, sociology and anthropology, human geography, political theory and the study of social movements.

Notes

1 This book focuses on queer cultures in mainland China. Readers interested in queer histories and cultures in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and other parts of the Sinophone Sphere can consult Chiang 2018; Chiang and Heinrich 2014; Kong 2010, 2019; Lavin, Yang and Zhao 2017; Leung 2008; Lim 2006, 2014; Martin 2003, 2010; Tang 2011; Yau 2010; Yue 2012, among others.

2 I use terms such as 'post-Mao era', 'postsocialist era' and 'reform era' interchangeably to refer to the historical era after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the ascent of Deng Xiaoping in Chinese leadership through the third plenary of the Eleventh Party Congress in 1978. I consider the 1976–78 juncture to be a watershed moment in modern Chinese history that marks the beginning of a new era, an era that marked China's re-entry into global capitalism after years of socialist experiments.
3 'Reform and opening up' refers to a series of economic reforms initiated by the then Chinese president Deng Xiaoping from the late 1970s, which include the privatisation and deregulation of a previously state-regulated economy and joining the global market and the world capitalist economy.
4 *Tongzhi*, literally 'comrade', is a popular term used in the Chinese-speaking world to refer to sexual minorities such as LGBTQ people. For a brief genealogy of the term, see Bao 2018: 65–91.
5 This remains controversial. Guo Xiaofei (2007) points out that the removal of 'hooliganism' from China's 1997 Criminal Law did not aim to decriminalise homosexuality, although in effect it produced an unexpected result which seemed to have decriminalised homosexuality.
6 CCMD-3 states that only those 'ego-dystonic' (*ziwo buhexie*) homosexuals need to seek medical treatment, and therefore this is not a complete depathologisation. This lends legitimacy to the 'treatment' of homosexuality by many hospitals and clinics in China today. See Bao 2018 for an account of the conversion therapy of homosexuality in China.
7 For an explanation of the term *lala* in the PRC context, see Kam 2013 and Engebretsen 2014.
8 I thank Howard Chiang for suggesting the term 'homotopia' to replace the heteronormative sounding 'heterotopia' (Foucault 1986). The concept of 'homotopia' is nicely in tune with the camaraderie and homosociality of the tongzhi/'queer comrades' subject discussed in *Queer Comrades* (Bao 2018).

PART I

Queer emergence

1

IMAGINING MODERNITY

The (re-)emergence of homosexuality

> We cannot promise that every research we do can be directly applied to society, but we should guarantee that it is conducted out of our best will. In researching the subculture of homosexuality, we hold the sincerest attitude towards our fellow human beings, and we hope that our research can help them. We do not have ill intentions or see them as enemies. We interact with them with good will. This reflects the principle of humanism in conducting scientific research.
>
> *Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo,* Their World *(1992: 6)*

A historical account is usually a good place to start a book. But if queer people's stories have been denied from official historical narratives and collective memories in the PRC, how is a queer history, or a 'genealogy' in the Foucauldian (1984) sense, possible? How did gay identity and queer desire emerge in the postsocialist context? What types of discourses and 'structures of feelings' brought queer identities and desires into existence in postsocialist China's public sphere?

This chapter offers a historical overview of the emergence of homosexuality in China's postsocialist era. This 'emergence' should be more appropriately called 're-emergence', as homosexuality first emerged in China in the Republican era (1912–49), with the translation of 'sexual science' from the West (Chiang 2010, 2018; Chou 2000; Hinsch 1990; Sang 2003; Kang 2009). It vanished for several decades in the Mao era (1949–76) before it re-emerged in the post-Mao period (1976 to the present). Popular discourse suggests that it is China's 'opening up' to the West in the postsocialist era that has brought the gay identity, repressed in China's socialist era, into being (CBC Doc Zone 2007; Ho 2010). While this insight is useful, as same-sex practices and discourses from the West do play an important role in shaping a specific type of gay identity in China, the narrative neglects the complex social and discursive changes inside China. In particular, it misses the role played by Chinese

intellectuals in imagining a new society and creating a new understanding of sexuality and identity in the first two decades of China's 'reform and opening up'. In this chapter, I strive to reconstruct some historical materials – including academic publications, legal documents and media reports – to trace the emergence of gay identity in the 1980s and 1990s. Using a Foucauldian discursive approach, I suggest that a multiplicity of discourses in this period – primarily medical, sociological and media discourses – constructed homosexuality as a medical category and gays and lesbians as a distinct group of people. Furthermore, I argue that the emergence of gay identity in China can be understood as part of China's imagination of modernity in the postsocialist era, which gives expression to the rhetoric of 'truth' and 'science' through a wide range of discourses. But this imagination is a precarious and even controversial one, as it is based on a violent rejection of China's socialist legacy and an uncritical endorsement of neoliberal capitalism. The re-emergence of queer identities and homosexual desires in China thus participates in and reaffirms the legitimacy of a post-Cold War and postsocialist world order in which specific types of gender, sexuality and desire play a part.

In this chapter, first, I engage with the 'Great Paradigm Shift' debate in studying the history of sexuality. I then examine narratives about homoeroticism in the socialist era in order to problematise the version of Foucault's (1990) 'repressive hypotheses' common in the study of sex and sexuality in China. After reviewing the construction of gay identity in some medical books and articles published in the 1980s and 90s, I will discuss the rhetoric of 'truth' and 'science' prevalent in these narratives. I conclude this chapter by considering the relationship between modernity and gay identity, approaching modernity as a contingent and indeed an imaginary category. I suggest thinking of gay identity as an outcome of China's postsocialist imagination of modernity.

The 'Great Paradigm Shift' in sexuality studies

In his discussion of the Foucauldian historicism in queer theorisation, Howard Chiang (2014) challenges the 'great paradigm shifts', or epistemological breaks between modern and premodern forms of sexuality, and between 'sexual acts' and 'sexual identities', in studying the history of sexuality. Chiang traces the divergence to an early debate between David Halperin (1989) and Eve Sedgwick (1990). In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick criticises Halperin for over-emphasising historical paradigm shifts in the Foucauldian historicisation and sets up the objective of her book as:

> to show how issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalised coexistence of different modes during the times they do coexist.
>
> *(Sedgwick 1990: 47)*

In other words, 'overlapping and contradictory, universalising and minoritising forms of gender and sexual expression coexist at any given moment in time' (Chiang 2014: 21). This insight is useful. The coexistence of different types of queer subjectivities in China, including *tongxinglian* (homosexual), *tongzhi* ('comrade'), *lala* (lesbian), gay, LGBTQ and queer, clearly supports this understanding. Furthermore, these diverse types of sexual subjectivities are often linked to converging modes of economic production which constitute China's postsocialist condition. A Marxist approach to the political economy of sexuality clearly deepens our understandings of why these sexual subjectivities coexist and converge with each other in each historical time and space.

This is not, however, to say that the Foucauldian perspective is not useful and should be readily dismissed. Acknowledging some problems in the Foucauldian 'sexual acts/sexual identity' dichotomy, Halperin still recognises the value of the Foucauldian interpretative framework as 'acced[ing] through a calculated encounter with the otherness of the past, to an altered understanding of the present – a sense of our own-identity to ourselves – and thus to a new experience as sites of potential transformation' (2004: 15). As Chiang remarks, 'the potential alterity of the past and the strangeness of its regulatory norms invite us to reconsider our present-day assumptions about what is conceivable, possible and transformable' (Chiang 2014: 23). Indeed, if we consider the study of sexuality a critique of the present, the Foucauldian genealogical approach can be extremely useful. In studying the emergence of gay identity in postsocialist China, I do not aim to discover or recover the 'Great Paradigm Shift'; rather, I hope to reveal how sexuality, power and knowledge are closely intertwined not only in certain epistemological regimes, but also under specific material conditions. These material conditions and historical specificities should be given due attention in studying the history of sexuality.

Chiang's research (2009, 2014) convincingly demonstrates the emergence of homosexuality (*tongxing lian* or *tongxing ai*), and furthermore, the establishment of *scientia sexualis* in Republican China at the beginning of the twentieth century with the introduction of Western medical science and psychotherapy. He also notes an important epistemic shift in characterising same-sex desires in China's transition from empire to nation: from the 'culturalistic style of argumentation' to a 'nationalistic style of argumentation' (2009: 109–18). Chiang correctly traces the emergence of *homosexuality* (*tongxing ai*) to the Republican era, which is not at odds with the argument proposed by many Chinese queer studies scholars, including Rofel (2007), Ho (2010), Kong (2010) and myself, that the contemporary *gay identity* is the product of postsocialist China's historical, social and discursive conditions. This is not, however, a reiteration of the sexual act/sexual identity dichotomy, or the 'Great Paradigm Shift'; but a recognition that a modern sense of gay identity is situated at the intersections of neoliberal capitalism, the LGBTQ movement and transnational popular culture in the post-Cold War era; and this identity remarkably distinguishes itself from the Republican sexuality despite their obvious historical continuity.

The 'repressive hypothesis' in socialist China

Inspired by the insights of Foucault, historians often associate sexuality and modernity in their writings. Foucault's work (1990) demonstrates that the invention of sexuality and, in particular, homosexual identity, was associated with the proliferation of discourses on sex from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century and that it was produced by, and indeed crucial to, a modern form of biopower. This counters what he refers to as the 'repressive hypothesis' common in the twentieth century which imagined sexuality as something repressed by earlier periods and liberated in recent times. Many scholars in China studies have contributed to this analysis. Frank Dikötter (1995) has examined how the efforts of Chinese intellectuals to introduce Western medical science to China contributed to the construction of sexual identities in the early Republican period. Harriet Evans (1997) has discussed the scientific construction of sexuality in China from 1949, focusing on the construction of women's sexual differences. Tze-lan Sang (2003) has explored the emergence of lesbian sexuality from premodern China to postsocialist China. Howard Chiang (2018) has traced the genealogy of sexual knowledge from the demise of eunuchism to the emergence of transsexuality; in doing so, he shows the centrality of new epistemes to the formation of Chinese modernity. In all these accounts, sexuality, medical science and modernity seem inseparable for contemporary social and cultural research in both global and local contexts.

Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' has influentially informed writings on homosexuality, as well as gender and sexuality in general. As it applies to China, it is believed that there was a time when Chinese homoeroticism was poetically depicted as the 'passions of the cut sleeve' (Hinsch 1990) and, it seems, was widely tolerated for more than three thousand years before the advent of 'modernity', coincided with the demise of the imperial Manchu dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is thought that the devastating military power and the medical science from the West dismantled an empire, disrupted a civilisation and ended a tradition. In representations of homoeroticism, *ars erotica* gave way to *scientia sexualis*, the latter of which primarily refers to scientific medicine as it pertains to sex and psychology in face of the sweeping forces of 'global modernity'. Sex and sexuality became repressed.[1] This repression reached a peak when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949 (Chou 2000; Dikötter 1995; Evans 1997; Hinsch 1990; Ruan 1991; Sang 2003). The CCP took an 'anti-body, anti-flesh, anti-sexuality attitude' (Zha 1996: 139) and homosexuality was considered to be among China's 'feudal remnants' or else to be a sign of 'Western decadence'.[2] It was deemed to be something that should be eradicated from socialist China, together with other practices such as prostitution and polygamy which were all deemed incompatible with the revolutionary hegemony.

According to this version of the 'repressive hypothesis', the postsocialist era has allowed people new hopes, desires and aspirations: 'true' humanity is rediscovered; sex and sexuality are liberated; and gays and lesbians joyfully celebrate their emancipation, enjoying the 'global gayness' (Altman 1997) that is only possible in

the postsocialist era. In short, gays and lesbians, seen as autonomous subjects with free will defined by their sexuality, are presumed to have been liberated by China's exposure to global capitalism and neoliberalism. Tomorrow might be even better for queer people in China, subscribers to the 'repressive hypothesis' believe. However, the continued existence of the 'totalitarian CCP' (Ruan 1991) may still lead to queer people's 'self-censorship' under this political regime (Ho 2010: 99).

Popular as it is, this version of the 'repressive hypothesis' is too simplistic to account for the complexities of homoeroticism in modern China. Drawing on Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, in which he outlines the 'repressive hypothesis', I hope to cast doubt on the enlightenment notion of the free and coherent human subject on which such a narrative depends. I am also wary of the Freudian conception of sex and sexuality as the product of natural drives repressed by civilisation and society. I do not subscribe to the traditional Marxist notion of progressive social development; nor do I share the Marcusian passion for non-normative sexuality as resistance to the procreative social order and potential for social revolution. Foucault was rightly suspicious of all these things, and suggests in response that power is not possessed but exists in its exercise; that power does not work according to a top-down model but, rather, like a capillary formation which pervades every social relation; and that power and knowledge are inextricably connected and mutually productive (1990: 94–96). Moreover, instead of looking for continuities across such historical shifts, it is important to 'identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations' that expose a body 'totally imprinted by history' (Foucault 1990: 81–83).

My task in this chapter, therefore, is to trace the genealogy of queer identities and desires from China's socialist to postsocialist era. The absence of historical accounts of homosexuality in socialist China may have reinforced the image of extreme suppression of gays and lesbians by the communist regime. People's general lack of knowledge about homosexuality at the time, illustrated by the official and unofficial statement that 'there are no homosexuals in China' (Ruan 1991: iv), may unveil a different facet of the story. One gay man recalled his experience in the Cultural Revolution as follows:

> In junior high school, boys often hugged each other; sometimes we touched each other. We had some fun, with some sexual innuendo. At that time, I did not know what it was. We just had a vague feeling for each other.
>
> *(Li 1998: 60)*

In contrast, intimacy between members of the opposite sex was frowned upon. According to the same person:

> At that time, political education was popular. Every student had to purify their thoughts. A boy in the class made friends with a girl. Somebody reported the affair to the teacher. The teacher criticised the boy and said that his thoughts were too complicated.
>
> *(p. 60)*

A range of sources have commented on the lack of sensitivity to homosexuality in socialist China and even in some periods and places in postsocialist China (Fang 1995: 6–8). From these accounts, we get a glimpse of how the Maoist 'sexual puritanism' worked. Maoism 'incarnated the unified body of "people-as-one"'; political subjectivity was prioritised, thus resulting in the erasure of differences in gender (Yang 1994: 204). Making friends with and dating people of the opposite sex could be treated with suspicion and contempt, as they were not in tune with the political subjectivity required by the party state. Public displays of intimacy between opposite sexes, wearing attractive clothes, cosmetics or jewellery, as well as listening to popular music or reading romances were considered proper only to a 'petit bourgeois' lifestyle, as opposed to the 'proletarian' lifestyle advocated by the party state. Some forms of same-sex intimacy, strangely, were socially tolerated, as they were often read as signs of socialist camaraderie due to people's general lack of knowledge about homoeroticism. In short, homosexuality as a social category may not have effectively existed in public knowledge at that time.[3]

At the same time, these accounts remind us of the homosociality pervasive in the socialist period. Homosociality, according to Eve Sedgwick (1985), differs from homosexuality in that it does not presume the centrality of sex and sexuality to one's identity. Understood as the close bond between people of the same sex, homosociality takes on diverse forms in different societies, including friendship, brotherhood, sisterhood and camaraderie. The comrade (*tongzhi*) subjectivity common in the socialist era indicates a strong sense of homosociality, as it emphasises sociality between people, regardless of whether they are identified as same sex or different sex. The comrade identity departs from the individualistic identity that privileges gender and sexuality; it is built on a belief in communist internationalism and social egalitarianism: all people under this umbrella term are considered equal. It sees itself incompatible with social inequalities and injustices, as it endeavours to create a more just society. The comrade identity is often politicised, and at times imbued with utopianism. Yet, insofar as it departs from bourgeois individualism and private property, redefines traditional regimes of family and kinship, and challenges conventional gender norms, it is queer in itself (Bao 2018).

The life story of a Beijing-based old gay man, Ning Guofeng (nicknamed 'Old Paris'), offers a valuable insight into China's queer history from socialism to postsocialism. In the 1950s, as a middle school student, Ning accidently came across a men's cruising area in downtown Beijing, and soon self-identified with 'that kind of person' (*nazhong ren*) (Phoenix TV 2016). He got to know his first boyfriend when he was attending a teachers' college. The two had an intimate relationship for four years from 1956 to 1960, and the relationship became public knowledge among their classmates. Ning was nicknamed 'liusao' ('Mrs Liu') because the boyfriend's nickname was 'Lao Liu' ('Old Liu'). Ning later discovered that his boyfriend had already married a woman before attending college. Ning felt betrayed and the two subsequently broke up. Ning became a high school teacher after he graduated from college in 1960. In 1963, Ning met a Frenchman in a cruising area and was given the nickname of 'Miss Paris' by fellow men. In 1964, Ning met his second

boyfriend who unfortunately died two years later. After that, Ning frequented Beijing's cruising areas and became a local celebrity in the 'circle' (*quanzi*). Despite regular police raids, a vibrant queer community persisted at the time. The police raids intensified after Mao's death. Ning was arrested in 1977 and later spent three years in a labour camp for 're-education' (Phoenix TV 2016).

Ning's experience echoes the experience of many other gay men who experienced the transition from the Mao era to the post-Mao era. Through interviewing older gay men who experienced the Mao era, historian Wenqing Kang discovers that despite stories which confirm the sexual repressiveness of the period, there are other stories that suggest otherwise:

> I have heard stories of men who enjoyed having sex with other men during the Mao era. What I find is that even in the prohibitive environment of socialist China, queer men were still pursuing their sexual desire. Therefore, my argument is that the conventional understanding of socialist China as a period of sexual repression is too simplistic. We might get an impression that the Maoist state was omnipresent in every single instance of people's daily experience, but the state clearly did not have absolute control over all aspects of their lives, including sex and the fulfilment of sexual desire. I also want to dispute the argument that 'reform and opening up' policies after the end of the Mao era brought sexual liberation in China. Rather, evidence shows that the mass arrests of queer men who were accused of disrupting the public disorder actually began in the late 1970s in the Chinese urban areas.
>
> *(Kang 2018: 1)*

A court case in 1957, a few years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, attests to Kang's argument about homosexuality in the Mao era. The Heilongjiang Provincial High Court received socialist Chinas' first court case concerning same sex *jijian* (sodomy) between two consenting adults.[4] As there was no law specifically addressing this issue at the time, the High Court turned to the Supreme Court for legal advice (*sifa jieshi*). The reply from the Supreme Court was as follows:

> Heilongjiang Provincial High Court,
>
> We have received your request No. 139 dated 19 March. The issue of same sex *jijian* between consensual adults is pending legislation. Before a clear provision is made in law, we think it is appropriate not to treat the aforementioned case as a criminal offence.
>
> *(Guo 2007: 63; Zhou 2009: 227; Kang 2012: 235)*

There have been no specific written laws for or against homosexuality in the People's Republic of China since 1949 (Guo 2007).[5] It is also worth noting that the quoted legal advice uses *jijian* instead of *tongxinglian*. *Jijian* was a term used in late imperial Chinese law to refer to same-sex practices. The term *tongxinglian*

entered China's social discourse during the Republican era, and it was available for legal experts to use during the socialist era. The fact that the court chose to use the premodern Chinese term *jijian* instead of turning to a modern term such as *tongxinglian* is an interesting issue to note. Legal scholar Guo Xiaofei suggests that one of the reasons may be that the law did not want to construct homosexuality as an identity: if same-sex crime is punishable by law, then same-sex rights should also be clearly written into law (2007: 4). In this sense, the fact that Chinese law makes no explicit mention of homosexuality should not be understood as negligence on the part of the legislators; it may be that legislators did not wish to construct homosexuality as a social identity in legal terms.

I am not claiming that homoerotism was freely practised in socialist China. Other researchers may well offer concrete evidence about the sufferings of same sex attracted men and women during the Mao era. Also, the fact that homosexuality was not written into law was no guarantee that homosexuals would not escape punishment from state violence and extra-legal means. Some may point out that a refusal to recognise the existence of certain groups and individuals and the impossibility of representations specific to them are already insidious forms of repression. Here, I hope to reflect upon what is likely to be lost when we apply contemporary concepts and terminologies, including homosexuality, gay, lesbian and queer, to historical analysis. As Foucault reminds us, 'The critique of the injustices of the past by a truth held by men [sic] in the present becomes the destruction of the man [sic] who maintains knowledge by the injustice proper to the will to knowledge' (1984: 97). The most important implications of this approach to historical analysis recognise that behind the fatality of nation and revolution lie the banalities of ordinary people's lived experiences that may not fit into the grand picture of 'monumental history' (Morris 1990); and beneath the dominant narratives are the 'trivial' narratives that might disrupt the seeming continuity and revolutionary overcoming of history (Benjamin 1969).

It is worth asking why so many people stick to the 'repressive hypothesis' with such confidence and obstinacy. There seems to be a reassuring consensus invoked in representations of socialist China characterised by disgust, fear and indignation. Journalists and academics in the West often seem to cheer the opening up of post-socialist China with unprecedented enthusiasm: the Chinese used to be different from 'us'; now 'they' are 'just like us' (Jeffreys 2004: 60) and are also members of the global capitalist and neoliberal community. However, from this perspective, 'they' cannot be exactly like 'us' yet, however hard 'they' strive to mimic 'us', because the Communist Party is still in power. Thus, 'the development of these *gay* and *lesbian* identities is conditioned and regulated by political thought and action' (Ho 2007a: iii, emphasis in original) even as they are embracing the 'momentum of *kaifang* ['opening up'] simply because *kaifang* is in their general interest' (Ho 2007a: 3). Does this 'ambivalence of mimicry – almost the same but not quite', to appropriate Homi Bhabha (1994: 91) – betray a sense of imperial, colonial and Cold War sentiment? Unfortunately, the deeply rooted bias against a Communist Other and the

lingering effect of a Cold War logic are still at work in the presumptions on which some of these reassuring judgements are based.

The (re-)emergence of homosexuality in postsocialist China

There is no doubt that since China's 'reform and opening up' in the late 1970s, same-sex attracted men and women have been more likely to gather in public spaces engaging in same-sex activities. Dongdan Park in Beijing and the two public toilets on both sides of the Forbidden City, also known as 'east palace, west palace' (*donggong xigong*), were popular meeting places for sexual encounters (Fang 1995). There was a 'homosexual triangle' where gay people cruised for sex partners near the Bund in Shanghai (Bao 2012). These people and places would not have caught the public attention had it not been for the proliferation of discourses on homosexuality in the 1980s and 90s.

The first time that homosexuality was raised as a public issue in postsocialist China was in 1981. Zhang Mingyuan, a medical doctor, initiated the discussion of the 'homosexual phenomenon' (*tongxinglian xianxiang*) by analysing a Chinese literary classic *Dreams of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng*) in a medical journal. Ruan Fang Fu (1985), another medical professional, published a journal article titled 'Homosexuality: An Unsolved Mystery' under the pseudonym 'Hua Jinma'. The same year witnessed the publication of Ruan's book *Manual of Sexual Knowledge* (*Xing zhishi shouce*) which included some discussion of homosexuality. In the article published under a pseudonym, Ruan made it clear that homosexuality was not a disease. However, in the book published under his real name, he put homosexuality in the category of 'sexual abnormality' (*xing biantai*), as this was the convention in medical science at the time. In the book, he also quoted a letter written by Sigmund Freud who expressed the opinion that homosexuality was neither a sin nor a disease and thus needed no treatment (Liu and Lu 2005: 34–35). Although postsocialist China's early discussions of homosexuality appeared in the field of medical science, medical researchers frequently turned to ancient China or the West for resources to justify the subject of their research as both compatible with China's 'cultural tradition' and as a universal issue throughout the world. A sense of essentialism and universalism, based on the understanding that an innate sexuality exists across time and space, pervaded discussions of homosexuality at the time.

A further proliferation of academic discourses on homosexuality in the 1990s was largely pioneered by sociologists. Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo from Beijing interviewed 49 gay men and published their findings in their co-authored book *Their World* (*Tamen de shijie*) published in Hong Kong in 1992 and in mainland China in 1993. Meanwhile, Liu Dalin from Shanghai University published a 'sexual civilisation' report, based on a survey of 20,000 gay people from fifteen Chinese provinces in 1992; this was celebrated as 'China's Kinsey Report'. Following this, Liu conducted a small survey of 254 lesbians and gay men from 1991 to 1992. At

the same time, the Shanghai Health Education Institute conducted a survey of 111 lesbian and gay people in Shanghai from 1990 to 1991. Sponsored by the World Health Organisation, Pan Suiming and Wu Zongjian surveyed 810 lesbian and gay people from eighteen Chinese cities in 1993 (Liu and Lu 2005: 36–38).

There seemed a sudden proliferation of sociological surveys for the issue of homosexuality during this period. I suggest that this was inseparable from the increasingly urgent call for more 'opening up' following the then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's 'southern tour' in 1992. The country's re-evaluation of science and technology as the primary drives of productive force demonstrates China's commitment to becoming part of the global capitalist marketplace and its endorsement of a universal humanity. Such a link was reinforced, as Dennis Altman (1997) suggests, by the global emergence of the HIV/AIDS as a public issue from the mid-1980s, contemporarily with postsocialist China's efforts to govern its population in a new way. The nexus of influence produced gender, sexuality, body, subjectivity and desire appropriate to the new historical era. These tendencies clearly seem to share a conceptual space with what Foucault (1990) refers to as the emergence of biopower and increasing governmentality in modernity.

It is worth considering more closely how the earlier publications described homosexuality. In Li and Wang's book (Li and Wang 1992) homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) and homosexuals (*tongxinglian zhe*) are two different categories: the former is a 'cultural phenomenon' (*wenhua xianxiang*), and the latter is 'a subcultural (*ya wenhua*) group with a unique conduct code and behaviours' (p. 1). In the chapter on the cause of homosexuality, the book introduced the 'nature' versus 'nurture' debate popular in the sexuality studies literature; the two authors openly endorse a social constructionist view on human sexuality. According to Li and Wang, there are several types of homosexuals including: *rentong nanxing de* (the male-identified type), *rentong nüxingde* (the female-identified type), *xuanze xingde* (the personal choice type) and *beipode* (the forced type) (p. 53). It is important to note that this taxonomy does not define homosexuality as an inherent personality, thus leaving some room for the possibility of change. This type of social constructionism is in line with the discourse of homosexuality (*tongxing ai*) during the Republican period (Sang 2003; Kang 2009; Chiang 2010). It is also in accord with a society undergoing rapid social transformations: in this context, every identity should be fluid and reworkable to facilitate the national project of social mobilisation. Notably, all the types Li and Wang describe also differ from the 'ordinary people', that is, heterosexual subjects that fit into social norms.

Medical scientists did not miss an opportunity to participate in the project of defining this newly discovered sexuality and establishing their authority in the new field. They even claimed to have found solutions to it. Lu Longguang, a neurologist from Nanjing Medical University, collected the clinical cases of 2,534 lesbian and gay 'patients' from 1987 to 1997 and treated 1,000 of them (Liu and Lu 2005: 276). The results were published in a book titled *Studies on Chinese Homosexuality*. In 1994, Zhang Beichuan from Qingdao Medical University published the first book-length study on homosexuality in the medical field in postsocialist China.

Zhang's book (1994) identifies homosexuality (*tongxing ai*) as a treatable disease and gives it a detailed clinical analysis: its definition, symptoms, taxonomy, causes, ways of spreading, relationship with other psychological and psychiatric problems, as well as methods of prevention and treatment. Side effects of homosexuality consist of other types of 'sexual deviance' (including transgenderism, transvestism, transsexuality, obsession with anal sex, narcissism, asceticism, masturbation, erotic dreams and sexual fantasy) and sexually transmittable diseases (including HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and stomatitis). In this book, Zhang also conducts a detailed analysis of the homosexuals (*tongxing ai zhe*), including their anatomical features, common behaviours and personal hobbies. For Zhang, homosexuality is a disease that needs treatment and that can be prevented (Zhang 1994: 261–305), while homosexuals become, in the words of Foucault (1990: 43), 'a personage, a past, a case history . . . nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality'.

Different methods were devised to 'treat' homosexuality. They included the use of Chinese medicine, Western medicine, and the combination of the two, often in tandem with psychological counselling and psychoanalysis. Liu Xinmin, a psychologist from Wannan Medical College creatively incorporated Chinese herbal medicine into his treatment of homosexuality. He invented a 'secret semen-boosting soup' (*mijing tang*) and a 'five-herb posterity-continuing soup' (*wuzi yanzong tang*) for his gay patients, and they were applied in conjunction with androgenic hormone injections. This was to eliminate both the 'symptom' (*biao*) and the 'essence' (*ben*) of the disease (Fang 1995: 330–34). One of the best known treatments at the time was known as the 'Guided Corrective Psychotherapy' (*shudao jiaozheng xinli zhiliao*), a combination of psychological counselling and apormorphine injections invented by Professor Lu Longguang, with an alleged success rate of 13.5 percent (Liu and Lu 2005: 276; Bao 2018).

Following these sociological and medical discourses, the media also turned their gaze to homosexuality. One of the first book-length media publications on homosexuality in postsocialist China, *Homosexuals in China* (*Tongxinglian zai zhongguo*), offers a journalistic account of homosexuals' lives. This is a piece of investigative journalism consisting of interviews with lesbian and gay people. The author Fang Gang, a journalist working for *Tianjin Workers' Daily* (*Tianjing gongren bao*) at the time, made a name for himself as one of the first journalists to conduct face-to-face interviews with homosexuals.[6] The interview process was quite an adventure, according to Fang: he ventured into parks and cruising grounds to eavesdrop on gay people's conversations; he took unmeasurable risks to meet homosexuals in person and even had dinner with some of them; he even disguised himself as a medical doctor specialising in the treatment of homosexuality in order to obtain stories from those who approached him for treatment. According to Fang, homosexuals have a peculiar way of thinking and communication:

> Homosexuals generally have very high IQs [. . .] They can recognise each other through eye contact, without having to use verbal language. Outsiders can hardly understand their way of communication. A few heterosexuals have

> tried to break into their circles by disguising themselves as homosexuals. No matter how well they perform, they can always be seen through at the first sight by people in the circle. [. . .] To communicate with homosexuals, one must strengthen their self-protective ability. For example, when a homosexual offers you water, are you going to drink it or not? If not, he would probably be offended; but if yes, what would you do if you got AIDS from it? [. . .] A journalist needs to be very well prepared before setting out to interview homosexuals. One needs to take all the possible scenarios into consideration to avoid getting into a difficult situation.
>
> *(Fang 1995: 79–80)*

This account of homosexuals, typical of media representations of homosexuality at the time, constructs a distinct image of being gay by drawing a clear boundary between gay and straight people. As Fang's account suggests, the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s propelled an increased visibility of gay identity in China. China's first HIV/AIDS case was reported in 1985. In 1992, Wan Yanhai, a gay activist and social worker, established the first HIV/AIDS hotline targeting the queer communities. In the same year, Wan organised the first gay social club in China: 'Men's World' (*nanren de shijie*) which was open to 'insiders' (*quanzili de ren*) only. 'Men's World' organised a special Valentine's Day celebration at the Seahorse Dance Club (*Haima Gewuting*) in Xidan, Beijing, on 14 February 1993. The event gained considerable media coverage both in China and abroad. It was a symbolic event: a hidden community finally came out of the 'closet' and a new identity started to emerge in Chinese society.

Science, truth and Chinese intellectuals

Researchers have highlighted the important role that intellectuals (*zhishi fenzi*) played in China's modernisation process in the twentieth century, in which medical researchers were particularly important in constructing sex and sexuality (Dikötter 1995; Evans 1997; Sang 2003; Chiang 2018).[7] The re-emergence of homosexuality in postsocialist China was closely associated with Chinese intellectuals' ambition for social enlightenment: to transform China from a 'backward' socialist society into a 'modern' nation state and a full member of global capitalism.

Chinese intellectuals' 'obsession with China' (Hsia 1971) is by no means unique to the postsocialist cultural sphere. Researchers (Davies 2007; Mitter 2004; Wang 2006) have pointed out that ever since late Qing, intellectuals in China have been preoccupied with nationalist and enlightenment agendas, in the hope of building a modern Chinese nation state amidst imperial and colonial invasions from the West. Such an agenda is closely inspired by a keen awareness of China's place in the world. When the imperial Chinese cosmology of *tianxia* ('under the heaven') was replaced by the modern concept of 'nation state' when China was forced open by Western invaders and colonisers at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the May Fourth intellectuals realised the importance of

'enlightenment' (*qimeng*) in China's 'national salvation' (Levenson 1958; Schwarcz 1986; Wang 2004).[8] The socialist imagination of the world geopolitics was characterised by an antagonistic division between the progressive, new communist world and the decadent, old capitalist world, as well as a communist internationalism that leads to the liberation of all humanity. At the beginning of the postsocialist era when China opened itself up to the capitalist world, a new wave of Chinese intellectuals came to the realisation that, instead of leading the global revolution, China not only lagged behind in modernisation and development compared to the rest of the world, but was also isolated from the international community due to its political and ideological differences (Meisner 1999; Mitter 2004; Wang 2009). This realisation contributed to a growing sense of urgency on the part of postsocialist Chinese intellectuals to carry on the enlightenment agenda from their May Fourth predecessors, hence the heated intellectual debates about China's identity and future during the 1990s 'high culture fever' (Wang 1996). Significantly, both the May Fourth intellectuals and the postsocialist intellectuals share a consensus: they build their argument for China's enlightenment on the China/West, tradition/modernity dichotomies that presume the centrality of the West in global geopolitics and the sovereignty of the Chinese nation state (Wang 2003: 144). In this context, China's enlightenment movement was also characterised by an intense sense of nationalism. Chinese intellectuals' obsession with China and the question of modernity therefore becomes understandable.

It is crucial to understand the role that Chinese intellectuals have played during the postsocialist era in reclaiming cultural hegemony in Chinese society. In the process, they re-appropriate and even subvert state discourses. To illustrate the agency of Chinese intellectuals, it is also necessary to focus on the motivations they declared when they undertook the study of homosexuality. In so doing, we can unravel the complex relationship between the intellectuals and the party state to explore what lies behind the construction of these discourses.

The first few publications on homosexuality in mainland China in the 1980s treated the issue with considerable care. Zhang and Ruan were clearly aware of the sensitivity of this topic, so they used various strategies to reduce political risks, including making references to well-known literary (such as the Chinese literary classic *Dreams of the Red Chamber*) and psychological texts (represented by the works of Freud and Ellis). Ruan even used a pseudonym (Hua Jinma) in publishing his article on homosexuality. Apparently, these medical scientists were not entirely certain about where the boundary of China's openness might lie. Their discussions of homosexuality were in fact acts of transgression designed to test the limits of government consent, social norms and morality. In any act of transgression, Foucault suggests, one tests and transgresses limits. The relationship between limit and transgression is not static; rather, the two affirm each other and 'take the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust' (Foucault 1977: 35).

In the preface of their co-authored book *Their World*, Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo justify the significance of their research with 'three principles of scientific research': the 'factual principle' (*shishi qiushi yuanze*), the 'anti-ideological principle'

(*fan yishi xingtai zhongxin zhuyi yuanze*) and the 'humanist principle' (*shanliang yuanze*) (Li and Wang 1992: vii). In the same preface, the two authors state:

> We have noticed two contrasting positions in conducting social science research: One position insists that science should endeavour to seek truth and that truth should come from facts. The other maintains that truth should be directed by ideology and that science should provide justification for ideology. . . . With regard to the first position, we acknowledge that homosexuality is a matter of fact in China, and we therefore cannot turn a blind eye to it. We must adopt a call-a-fact-a-fact attitude. . . . As for the second position, we find ourselves insane: our research is seen as indecent; it is hard to make political statements in an academic language; most importantly, this research cannot attest to the correctness and grandeur of the dominant ideology in our society.
>
> *(Li and Wang 1992: v)*

Despite its controversial topic, Li and Wang's book on the homosexual subculture in urban China speaks to the postsocialist sentiment of 'seeking truth' and 'anti-ideology' and therefore is well justified. Notably, they are not the only Chinese intellectuals who justify their research into homosexuality as 'scientific', 'truth-seeking' and 'anti-ideology'. Zhang Beichuan, a medical researcher, writes in the preface for his own book on homosexuality:

> In Chinese history, many lives were lost because of feudal morality. Today, our world is still full of ignorance. This reality requires me, with the conscience of a medical doctor, to write down all the knowledge I know. Only science can dispel the dark clouds of ignorance and sufferings.
>
> *(Zhang 1994: 3)*

These examples demonstrate that early research into homosexuality in the postsocialist era was guided by a keen sense of social responsibility and universal humanism. It is also important to note that postsocialist intellectual discourses on sexuality have not constructed sexuality as inherent and essentialised: people can change their sexuality in the same way that they can change their own subjectivity. In a society undergoing rapid social transformations, people need to be well prepared enough to adapt themselves to changes. To know and to be prepared to transform the self is thus essential for such an acute sense of history. An intense feeling of voluntarism and optimism characterises this notion of the self.

It was this voluntarism and optimism that pervaded every corner of Chinese society in the first two decades of China's postsocialism. It is also this strong belief in the 'true self' and a better future that gives continued life to a 'repressive hypothesis' concerning homosexuality in China. The emergence of a publicly declared gay identity should be placed in this historical moment and within the epistemic shifts of gender, sexuality, subjectivity and identity from socialism to postsocialism. Gay identity is thus a discursive formation in this process of looking for 'truth' in

postsocialist China, and as an outcome of the individual's and nation's imagination of a postsocialist modernity.

Postsocialist modernity and gay identity

The re-emergence of homosexuality in postsocialist China should be seen as a discursive constellation in a long historical process. It results from modern people's desire to know, to understand, to categorise, to conquer things and to fit them in clearly defined categories. Medical scientists, sociologists, journalists and other intellectuals are not the only group of people who strive to make sense of homosexuality in modern China. Lesbian and gay people also participate in this 'truth-seeking' project by looking for their 'true selves' and by transforming these selves into new subject regimes.

Foucault's notion of biopower is helpful for us to understand how power works in relation to the human life. The despotic 'power over death' was replaced by the 'power over life' in modern society. Biopower, according to Foucault, often manifests the 'disciplines of the body' and 'the regulations of the population' (1990: 139). If, in socialist China, individual body, gender, sexuality and desire were territorialised into a unified national body required by the state, then certainly postsocialist China has not liberated them. Rather, it has adopted a new form of governmentality: from household registration to birth control, from sexual science to socialist morality, from discipline in educational institutions to compliance in work units. The three forms of modern subjectivation that Foucault proposed – sciences, dividing practices and self-subjectivation (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 208) – are all at work. Bodies, gender, sexuality and desires have therefore been re-territorialised into what the state and capitalism crafted in postsocialist China. The re-emergence of homosexuality as a sexual category and as an embodied social identity is thus an outcome of this new form of power and governmentality. The newly invented gay and lesbian bodies manifest the hegemony of discourses of being modern.

As many critics acknowledge, it is as hard to define modernity as it is to explain what 'Chinese modernity' is (Chow 1991; Dikötter 1995; Lee 1999; Martin and Heinrich 2006; Mitter 2008; Rofel 1999; Schein 1999; Shih 2001; Tang 2000; Wang 2004; Wang 1997; Wang 2009; Wang 1996; Zhang 1997). Bruno Latour (1993) argues that the sign of modernity under which we have lived is an imaginary one. Following Latour, Lisa Rofel highlights regional, national and local differences in such an imagination and 'modernity's centrality in constituting otherness' (1999: xiii). Michel Foucault defines modernity as a 'critical attitude': 'For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is.' (Foucault 1991: 41). Catherine Driscoll (2010) also highlights the role of 'critical attitude' in making the modern world. I draw on these authors' suggestions that modernity exists in people's imaginations, and that it is felt in lived experiences as 'structures of feeling' to suggest that imagining of modernity is historically contingent. Even when we agree that the passion for modernity pervades the whole of twentieth-century history, we still

need to acknowledge the different dreams, wishes and fantasies that people of different eras may have. If people's imagination of modernity in socialist China was largely imbued with socialist passion and revolutionary utopia, the imagination of modernity in the postsocialist era takes on different meanings and conjures up distinct images for various people and social groups. For some, it promises better lives and prosperous futures; for some, it tolls the passing of a passionate era; for some, it offers a sense of true self and a possibility of change; whereas for others, it celebrates the liberation of sex, gender, sexuality and desire repressed in the socialist era. I conclude this chapter with a poem to exemplify how modernity is imagined in relation to sex and sexuality.

In 1979, three years after the death of Mao and one year after the Communist Party Conference made the crucial decision of 'reform and opening up', thus starting its historical transformation from socialism to postsocialism, a 'big character' poster (*dazibao*), posted by some young people on a wall in Beijing, later known as the 'democracy wall', captured many people's imaginations. On the poster was a poem titled '*xing kaifang* OPEN SEX'[9] (sex open-up opens up sex). It read:

> 1979 is Open Sex year.
> If we take a figure of speech:
> This year is a girl;
> 'Open Sex' is the little woollen hat on her head.
> If you do not put it on,
> You are not modern at all. (Ruan 1991: 179)

The authors and distributors of this poem may or may not have known what modernity means in a scholarly sense, but it does not prevent them from taking modernity as a key to imagining their desired future and their positions within the future. Sex and sexuality seem crucial in this process and to such imaginations. It is in this contingency and ambiguity of imagining and reimagining postsocialist modernities that gay identities and queer desires started to emerge.

However, such an imagination of modernity is also precarious and even problematic: it is characterised by a sense of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011), in which an uncritical feeling of optimism effectively disguises what transnational capitalism will do, and has been doing, in China and worldwide as it puts democratisation processes, public welfare, as well as social equality and justice at risk. In imagining a liberal pluralist society for China, many Chinese intellectuals have hastily bidden farewell to revolution and self-consciously departed from socialism and Marxism. In imagining China to be part of a 'singular modernity' (Jameson 2002) in capitalist globalisation, China's socialist past and its legacy have been forgotten and even renounced. The last four decades mark a turbulent era, not only for China but also for the rest of the world, as a socialist vision gives way to a neoliberal consensus, and as neoliberalism starts to transform human subjectivities and lives at an unprecedented speed. Gay identities and queer desires in China have emerged at this precarious historical juncture.

Notes

1 In the 1910s and 1920s, apart from the introduction of concepts such as gender, sex and sexuality, the term *tongxing'ai* (same-sex love; homosexuality) entered the Chinese language from the European sexology (particularly from writings by the German Richard von Krafft-Ebing and the Englishmen Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter), often through Japanese sources (Dikötter 1995; Kang 2009; Sang 2003).

2 Discourses of homosexuality as both 'feudal remnant' and 'Western decadence' seem contradictory, but they represent the multiple and often conflicting discourses about homosexuality circulating in the postsocialist Chinese society. In fact, there is never a single and coherent discourse about homosexuality in China. It is productive to ask what discourses there are and how people negotiate these discourses.

3 For discussions of male same-sex desire in the Cultural Revolution see Ye (2018) and Kang (2018).

4 The Chinese term *jijian* is not exactly equivalent to the English term 'sodomy'. Both terms have their distinct historical and cultural associations. *Jijian* does not have the religious association that 'sodomy' evokes. In China, *jijian* only refer to same-sex anal sexual behaviour between males and it is a term that appeared at the end of China's imperial dynasties. There was no law before Ming and Qing dynasties to punish *jijian* between consensual adults. Ming and Qing criminal laws made *hetong jijian* (consensual sodomy) an offence that involved a punishment of '100 strokes of heavy bamboo' because it disrupted the social and gender order, but the punishment was by no means heavy at the time, and the law was seldom implemented in practice (Guo 2007: 21–22; Sommer 2000: 122).

5 But this does not mean that homosexual behaviours were not punished in the socialist and postsocialist China. Guo points out the difference between law in texts (*shuben shang de fa*) and law in practice (*xingdong zhong de fa*) (Guo 2007: 1). In the socialist era and the early stage of the postsocialist era, homosexual behaviours were sometimes punished with the charge of 'hooliganism' (*liumang zui*) (Dutton 1998). 'Hooliganism' was removed from China's 1997 Criminal Law, which was generally considered 'decriminalisation (*feizuihua)* of homosexuality in China. 'Administrative penalty' (*xingzheng chufa*), which takes the forms of lowered job position, less salary and even unemployment, is also another form of punishment in China.

6 In 1999, Fang was sued by one of his interviewees, a Mr. Xu, for ruining the latter's reputation by disclosing his identity in the book. This court case marked a watershed moment in postsocialist China's legal history concerning homosexuality: The judge had to delete the sentence 'homosexuality is seen as an abnormal sexual behaviour' in his court decision because of Fang's appeal. For details of the case, see Rofel's chapter 'Legislating Desire' in *Desiring China* (2007: 135–55).

7 Admittedly, the term 'intellectual' (*zhishi fenzi*) in Chinese has different connotations from the word 'intellectual' in English. The Chinese term covers all the 'educated' professionals including teachers, editors, journalists, medical doctors, scientists and engineers. The denotations and connotations of the term *zhishi fenzi* vary from historical and social contexts. The importance of intellectuals in China, however, should not be underestimated, not only because they are considered to embody the Confucian ideals of 'nurturing one's virtue, taking care of one's family, governing the state and pacifying the world under heaven' (*xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, pingtianxia*), but also due to the important roles that they played in Chinese history, especially during the May Fourth Movement in the 1910s and 1920s and, as I suggest in this chapter, in the postsocialist era.

8 I use the term 'enlightenment' in a broad sense, instead of referring specifically to the Age of Enlightenment in the West which centred upon the eighteenth century. For a discussion of 'enlightenment' (*qimeng*) in the modern Chinese context, see *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Schwarcz 1986).

9 I use capital letters here to indicate that the original language is in English.

2

WOMEN FIFTY MINUTES

In search of queer women's spaces

> The concave symbolises the *yin* and the convex the *yang*. In China, the two terms are often used to refer to gender, and it is said that the union between man and woman is the union between *yin* and *yang*, a natural balance. But in actual matter of fact, *yin* and *yang* are not immutable; constant transformation occurs between the two. Whatever your gender, you yourself are a combination of *yin* and *yang*, a complete and entire self.
>
> *Shi Tou (2013) on her artwork* Concave-Convex

Hailed as 'one of the most outstanding female artists in contemporary China' (Dixon Place 2018), lesbian artist, filmmaker and queer activist Shi Tou uses films and artworks to explore bold and intimate issues such as gender, sexuality and identity. Her films, artworks and activist practices have contributed to the formation of queer identities, communities and spaces in postsocialist China. In this chapter, through an analysis of the representation of queer spaces in Shi Tou's 2006 film *Women Fifty Minutes* (*nüren wushi fenzhong*), I discern the construction of queer women's subjectivities and spaces in postsocialist China.

Shi Tou's artworks, films and activism have been discussed separately and often in isolation by scholars from different academic fields (Sang 2003; Chao 2010a; Liu and Rofel 2010; Martin 2010; Bao 2010, 2018; Tong 2011; Huang 2018). This chapter brings together her film, artwork and activism through an analysis of her representative work *Women Fifty Minutes*. With an emphasis on space and place, I examine the construction of queer women's subjectivities and spaces through representational strategies. In doing so, I hope to delineate the emergence of queer women's subjectivities and spaces through film, artwork and activism in postsocialist China, and interrogate how queerness emerges within critical engagements with feminist discourses.

Shi Tou and *Women Fifty Minutes*

As an artist, photographer, independent filmmaker and queer activist, Shi Tou is one of the best-known queer public personas in mainland China.[1] She was born in 1969 into a family of Miao (also known as Hmong), an ethnic minority in Southwest China's Guizhou Province, and trained as a painter at the Guizhou Art Academy. After graduation, she taught art at a local high school for several years before leading a nomadic lifestyle as an artist, traveling to different parts of China. In the early 1990s, she went to Beijing and became a member of the Yuanmingyuan Artist Village, a group of artists who used modern art for social and political critique (Welland 2018). Art critic Huang Zhuan (2008) regards Shi Tou as one of the most outstanding female artists in contemporary China and notes how her ethnic, gender and sexual identities may have had an impact on her artworks:

> Her nuanced visual treatment of Chinese queer women in particular has given her a unique place in contemporary Chinese art. Shi Tou's experience as a member of the marginal artists in the early 1990s at Yuan Ming Yuan, together with her later nomadic experience in Northwest China and her belonging to an ethnic minority in China, have all contributed to the delicacy, sophistication, and humanity in her artistic touch.

In the immediate aftermath of the depathologisation of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 2001, Shi Tou took part in a TV talk show about homosexuality on the Hunan Satellite Television with sociologist Li Yinhe and queer writer Cui Zi'en. She subsequently became mainland China's first 'out' lesbian celebrity. In the same year, she played a lead role in China's first lesbian feature film *Fish and Elephant* (*Jinnian xiatian*, dir. Li Yu, 2001). The success of the film at numerous film festivals, including winning the Elivra Notari Prize at the Venice International Film Festival, gained her an international reputation. Shi Tou has played an important part in mainland China's queer activist movements since the 1990s. She has led queer community groups, hosted community hotlines and organised queer film festivals. Together with other queer activists in Beijing, Shi Tou co-organised the Cross-Cultural Dialogue (*dongxifang xiaozu*) (a queer-themed reading and discussion group in Beijing), the Beijing Sister Group (the first lesbian-focused grassroots organisation in Beijing) and the Beijing LGBT hotline (the first community hotline offered to queer people in the PRC) in the 1990s and thus became one of China's earliest queer activists in the postsocialist era. After her media 'coming out' in 2001, she became even more active: she participated in the organisation of China's first national queer conference in Beijing in 2001, the Beijing Queer Film Festival (the longest running queer film festival in China since 2001) and the China Queer Film Festival Tour (a queer film collective initiative that brings films to different Chinese cities for community screenings) (Engebretsen 2014; Wei 2015; Bao 2018).

Shi Tou has worked with different forms of art and media, including painting, photography, installation and film, during the past two decades. Ever since 2001, filmmaking has become an important part of her life. Her films include *Dyke March* (2002), *Gu Wenda: Art, Politics, Life, Sexuality* (2005), *Women Fifty Minutes* (2006), *Gate, Mountain, River* (2006) and *We Are Here* (2016). Most of these films are made in collaboration with her lesbian partner Ming Ming, who often acts as Shi Tou's model and cameraperson (Figure 2.1).[2] Many of Shi Tou's films are independent documentaries made with digital video cameras and for the queer communities; they form part of China's New Documentary Movement (Berry, Lü and Rofel 2010) and the 'New Queer Chinese Cinema' (Leung 2004). These films engage with manifold issues about China's social changes in the postsocialist era as well as their impact on people's lives, with an emphasis on gender, sexuality and identity.

From 2000 to 2004, Shi Tou and Ming Ming travelled to different parts of China to make a documentary about China's social changes and their impact upon women's lives. The film was shot with a digital video camera and on a shoestring budget. The shooting of the film took place in a wide variety of geographical locations which they had visited: from cosmopolitan Beijing to small towns in southwest China's Guizhou Province, from nomadic tents in Qinghai to lama temples on the Tibetan Plateau. The female characters represented in the film include breastfeeding mothers, ice-skating children, wedding couples, weeping mourners, praying Tibetans and homeless beggars. The film even contains unexpected scenes captured spontaneously on camera, such as a traffic accident, drug trafficking on a long-distance coach and a lesbian couple kissing each other inside a Beijing subway station. Through representing women's individual and collective experiences, this film unfolds a panorama of Chinese society in the postsocialist era, with its dreams and despairs, excitements and disenchantments, all of which are deeply gendered. The film is titled *Women Fifty Minutes*, indicating the subject matter and the length of the film (Figure 2.2).[3]

Women Fifty Minutes does not have a single, unified and coherent narrative. It consists of more than twenty short clips montaged together, each set in a different place and focusing on a specific scene, although there are occasional overlaps of people and places. Some clips are as short as a few seconds and others are longer than five minutes. Assembled together, they make powerful statements about women and China; they also challenge the aesthetic conventions of the documentary at the time. As Reel China (2009) notes on *Women Fifty Minutes*, 'its combination of narrative and experimental moments provides an edgy and beautiful counterpoint to more straightforward recent social documentaries'. Indeed, if most films in China's New Documentary Movement seem obsessed with constructing a single, linear and coherent narrative, *Women Fifty Minutes* refuses to follow this narrative pattern. Furthermore, as many male Chinese documentarians strive to expose the harsh realities of marginalised people's lives by using their signature documentary realism borrowed from the direct cinema and *cinema verité* traditions, *Women Fifty Minutes* mixes up documentary realism with poetic romanticism and even dream-like surrealism, and frequently intercepts objective documentation

FIGURE 2.1 Shi Tou (left) and Ming Ming (right)

Source: Photo courtesy of the artists

FIGURE 2.2 *Women Fifty Minutes* DVD cover

Source: Photo courtesy of the artist

with the filmmaker's personal voices and subjective perspectives. The film even blurs the boundary between documentary and painting by incorporating some of Shi Tou's artworks into the film narrative, and, in doing so, lends to the film a painting-like aesthetic quality and an old photo-style nostalgic ambiance. All these features make *Women Fifty Minutes* a distinct film in China's independent documentary movement.

Women Fifty Minutes touches on many social issues including women's lives, intimacy between queer women, life in different parts of China, folk traditions such as ethnic and rural weddings and funerals, religious and folk practices, China's environmental degradation and uneven economic development. It is very difficult to sum up in a single statement the themes of the film. I contend that it is the refusal to make grand narratives, the focus on multiplicity and differences, along with the attention to meticulous details and the mundanity of everyday life, that makes Shi Tou's film intrinsically queer, in the sense that queer defies definition and celebrates a non-conformist way of life. Shi Tou (quoted in Gardiner 2007) explains her motive of making such a film in an interview with a *Fridae* website correspondent: 'I want to explore the different ways that women live in these places, and by showing how different they are you can see how society is changing and how women's lives are changing.'

Indeed, this film is primarily about Chinese women in a rapidly changing Chinese society under neoliberal globalisation. In contemporary China, there are as many ways of being a woman as there are as many discourses of feminism. An examination of how Shi Tou represents women in *Women Fifty Minutes* thus unfolds different types of female subjectivities and feminist discourses in postsocialist China. It also reveals the limitations of these subjectivities and discourses in understanding queer women's lived experiences: indeed, without taking sexuality into account, the understanding of feminism and women's experiences would certainly be incomplete. It is sexuality, and furthermore, queerness, that Shi Tou tries to insert in Chinese women's narratives.

Narrating the female subject in postsocialist China

In her pioneering work on Chinese feminism, Tani Barlow (1994, 2004) glosses the different Chinese terms frequently used to refer to women in postsocialist China: *funü, nüxing* and *nüren*. Although all these words mean 'women' in the Chinese language, their social and cultural connotations differ. These words also represent different but intersecting subjectivities, or rather, subject positions, that contemporary Chinese women inhabit. In contemporary China, the three terms *funü, nüxing* and *nüren*, as well as their associated subject positions, coexist and often conflate. They circulate concurrently to reveal the complex landscapes of gendered subjectivities and discourses as China bids farewell to state socialism and embraces neoliberal capitalism.

The first term, *funü*, is a popular term used in the socialist and postsocialist state feminism, which is sometimes called 'state feminism', 'official feminism' or 'socialist feminism' (Barlow 1994, 2004; Evans 1997; Yang 1999). Under state feminism, the state has instituted All China Women's Association (*Fulian*) as a national organisation representing women's interests; it also celebrates the eighth of March as the International Women's Day. A sequence in *Women Fifty Minutes* presents a picture of how state feminism works in the postsocialist era by documenting a Spring Outing (*chunyou*) event organised by a local *Fulian* on a Women's Day. The scene is set in a rural area in Southwest China: a group of women arrive at a scenic spot. They talk happily to each other as they walk past a bridge and to some simple do-it-yourself entertainment facilities. After singing some folk songs following the local tradition, these women play mah-jong and card games; some participate in a jogging competition. Everybody seems contented in the picture, and *Fulian* does seem capable of mobilising women to form a community of mutual help and support. In documenting the scene, Shi Tou shows the self-organisation and empowerment of rural women under China's state feminism. In the film, state feminism is tinted with a nostalgic sentiment at a time when state socialism is questioned, rejected and even forgotten.

Nüxing and *nüren* have emerged in postsocialist China as subject positions in response to and as a correction of *funü* the subject of state feminism. *Nüxing* can roughly be translated as 'woman the sexed subject, the other of humanist Man' or

'essential woman' (Barlow 1994). It highlights 'sex differences' (*xing bie*) by interpreting gender in sexed, othering and binary terms. It celebrates gender and sexual differences as well as 'individual choice' brought about by China's entry into global capitalism with the state endorsement of neoliberal ideologies. *Nüxing* the sexed subject is mostly portrayed negatively in Shi Tou's film: at a nightclub, lights are dim, and music is loud; a blond woman is dancing while flirting with her male clients. *Nüxing* the sexed subject is treated by the director with the same approval as of a Westernised capitalist modernity, commercial culture and male desires.

The category *nüren* emerged in China's women's studies movement in the postsocialist era. Leading Chinese feminist scholar Li Xiaojiang maintains that Chinese women are collectively oriented, and that they should seek not so much individual rights and interests but pursue the universal good for all of humanity. The turn to universalism, represented by the *nüren* subject, in the first few decades of the postsocialist era bespeaks Chinese intellectuals' imagination of a postsocialist modernity and women's position in such a modernity. Although state feminism represented by the *funü* subject is widely questioned on the ground that it erases women's 'sex difference', Western liberal feminism represented by *nüxing* the sexed subject is seen as equally problematic because of its complicity with consumer capitalism. *Nüren* should thus be seen as an example of Chinese intellectuals' effort to rethink women's role in a postsocialist world and to remap Chinese feminism beyond a socialism/capitalism binary. Shi Tou's use of the term *nüren* to designate women in this film should be understood in this light.

Shi Tou's *Women Fifty Minutes* focuses primarily on *nüren*, woman as the universal subject. In the film, women and men are not seen as binary opposites. Rather, they work and live together to fight against the tyranny of dominant social structures such as the nation state, capitalism, consumerism and uneven development. Women of different race, ethnicity, religious belief, class and sexuality all find their way under the umbrella term of *nüren*. In the film, the poor woman praying on the Tibetan plateau may have little in common with the middle class woman practising yoga in Beijing. Yet it is their perceived biological traits that bind them together. Like the Chinese feminist scholar Li Xiaojiang, Shi Tou seems to believe that it is women's biological and cultural specificities, such as their birth, marriage, pregnancy and mothering experiences, that make them intrinsically different from men. This type of female subjectivity is far from being individualistic; it is situated in complex and interwoven social structures such as family, kinship, cultural tradition, state power and economic development. Shi Tou's conception of women is thus close to the female subject in the socialist feminist discourse, which places an emphasis on social structures such as patriarchy and capitalism that combine to subjugate women. It is this type of female subjectivity that Shi Tou attributes to women, and it is in this belief that *Women Fifty Minutes* uses gender as a lens to look at Chinese society. In recovering the histories and memories of state feminism, and in embracing universalism and internationalism, Shi Tou's film launches a socialist feminist critique to the reification of gender and the individualisation of society under the influence of capitalist globalisation.

Queer political space

Women Fifty Minutes is an ambitious project: besides trying to understand and reconstruct women's subjectivities and experiences in the postsocialist era, Shi Tou also strives to insert sexuality into the discourse of gender, and to combine queerness with feminism. This is demonstrated by her representation of queer subjectivities and spaces in the film.

In documenting Chinese women's lives, Shi Tou is quick to capture moments of intimacy between women, which would otherwise have gone unnoticed in the grand narratives of women and the nation. *Women Fifty Minutes* is also a film about queer identities and spaces. These queer spaces are at once real and imaginary, material and utopian. They bespeak the fluidity, volatility and hopes of queer women's spaces in contemporary China where queer rights are not officially recognised, and queer women's issues are marginalised in gay men-focused narratives (Sang 2003; Martin 2010; Kam 2013; Engebretsen 2014).

In the film, there are several explicit references to same-sex intimacy between women. They point to different types of queer subjectivities and spaces. One scene takes place at the Tiananmen Square, the symbolic political centre of the Chinese state. Shi Tou juxtaposes two sets of shots against each other: one documents a solemn national flag hoisting ceremony; the other shows two girls kissing intimately inside a subway station (Figure 2.3).

This is perhaps one of the most intimate moments in the film: two girls are kissing each other in a public space. The camera zooms out and reveals a quiet waiting area at a subway station in Beijing. The two girls are so engrossed in their own world that they do not seem to care about, let alone notice, anyone passing by. For one moment, time freezes. The kissing scene occupies the whole frame. A moment later, a subway train pulls into the station. The two women stand up and walk into

FIGURE 2.3 'But none of these disturbs this intimate moment between these two girls.' Film still from *Women Fifty Minutes*

Source: Author

a train carriage, hand in hand. Before they disappear on the train, the school bags on their backs look as bright as booming sunflowers in the heat of the sun. The camera then cuts back to the flag hoisting ceremony at the Tiananmen Square: the ceremony is still going on, and the soldiers are continuing to march, yet the whole process has lost its solemnity and significance. Shi Tou's voice emerges off-screen: 'it is like a fairy tale, isn't it?'

It is not unusual for Shi Tou to insert her voice and body into her own films and this serves as a form of feminist and queer intervention into documentary filmmaking in China's New Documentary Movement (Chao 2010a). The playful tone of the voiceover seems to subvert the highly ritualistic, theatrical and mythical hyperreality of the state ceremony. For Mikhail Bakhtin (1965), the carnivalesque ecstasies can potentially collapse the sacred order of the state and religious power, however temporary it may be. The existence of parallel secular times and spaces for queer women can thus decentre the linear, progressive national time and 'the space of phallic verticality' (Lefebvre 1991: 287).

Back to the Tiananmen Square, Shi Tou's camera pushes through the crowd who stand along the Chang'an Boulevard and watch the flag hoisting ceremony. It zooms in on a squad of fully armed soldiers. They are symbols of the Chinese state, which is often seen as masculine and heteronormative.[4] In the subtitle of the film, Shi Tou comments:

> You never know what happens at the Tiananmen Square:
> Ticket sellers selling flight tickets, poor citizens appealing to authorities for help,
> Fighting over a place to watch the national flag hoisting ceremony, begging for money . . .
> But none of these disturbs the intimate movement between the two girls.[5]

The subtitles, in both Chinese and English, are not literal transcriptions of people's conversations in the film. They function as Shi Tou's diary or commentary to introduce the background of a story or to make social critiques, thus making the film akin to an 'essay film'. This commentary about the Tiananmen Square can be seen as a form of understatement with a heightened rhetorical effect. Certainly, many historical events have taken place at the Tiananmen Square, giving rise to significant impacts on China and modern Chinese history. What Shi Tou has mentioned in the subtitle may appear mundane and insignificant compared to the monumental historical events such as the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the Red Guard rally during the Cultural Revolution, or the student protest in 1989. The understatement reminds audiences of the politically sensitive subtexts hidden in these lines and the way how the filmmaker uses understatement to circumvent government censorship. It is what is unsaid, as well as the tension between 'banality' and 'fatality' (Morris 1990), that highlights the message that Shi Tou strives to convey. Despite the serious nature of the highly politicised national flag hoisting ceremony, people at the square react to the ceremony in different ways: some smile; some yawn; other talk to each other while buses and cars continue to drive past the

square as usual. This scene reveals the ruptures between the national time and the heterogeneous temporalities of ordinary people's lives and experiences (Anagnost 1997); it also challenges the nation state's hegemony of time and space.

Queer space in this sequence is at the same time a public space. The city planners may not have intended the subway station to be a queer space; yet this does not prevent people from appropriating the public space as a space of their own. More importantly, by juxtaposing scenes of the state ceremony and queer intimacy, Shi Tou makes a strong political statement: the state, however powerful it is, cannot control people's pursuit of love and happiness. The private, intimate and queer spaces may well challenge the public, masculine and heteronormative space of the nation state. Admittedly, it is problematic to see sex as antithetic to the state power and queerness as being capable of subverting the hegemonic power of the nation state. However, if Mark McLelland (2009) is correct in noting that 'kissing is a symbol of democracy' in his account of post-War Japanese queer culture, and if we take into consideration the development of the queer movement in China, which constantly has to negotiate with government censorship and state intervention, Shi Tou's position of 'saying yes to kissing means saying no to power' becomes understandable in this context.

Queer utopian space

Women Fifty Minutes presents the audience with a 'queer town' where intimacy between women is widely seen. The small town is presumed to be located somewhere in southwest China where Shi Tou and Ming Ming are from. Like many other towns in China, it is experiencing a rapid process of urbanisation, accompanied by serious environmental problems. Through Shi Tou's camera lens, the sky is grey, and the river is dark. Traditional houses and courtyards are demolished to give way to multi-storey high rises. Rubble is littered everywhere. People from all walks of life are dressed in various styles of clothing displaying an uneven sense of fashion and economic status. On the street, a boy is dancing in order to beg for money; people around him look on with a mixture of indifference and boredom. A group of elderly women are sitting outdoors on some benches enjoying the sunshine. Two of them even appear to be holding each other (Figure 2.4). Shi Tou tells the story of the two women in the film subtitle:

> Ever since their childhood,
> Granny Chen and Granny Yu have been close friends.
> In their teenage years,
> Arranged by their parents, both got married.
> After their husbands died,
> On sunny days like this, they often come here to enjoy the sunshine together.
> They are in their nineties.
> They have been in love with each other for more than eighty years.
> Other elderly people in this town share similar stories.

FIGURE 2.4 'They have been in love with each other for more than eighty years.' Film still from *Women 50 Minutes*

Source: Author

We do not know whether the story is true or not, or if it is Shi Tou who has projected her own assumption onto these elderly women and creatively interpreted their friendship as same-sex intimacy. But the question of whether these women are indeed lesbians seems to bother neither the filmmaker nor the audience. Most would rather believe in such a sweet story, or that such a queer town actually exists in this world.

It is worth noting that Shi Tou does not impose a lesbian, or *lala*, identity to these women. Her understanding of same-sex intimacy is akin to Adrienne Rich's (1986) notion of 'lesbian continuum' or Eve Sedgwick's (2003) notion of 'homosociality', that is, same sex intimacies that cannot be encapsulated by fixed modern identity categories. Shi Tou's film can be seen as an effort to translate Western queer theory to China, with her own interpretations and creative licenses. It is certainly situated in the long process of translating feminism and queer theory in a transnational context, with interesting local/global configurations (Ko and Wang 2007).

Queer space in Shi Tou's film can take the form of a romanticised space for women and between women. It transcends time and space and points to immanence and eternity. These women's old age and their 'long-term relationship' bespeak such temporalities. The implication is clear: queer space is a space for pure love and intense emotional attachment (*qing*).[6] No other forces including family pressures for heterosexual marriages and the passage of time can alter women's love for each other. It is easy to see the utopian nature of such a narrative while at the

same time miss the social critique that such a narrative entails: the obsession with true love and utopia often serves as a critique to the commercialisation and reification of desire under capitalism in the postsocialist era.

The theme of a utopian queer space is also demonstrated in another scene. At a restaurant in the same town, a group of young women are having dinner together and singing Karaoke afterwards. A bit tipsy, they play jokes on each other and even hug and touch each other. A young woman asks the woman sitting next to her, 'do you love me?' The reply: 'I like you, but I also like Xiaohong [another woman's name].' (Figure 2.5) After the dinner, the group, all drunk because of the rice wine, put their arms around each other and dance to the music. The subtitle tells the audience that Qiuqiu, a tomboyish woman becomes a man after a sex reassignment surgery two years later.

Shi Tou locates queer spaces in a specific place: a small town in southwest China. She seems to suggest that queer love is a beautiful and special feeling among women, which has not yet been contaminated by the all-pervasive consumer society. With increasing economic development and commercialisation of society, it would probably vanish, in the same way that the old houses and streets would eventually be replaced by things modern. 'Everything shall change for certain', Shi Tou writes in the synopsis of the film with a poetic sentiment. This type of queer space, albeit romantic and utopian, is also precarious, because it can only be located in a marginalised place such as a small town and is subject to change in a fast-developing

FIGURE 2.5 'I like you, and I also like Xiaohong.' Film still from *Women Fifty Minutes*

Source: Author

society. Shi Tou's nostalgic sentiment is nicely captured by soft and dreamy light and old songs used in the film.

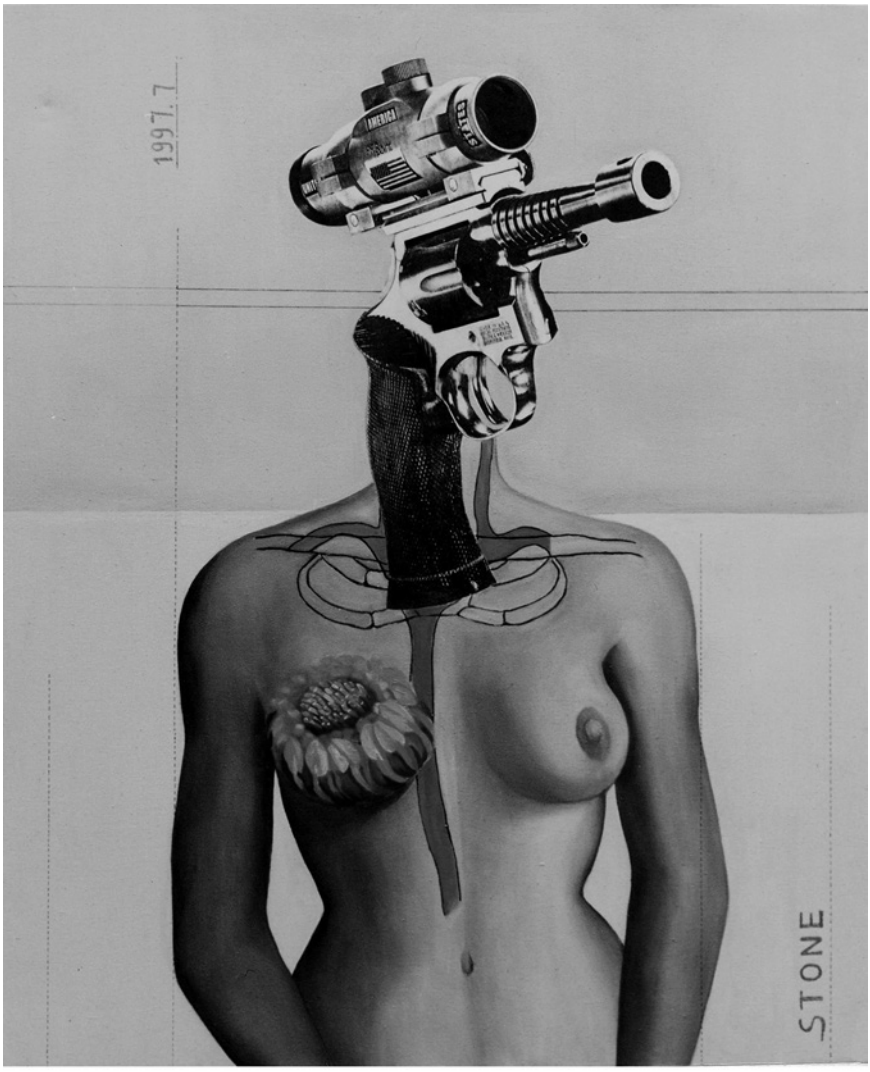
The aesthetics of queer space

The queer space that Shi Tou depicts is also an aesthetic space, constructed by the visual codes that she creates with a video camera. Trained as a painter herself, Shi Tou's artistic sensibility has lent her film a painting-like quality. Some camera shots carry a strong oil-on-canvas effect and a dramatic musicality. For example, large patches and broad-brushstroke stripes of trees are pushing backward while a motorbike is riding forward at speed on a road while non-diegetic music with strong beats is playing at full volume. In another sequence, a couple of desolate trees stand by the water on a cold winter's day with melancholic music playing in the background.

Yet the video camera is not the only form of medium with which Shi Tou works. She also incorporates some of her own paintings and photography in the film. In the latter half of the film, she exhibits some of her artworks about women's experiences. Most of these artworks are modelled on herself and Ming Ming. About twenty paintings and three photographic works are featured in the film. In doing so, she blurs the boundaries between different forms of medium, and between art and life. Indeed, as Foucault asks, why can't the life of everyone become a work of art (quoted in Eribon 1991: 317–32); and as Shi Tou suggests: why can't we integrate artwork into life, and *vice versa*?

Shi Tou's paintings and photography are grouped into several series. Most of them portray nude or semi-nude female bodies and intimacies between women. Many of them use symbolism. For instance, in her *Weapon* (*Wuqi*) series, beautiful nude female bodies are juxtaposed with lethal weapons of war, such as guns, cannons, bullets and knives. In one of these paintings (Figure 2.6), the head of a woman is replaced by a pistol, whilst her left breast turns into a blooming sunflower. The painting can be interpreted as a feminist statement to stop war and to embrace peace and love. Shi Tou explains the picture as an 'incisive, critical look directed at our world, courageous and fearless' (quoted in Sang 2003: 172). Another series (Figure 2.7) feature women and animals. Women are put in the same frame with ferocious animals such as wolves and sharks. A queer couple, one with a yellow head, presumably representing an Asian woman, and the other looking like a white woman, walk together hand in hand with confidence. In the background, a wolf-shaped animal walks away in despair. With these images, Shi Tou sends a clear message: with love and international solidarity, women have nothing to fear. Considering that Shi Tou's active participation in transnational feminist and queer activism since the Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1995, the theme of sisterhood and international solidarity among women in her 1997 painting becomes clear.

Another series is titled *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies* (*yuanyang hudie*) (Figure 2.8), named after a literary genre of popular romance in late imperial China.[7] The paintings feature young women swimming and hugging in multi-coloured pools. As Sang (2003: 172) comments, 'the liquid dreamscapes seem to suggest the



武器之六 1997年 73x60(cm) 布面油画

FIGURE 2.6 *Weapon* series, No. 6, 1997, 73 × 60 cm, oil on canvas

Source: Shi Tou, courtesy of the artist

artist's visions of blissful, carefree female-female intimacy are somewhat fantastic and utopian'.

This is not the first time that Shi Tou draws on historical themes or forms. Some of her photographic works (e.g. Figure 2.9) resemble New Year calendars (*yuefenpai*) from the Republican era (1912–49), with spring couplets (*chunlian*) decorated on

FIGURE 2.7 *Female Friends*, 1997, 100 × 81 cm, oil on canvas

Source: Shi Tou, courtesy of the artist

both sides of the picture frame, and advertisements for cigarettes and 'things modern' dotted around the picture. Shi Tou and Ming Ming stand in the middle of the picture, dressed in traditional Chinese cheongsam (*qipao*) and hugging each other intimately.[8] In this series, Shi Tou combines two types of medium – photography

鸳鸯蝴蝶之庄周之梦　２０００年　５０ｘ６１(cm)　布面油画

FIGURE 2.8 *Zhuangzi Dreams of a Butterfly*, in *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies* series

Source: Shi Tou, courtesy of the artist

and painting – and she incorporates elements from traditional cultural forms such as New Year calendars and spring couplets. In doing so, her works display a modern but at the same time nostalgic sensibility.

In Republican China, pictures of female homoeroticism abounded in newspapers and magazines and popular art forms including calendars (Sang 2003; Kang 2009). By rediscovering historical themes and forms, Shi Tou suggests that same-sex

FIGURE 2.9 *Commemoration* (*Ji'nian*), 127 × 92 cm

Source: Shi Tou and Ming Ming 2006 photography, courtesy of the artists

intimacy between women has a long history in China, and that it is indigenous. Shi Tou's effort to reconstruct a history of female homoeroticism is at the same time an affirmation of queer women's desires as legitimate, historical and indigenous. After all, reconstructing a historical past, however faithful or reliable it may be, gives coherence to an imagined identity in the present. As Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) reminds us, 'traditions' are new inventions of the past from the perspectives of the present. In the light of this statement, queer history in China can also be seen as an 'invented tradition'. To be sure, contemporary queer identity is vastly different from homoeroticism practised in the Republican era (Sang 2003). Nevertheless, strategic interpretations of historical events by linking the past to the present play a crucial role in creating a modern lesbian identity. In the case of Shi Tou's works, the artist not only reconstructs a history of homoeroticism in China by

tracing it to the Republican era but highlights the 'Chineseness' of such identities as well. Her artistic representation of homoeroticism challenges the 'global queering' thesis advocated by Dennis Altman (2001), in whose theorisation lesbian and gay identities are imported from America to other parts of the world; it also subverts the ideology of the Chinese state, in which homosexuality is seen as a 'Western import' and thus incompatible with Chinese society and culture.

The use of paintings and photography in Shi Tou's film is particularly interesting because, through media convergence (Jenkins 2006), Shi Tou creates a mediated and imagined queer space. Such a space is both artistic and utopian. Yet it also translates into people's dreams, fantasies, bodily and affective experiences. This space is what Henri Lefebvre (1991) calls a 'representational space'. According to Lefebvre, representational spaces are spaces 'directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"' and spaces of some artists who '*describe* and aspire to do more than describe'; such spaces are both physical and imaginary, and they challenge the 'representation of spaces' mapped out by hegemonic powers and significations (1991: 39 emphasis in original). If we consider artworks important ways for marginalised social groups such as queer communities to articulate their existence and to fight for cultural hegemony, the production and circulation of queer art, photography and films are certainly instrumental in bringing about a queer public sphere in contemporary China.

Queer space as imagined, affective and performative

The queer spaces that Shi Tou depicts in *Women Fifty Minutes* are a combination of real spaces and imagined spaces. On the one hand, queer love and intimacy are romanticised in this film. On the other, these spaces are either spaces that challenge hegemonic spaces of the masculine and heteronormative nation state, or exotic places where true love transcends time and space, or aesthetic spaces that weave together dreams and fantasies in artistic representation. Audiences of the film may ask these questions: are they real places? Is the film a 'true' representation of queer women in China?

Fridae's Beijing correspondent Dinah Gardiner (2007) began her article 'Woman on Film' with a blurb:

> Imagine a village full of queer women, and according to Shi Tou, the queer filmmaker of a new documentary, *Women Fifty Minutes*, such a place does exist.'[9]

Gardiner's article generated heated discussions online. On the same website, following the article, several readers posted their comments and expressed their interest in visiting this place. One of them, posted in English by a non-Chinese queer, asks: 'How can non-Chinese lesbians find this place or are we unwelcome (which is, I think, perfectly understandable)?'

Gardiner and the netizens' readings of the film are fascinating, as they have clearly understood the film literarily and, in a sense, creatively 'misread' the film. Shi

Tou may not have intended to convey the message that the town is a paradise for queer women, although she has portrayed homoeroticism, or rather, female homosociality, between women in this town in her film. In the film subtitle, she makes the following comment on the town: 'the strange thing about the town is that there are lots of girls who like and love each other, but I have not noticed any boys in love with each other'. During an interview, Shi Tou told me that she only suggested that she had not 'noticed any boys in love with each other', but this does not mean that there are no such boys. Nor did she suggest that this is a 'lesbian town' where queer women stay together and live happy lives free from social prejudice. Her discovery is aimed at discovering what is often gone unnoticed in everyday life (in this case same-sex intimacy between women), and partly her own imagination. However, this does not stop the audience from interpreting in their preferred ways and imagining such a utopia as a 'queer town'. I consider the readers of Gardiner's article as engaging in a type of 'creative reading' rather than 'misreading', through which they share their emotions, dreams and fantasies as well as mutual support for each other.

Feminist media studies (e.g. Ang 1985; Radway 1984; Hermes 1995) have shed light on the manifold ways in which women construct their subjectivities through adopting specific reading strategies. Reading 'a lesbian town' out of the film reveals the dreams, fantasies and experiences of the filmmakers, audience and readers. Together, they construct a mythical 'lesbian town', through which queer women share their emotions and construct their identities and communities. Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of 'imagined communities' is useful here: through practices of consuming and interpreting media texts, media producers and users 'imagine' a shared identity and community, and this is a long historical process. Although Shi Tou, her film audience and the netizens may never have met each other, and although their lives and experiences may diverge dramatically, they are still able to identify themselves with being queer, women and lesbian. More importantly, queer women from all over China and the world, despite their differences in language, nationality, ethnicity, race and class, may share the dream of finding and living in a queer utopia. Media such as film and the Internet certainly play a significant role in constructing such a queer utopian space.

Although Anderson insightfully identifies the importance of media, especially print media, to the formation of identities and communities and to the development of print capitalism, he has undermined the importance of people's feelings and emotions in such processes. Feminist scholars including Doreen Massey (1994), Sedgwick (2003), Elspeth Probyn (2005) and Melissa Gregg (2006) have drawn our attention to the importance of affect. Space, as Massey argues, is produced culturally by social relations and is invested with emotional commitment so that spaces become places. Emotion, then, lies central to the formation of places and identities. An emotional geography 'attempts to understand emotion – experientially and conceptually – in terms of its socio-*spatial* mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states' (Davidson, Bondi and Smith 2005: 3, emphasis in original). Indeed, as the representation of intimacy between queer

women in Shi Tou's film demonstrates, queer public spaces are as much imagined as they are affective.

This also raises a key question for our discussion of queer films and public spaces, that is, how do we understand representation? Under the modern episteme, art and media are often seen as 'representations' of real life, in the same way that the Saussurean linguistics considers the signifier as 'representation' of the signified. J. L. Austin (1975), Jacques Derrida (1982) and Judith Butler (1990), among others, have reminded us of the importance of performativity: language not only describes things; it also triggers actions and makes things happen. In this way, social realities are constantly produced and reproduced through representational practices. Talking about films as a signifying practice, Michael Ryan (1988: 479) contends that film and the culture and society in which it is situated are not two separate spheres; they are mutually constitutive; in other words, representations produce the social realities that they strive to represent.

Indeed, representations should not be seen as outside reality or merely signifying reality. They impact on and constitute people's lived experiences. In this sense, *Women Fifty Minutes* not only portrays a picture of queer women's identities and spaces in contemporary China, but also brings them into existence. Such spaces are multiple and contingent. They include multiple dimensions of queer spaces represented in the film: film screening spaces such as queer film festivals, online spaces where people discuss the film, as well as a shared space of identity and community constituted by people from various locations through the use and convergence of media across geographic and national boundaries. Such spaces are at once imagined, affective and performative. They are both utopian and realistic, both imagined and lived. They constitute what Edward Soja (1996) terms 'the third space' or what Foucault (1986) calls 'heterotopia'. The queer spaces in discussion are not perfect. One can detect the precariousness of such spaces and their continuous negotiations with dominant social discourses such as the state control and heteronormativity (Kam 2013; Engebretsen 2014). One can even criticise their limitations in terms of class, gender and ethnicity bias, as well as the inclusion and exclusion of such identities. However, it is the women's shared feelings and lived experiences in imagining such spaces that make such spaces 'spaces of their own' (Yang 1999).

Women Fifty Minutes also marks a queer engagement with critical discourses about Chinese women and feminism. It highlights the heterogeneity of Chinese women and the important role of sexuality in mediating women's experiences. The film adopts a queer feminist perspective to critique China's economic development, in which women are further marginalised by the entanglement of capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity. After all, 'Chinese women' are never simply about gender identities. Sexuality, ethnicity, class and locality also intersect with gender in significant ways and such intersections exert powerful influences upon women's lives. With the rise of queer feminist activism in recent years (Hong Fincher 2018), a diverse and more inclusive feminist politics would be impossible to imagine without queer interventions.

Notes

1 Shi Tou's name is sometimes spelt as Shitou. It is a pseudonym name that the artist chose for herself. According to an interview conducted by Xin Huang, Shi Tou's original name is Shi Xufei and she 'discarded her original typically feminine name given by her parents and claimed a name that seeks to express her queerness' (Huang 2018: 128).
2 As a camerawoman, Ming Ming has shot several films directed by Shi Tou. Shi Tou attributes many of the works, especially photography, to the joint authorship of herself and Ming Ming.
3 *Nüren* in the film title is translated into English as 'woman'. Yet other words such as *funü* and *nüxing* also refer to women in the Chinese language.
4 The Chinese state has been advocating heteronormativity in the names of family values, social stability and cultural nationalism, especially in recent decades. For more discussions about (hetero)sexuality in relation to the biopower of the postsocialist Chinese state, see Evans 1997; McMillan 2006.
5 The film has English subtitles, but I have re-translated them to make the text flow more naturally.
6 *Qing* is a Chinese term referring to deep sentiment or passion between people. The notion of *qing* is central in understanding Chinese conceptions of love, friendship and intimacy, especially in premodern Chinese context. Chou Wah-shan (2000: 15–19) argues that same-sex eroticism in China is characterised by *qing* instead of *xing* (sex) as in the West. According to classical Chinese philosopher Xunzi, nature (*xing*) is that which is formed by Heaven; the disposition (*qing*) is the substance (*zhi*); the desire (*yu*) is the proper response (*ying*) of the disposition (Yu 1997: 58; See also Lee 2006). In Ming and Qing Dynasties, *qing* refers to the intent of the mind/heart and *yu* refers to the intent of the flesh. (Huang 2001) For more discussions about *qing*, see Chou 2000; Huang 2001; Plaks 1976; Yu 1997.
7 For discussions of 'mandarin ducks and butterflies' (*yuanyang hudie*) as a literary genre, see Link 1981; Chow 1991; Wang 1997.
8 The *New Year Calendar* series are not featured in the film. They are photographic works created by Shi Tou shown in some art exhibitions, including the *Dreaming Fantasy* Photo Beijing exhibition held at the Agricultural Exhibition Hall (*nongye zhanlan guan*), Beijing on September 6–9, 2008. The works in this series include: *Karaoke* (*Kala OK*, 127 × 92 cm, 2006), *Commemoration (ji'nian*, 127 × 92 cm, 2006) and *Witch Work* (*monü gongzuo*, 127 × 92 cm, 2006). For an insightful analysis of Shi Tou's artworks, see Huang 2018.
9 *Fridae* (www.fridae.asia) is one of the biggest and most influential queer websites in Asia. Based in Hong Kong and with the slogan 'connecting gay Asia', it offers information and personal ads services in both English and Chinese languages to queer communities in Asia and other parts of the world.

PART II

Queer becoming

3

BEIJING STORY

Becoming gay in postsocialist China

> I had thought that I could live together with Lan Yu forever. That was what I had always wanted. I did not care about whether society could accept two men living together and loving each other. I had money, and could therefore get around all the hassles and have everything under my control . . . I don't know if two men can stay together all their lives. Some say that gay relationships can last one year at the longest. I disagree, because I had a happy life with a young man for almost four years. Perhaps it was because our life was so happy and so peaceful that a tragedy would soon descend upon us.
>
> *Chen Handong in* Beijing Story

In *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida (1994) observes that both Karl Marx and William Shakespeare shared an obsession with spectres. He coins a neologism 'hauntology', as opposed to 'ontology', to refer to something that is not present, not real, not there, but that nonetheless enters and disrupts the closure of whatever *is* present, real, and there. 'Everything begins by the apparition of a spectre', Derrida writes, 'a spectre is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because *it begins by coming back*' (pp. 4–11, original emphasis). Despite the often-unjustified accusation of mysticism and nihilism usually targeted at Derrida, 'hauntology' opens possibilities to think about time, space, being, identity, history and memory as well as many other social, political and cultural issues including globalisation (Benedicto 2008), nationalism (Anderson 1983) and contemporary China's historical condition (Rojas and Litzinger 2016). In this chapter, I draw on 'hauntology' to discuss the construction of Chinese gay identity in a popular queer online fiction *Beijing Story*.[1] In doing so, I propose to consider the intersectionality of sexuality and class in contemporary China in the context of neoliberal globalisation. As I delineate the complicity of gay identity and queer desire with global capitalism and transnational neoliberalism, I also endeavour to identify possible resistances and lines of

flight within such an overwhelmingly deterministic picture, with a focus on queer haunting and socialist nostalgia.

Beijing Story

Published online by 'Beijing Comrade' (Beijing Tongzhi, pseudonym) in 1998 and adapted to a film titled *Lan Yu* by Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan in 2001, *Beijing Story* (*Beijing gushi*) is one of the best-known queer novels from mainland China and the Sinophone world.[2] The story narrates a decade-long romantic relationship between two men in Beijing living in the 1980s and early 90s. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist Lan Yu travels from a small country town to Beijing to attend university. He prostitutes himself to pay for his university tuition. In the process he meets his first patron Chen Handong (hereafter Handong). The son of a retired communist cadre, Handong makes money in international trade through his connections with government officials. Handong showers money and gifts on Lan Yu who refuses most of them. They begin to fall in love with each other, yet Handong still maintains sexual relationships with other men and women at the same time. It is only after experiencing the student protest at Tiananmen in 1989 that Handong realises the importance of Lan Yu in his heart. Despite this, he still breaks up with Lan Yu and marries a woman. Years go by before they meet each other again by accident. Handong, divorced now, tries to resume their relationship. When he is put into jail because of illegal financing, Lan Yu buys him out of prison. While they are preparing to live a happy life together, Lan Yu is killed in a car accident, leaving Handong heartbroken. Years later, Handong remarries and emigrates to Canada, cherishing the memory of Lan Yu.

This story has gained enormous popularity in China's queer communities after its online publication. It has become well known internationally and particularly in the Sinophone queer communities with Stanley Kwan's 2001 film *Lan Yu*. Remy Cristini (2005, 2006) and Loretta Ho (2007b) regard this work as representing a new literary genre, namely 'comrade literature' (*tongzhi wenxue*), and as a social commentary, with its tragic ending reflecting 'the harsh realities of the gay world in China' (Ho 2007b: 63). Howard Chiang (2014) reads the story as an allegory of the Sinophone, in which a PRC-centric understanding of China is effectively transformed by the Sinophone world. David Eng (2010) reads the film *Lan Yu* as a narrative of desires and queer space in postsocialist China. I basically concur with Eng's reading but would like to highlight the intersection between sexuality and class in this story, which I consider significant but often gets overlooked in understanding the formation of gay identities and queer desires in contemporary China.

The story was set in the postsocialist context. As discussed in Chapter 1, in modern Chinese historiography, the year 1978 marked the end of the socialist era and the beginning of a new era. China found itself faced with a world of global capitalism in which it had to participate in order to survive and prosper. Both the nation state and its people seem eager to cast China's socialist past behind and enter the 'brave new world' of global capitalism. Creating new desires and identities thus

becomes central to China's national project of imagining a postsocialist modernity. Wendy Larson defines a 'postrevolutionary sensibility' as one that appropriates the discourse of desire and sexuality that the Maoist politicism suppressed (1997: 204). Larson's view resonates with Rofel's (1999) theorisation of the 'postsocialist allegory of modernity' which celebrates a liberated desire that was supposedly suppressed in the socialist past. Rofel contends that desires appear to be 'the most explosive and powerful realm for constructing novel citizen-subjects not merely in China but in China's reconfiguration of its relationship to a postsocialist world', and that 'sexuality is one of the several sites in which desire is imagined and discussed in these encounters' (Rofel 2007: 2). The emergence of homosexuality and gay identity in postsocialist China, therefore, becomes an important marker for the country's grand social engineering project to construct new bodies, identities, desires, dreams, and aspirations that would bring the country into a new historical era and the world of global capitalism. Queer desire, together with other desires depicted in the story such as desire for wealth, fame, belonging, recognition, respect and happiness, presents a panorama of a 'desiring China' in its imagination of and pursuit for modernity in a postsocialist world. In this sense, the story is not so much about a realistic depiction of 'the harsh realities of the gay world in China' (Ho 2007b: 63) as about a 'national allegory' (Jameson 1986) of a 'desiring China' in a postsocialist world.

'Becoming Gay' in postsocialist China

Beijing Story is a 'becoming gay' story. In the story, neither Lan Yu nor Handong was born gay. They start from engaging in commercial sex and both regard homosexuality as a temporary period of 'playing around' *wanr* in their lives. Note that to 'play around' is a classed category: in late imperial and Republican China, men from a higher social class often 'played around' with male favourites and male opera singers, as an 'obsession' (*pi*) and a form of social distinction (Kang 2009). This practice has its resonance among postsocialist China's social elites, especially those who have more political and economic capital. With the exposure to information and images about gay identity from 'abroad' (*guowai*), including the West and transnational Asia, Handong and Lan Yu begin to attribute specific meanings to their sexual practices and desires. In this way, homosexuality becomes an identity.

In many ways, the queer subject formation portrayed in *Beijing Story* seems to support Dennis Altman's (1997) argument of a 'global gay' identity, in which a Western type of gay identity has been spread to all parts of the world. The story is set in the 1980s and 1990s when China opened itself up to the West. Both Lan Yu and Handong were extensively exposed to Western and transnational Asian cultural flows. For instance, Handong does business with Russian businessmen, consumes imported wines and cigarettes, drives an expensive car, and watches American porn videos. His house, located in the northern suburbs of Beijing, is deliberately named 'North Europe' (*Beiou*). Lan Yu wears clothes from Hong Kong, works for a Japanese company, and studies for the TOFEL examination in

preparation for studying in the US. Both visit Thailand and watch commercial sex shows there, enjoying the sexual freedom that China did not have at the time. It seems that their gay identity is, after all, an import from the West as much as from transnational Asia. It would also seem that the empire of global capitalism has successfully constructed a queer neoliberal subjectivity in China. Even the depiction of the Tiananmen scene seems to resonate with Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' (1992) thesis. In 1989, Lan Yu joins his schoolmates in their protest at the Tiananmen Square. He survives the night of military intervention. Prior to the event, Handong has refused to acknowledge his gay identity and recognise his feelings for Lan Yu as love. After the experience at Tiananmen, he finally comes to terms with his own sexuality:

> Having just escaped death, we began to feel each other. We tried to confirm with our bodies that we were still alive. I caressed his skin with my face: it was warm; it was alive; he was still in my life . . . I grabbed his hair and looked at him in the face. There was only one thought in my mind:
>
> 'I can't lose him! I can't!' I almost cried out. I pushed him to the floor, his face in my hands, and I looked at him in the eye:
>
> 'I love you.' . . . These words came out naturally. These were the only words that I could think of at the time . . .
>
> It was not about sex; it was true love. I don't care what other people think of it. I feel it that way, truly, deeply and earnestly. Every time when I recall the moment, I can still feel the passion.
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

As the history of postsocialist China shows, the 1989 student demonstration at Tiananmen marked the last in a series of large-scale disruptive mass mobilisations aimed at making a radical change to the society in twentieth-century China. This long tradition has an often-misunderstood name and it is called 'revolution' (Wang 2009). Revolutionary passion derives from an observation of social inequalities and injustices in a society, a keen sense of social responsibility, a determination to change the unjust status quo, an activism that is both pragmatic and utopian, and an imagination for a better future. The failure of the 1989 social movement signifies the end of a century of revolution in China. Concomitant events elsewhere including the fall of the Berlin Wall mark the conclusion of more than forty years of Cold War in the world. After this, China accelerated its process of marketisation and privatisation and finally became a full member of the global capitalist world. The emergence of gay identity, along with other gendered, sexed and desiring subjectivities, marks China's entry into the world of neoliberal capitalism. Such neoliberal subjectivities are only possible with the overcoming of revolutionary passions and the erasure of alternative social imaginaries. The public silence about class despite increasing social stratification, the forgetting of China's socialist history and legacy, and the replacement of Marxism by science and commerce in postsocialist China all speak to this 'brave new world'.

One of Handong and Lan Yu's conversations in the novel, however, disrupts the myth of the West and globalisation. When Handong tries to persuade Lan Yu to go to a psychologist to have his homosexuality 'cured', Lan Yu tells him, 'I have read some materials from abroad. Now they do not consider it [homosexuality] a disease, but a . . . I forget the word. Some people like men; some people like women. It's only a matter of choice'. Handong refutes him, 'some materials from abroad! There is also porn from abroad. There is also sexual openness from abroad' (Beijing Tongzhi 1998).

How the notion of 'abroad' (*guowai*) is imagined in this conversation deserves attention. 'Abroad' (*guowai*) is often equivalent to foreign countries (*waiguo*) or the West (*xifang*), and sometimes Asia and the Sinophone world, in vernacular Chinese. In the Chinese language and popular culture in mainland China, *guowai* is often depicted as a symbol of modernity, characterised by abundant wealth and freedom. Meanwhile, it is also paradoxically portrayed as a place of danger, corruption, and decadence. 'Porn' (*maopian*) and 'sexual openness' (*xing kaifang*), mentioned in Handong's speech, are considered symptomatic of sexual promiscuity and moral corruption, and are thus overall frowned upon by many Chinese including Lan Yu and Handong. However, the public discourse about the West is not singular and coherent. There are multiple and contradictory discourses about the West, too. The West is imagined as something to be desired and at the same time something to shy away from. Similarly, gay identity is represented in a contradictory way in the story: it is at once considered a free expression of the self, a fashionable style of life, and an abnormality. Judging from the example cited earlier, gay people in China seem critical of the West and the 'global gay' identity. Whether they happily greet 'global queering' or 'opening up' and readily pick up neoliberal subjectivities without appropriation, subversion and resistance calls for careful deliberation.

Although the 'global gay' perspective rightly identifies the impact of neoliberal capitalism on sexual subjectivities worldwide, it is insufficient as the narrative assumes that people in other cultural contexts have equal access to transnational gay images and ideologies. In the story, this may be the case for Handong as a rich businessman but for Lan Yu it is not. At this point, it is necessary to take into consideration class and other forms of social inequalities in Chinese society to understand the complex processes of queer subject formation, as well as queer articulations of possible resistance through memories of and nostalgias for the past.

Sexuality and gender with a class distinction

Handong grew up in a retired Chinese government official's family. From his own account, we learn that his father had been a high-ranking Communist Party cadre (*gaogan*) before retirement. It is likely that the father had participated in the socialist revolution, as he referred to his friends as *zhanyou* ('friends from the army'). Many high-ranking government officials and military officials in Beijing attended his funeral. Handong's mother is keenly aware of the class position of the family and

insists that Handong should marry someone that matches the family's social status (*mendang hudui*). Handong starts a small company while he is a second-year university student. He later runs a large import and export company after graduation. He makes a fortune in conducting international trade with businessmen from Eastern European countries, primarily Russia, importing and exporting state-monopolised industrial products such as steel and cars. He is the boss of a large company at the age of 27. He is a young member of China's 'new rich' class and among the first capitalists in postsocialist China.

Handong's personal history is exemplary of the rise of the 'new rich' class in postsocialist China. In the socialist era, especially during the Cultural Revolution, 'capitalists', or people making money through business transactions or holding means of production, were seen as 'class enemies'. In a society that upheld egalitarianism, to be rich was considered shameful. The economic reform in the postsocialist era required the formation of a new capitalist class, now under the new name of 'entrepreneurs' (*qiyejia*), legitimised by the state slogan of 'to get rich is glorious' (*guangrong zhifu*). The official 'primary stage of socialism' (*shehui zhuyi de chuji jieduan*) theory provides ideological justifications for the rising new rich: at this stage of historical development, or so the theory goes, the state allows a group of people to get rich first; after these people have got rich themselves, they can help other people get rich as well (*xianfu daidong gongfu*). The first group of people to get rich in the postsocialist era happened to be government officials and Communist Party cadres, the two categories often overlapping each other and encompassing the same group of people in a CCP-led party state (Chen 2013). In other words, despite the dramatic transformation from socialism to postsocialism, China's political structure has changed very little. Social elites have remained in power despite the transformation in the economic sphere. What is specific to the postsocialist era is that the CCP not only holds the political and military power of the state, but economic power as well (Goodman 2008). Privatisation of public properties that used to belong to the state required a redistribution of wealth. As people were not overall rich in the socialist era, no one could truly afford to purchase these public properties. The state therefore gave away many public properties to powerful and well-connected individuals. The CCP cadres and their families thus benefitted from the nationwide redistribution of wealth, as many of them were decision-makers, or connected to decision-makers, at the time. In other words, political elites appropriated the properties that used to belong to the state and the public under China's socialism. With their social capital, they formed a powerful network that facilitated their accumulation of wealth. This further accelerated their appropriation of public properties. The group of people who 'got rich first' did not seem eager to help other people to get rich. On the contrary, there was growing official corruption, inflation and unemployment, as well as increasing social inequalities and injustices in Chinese society. The accumulating public grudge against the Party State culminated in the student demonstration in 1989.

The making of the new rich class does not simply involve accumulation of wealth; it also entails the cultivation of the new class tastes (Donald and Zheng

2009). Material goods from the West are imagined as benchmarks for the newly emerged class taste. Handong uses foreign-brand goods and drives imported cars. His wife Lin Jingping is obsessed with big brands from abroad. In Handong's account:

> After marriage, I began to know Lin better. She was fussy about everything. She would only use big brands, even for small things such as toilet paper. She told me that all the domestic brands were rubbish, that the products from Hong Kong were rubbish too, and that only some stores in Japan and on the Fifth Avenue in New York sell truly classy goods. She went to beauty parlours located in expensive hotels every day to have skin care or to do her hair. She employed a live-in housemaid, as she could not do any housework with her beautifully trimmed fingernails . . . I did not care how much money she spent. I was simply surprised at how a daughter from an ordinary family could spend other people's money with such ease and confidence.
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

This account shows how quickly Jingping, daughter of an ordinary Chinese family in Shanghai, transforms herself from a company employee to an upper-class housewife. She turns to consumerism to foster her new class identity. For Jingping, gender, represented by her femininity, is at the core of her class mobility. As for Handong, sexuality is a way to demonstrate his class distinction:

> I kept changing sex partners. To find a woman was not difficult for me, but it was difficult to get rid of them. I detested these women. They always wanted to talk me into marriage . . . Someone in the circle introduced me to a boy. He was a singer in a club. From there I found a new way of having fun.
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

Handong soon finds gay sex more satisfying than straight sex and he even developed his own theory of sexual difference:

> The biggest difference between men and women is this: women have sex with you because of your talent, or for your money, on which they can rely for the rest of their lives. Sex is their gift bestowed upon men. Men have sex simply because of love and out of their most primitive desire.
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

It is easy to dismiss Handong's statements as misogynistic, but it is more productive to ask why he sees gay love in a romantic and even utopian way. As Ernst Bloch (1988) and Fredric Jameson (2004) remind us, utopia is deeply rooted in social realities and can be read as a social critique. In this context, the commercialisation of heterosexual love, sex, and even marriage foregrounds the construction of queer love as utopia. If Handong's marriage with Jingping is built on commercial

exchanges, his love with Lan Yu seems not. In the story, Handong showers money and presents on Lan Yu, and Lan Yu declines most of them. Handong ruminates:

> I have given him an upper-class way of life. I have offered him great wealth and material comforts. I have even given him an expensive house as a present. He has asked for nothing and accepted nothing from me. He does not care about money.
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

Here, queerness is seen as the ultimate index of socialism and thus source of desire; this runs contrary to John D'Emilio's (1993) argument that queerness is a product of capitalism in the US context. Here we also see a revival of universal concepts such as love. As Jameson (2002) suggests, the attempt to revive universalism in the post-Cold War era, including love as *raison d'être*, speaks to the provisional condition of the disappearance of alternatives to capitalism. In the story, the obsession with a universal true love takes place in a society under dramatic transformation from state socialism to transnational capitalism. All other human relations, including the heterosexual family, are represented as pragmatic and profit driven. While Handong describes his mother as hypocritical and Jingping as a greedy *femme fatale*, the relationship between men, in terms of both homosexuality and homosociality, is romanticised and associated with universal values. For example, the friendship between Handong and his childhood friend Liu Zheng is reaffirmed by the latter's generous help when Handong is in prison. The true love between Handong and Lan Yu is tested by many disruptive events over the course of ten years, including the Tiananmen student protest in 1989 and Handong's imprisonment. Petrus Liu glosses this scenario succinctly:

> The novel romanticises the conceptual dichotomy between love and money, presenting Lan Yu as the embodiment of values and emotions found in our 'natural' state of being prior to, or at least untainted by, the complications of economics . . . *Beijing Comrades* articulates the cultural fantasy about the separability of love and money in human relations.
>
> *(Liu 2016: 374–75)*

In the story, the 'non-commercial' and 'pure' gay love is juxtaposed with the commercialised heterosexual love and marriage. The imagination of queer love as utopian thus serves as a critique to the commercialisation of social relations and affective terrains under neoliberalism.

Premodern memories, nationalist sentiments

China's premodern past is frequently referred to in the text. Lan Yu is presented as a person who embodies neo-Confucian values and virtues such as *ren* (humanity), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (politeness, knowing rituals and following codes of conduct),

zhi (knowledge), *xin* (integrity), *zhong* (loyalty), *cheng* (honesty), *shu* (kindness and forgiveness), *lian* (honesty and integrity, especially financially), and *chi* (shame, being able to judge right from wrong). The fact that Lan Yu refuses to take Handong's money despite his poor economic condition is indicative of his embodied virtues of *lian* and *chi*. Lan Yu is so loyal (*zhong*) to Handong that he refuses to have sex with other men even when his life is in danger. According to a third person's account:

> The boy [Lan Yu] was so loyal to you [Handong] that he managed to keep his virginity for you at all costs . . . He grabbed Yonghong's knife and shouted: 'spare me or kill me!'
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

For Chinese readers of the story, this description strikes interesting resonances with classical Chinese stories such as *Lady Dushi* (*Dushi niang*), which depicts the love and sacrifice of a virtuous prostitute. This is not to compare Lan Yu to a prostitute, but it does raise interesting questions about the representation of Lan Yu's gender: he is a man, but plays a passive role in sex. He carries traits such as integrity and courage usually considered to be more 'masculine'. Meanwhile, he also embodies virtues such as loyalty and chastity traditionally associated with the 'feminine'. Also, he bought Handong out of jail while the heterosexual wife did not take any action. The gay subject represented by Lan Yu thus expresses the utopian wish of making a perfect human being that crosses the gender binary, and that is universal and distinctively Chinese at the same time.

The turn to the 'Chinese traditions' reflects multiple and conflicting discourses in Chinese society in the 1980s and 90s. The story was written in the late 1990s when several schools of thought had gained popularity in China's intellectual field: liberalism, neoliberalism, and 'national learning' (*guoxue*). Liberalism and neoliberalism contributed to the dissemination of Western universalism and economic rationality in Chinese society. The 'national learning' school advocated the revival and reinterpretation of 'Chinese traditions', especially Confucianism. The latter is unreservedly supported by the Chinese government because of its perfect fit in the CCP's nationalist project. Some ideas, including Confucian capitalism, even provides ideological legitimation for neoliberal economic reforms in China and subsequently becomes state policy in the new millennium (Wang 2003: 162). Apart from its ideological complicity with the Chinese state and transnational capitalism, 'national learning' supports universal values by both constructing a version of Chinese universalism and placing China as an 'exception' to Western universalism. As Zhang Xudong points out:

> a seemingly 'inward' turn in Chinese knowledge and intellectual production is an anxious search outward for a new entry into global hierarchy and division of labour governing the field of knowledge production, and into the system of representation and power in a global space.
>
> *(2008: 49–50)*

This 'inward turn' to 'national learning' and 'Chinese traditions' in effect reinforces a Western universalism and capitalist globalisation. The utopian longing for universal love and true friendship, together with an obsession with 'Chineseness', should be understood in this historical context.

Yet the obsession with universalism and 'Chinese learning' does not always have to be totalising and hegemonic. While it is important to examine how these discourses have been constructed, it is also necessary to see how they have been received, appropriated and resisted in people's everyday lives. In the story, the protagonists often turn to premodern China for cultural references or even inspirations when they encounter problems. When Handong's mother discovers Handong's homosexuality, she reprimands:

> Now you have done such despicable/low-class (*xialiu*) things. If people knew about it, how would you walk in society? . . . How could a mother bear to see her son looked down upon by other people?
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

In answering this question, Handong turns to classical Chinese references to homoeroticism:

> You have misunderstood it. This is a game that all the rich people play nowadays. People come up with different ideas for fun and they compete with each other. No one takes these things seriously. I used to hang out with boys. I am bored with them now. I am now into horse racing. I like horses, in the same way that I liked boys . . . In fact, this is nothing new in China. It was called 'southern/male style' (*nanfeng*) in ancient China. Rich people regarded it as 'having fun'. Do you know Cai Ming [a pop singer]? He occasionally does this too. I only had dinner with young boys and chatted with them, and there was nothing else.
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

'Southern style' (*nanfeng*) is at the same time a pun and a euphemism in classical Chinese. The Chinese character 'southern' is homophonic to the character 'male'. Therefore, 'southern style' also suggests 'male style', that is, same-sex intimacy between men, with the belief that homoerotic practice was widely practised in southern Chinese provinces such as Fujian in premodern times (Vitiello 2011). Handong's mother, apparently aware of such practices in premodern China, seems reasonably convinced by Handong's explanation. For the mother, 'southern style' is simply a hobby and a widely accepted practice among the socially privileged and it does not jeopardise social institutions including family, marriage, or 'face' (*mianzi*), that is, honour and prestige, valued in Chinese societies. But when it comes to 'gay' as a socially stigmatised identity, the mother could never have tolerated it.

Class plays an important part in distinguishing elitist homoerotic practices from stigmatised gay identities. Handong's mother does not approve of her son engaging

in gay sex because it is despicable/low class (*xialiu*). Homosexuality is despicable because it is associated with the lower class. For the mother, this jeopardises the family's class privilege and makes the family lose face in their social circle. Aware of the importance of class, Handong reassures his mother that same-sex intimacy is not a sign of the lower class; instead, it is a token of upper-class privilege: 'This is a game that all the rich people play nowadays'. He compares his interest in men to his interest in horses, and further justifies his statement from both historical and popular cultural references: pointing out that same-sex eroticism was widely practised by rich people in ancient China and it is still practised by rich people today. This explanation apparently reassures the mother, who accepts that her son engages in gay sex as one of his upper-class hobbies.

Socialist nostalgia

The spectre that haunts queer love is class in this context. Handong engages in gay sex to demonstrate his 'new rich' class distinction; Lan Yu 'becomes gay' because he must earn university tuition for himself, and later for love. The utopian discourse of universal love brings the two people from divergent class backgrounds together. Drawing on classical Chinese references of brotherhood and the socialist reference of camaraderie, the relationship between men, both friendship and gay love, has been constructed as inherent and transcendental. In this sense, Western universalism and Chinese nationalism have joined hands. They effectively suture the postsocialist social and ideological space to conceal the issue of class. I will now turn to Lan Yu's life story to illustrate the centrality of class and socialist nostalgia in the story.

Lan Yu grows up in a teacher's family. He had a happy childhood with his family during the socialist era. In the postsocialist era, with China's market reform, everything has changed:

> After the state's 'reform and opening up', my father was among the first intellectuals to 'dive into the business sea' (*xiahai*) . . . My family became the richest on university campus. We had a refrigerator and a colour TV at home. People in the neighbourhood all envied us.
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

Lan Yu's father had an extramarital affair, a popular practice of many rich people at the time. The mother could not put up with this and subsequently committed suicide:

> When my mother died, she left a long farewell letter to me and my father. She said that she hates money. She said that money makes people cruel, selfish and merciless. Love was what she valued most. She would rather die than live without love.
>
> *(Beijing Tongzhi 1998)*

In this account, 'true' love is juxtaposed with 'evil' money. Money should be read as a metonymy of capitalism, which includes both the capitalist mode of production and the commercialisation of social relations. The suicide note written by Lan Yu's mother serves as a protest to the expanding capitalism in China, which commodifies and reifies existing human relations.

In Lan Yu's account of the past, true love is imagined as antithetic to the capitalist market. Meanwhile, there is often a strong sense of nostalgia for the 'good old days' of socialism. This sentiment is not co-incidental, as socialist nostalgia is a popular theme in postsocialist China's public discourse. The socialist period, especially the early years of socialism, is constructed as a 'golden time' when people devoted their enthusiasm and confidence to the newly founded socialist state, and when social relationships were imagined as simple, pure and authentic. Through her interviews with three generations of women factory workers in Hangzhou, Rofel (1999) demonstrates the importance of nostalgia in constructing postsocialist subjectivities: nostalgia may not tell people what a historical era was really like; yet it speaks to the social issues of the present and serves as 'a strike of countermemory to the postsocialist transformations of categories of gender and class' (p. 148). Socialist nostalgia in the story, therefore, functions as a critique to the postsocialist present when capitalism transforms people's subjectivities and social relations. Both queer love and socialism are imagined as utopia in the story to serve as counter memories of the postsocialist modernity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered an analysis of the online queer fiction *Beijing Story*, reading it as a social critique of neoliberalism in China. I have highlighted the intersections between sexuality, gender and class in the narrative, as well as the potential productivity of paying more attention to the issue of class in queer subject formation in contemporary China. I have also emphasised the crucial role of the transnational discourses in constructing contemporary gay identity in China: gay identity has been made possible with the transnational imagination of modernity in the postsocialist China, but there is no seamless suture between the global and the local. Historical traditions and cultural memories play a crucial role in shaping contemporary gay identities and queer desires. It is thus important to pay attention to historical forms of homoeroticism, as well as recent social memories of revolution and socialism. It is also necessary to identify possible forms of queer resistance to neoliberal subjectivation – from premodern sentiments to socialist nostalgia to the longing for a queer utopia.

A 'queer Marxist' (Liu 2015) perspective, with an emphasis on class and ideological critique, is very much needed in understanding queer subject formation in contemporary China. At a time when socialism became a quickly forgotten historical past, and Marxism – with its emphasis on class and social egalitarianism – becomes a cliché, the spectre of class keeps haunting Chinese gay identities and queer desires in their imaginations of a new identity completely different from its

historical precedents and in China's imagination of a gleaming neoliberal present and future.

Notes

1 The story has been translated into English and published under the title of *Beijing Comrades* in 2016 (Bei Tong 2016). The story is also available online at www.bhzw.cc/book/3/3280/162448.html (in Chinese, accessed 25 August 2019) and www.wattpad.com/story/67282221-beijing-story-lan-yu (in English, accessed 25 August 2019).
2 The author was later identified as a writer named Youhe. The story was first published in an online magazine titled Huazhao in October 1998 and was later reposted on other websites including Yifan and Huangjin shuwu.

4

PINK AFFAIRS

Narrating desire in a girls' love fan fiction

> What lights us up is not the fireworks outside the window but ourselves. There are many crossroads in life. We always think that we will miss the scenery if we make a wrong choice, but every road takes us to the same destination. What has been predestined cannot be altered however hard one tries. One will always go back to the same point. This is pre-determined. The encounter between me and Shang Wenjie was set up by destiny from the outset.
>
> *Liu Liyang in* Pink Affairs

Super Girl (*Chaoji Nüsheng*) was an annual talent contest in China organised by Hunan Satellite Television between 2005 and 2011.[1] Referred to as the mainland Chinese equivalent of *Pop Idol*, the TV show was orchestrated around the 'idol' convention of deciding the best young pop singers based on viewer voting. With over 280 million viewers having voted via their mobile phones at a given time in response to the final in 2006, the show was seen as one of the largest 'democratic' voting exercises in mainland China (Yadley 2005: 134) and cheered by many as a sign of 'democratic consciousness' and the harbinger of a 'civil society' in 'a country where ordinary people cannot choose their political leaders' (Anonymous 2007). The winners of the contest have become well-known public figures, and many have subsequently made their names in the entertainment industry. Some contestants won a huge number of fans and these fans engaged in various fan activities, including organising fan clubs, publishing fanzines, creating fan *anime* and *manga*, as well as writing fan fiction.[2] *Super Girl* fan fiction (*chaonü tongrenwen*) has become one of the most popular forms of fandom since its online debut in 2005.

Super Girl fan fiction is a type of *doujinshi* (*tongren zhi*), or self-published fan fiction that tells love stories between *Super Girl* contestants.[3] It is a type of RPS (real person slash) that narrates fictional stories of the romantic and erotic relationships between the contestants.[4] Although the fictional narratives bear some traces of

these contestants' real lives, most of them are made up by the enthusiastic fans. An important feature of such stories is the 'queerness' of the protagonists' sexuality: although the contestants are generally identified to be straight in their real lives, most of them have been depicted as lesbians or bisexuals in the fan fiction. This literary genre therefore has relevance to our discussion of queer China.

Super Girl fan fiction fits into the genre of Girls' Love in contemporary East Asian popular culture. Girls' Love, also known as GL or sometimes called *Yuri* (*baihe*), is a popular form of fandom in East Asia.[5] It resembles the 'slash' type of fan fiction in the Anglophone world.[6] GL fiction usually depicts romantic and homoerotic love between young women, with explicit portrayals of sex and sometimes violence. GL fan fiction blurs the boundaries between producers and consumers of texts as well as between romance and pornography. They also open up discussions about gender, sexuality, subjectivity and desires in a transnational context (Driscoll 2006; Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007; Harris and Alexander 1998; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992; McLelland 2006, 2009; McLelland et al. 2015; Yang and Bao 2012; Lavin, Yang and Zhao 2017).

In this chapter, I examine the production and consumption of the *Super Girl* fan fiction in mainland China. Through textual analysis of an exemplary text, *Pink Affairs* (*Feise Shi*) published online in 2007, I delineate how this text portrays the middle class dream, transnational imagination and queer desires, which are elements central to queer subject formation in postsocialist China. Meanwhile, seeing the text as symptomatic of the 'structures of feeling' in contemporary Chinese society, I unravel the historical and social contexts in which such queer desires are situated.

Pink affairs: girls' love and *bildungsroman*

The 'Pink *Super Girl* Club' (*Feise Chaonü Ba*) is one of the most popular online forums for *Super Girl* GL fans.[7] Any reader can access the stories online, but one needs to register to become a member and participate in online discussions. The caption of the forum states 'Pink Sky, *Tongren* Back Garden, BT Concentration Camp – No Entry for Non-Fans', followed by a line mixed with Chinese characters, English letters and strange punctuation marks, 'GL-Involved★Heaven's Way Followed★*Tongren* Prioritised★ – BT Not Guilty, YY Fully Justified'. This information may look confusing to outsiders, but it provides insiders with important cues about the content of the website. It also justifies what fans do in the community and warns outsiders against entering the site by accident, thus effectively distinguishing insiders from outsiders. Only those with necessary 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1996) can fully decode the strange combination of characters, letters and symbols: pink for female homoeroticism, *tongren* for Boys' Love (BL) or Girls' Love fans, GL for Girls' Love, BT for *biantai* (perverse),[8] YY for *yiyin* (erotic fantasy), and Heaven's Way (*wangdao*) for the important task in which GL fans engage (to follow the way of heaven is to justify what fans do with regard to pairing). While *tongren*, GL and BT bear Japanese influences, 'Back Garden' and

'Heaven Way' carry imprints from classical Chinese stories and martial arts fiction. The asterisk (*) is often used in online communication among young people and is a symbol of the 'Martian' (*huoxingwen*). The line 'GL-Related*Heaven's Way Followed*Tongren Significant' also appropriates some Communist Party slogans and commercial cultural references, such as 'human life-involved' (*renming xiangguan*), 'humanity-concerned' (*rendao xiangguan*) and 'customer-prioritising' (*yonghu zhishang*). 'BT Not Guilty, YY Fully Justified' seems a parody of 'revolution is not guilty; rebellion is fully justified' (*geming wuzui, zaofan youli*), a well-known Red Guards slogan from the Cultural Revolution. These references create a sense of fearlessness, provocation and violence; they also effectively set the tone for the depictions of sadomasochistic sex, feud, bloodshed, death and violence – themes common to BL and GL stories. References to both Chinese, Japanese and Western culture are common in BL and GL fan communities. Fans creatively use their shared cultural resources to construct identities, build communities and distinguish themselves from non-fans.

Published on the Pink *Super Girl* Club website from November 2006 to January 2007, *Pink Affairs* has become one of the most popular online GL fictions in the *Super Girl* fan community. Besides its main text, which consists of 58 chapters, the story also has a sequel of 17 chapters. Millions of readers have clicked on the website link of the fiction and tens of thousands have commented on the text. The story has also been posted on other websites and attracted large numbers of readers. For many *Super Girl* GL fans, *Pink Affairs* is a fan fiction canon and a must-read. The author of the story, 'Clockwork Orange 521' (*Fatiaocheng 521*) has since established her name as one of the best GL fan fiction writers in the *Super Girl* fan community.[9]

Pink Affairs tells a love story between two girls, Yang Liyang and Shang Wenjie (Yang and Shang hereafter). Although the two characters bear the names of the contestants from the 2006 season of *Super Girl* TV Show, the *Pink Affairs* story is purely fictional. Yang, the narrator of the story, meets Shang at the age of twelve when Yang's father marries Shang's mother. Yang is hostile to Shang during their high school days. After getting involved in a gang fight on campus, Yang is expelled from school and is subsequently sent by her father to the UK to attend university. Refusing to accept money from the father, Yang manages to make a living by herself in the UK. After experiencing a hard life abroad, she begins to see her past behaviours as selfish and indulgent. Yang and Shang meet each other unexpectedly in France and try to reconcile their differences with each other. They fall in love with each other after Yang returns from the UK to work in China. Their relationship does not go smoothly, as both women have their own girlfriends, one of whom is Tang Weiwei, another character from the 2006 *Super Girl* contest. Yang and Shang finally resolve all their disagreements and manage to live together. They lead a happy life for half a year before Yang learns that they are in fact blood sisters from the same father. Shang's mother tries to intervene to stop their incestuous relationship. Shang leaves home for Tibet after finding out the truth about their family relationship and is killed in an accident there. Shang's father is heartbroken and dies in grief two years later. Shang's mother is sent to a mental hospital after a suicide

attempt. Yang cherishes the memory of Shang. In a dream sequence at the end of the story, Shang says to Yang:

> The same blood runs within our bodies. Can any intimacy in the world be stronger than this? We share the feeling that I am part of you, and you are part of me. Nothing can separate us from each other, be it the passage of time or betrayal . . . I am leaving you. I will wait for you till my death. This is my way of repaying your love . . . I love you.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007 Chapter 58)*

Yang decides to wait for Shang, in the belief that Shang will come back to her one day. In the sequel to this story, Yang goes to Tibet to work as a charity volunteer and accidently runs into Shang. It turns out that the one killed in the accident was not Shang but another girl who had taken Shang's identity card by mistake. The two girls live happily ever after.

Pink Affairs appeals to *Super Girl* fans in many ways. On top of a gripping plot, the story also successfully constructs two protagonists with distinct personalities. Notably, Yang and Shang are two of the most popular contestants in the 2006 S*uper Girl* Contest and they both have large numbers of fans. But not every fan of Yang and Shang would be interested in reading this novel. In the opening notes for the story, the story is clearly identified as a 'Yang/Shang' slash.[10] This label makes it clear that the fiction is to match Yang with Shang and that Yang is the *seme* (*gong*) and Shang the *uke* (*shou*).[11] That is, Yang plays the active role in sex and Shang the passive role. In the story, Yang is portrayed as tall, slim, short-haired, extrovert, and sporty with tomboy mannerisms. In contrast, Shang is depicted as quiet, introvert and feminine. Although this type of characterisation only partly fits in with the two contestants' real-life images, the fans regard it as their obligation to 'pair' them in their preferred ways. This is referred to as 'the king's way': that is, the 'absolutely irreversible way' to pair characters. This pairing does not cause much controversy in this fan community, as readers here are already self-selected, following the tagline of the story. Those readers who do not like this pairing usually choose to enter other communities, such as the Shang/Yang forum.

Pink Affairs is a joint production between the writer and the readers. As soon as the author completed and posted a chapter online, the readers would comment on the story, encouraging the author to carry on, or advising the author on how the story should develop. Some readers would write vignettes based on the chapter; others would share their own stories and even life experiences related to the chapter. The pace of publishing instalments was often decided by the author. She usually published one chapter in two or three days, but there were times when she did not publish anything at all for a couple of weeks. It was likely that she was too busy to write anything during that time, or that she simply needed more encouragement and praise from the readers. The readers, well aware of the rules of the game, usually posted more comments, poured more words of praise, and continually begged the author to publish the next chapter. Having collected enough praises and with

her ego hugely boosted, the author would then publish another chapter and thank her readers for their love, encouragement and loyalty. In this way, the readers were encouraged to write more and to participate more actively in the forum discussion. The rapport between the writer and the readers not only set the pace for online publication, but, under some circumstances, directed the trajectory of the narrative. The author often took the readers' feedback into account in developing her story. For example, having sensed a widespread disappointment with the conclusion of the story from the readers, the author subsequently wrote a sequel, which saved Shang from death and made the two protagonists live happily ever after. From the perspective of cultural production, clearly GL writing involves very close interactions between the writer and the readers. The readers are 'prosumers' (Toffler 1980), that is, producers and consumers at the same time, in what Henry Jenkins (2009) calls a 'participatory culture'.

The readers' agency has limits. There were always impatient readers who could not wait for the author's publication of the next instalment; they went ahead and wrote their own chapters. Such a transgression of the writer's role was not usually taken too seriously by the majority of readers, who would read these new chapters quickly and then laugh them off without really engaging with the newly written stories from these other authors. Most readers seemed to believe that the author still had the greatest authority over the fictional text. Although readers made suggestions to the author, they seemed to have little control over whether the author would take their suggestions or not. For example, even after many readers had expressed their disappointment with Shang's death at the end of the story, they still agreed that this was an excellent story with a credible ending.

The story *Pink Affairs* is a women's *bildungsroman*. According to my observation, the participants in the forum were mostly female high school and university students in their teens and twenties, and therefore topics related to growing-up, friendship, intimacy, love, sex, as well as rebellion against parents and teachers appealed to most of them. The small number of readers from other age and professional groups, such as company employees, housewives and mothers, also enjoyed the story and considered it to be a story written by a woman, for women, and about women's growing-up experiences.

Pink Affairs is also a queer story. It places the intimate and erotic relationship between Yang and Shang at the centre of its narrative. For many heterosexual-identified readers, this is often the first time that they learn about same-sex intimacy, which is invariably portrayed positively and poetically in GL fictions. Some GL readers identify as queer too. The fictional narrative disrupts a rigid heterosexual/homosexual binary, and so does the composition of the readership. This points to the complexity of gender, sexuality, identity and identifications.

At the beginning of the story, both Yang and Shang are 12 years old, with Shang being slightly younger than Yang. Shang is represented as plain-looking and lacking in self-confidence. She fits into the stereotype of a nerdy 'good student' whose only aim is to perform well at school. However, as Shang grows up and excels academically, her beauty and confidence begin to grow. Yang stands in stark contrast to Shang. She is indulgent and rebellious. She gets into 'bad' habits such as smoking,

drinking, playing video games, and engaging in lesbian sex and group fights, all of which are frowned upon by her parents and society at large. However, when Yang attends university in the UK where she experiences hardship in life, and especially after she has got to know her flatmate and best friend Sister Orange, her attitude begins to change:

> Only then did I realise that, in comparison with her [Sister Orange], what I did and what I thought about in the past was nothing but silly mistakes committed to my parents by a spoilt brat from a well-off family. She has also made me understand that living a real life means that people have to learn to support themselves, instead of leaving everything behind when they feel bored or angry.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 6)*

Many readers in the GL fan community talked about what they had learned about love and life from the story. Some pointed out important qualities that they had learned from the protagonists such as independence and perseverance. GL fan fiction, in this context, has become a 'technology of the self', by which Michel Foucault refers to a number of ways in which individuals 'effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality' (Foucault 1988: 18). GL fans learn how to love, have sex and live a life as young women through reading and discussing fan fictions.

Pink Affairs manifests common themes shared by popular romance, including the centrality of romantic love, depiction of a middle class lifestyle, transnationalism, transgressive pleasure and gothic mysticism, all of which contribute to the popularity of the genre. I shall elaborate on some of these aspects in the following sections through an analysis of the story.

Home and gender: narrating the middle class dream

Despite Yang's rebellion against family and Shang's fear and anxiety when she first enters into the new home, home is portrayed in this story as a desirable place and a safe haven.[12] No matter what has happened and how one has suffered outside, 'home' is always a place that one can turn to when in need of help and support. As a rebellious child, although Yang frequently runs away from home and cannot bear staying at home, she still goes home occasionally, and, when she is at home, enjoys the homely comforts. Yang and Shang cherish fond memories from their childhood such as having dinner and watching TV together, Shang's excellent academic report, Yang's sudden appearance after a long-time absence from home, and taking family photos in the courtyard. This seems to fit into the imagination of home in popular cultural representations. It also endorses some scholarly argument about the centrality of home in Chinese society and culture (Chou 2000). Here I consider the image of 'home' depicted in this fiction as a constructed social institution and

cultural imagery. I suggest that the construction of a romanticised home is related to the middle class dream prevalent in postsocialist Chinese society.

The author of the story has not given much information about the location of the protagonists' home, but there are some clues about their house from the information scattered through the text. The city they live in is Shanghai, as we can infer from the family's easy access to an international airport, foreign companies and famous universities such as Fudan University. In a big metropolis such as Shanghai, where most people live in flats or traditional *linong* (small alleyway) houses shared by multiple households, Yang and Shang's family own a two-storey house and a car; they also employ a servant. This is reminiscent of the social elites' lifestyle in Shanghai at the beginning of the twentieth century. The author narrates the story from a first-person perspective and from 'now' (presumably at the time of writing in 2007 when 'I' was 29) and traces back to her school days when 'I' was 12. The narrative time, we can infer, starts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when China was still trying to grapple with its socialist past and the 'reform and opening up' drive was yet to speed up. A large part of the country still relied heavily on a planned socialist economy and its rationing system. Ordinary citizens' living standards were low overall. The life of Yang's family forms a sharp contrast with that of other households in the story. For instance, Yang has had many exotic foods that her classmates have never seen. While she is overseas, her father keeps her room in the house. Yang returns home from overseas feeling how lucky she is:

> There are such lucky people in the world: even when they get married to other people, they still have a room in their parents' house, where everything in their adolescence is kept intact: high school textbooks on the desk, children's clothes in the wardrobe. Whenever they get hurt, they can always go home and go back in time, feeling protected, indulgent and carefree without any excuse. I am one of them.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 11)*

By contrast, when Shang comes to the new home with her mother, she feels uneasy and out of place. The new home looks like a royal palace in a fairy tale. Shang told Yang about her first impression of the new home:

> At the age of twelve, when I first came to the house, I saw a big house with many things that I had never seen before, my immediate reaction was fear. And you, Liu Liyang, you were as beautiful as a princess living in a royal palace. You looked at me with contempt, which made me feel ashamed of myself.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 13)*

In Shang's account, the sense of being 'out of place' and the feeling of shame speak to her identity through its gendered embodiment and affect (Probyn 2005). When people feel out of place, they are interpellated into an undesirable subject position and labelled with an identity of the 'other'. They have to negotiate their place by transforming their subjectivities in order to fit into the space. In the story, Shang

negotiates the sense of home by rejecting her old identity and constructing a new one. By hiding in her own room and concentrating on her schoolwork, she eventually gains a place in the new home with the recognition of her academic excellence. This also leads to a change in people's attitudes towards her personality and even in their perception of her femininity:

> In the next three years, she always got first place in examinations. Teachers and student leaders all asked her to perform [singing and dancing] on various occasions. She would always decline, whereas previously she had no choice but to accept the invitation. She was always modest, never proud or arrogant. Her facial expression did not change much, but she always wore a smile on her face. People were all amazed by her beauty.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 2)*

In this account, Shang's femininity is not demonstrated by wearing fashionable make-up or clothes. On the contrary, she is seen as one of the 'good students' who usually knows nothing about beauty and fashion. But this seeming lack of gendered consciousness does not undermine her femininity. The social recognition of Shang's femininity – or the lack thereof – should be placed in the historical context of gender in modern China. While Yang fits into the stereotype of 'iron girls' (*tie gu'niang*) or 'tomboy' (*jia xiaozi*), Shang certainly fits into the popular image of a 'girl student' (*nü xuesheng*). The androgynous image of an 'iron girl', a 'boy in disguise' or a plain-looking 'girl student' dominated popular representations of women and femininity in China for a long time, especially during the Mao era (Evans 1997; Edwards 2008). This construction of femininity marks a radical break from both the 'Western' and 'bourgeoisie' type of femininity, and from the 'traditional' and orientalised version of femininity. Femininity represented in the story therefore bears traces of the Maoist revolutionary history, and the post-Mao imperative to break away from this history, together with gendered representations from transnational popular culture.

In highlighting the historical and social context of the story, I underline the imperative to break away from a simple understanding of the femininity depicted in the fan fiction as fitting into one single type and having a specific source. In the paragraph quoted earlier, Shang's academic excellence, her artistic talent, as well as her virtue of modesty all underline her femininity. With her academic achievements and other attributes, she wins her place not only at school but at home as well. As a person who came to the new house as a stranger and often felt out of place, Shang finally finds herself in place and at home.

Shang and her mother enter Yang's family under special circumstances. Shang insists that her mother marries Yang's father because of money. She always feels guilty that she had to abandon her father's home for the new home. Shang recalls:

> At that time, I felt certain that my mother divorced my father because of money. When they were divorced, my father persuaded me to follow my mother. He said that girls should not suffer poverty. Perhaps I am a woman of

> vanity who values material comfort more than loyalty and gratitude. I agreed. That was why I chose to follow my mother.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 13)*

Home, as such, becomes a battlefield for contested ideologies and moral economies. While some choices naturally occupy moral high grounds, others constantly have to be justified. Such is the case with Shang and her mother, who constantly have to explain their decision to leave the old home and enter the new home. In Shang's account, addressed to Yang:

> The night you ran away from home, my mother had a conversation with me in my room. She took my hand, tears streaming down her face before she opened her mouth . . . She asked me if I thought that she was the kind of woman who could not put up with poverty and who only married for money. I said nothing.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 13)*

It is hardly surprising that Shang's mother feels compelled to justify her own choice of home. In Chinese popular culture, a woman's femininity is often associated with virtues such as loyalty to her husband, endurance of hardship, and sacrifice of one's personal interests for the family interest or public good. Nothing is worse than being seen as a person who leaves her husband to marry into a rich family in this patriarchal and heteronormative moral economy.

Femininity is shaped by cultural traditions and postsocialist social conditions; so is masculinity. From the second part of the story, we understand that Shang's mother had a baby with Yang's father from twelve years ago, and that the baby turns out to be Shang. This suggests Yang's father is also Shang's father, and that Shang's foster father always knew that he was not the biological father. The masculinity of Shang's foster father was thus compromised by his lack of material wealth and his relatively low social status. Shang recalls her last meeting with the foster father before his death:

> I went to see my father when he was in hospital. He did not seem to be confident about his health . . . let me put it this way . . . he was never confident about anything really. Men without much wealth always lack confidence. He talked a lot. He told me that he broke up with my mother because of their personality differences. My mother needed a masculine man who did not take small things seriously. He was not that kind of person.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 13)*

In the postsocialist era, especially from the 1990s onward, a man's masculinity is usually marked by material wealth and social status. In the story, Shang's foster father is seen as less masculine because of his poor economic situation. But at the same time, he is depicted as a decent person in the traditional moral economy: he

raises another man's daughter without complaint. He supports his wife's decision of marrying a richer man. As a result, the home that the father represents, although less desirable in terms of material wealth, is represented as a place full of happiness, nostalgia and emotional attachment.

Natural as it may seem, the construction of a sweet and desirable home involves a great deal of cultural politics. Certain types of homes are portrayed with a romantic tint, so people can always go back even though they frequently try to break away. Other types of homes are deemed less desirable, so people can discard them whenever they can make a choice. Significantly, home is closely associated with the construction of gender. Masculinity and femininity are often shaped by the choice of homes. In writing and reading fiction, both authors and readers seem to feel the imperative to make a moral justification for abandoning an old home and entering into a new one. The author and the readers would have found it difficult to to accept that Shang and her mother be placed in an ethically inferior position, simply because both are 'underdogs' in a rich home. The textual solutions are therefore manifested in the following ways: first, the author constructs a romantic and sentimental old home as well as a happy, loving new home at the same time. Both homes are good, but the latter apparently offers Shang and her mother more freedom and choice. Freedom and choice are considered crucial in postsocialist China, in contrast to the seeming lack of them in the Mao era. Also, importantly, the man associated with the second home has more wealth and masculinity than the first one. The second narrative strategy that the author deploys is to create a familial blood link between the old home and new home. Shang is the daughter of the second home, so it makes sense that she returns to her 'real' home. By deploying such a narrative strategy, the protagonists' choice of leaving a poor home for a rich home becomes fully justified. At the same time, the readers' curiosity about such a moral dilemma is satisfied without compromising both the protagonists' and the readers' moral integrity. However, such textual resolutions are also ambivalent, as the author has, after all, constructed the story of leaving home. The mother therefore must go back to Shang and confess her deep regret and guilt for leaving the old home, and such an act is a deeply gendered one.

Even in the same family, some members have more rights and privileges than others. Yang used to claim more legitimacy at home than the 'outsider' Shang. But power relations are never static and always subject to change. With the family's disappointments with Yang's self-indulgence, Shang seems to enjoy an increasing recognition in her new home. Despite this, both Shang and her mother maintain a critical distance to the new home. While Yang is in hospital after a fight on campus, Shang's mother, that is, Yang's stepmother, visits Yang. Yang recalls:

> The care that Aunt Chai [Shang's mother] took was admirable. She knew when to say things and what to say. Over so many years, she never took herself as the only hostess in the family. She never tried to take the place of my mother.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 5)*

The critical distance to her new home highlights the mother's ethical stance and effectively stops her being labelled as a 'wicked stepmother'. In this context, femininity not only rests on a woman's appearance, but also on socially accepted traditional virtues including humility, kindness and knowing one's social position. This brings back the spectre of patriarchy. A Confucian patriarchal home is characterised by its hierarchy and order, with every member knowing their place and performing their roles. A traditional Chinese home is thus intrinsically gendered, in which women often assume perceived social roles to fulfil. Shang is different from her mother in performing gender roles. The mother fulfils her role and manages to maintain the order of the family and uphold societal values by preventing transgressive behaviours such as lesbianism and incest. The daughter, by contrast, transgresses these rules and conventional social order with her firm belief in love, a *raison d'être* for everything transgressive in popular fiction.

A detailed examination of the politics of home brings to light the issue of being middle class in contemporary China. In the story, the experience of living in a middle class home seems a reassuring experience for Yang whilst a traumatic experience for Shang. Yet they have both benefited from that way of life and being members of a privileged social class.

China's social and cultural history needs to be taken into consideration in understanding the issue of home and class. 'Family background' (*jiating chushen*) used to be, and arguably is still, a keyword in understanding social identities in Chinese society. In the Mao era, people's lives were predetermined by the families they were born into. Workers' and peasants' identities enjoyed more political legitimacy than those of 'capitalists', that is, people who owned property in the old political regime.[13] In the post-Mao era, with the country's 'reform and opening up', families of property became desired families, and the idea of being 'middle class' (*zhongchan jieji*) dominates people's social imagination. David Goodman (2008) argues that the middle class as is commonly understood in the West today does not exist in China, as China's social elites are often closely associated with, and incorporated into, the Communist Party State. However, the image of middle classness is so appealing in contemporary China that many people actively imagine themselves as part of the emerging middle class (Chen and Goodman 2013). Obviously, the middle class dream has saturated many popular cultural texts as well as people's reading practices.

Home is an ideology that serves to suture China's cosmopolitan dreams (Hird and Song 2018). The desire for a sweet and happy home bespeaks the postsocialist desire to depart from China's socialist past and enter into the world of global capitalism (Rofel 2007). Here, Shang becomes a metonymy for the postsocialist China she lives in: she leaves her past of being poor behind and enters a new home – a home of wealth, love and freedom. Despite numerous difficulties, she eventually finds her place in the new home with her determination, perseverance and diligence: individual entrepreneurial qualities that are encouraged in a market economy under neoliberalism.

Scholars in feminist media studies (e.g. Radway 1984; Ang 1985) have noted that many women enjoy reading romances and watching soap operas which depict

upper- or middle class lifestyles, or lives that seem like fantasies for the audience. This is also the case with readers and audiences in urban China (Lewis, Martin and Sun 2016). For most of the *Pink Affairs* fans, the lives of Yang and Shang seem like fantasies. Most readers have not lived in a house with servants; nor have they studied or travelled abroad. But they can still imagine a perfect world where they can escape from their mundane lives. Reading fan fiction is, therefore, one of the ways that readers can participate in the dreams and aspirations of a postsocialist world.

The 'Double-consciousness' of a transnational China

'Double consciousness', as used by W. E. B. Du Bois (1994 [1903]) and Paul Gilroy (1993), describes the fractured nature of life for the black people living in the West who consistently find themselves 'locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship' (Gilroy 1993: 1) between two worlds: one black, and the other white. Here I use the term 'double consciousness' to capture the constant negotiation of identities of being both transnational and Chinese, as well as the sense of having 'flexible citizenship' (Ong 1999), as experienced by the protagonists in this story and by many middle class Chinese citizens in the postsocialist era.

Pink Affairs conjures up a powerful image of being a world citizen, a popular dream in postsocialist Chinese society. It is true that in the story, both Yang and Shang were born in China, yet their 'Chineseness' is no more important than their 'globalness'. For example, they both speak foreign languages. Familiarity with foreign languages and Western ways of life constitutes an important part of their identity. While Yang works hard to improve her English in the UK, Shang studies French at Fudan University, a top university in China. They both spend their holidays in France, and both work in foreign enterprises in China. Their family background, education and employment make them part of China's rising middle class. Born and brought up in a wealthy family in Shanghai, they have more access to 'globalness' than many of their peers in other parts of the country.

Locality is as important as class in middle class identity formation in postsocialist China. Shanghai has been at the forefront of China's economic reform and neoliberal experiment since the 1980s. Despite the snobbery often displayed by some Shanghainese towards the 'country bumpkins' – newcomers to the city and people from other parts of China – Shanghai has become a popular place to pursue cosmopolitan dreams and to become a world citizen for many people. It is not surprising that both Yang and Shang choose to stay in Shanghai after they have studied abroad. For them, Shanghai is an ideal place where locality meets globality, where 'Chineseness' meets transnationality, and where people embody 'double consciousness' of being both Chinese and a world citizen at the same time. This 'double consciousness' offers a sense of imagined mobility although most people can also feel trapped in social immobility in their everyday lives. Popular fiction, as such, offers an escape from mundane everyday lives and social problems.

In the story, both Yang and Shang have Western names (Jade and Laure). English and French are daily means of communication for them, their colleagues

and friends. Their conversation, full of hybridised language and code switching, becomes a fascinating display of multilingualism and multiculturalism. That does not mean that everyone involved understands foreign words or sentences. The mere act of speaking them manifests social distinction and conveys one's background of class, education and profession. That people communicate with each other in such ways indicates that they are people of similar social status and aesthetic taste and they belong to the same social field with shared dispositions (Bourdieu 1984). Foreign languages, in this context, function not only as a means of communication, but as 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) that defines one's identity and social status in a postsocialist society. When Yang meets Shang at a Christmas party, for example, Shang is with her new girlfriend, Huang. Shang 'appeared in the crowd, dressed elegantly in a business suit and holding a glass of champagne in her hand'. The beautiful Huang was 'in her thirties, mature, elegant, quiet, and charming enough to impress both men and women'. As Yang takes hold of Shang's hands, Huang asks, '*Laure, qu'est elle*?' Shang, nevertheless, replies in Mandarin Chinese: 'she is my . . . sister.' (Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 15)

While celebrating a Western holiday such as Christmas, drinking champagne and speaking French are all signs of being middle class and cosmopolitan citizens, the way how Shang switches to Mandarin brings them back to the situatedness of 'Chineseness'. The protagonists' cultural identities are constantly shifting between 'globalness' and 'Chineseness'. While neither of these identities is stable and coherent, the moments of ambiguity and in-betweenness point to the fragmented nature of social identities in a transnational and postsocialist world.

The politics of language is played out while the protagonists are having sex with each other. Yang and Shang had a strange, code-switching conversation after their passionate sex at home:

> *La vie est une illusion*.
> Pardon? Half asleep, I asked.
> *L'amour est une grande douleur.*
> Taking no notice of my question, she added:
> Do you speak German?
> No, but why?
> Nothing, she said, and then she uttered the next sentence, which I could not understand either – *Ich liebe Dich. (Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 19)*[14]

In this scenario, Shang does not make any attempt to make Yang understand the French and German sentences that she utters. It also seems that neither Yang nor the readers are bothered by the obscurity of these foreign words. These words function as symbols of a transnational identity as well as a testimony of universal love and sexuality. They do not have to be translated. The mere act of inserting them into a conversation is significant enough to showcase one's cosmopolitan disposition. Notably, Yang and Shang choose to speak foreign languages during sex, as if Western European languages are more erotic than their native Mandarin.

Indeed, as Gayatri Gopinath (2005) points out, sex and sexuality are always racialised in cross-cultural representations. In this story, the cultural politics of sex and sexuality often helps the protagonists negotiate between their Chinese and global identities.

In many ways, the two protagonists represent different, and shifting, identities and cultures in postsocialist China. At the beginning of the story, Yang appears to be more Western and Shang more Chinese. While Yang represents 'Western' individualism and freedom of choice, Shang is given the virtue of being quiet, modest, tolerant and diligent often associated with 'Chineseness' and femininity. However, Shang's 'Chineseness' soon shifts after she has studied French and done her internship in Paris. She becomes as international as, if not more fashionable than, Yang. This is when she begins to appeal to Yang and becomes Yang's object of desire. In other words, Shang's sexual attractiveness, to a large extent, derives from possessing a global identity. As such, Yang and Shang both become transnational citizens with desiring subjectivities that the postsocialist China tries to forge (Rofel 2007).

It would be problematic to think that having a global identity entails the sacrifice of one's 'Chineseness'. The two protagonists' insistence on a long-term monogamous relationship, their attachment to home and their belief in predetermined destiny are all represented in the story as uniquely 'Chinese'.[15] Their 'double consciousness' of being both 'global' and 'Chinese' bespeaks China's imagination of its cosmopolitan identity in a postsocialist world.

In *Modern China*, Rana Mitter (2008) argues that modern China is *both* modern *and* Chinese. This simple statement points to the two most important agendas in Chinese governance since the late nineteenth century: the nationalistic agenda and the modernising agenda. Being modern means situating oneself in an increasingly globalised world with its standardised way of measuring time and experiencing space. China departed from its own way of conceiving time and space in premodern times by placing itself in the Hegelian linear and progressive historical narrative and in the Newtonian visible physical space (Levenson 1958). What we call 'globalisation' today is the world that China situates itself in. It is no longer possible to live in a closed and self-sufficient system 'under the heaven' (*tianxia*), a cosmopolitan and yet China-centred way that the world was understood in premodern times. China has to adapt itself to fit into this changing world. The Mao era brought China to the forefront of a global modernity by opening up a new political imaginary of socialism (Liu 2004). At the same time this alternative modernity isolated China from the Western, capitalist world. The 'reform and opening up' policy in the postsocialist era helped bring China back to the capitalist world where China subsequently became part of a global political economy. This system, however, is far from being egalitarian. Some dreams have been constructed as more appealing than others; they include economic development, personal freedom and responsibility for oneself, among others. Particular desires have also been privileged over others, and queer desires are among the newly emerged desires that capture the postsocialist structures of feeling. Indeed, desire is far from being natural, spontaneous and innate. Rather, it is constructed along the unequal nexus of power.

In the 1980s and 90s, desires for a 'global' (read 'Western") identity and a middle class lifestyle dominated urban Chinese citizens' imagination. Many Chinese are enthusiastic about learning foreign languages, eating Western food and tasting Western wine, as well as going abroad. In this story, both Yang and Shang live Westernised lifestyles. They also work in foreign enterprises and associate with people who have lived or studied abroad. They have both picked up a 'Western' identity in order to be sexually attractive.

For Mitter (2008), 'modern China' is also intrinsically 'Chinese' because nationalism often stands at the core of China's modernisation project. The nation seems to cherish 'Chineseness' as a 'national essence' despite its obsession with 'globality'. Certain personalities and virtues are considered to be more 'Chinese' than others, among which are qualities such as loyalty (*zhong*), deep emotional attachment (*qing*), tolerance (*ren*) and the value of home (*jia*). In the story, Shang wins the respect and love of Yang not only because of her transnational and cosmopolitan identities, but her 'Chineseness' as well. It is Shang's 'Chinese' virtues that make her femininity stand out in the transnational scenes of desire in cosmopolitan Shanghai. Meanwhile, Yang also transforms herself dramatically after seeing the 'decadence' of the West, especially as she gets to know the racial politics in the West from Sister Orange during her stay in the UK:

> The British look down upon women from mainland China deep in the heart. It is fine to have a British boyfriend, but he only wants to have sex with you. There is no way that he will lend you money.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 6)*

The West, especially the UK, is represented as a place where there is no true love but casual sex, especially between people of different races, ethnicities and cultures. The 'Westerners' are seen to be pragmatic, selfish, arrogant and hypocritical – characteristics of a capitalist humanity. That accounts for a major reason why Yang feels lonely in the UK. By contrast, France is represented as a totally different country from the UK: romantic, sentimental and full of pleasant surprises.[16] Despite such an occidentalist association, France does not offer the protagonists a sense of home either. After living abroad for several years, Yang and Shang both decide to go back to China, where their imagined home is.

If imagining and feeling home is a way to articulate cultural longings and belongings, China offers both protagonists a home to settle down. Although this home is not perfect and can still be full of mundanity and even turbulance, it is a place where they feel safe and a place they can turn to in hard times. With the 'double consciousness', Yang and Shang negotiate their imagined identities of being both global and Chinese. While the global identity offers an imagination of living in a cosmopolitan, romantic, exotic and even utopian world, the Chinese identity gives them a sense of security, a home to settle in. Just as home can be rife with domestic politics, the global identity can also be full of exclusion and inequality. What is more, negotiating identities also involves locating and dislocating desires in various places, and developing different senses of space and place. From this perspective, this

story is about desires and their localities; writing and reading fan fiction itself can be seen as an active and ongoing process of locating and anchoring desires.

Painful pleasures and social distinction

GL and BL texts are often highly erotic. These texts not only depict sex in explicit languages; the depiction also involves quite queer and often transgressive desires, such as homosexuality, transgender, sadomasochism, fetishism, rape, sexual violence, paedophilia, bestiality and necrophilia. In online fan fiction communities, BL and GL texts are often divided into 'clear-water texts' (*qingshui wen*) or 'H texts' (*H wen*) and are labelled as such in the title line. 'Clean-water text' refers to stories that do not involve explicit depictions of sex. H, short for the Japanese word *hentai*, refers to sexually explicit representations. Some authors would remind their readers of the pornographic nature of the story by putting *8CJ* (short for *bu chunjie*, 'not pure') in the headline. There are different attitudes towards explicit depictions of sex in GL fan communities. A few readers in the *Pink Affairs* GL fan community have expressed their reservations about, and even opposition to, explicit depictions of sex in the story. However, an overwhelming majority of readers seem to consider sex an indispensable part of the GL romance.[17] For many, sex is the ultimate manifestation and culmination of love. Without good sex, love would be mundane, incomplete and imperfect. This point is reiterated by the author of the story: 'True love may not be perfect, but there has to be perfect sex.' (Clockwork Orange 521 2007, postscript) The mutual-constitution of love and sex is also emphasised in the story: 'There can be sex without love. But perfect sex only exists when there is true love.' (Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 42)

These statements from the author echo many readers' expectations and preferences in the BL and GL fan communities: if one truly loves the other, one must torture the other physically and psychologically. What is more, the deeper love is, the more extreme and transgressive sex should be; the intensification of love corresponds to the intensification of sex and pain. Many authors and readers seem to believe in the notion of 'true love', and that love is the *raison d'être* for all things transgressive. But this 'true love' must be brought to culmination by good sex. Sex and transgression in BL and GL fiction, therefore, should not be considered as antithetical to love, but rather as a profound expression of true love.

In postsocialist Chinese popular culture, there is a popular belief among urban youth in romantic love, sex, pleasure and free expression of the self. Many young people in this fan community comment on how promiscuous many Westerners are and that they prefer the Chinese tradition of deep emotional attachment (*qing*). Meanwhile, desiring to be a global citizen, they certainly do not wish to be left behind in the global scene of 'sexual opening up' (Farrer 2002). Young people in Chinese cities indulge themselves in all the best that life can offer, including food, sex and luxury goods, most of which their parents' generation did not have chance to experience. Urban youth in China are finding ways to negotiate their identities in an increasingly complicated world (Probyn 2008). Practising alternative sexuality is one of the ways they use to achieve this goal. Some consider homosexuality

a fashionable identity and a new way of life, and this helps them depart from a widespread sex-negative attitude in Chinese society and the strict discipline from their parents and schoolteachers. Others consider the regime of heterosexuality and monogamous long-term relationship old-fashioned and incompatible with the global identity that they are eager to embrace. Gay and lesbian desires as well as GL and BL genres in China should thus be placed in the context of a transnational China in an increasingly globalised neoliberal economy with its ways of producing subjectivities and desires; and these subjectivities and desires are often full of contradictions.

In *Pink Affairs*, the legitimacy of sex is supported by a belief in 'true love', a notion characteristic of a modern society (Giddens 1992). The story features more than ten intimate scenes. When the two protagonists meet in France and fall in love with each other, a kiss from Yang is met with Shang's refusal. The second time follows a 'hurt/ comfort' narrative convention. When Shang feels upset after seeing her dying foster father in hospital, Yang takes the tipsy Shang home and kisses her again:

> I pulled her chin to my side and kissed her slightly open lips forcefully. She lifted her face and, to my surprise, accepted the intrusion of my tongue.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 14)*

What happens next reads rather like a rape scene, albeit with Shang's consent:

> I tore her shirt open. My lips stuck, like leeches, to the virgin land that no one had explored before. Her collarbones looked very pretty. I could not help but bite it. Out of pain, she grabbed and pulled my hair. The sudden and severe pain turned me on. My eyes turned green with lust.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 14)*

Yang proceeds to penetrate Shang with her fingers:

> Her body shivered as I thrust my finger into her body. I held her with one arm and carassed her back gently with my other hand. She held on to me tightly and endured the pain. This was her first sexual experience.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 14)*

Depiction of the first sexual experience is often an important challenge for fan fiction writers and thus constitutes a significant benchmark for readers to assess the literary quality of the text. The author spares no effort to describe the process in minute detail, to an extent that pain becomes romantic and erotic. The metaphors of 'land' and 'soil' are used to refer to Shang's virgin body:

> Encouraged by her submission, I thrust my finger deeper, like a plant growing freely in the spring soil. She cried out of shame and pleasure. Drops of tears rolled down her eyes and wetted the sheets. She looked remarkably beautiful.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 14)*

Shame plays a pivotal role in constructing and transforming one's identity. In a previous section, Shang vows to transform her own identity and fit herself into the new home in response to Yang's humiliation. Shame, in that context, interpellates Shang into her embodied identity and compels her to reject her abject identity of being an 'outsider', a person from a different class and a different home. Here, in the account of her first sexual experience, Shang cries with shame during the intercourse. As Yang tortures and humiliates Shang, Shang attains orgasm out of shame and pain. There is an intense power play at work in this sadomasochistic scene, where pain and pleasure, shame and joy, are closely intertwined.

At the height of their relationship, Yang and Shang practise sadomasochism to express their mixed feelings of love and hatred, deep emotional attachment and resentment against the other person's suspected betrayal:

> I tied her hands to the bed with a scarf. I fetched ice cubes and hot water from the kitchen. I turned around and pretended that I did not see the red liquid on her body . . . Yes, hate me, please. Hate me to your guts with your heart for a half or one year. But remember me with your body all your life.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007 Ch. 45)*

The colours 'red' and 'pink' appear frequently in the story and they are sometimes used interchangeably. The Chinese characters *feise* ('pink') as in the title *Feise Shi* ('pink affairs') can refer to both colours: dark red and pink. In this story, the author uses both connotations of the term: while pink invites association with queerness in popular cultural representation, dark red points to the brutality of sex and violence. The text frequently conjures up a violent and blood-stained imaginary. Blood is used as a trope to signify different things in the text: the two protagonists' blood ties, sex, pain and violence. Blood can also signify things as passionate and profound as love and destiny: the two protagonists are destined to meet, fall in love and then separate, all of which result from the fact that they share the same blood, as they were born of the same father. Here we also note the importance of the father, instead of the mother, in the creation of the blood ties as represented in this story.[18] This is itself a gendered bias deeply rooted in a patrilineal and heteronormative society. Meanwhile, blood also brings the deepest emotional and physical attachment, and it is only through resorting to blood that human relations can be explained and resolved in the story, a narrative convention often deployed in gothic fiction.

Bodies matter here. Bodies are often seen to be passive, a surface that waits to be written and inscribed upon. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's (1979) bodies are disciplined by the panopticon gaze. Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) classed bodies mark social differences. Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) bodies are gendered and sexed, and they perform both consciously and unconsciously in and out of their social norms. In this text, bodies are penetrated, tortured and marked. But it would be simplistic to assume that bodies are passive recipients of love. Bodies also offer love, inflict pain and pleasure, and remember. Body speaks and flesh tells, as Vicky Kirby (1997) suggests. In this sense, the two protagonists in the story express their love and desire with their bodies and embodied pains and pleasures.

Perhaps there is a fine line between pleasure and pain, and perhaps the boundary between pride and shame is volatile. Sadomasochism is, in essence, a game of power play and an eroticisation of power. While Li Yinhe (1998) considers sadomasochism to be an upper- and middle class way of life enjoyed by a privileged few, Foucault (Foucault and Lotringer 1989) is more interested in the creative possibilities that sadomasochism can bring to established social structures and power relations. Clearly, neither Li nor Foucault considers sadomasochism between consenting adults abusive and exploitative. In this story, although Yang always plays an active role in sex and Shang a passive role, the unequal power relation does not necessarily demean Shang. Rather, Shang seems able to attain sexual pleasure from the performative act of being dominated and penetrated. Wood (2006) contends that the *seme/uke* role dichotomy in BL *manga* are not exploitative. Rather, 'the *possibility* of changing roles often serves as a point of teasing humour and even sexual excitement between partners', thus exposing the performative nature of sex and sexuality. In *Pink Affairs*, although Yang is often the *gong* (*seme*) and Shang the *shou* (*uke*), there are times when Shang acts aggressively and makes Yang lose her virginity. My point here is not to suggest that sex is free from power. Foucault (1984), in refuting the 'repressive hypothesis', cautions us against the popular belief that saying yes to sex means saying no to power. Indeed, at no time is sex free from power. The crucial point is that neither power nor sex is static. The power play in sex, or the eroticisation of power, manifests the fluidity of sexuality and subverts the rigidity of power. A celebratory tone about lesbian sex and sadomasochism as a 'queer utopia' and a pessimistic view about sex as power play and reproduction of social inequality can be equally problematic.

Lesbian sex and sadomasochism do not direct us to a 'queer utopia' where there is no sexual hierarchy and negotiation of power (Benjamin 1988; Chancer 1992), as the division of sexual roles into *gong/shou* dichotomy and the occasional switch of the roles suggest. Yet we need to take into consideration the emotional and affective dimensions of the sexual and intimate relationship. We cannot dismiss the embodied and affective experience, as well as the cathartic and therapeutic *jouissance* gained from the power play of sex. In the story, the emotionally and psychologically charged love and sex seems to have transformed both Yang and Shang. Yang has learned to love and to cherish love. Shang eventually recovers from her traumatic childhood experience. For them, the love and sexual experiences are both transformative and self-reflexive. As a story of *bildungsroman*, both protagonists have grown up and become more self-reflexive with their experiences in love and sex.

Queer texts, affective engagements

Researchers in fandom studies have been interested in why women take great interest in queer texts. In China, public discussions of whether these queer texts will turn 'good women' queer are not uncommon. Sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists, among others, actively participate in the 'incitement to discourse' (Foucault 1990) to produce BL and GL identities. McLelland (2006) asks, 'why

should men's interest in "lesbianism" be taken for granted whereas women's interest in male homosexuality is somehow in need of interpretation?'

McLelland's question captures a sense of queerness. Queer usually describes the 'gestures or analytical tools which dramatise incoherences in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire' (Jagose 1996: 3). In the light of this statement, not only are gendered and sexed identities and practices – including homosexuality, bisexuality, sadomasochism, and many other categories that modern society has created for people – queer, insofar as they challenge society's taken-for-granted heterosexual norms; the gestures and attitudes that defy the truth claims and the hegemonic constructions of knowledge are also queer. As Eve Sedgwick argues, queer indexes 'the open mess of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning [that occur] when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically'(1993: 9). Indeed, queer frees us from monolithic and normative ways of thinking. It points to a myriad of possibilities of being, doing and ways of knowing.

Perhaps we should move away from the questions of 'why GL', for asking the question itself may assume a heteronormative stance by seeing GL as a problem. After all, fans become a problem only in the cultural intelligibility of heteronormativity (Butler 1990). Fandom reveals the complexity of gendered and sexed identities and point to their instabilities. Perhaps we can ask instead: why do we study GL? What does our interest in GL tell about us and the society at large? Under what assumptions has GL, as well as women's queer desires, become a problem? GL, as such, becomes a point of departure to explore complex social constructions of gender, sex, and sexuality. In doing so, we not only interrogate our own identities but also the social norms that have been taken for granted.

How is the queer desire in GL fiction related to postsocialist Chinese society? Fredric Jameson (1981) begins his book *The Political Unconscious* with a famous call: 'always historicise!'. A GL fiction is not necessarily a 'national allegory', a definitive feature that Jameson attributes to all the 'Third-World literature' (Jameson 1986). Jameson's call for historicisation and contextualisation still encourages us to look at the social contexts of GL fiction and the desires that make the GL fan culture possible.

In *Pink Affairs*, both queer desires and transgressive sexual practices including sadomasochism are considered modern and fashionable by the protagonists because they are social practices that people believe the modern world, or rather, the modern West, engages in. To be part of the modern world means to have similar desires as people in the West. While reading the fiction, the readers are also actively negotiating their identities as being both global and Chinese. They express their dreams to be modern and global at the same time by engaging in the transnational practices of fan fiction, and by expressing their fascination with different forms of sexuality and desire. Meanwhile, they have not forgotten their 'Chineseness' by giving preference to the character Shang, who seems to be an incarnation of 'Chinese values'. Reading stories that mix Chinese characters with English, French and

German has not proved to be a problem for most readers. Not that they understand these languages necessarily, but that consumption of such transnational and multicultural cultural texts signifies their 'global' identity and their social distinction. The 'double consciousness' of being both a Chinese citizen and a 'global citizen' is key to their construction of identities through reading practices.

I have so far discussed the representations of middle classness and transnationalism in this story. I have also highlighted the representation of queer desires. It is now time to consider the connections between these categories. Middle classness, transnationalism and queerness are all desires produced by and even prioritised in postsocialist China. These desires are not distinct from each other; they are often intertwined with one another. It is exactly because of their inter-connectedness that the story *Pink Affairs* has gained a wide appeal among its readership. It is also their convergences that give meanings and significance to the practice of producing and consuming GL fiction.

Yang recalls her sexuality in her school days:

> I was active and easy-going; I was also generous and handsome. My schoolmates liked hanging out with me, so I had a lot of friends. I was thirteen years old when I started to figure out my own sexuality.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 2)*

Yang's attractiveness derives from her personal attributes such as being easy-going, generous and good-looking. The issue of class and social distinction plays an important role here. Yang's popularity results from her attributes, or *habitus*, brought about by her middle class family background. Pierre Bourdieu describes *habitus* as 'a durable, transposable system of definitions' acquired through early socialisation in the home and family. It forms 'the basis of all subsequent experiences . . . from structuring to restructuring' (Bourdieu 1992: 134). While the acquired *habitus* is an open and generative system, it is still characterised by a certain situatedness, be it class, or gender, or race and ethnicity. In this context, Yang's *habitus* manifests her middle class family background in which she has more access to Western knowledge and material goods than her peers. Her girlfriend at school describes her in this way:

> When I saw you for the first time, you were playing video games with your friends. All other people seemed similar to me. You were different. You were in a white shirt and blue jeans, nothing fancy, but you looked different. Liu Liyang, you had an air of elegance about you.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 4)*

In this context, class and sexuality are closely intertwined. Being a lesbian is not simply a 'fashionable' practice for Yang and her peers, but rather a classed identity. They use their sexuality to differentiate themselves from people of other classes and social economic backgrounds. Sex and sexuality certainly help make social distinctions. Yang acquires social distinction by becoming a lesbian and by having

sex with the most beautiful girl at school. Being a lesbian and pursuing transgressive desires is thus seen as a social privilege in this story.

Coincidentally, all the lesbians in *Pink Affairs* are from middle class, or socially privileged groups in China, such as staff working for international corporations. When Yang meets Tan Weiwei, one of her girlfriends, Tan is depicted as follows:

> She is a tall, beautiful and mysterious woman. She is a senior manager in the business partner's company. While I was exchanging my business cards with people in an absent-minded manner, she came up to me, a champagne glass in her hand. She was dressed in a smart red business suit and a pair of high-heeled shoes of the same colour.
>
> *(Clockwork Orange 521 2007, Ch. 12)*

Shang's girlfriend Huang is depicted as a 'mature, elegant and quiet' woman in her early thirties. Huang is the boss of her own company and speaks good French. Being queer is a symbol of social distinction as depicted in the story. In this context, middle classness, transnationality and lesbian identity form interesting configurations. In consuming the text, the readers may also acquire a sense of social distinction by sharing the same 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1996) with other GL fans. *Pink Affairs* GL fan community, as such, is a community of taste. The text and the communal practices of consuming the text convey a sense of social distinction by privileging middle class lifestyle, transnationality and queerness. In this sense, both being queer and GL fans serve as symbols of cultural taste. It also bears witness to Chinese citizens' entry into the neoliberal world with their imagined universal sexualities and desires.

However, as my discussion of 'double consciousness' has demonstrated, these crafted neoliberal desires and subjectivities do not stand on their own. They fit into postsocialist China's agenda of making a 'modern China' and constructing neoliberal subjectivities for its citizens. Queerness may not be what the state wants to encourage. But as soon as desires for middle classness and transnationality are legitimised, queer identities also emerge as part and parcel of the neoliberal subjectivities and practices. The postsocialist Chinese state has tried different means to territorialise queer desires by highlighting the 'socialist spiritual civilisation' or 'socialist core values' and by stressing the 'Chineseness' of sexuality and morality. Queer identities and desires can only manifest their 'cultural citizenship' (Rofel 2007) instead of getting assimilated into the 'global gay' imaginary.

My discussions about the interplay between middle classness, transnationality and queer desire should also caution against an uncritical optimism for a 'queer utopia' brought about by fandom. When people claim that BL and GL fiction bring about gender plurality and sexual diversity, it is important to remember that this queerness does not necessarily entail egalitarianism in gender and sexuality. Rather, queerness may index widening gaps between different social groups. Queerness may even become people's privilege with which they can exclude others.

Similarly, consuming GL fan fiction may become a privileged position and have discriminatory effects. The fans who read and write fan fiction may dream of evading state power and constructing a queer utopia; but many may find their desires crafted by the nation state's nationalist agenda of constructing desires and subjectivities and by capitalism's strong force of creating consumer desires. The desires for a middle class lifestyle, transnationality and queerness may well facilitate capitalistic production and consumption. As such GL fiction may reproduce and consolidate values that sustain neoliberal ideologies. All these possibilities point to the constant processes of deterrirotialisation and reterritorialisation of identities and desires under postsocialism.

For readers, reading GL fan fiction can be an active and creative process. It is also a process that involves fun and creativity, as well as great emotional and affective investment. More importantly, it involves readers in constructing their own gendered and sexed subjectivities. It is the ordinary people's ingenuity and 'tactics' in their lived experiences that manifest the agency of individuals in the seemingly overwhelming social structures.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the production and consumption of a *Super Girl* fan fiction in an online fan community. Through textual analysis of a lesbian-themed online GL fan fiction, *Pink Affairs*, I have delineated how this text depicts the middle class dream, transnational imagination and queer desires. Meanwhile, by considering the text as symptomatic of the 'structures of feeling' in contemporary Chinese society, I have also explored the postsocialist historical and social contexts in which such cultural practices and queer desires are situated. Overall, the 'becoming gay' narrative in *Beijing Story* (Chapter 3) and the 'becoming lesbian' narrative in *Pink Affairs* both testify to the complex processes of constructing gendered, sexed and desiring subjectivities in a postsocialist and neoliberal context. Such processes are characterised by the formation of classed identities, tastes and desires. Literature and popular culture play a pivotal role in this process.

In addition, by examining the author-reader interaction in co-creating the story, I have drawn attention to the importance of consumption – or 'prosumption' (Toffler 1980), a combination of production and consumption – in shaping queer popular culture. Indeed, as we look at queer cultural production, a focus on consumption, as well as how queer cultural texts are shaped and co-created by their readers and the audience, is indispensable.

Fan cultures in China have been strongly influenced by popular cultural flows in East Asia and the Sinophone spheres; they also manifest a strong sense of queerness that cannot be neatly captured by identity politics. BL and GL fans are often described as heterosexual-identified women who enjoy reading queer texts. But who is to say that these readers are absolutely straight, and that queerness is not at the heart of every identity and all reading practices? Perhaps texts are always polysemic and ambiguous, and the act of reading often mobilises complex corporeal,

sensorial and affective experiences. Such experiences cannot be pinned down to simple identities and restricted by social norms. In this sense, literary texts and reading experiences are in themselves always already queer.

Notes

1 The show's official name was the Mengniu Yoghurt Super Girl Contest, after the company that sponsored the series. The reality TV show ran between 2004 and 2006. The organiser, a provincial TV station, had to stop the show in 2006 because of the political sensitivity and controversy over the media event. Liu Zhongde, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, accused the program of being 'poisonous' and corruptive for the youth (Martinsen 2006). The show was relaunched in 2009, with the Chinese name changed to 'Happy Girls' (*kuaile nüsheng*) though the English name '*Super Girl*' remained unchanged. The last season of the show was aired in 2011.

2 Fanzine is a nonprofessional and nonofficial publication produced by fans for the pleasure of others who share their interest. In Asian popular culture, *anime* refers to digital animations in films and videos, while *manga* refers to comic art magazines and books.

3 The Chinese term *tongren zhi* comes from the Japanese term *doujinshi* and refers to self-published works, usually hard cover art or *manga* but also extended to include paperback or online production. Some derivatives of the term include *tongren wen*, self-published stories either in print or online, and *tongren nü*, young girls who produce and consume these self-published works.

4 Slash fiction is a type of fan fiction that focuses on sexual or romantic relationships between fictional characters of the same sex.

5 GL and *Yuri* (*baihe*) are different genres of writing in the fan community. In mainland China, it is generally considered that Yuri depicts more 'pure' love without explicit sex scenes, while GL may have a lot of depiction of sex. In Japan, *Yuri* is a term used in the fan community while GL is the term used by outsiders.

6 There are some differences between Japanese slash and Anglophone slash but their differences are not significant. The two conventions of aesthetic and graphic slash, 'boys' love' (*Shōnen-ai*) and *Yaoi* in Japanese slash, are also apparent in the Anglophone slash.

7 Web link: http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E7%B3%C9%AB%B3%AC%C5%AE (accessed 23 March 2019) The story is also available at www.sto.cx/book-26399-1.html (in Chinese, accessed 25 August 2019).

8 BT is the short form for the Chinese term *biantai*, meaning perverse. Its Japanese equivalent is *hentai*.

9 The author's name 'Clockwork Orange 521' shows an Anglophone influence. There is ample evidence in online GL fan communities that Chinese GL fans are familiar with both Asian and Western popular cultures, in terms of both 'high' and popular cultures. Fans often adopt names from a wide repertoire of cultural references to demonstrate their distinctive personalities and classed tastes.

10 In *Super Girl* fan communities, Yang represents Liu Liyang and Shang represents Shang Wenjie. I use Liu and Shang to refer to the two protagonists in this chapter.

11 *Seme* (*gong*) and *uke* (*shou*) are jargons in BL and GL fan communities. In a GL sexual relationship, *seme* (*gong*) refers to the active, and usually penetrative, party; *uke* (*shou*) is used to describe the passive, and usually penetrated, party. In the BL and GL world, all the characters have their distinct roles in sex, and they are either *seme* or *uke*. *Seme* (*gong*) and *uke* (*shou*) are fan jargons and they differ from the jargons in the Chinese-language gay and lesbian communities, such as top (1), bottom (0), butch (T) and femme (P).

12 'Home', 'house' and 'family' can all be translated into *jia* in the Chinese language. I primarily use 'home' to translate *jia* in this article with some context-specific exceptions.

13 Though privileging peasants and workers in general, the Maoist society had its own ways of social distinction. 'Capitalists' with good connections with the Party State still

prospered. Those who attended the People's Liberation Army and those who allied themselves with the Communist Party in the early years became social elites in the Mao era. For a brief account of the Mao and post-Mao Chinese history, see Maurice Meisner (1999); for discussions about social class in China, see David S. G. Goodman (2008) and Minglu Chen (2013).

14 The foreign language texts I quote here are all from the Chinese text. The non-English sentences in the conversation mean: life is an illusion (in French); love is a great pain (in French), and I love you (in German).

15 Although these traits are also common to Anglophone romance fiction, people in China still widely believe that people in the West are more promiscuous in sex, and that loyalty and long-term relationship is characteristic of Chinese people. Chou Wah-Shan's (2000) *qing/xing* dichotomy is a good example of this type of popular understanding: in Chinese culture, people attach more importance to *qing* (deep emotional attachment) while people in the West put more emphasis on *xing* (sex).

16 It is possible to attribute this type of culture stereotyping to the influence of other cultural texts, including literature, film and popular cultural representations. Many high school and university educated Chinese people associate the UK with capitalism, industrial revolution and the 'alienation of human beings', exemplified by critical realist novels such as those written by Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, and France with culture, taste and romance. These cultural texts are widely circulated both in school curriculum and in popular cultural representations. Most readers in China are familiar with the Marxist vocabulary of reading cultural texts as a result of the compulsory Marxist training in the school curriculum.

17 This is in line with the Japanese meaning for YAOI (aka Boys' Love), short for *Yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi* ('No climax, no point, no meaning').

18 The works of Claude Levi-Strauss (1969) and Gayle Rubin (1975) on family, kinship and the exchange of women in the patriarchal society is useful in understanding this issue.

PART III

Queer urban space

5

'NEW BEIJING, NEW MARRIAGE'

Performing a same-sex wedding in central Beijing

> Our wedding ceremony was also a call for social recognition for homosexual, non-monogamous, and other non-conforming relationships. Having one man and two women getting married challenges the traditional marriage institution, while simultaneously making fun of the institution . . . We wanted the wedding ceremony to be a space to discuss sexual relationships, to understand sexual desires and to communicate sexual needs. We also wanted to use the marriage institution to celebrate and legitimise all kinds of sexual relationships.
>
> *He Xiaopei (2010) on her unconventional marriage or* ménage à trois *in Beijing*

Amongst all the dreams cherished by queer Chinese citizens, the hope to marry their same-sex partners is probably the most conspicuous one. This hope not only reflects the impact of transnational queer discourses and practices, it also marks culturally specific forms of queer activism. This chapter takes the practice of gay wedding, or same-sex marriage, to task by looking at its articulation in the PRC context. It examines how the seemingly hegemonic signs of the same-sex wedding from the West have been appropriated by Chinese queer activists to forge queer identities and communities, and to raise public awareness on queer visibility and rights. Such an appropriation gestures towards active and creative processes of cultural translation, as well as context specific and culturally sensitive forms of political and social activism.

On 14 February 2009, Valentine's Day, a same-sex wedding took place on the newly renovated Qianmen Street, a tourist spot featuring pseudo-ancient architecture in downtown Beijing, near the Tiananmen Square. Dressed in Western-style suits and wedding gowns, a gay couple and a lesbian couple displayed various intimate poses in front of the looking-on public (Figure 5.1). The event attracted a large crowd, including both locals and tourists. As the photoshoot was going on,

FIGURE 5.1 Valentine's Day same-sex wedding photo 1

Source: Courtesy of Fan Popo

several young people, identified as volunteers working for a local queer NGO, held digital video cameras and microphones and interviewed spectators on their attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The onlookers reacted differently to the scene: some expressed disagreement and disgust; some showed support and sympathy, while a few others seemed reasonably confused and even shocked. After the photoshoot, the couples distributed flowers to the audience and wished them a happy Valentine's Day. The whole event took about half an hour before the couples and the photographers packed up their equipment and left.

A couple of days after the event, media reports of the event mushroomed in Chinese cyberspace. The event was covered by some print media including the *New Beijing Daily (Xin jingbao)*, *Southern Metropolitan Weekly (Nandu zhoukan)*, *China Times (Zhongguo shibao)*, the Hong Kong-based *Wen Hui Pao* and the national English newspaper *China Daily*. The Guangzhou-based *Southern Metropolitan Weekly* celebrated the increasing public visibility of queer identities and communities with an eye-catching caption 'Same-Sex Wedding in Beijing: From Underground to the Street', highlighting the historical significance of this event.

This news headline captured the optimistic structures of feeling in the Chinese queer communities at the beginning of the new millennium, although this optimism is often met with harsh realities. Despite the recent legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan, same-sex marriages are not legally recognised in mainland China; self-organised community weddings are largely underground or semi-public and are far from being on the street yet. Since the (re)emergence of the issue of homosexuality in China's public sphere decades ago, with the effort of sociologists, medical professionals, journalists and queer activists to bring the group identity into visibility (see Chapter 1), the public in China have been increasingly aware of the existence of homosexuality through media reports and queer public events. Sociologist Li Yinhe made repeated proposals to legalise same-sex marriage to China's legislative body, the National People's Congress. Although her proposals were routinely rejected, they generated heated debates in public media and in Chinese society, and this helped increase the visibility of queer issues. Meanwhile, there have been constant calls and petitions from queer individuals and organisations all over the country to legalise same-sex marriage. At the end of 2019, an online campaign led by some queer activist groups for the legalisation of same-sex marriages achieved a limited success: a National People's Congress spokesperson acknowledged at a press conference that the request for the legalisation of same-sex marriage was among the most popular requests submitted to the congress for consideration and debate for inclusion in the country's new civil code. Same-sex weddings, though unrecognised by Chinese law, have taken place in queer communities across the country in the past two decades. The same-sex wedding event in Beijing was one of them. Why do queer people still hold ceremonies and photoshoots even though same-sex marriages are not recognised in Chinese law? Are they simply emulating Western practices? Are they reproducing heterosexual scripts of family and marriage in their imaginations of a happy life? What was the significance of the photoshoot event at Qianmen?

This chapter focuses on the cultural specificity of Chinese queer politics by examining the interactions between space and identity pertaining to the same-sex wedding case in Beijing. By analysing how the Qianmen event constructs gay identities and engages in queer politics through live performances and digital mediation, I highlight the importance of using performance art and digital media in communicating identity, community and social movements. In doing so, I argue for a 'soft' type of activism through the use of performance art and digital media. This type of queer activism departs from an emphasis on visibility, confrontation and direct intervention into the state politics that characterises many LGBTQ pride parades in the Western context. I also interrogate how the production and dissemination of queer performance art and digital media function as a type of 'soft' political and social activism that can empower marginalised people and communities.

Queer activism in contemporary China

'Global gays' (Altman 1997), that is, the globalisation of LGBTQ identity and politics worldwide, marks an important debate in transnational queer studies. Scholars have debated on whether sexual identities and queer activism in Asia today were 'borrowed' from the West, or whether they derived from local historical and cultural traditions, or whether we are currently witnessing a new 'hybrid' form of queer identity (e.g. Rofel 2007; Martin et al. 2008; Ho 2010; Kong 2010; Kam 2013; Engebretsen 2014; Engebretsen, Schroeder and Bao 2015; Bao 2018). The tension between a confrontational type of queer politics modelled on Stonewall and represented by pride parades and a Chinese style of 'soft' activism using media and culture to build communities has persisted in academic writings, exemplified by the 'nomadic activism' in Lisa Rofel's (2013) and Elisabeth Engebretsen's (2015) accounts. Engebretsen (2015) juxtaposes three landmark queer activist events in the PRC: a Stonewall anniversary celebration in the form of a birthday party in Beijing in 1996, the Shanghai LGBT Pride in 2009, and a pride parade in Changsha in 2013. It is easy to see the three events in a linear, teleological manner and thus imagine that the Western type of pride parade might be the future for China as the country is becoming more accepting of homosexuality and as younger generations of queers are becoming more confident and conscious of their sexuality and rights. However, on closer examination, even the 2013 pride parade in Changsha did not simply emulate the Western model. The organisers took careful consideration of the local contexts and devised many tactics to reduce risks. It is more appropriate to say that the three events were contingent, and the organisers were able to understand and make use of this contingency in different ways. As Engebretsen observes:

> activists use nuanced modes of articulation and develop meaningful ways to further their political agendas while minimising the risk of censorship and violence. The communicative strategies convey messages of sameness and difference, or of transgression and compliance, depending on the perspectives

> of the audiences. In this way, they contribute toward creating powerful, and complex, and yet paradoxical discourses of what it means to be Chinese *and* queer, in a comparative, geopolitical perspective.
>
> *(2015: 106)*

Indeed, Chinese queer activism is characterised by its contingency, as it is dependent upon multiple factors including state policy, geographical location, organisers and participants. It is therefore difficult to come up with a generic statement of what type of activism suits China or will take place in China in the future. However, with the strengthening of political control in the Xi Jinping's era, the pride parade type of activism has become increasingly difficult in the PRC. Based on these circumstances, I suggest that the following three types of activism may become dominant forms of queer activism in China in the years to come:

The first lies within the area of litigation. Although homosexuality is not legally protected in the PRC, an increasing number of queer individuals have taken respective public institutions and government ministries to court for their discriminatory policies and practices against gender and sexual minorities. This was exemplified by queer filmmaker Fan Popo's 2013 case against the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television over the online censorship of his film *Mama Rainbow* in 2013, queer activist Peng Yanzi's 2014 case against the Xinyu Piaoxiang Psychiatric Clinic over gay conversion therapy, and Qiu Bai's 2016 case against the Ministry of Education over the negative depiction of homosexuality in university textbooks (Parkin 2018). Although most of these court cases did not achieve the results the plaintiffs had hoped for, the fact that government ministries and public institutions can be taken to court and held to account for their mistakes serves as an inspiration for sexual minorities and other marginalised social groups.

The second dominant form of queer activism engages with the Internet and social media. With the rapid development of the Internet and social media in China, as well as its widespread use among sexual minorities, online and social media activism have become an important means of activism in China today. Such cases include the community response to Lü Liping and Sun Haiying's homophobic remarks in 2011 and Sina Weibo's reversal of the ban on gay content in 2018. It is important to note that online activism often works in tandem with offline activism, and is facilitated by queer organisations, media companies, celebrities and the Chinese government. In this light, we should be careful not to celebrate techno-determinism or techno-utopianism too hastily.

The third type of queer activism is associated with organised cultural activities and events. This can take various forms, including film festivals, art and photography exhibitions, cultural festivals, and sporting events. Examples include the Beijing Queer Film Festival, Shanghai Queer Film Festival, PFLAG meetings, and the Shanghai Pride. These cultural activities also include dinners, karaoke and playing sports, what William Schroeder (2015) describes as the affective forms of having 'fun'. These activities may not look political, but they play a significant role in

constructing identities and communities and raising awareness of minority rights. More importantly, they effectively circumvent government censorship and are therefore sustainable for community building. They serve as a culturally sensitive and sustainable means of queer activism in China today.

These three types of queer activism coexist in contemporary China, and they play different roles. Activists usually combine them for rights advocacy and community building and select the most appropriate form, and often a combination of them, according to their needs and specific contexts. It is difficult to predict whether the confrontational type of queer politics represented by pride parades will ever take place in China. The 'soft' activism represented by organised cultural events including film screenings, choir rehearsals and performance art may dominate China's queer activism for a long time to come, given the consistency of a rigid government policy of 'no support, no opposition, and no advocacy' (Wang 2015: 174) with regard to homosexuality. In the following section, I shall use the same-sex wedding event at Qianmen to demonstrate how 'soft' activism works in the context of China's queer communities. My focus is on the interactions between affect, the body and public space in shaping queer identities and sexual politics.

Performing gay identity

The issue of performance and performativity seems central to this highly orchestrated media event at Qianmen. People tend to be rather disappointed after they have learned that the event was a public performance organised by Tongyu (meaning 'Common Language'), a local queer NGO, to raise awareness about queer issues and that the two couples are not real couples. In fact, the two bridegrooms had never met each other before this event. They were simply lesbians and gays men who volunteered for the event. In a sense, the couples, the photographer, the journalists and the NGO volunteers were all performers; they made elaborate efforts to put on this show in front of the viewing public. Why did they do this? What roles do performances and other forms of queer cultural events play in the construction of queer identities and communities in China?

Graduated from Beijing Film Academy, Fan Popo is a queer activist who engages himself actively in the queer movement in China. He was on the spot with a digital video camera when the event took place. Whilst I do not think that documentaries necessarily give 'true' and 'objective' representations of histories and realities, Fan Popo and David Zheng's 2009 documentary *New Beijing, New Marriage* (*Xin Qianmen Dajie*) still offers us an interesting perspective in understanding the event (Figure 5.2).

In Fan and Zheng's film, the preparation for the performance took place in an apartment. In one room, a make-up artist is assisting the brides and bridegrooms to wear make-up. In another, some Tongyu volunteers are preparing flower bouquets for the public. People in both rooms make casual conversations and play friendly jokes on each other. The brides and grooms try to overcome their nervousness

FIGURE 5.2 Valentine's Day same-sex wedding photo 2

Source: Courtesy of Fan Popo

while they talk to each other. The whole scene reminds us of the 'backstage' in Erving Goffman's (1973) dramaturgy, that is, the space for preparation before one performs a social role. Meanwhile, it is the practice of working together at the same place, at the same time and towards the same goal that gives the event participants a shared sense of identity and community. The conversation, the smiles and laughs, the tediousness of wrapping flowers, along with a shared sense of anxiety and mutual support, all play a role in imagining same-sex identities and communities.

The performance begins when the group arrive at the Qianmen Street, their chosen 'stage' for the performance, dressed up in costumes appropriate to their assigned roles, and getting all their 'stage props' ready in place. The couples display various poses showing love and intimacy in front of the public, or rather, to attract the attention of the public. They must immerse themselves in the scene by imagining themselves to be the characters (of brides or grooms) to make the show appear realistic. Whether they are performing a Stanislavsky theatre or a Brecht theatre (or, whether they forget the 'self' or remain conscious of the 'self' in their performances) does not matter here. The important thing is that they are performing socially scripted roles and the performance itself makes the difference. These performances are necessarily performative; that is to say, they bring queer identities into existence through language and corporeality (Butler 1990). Indeed, as people speak or act, and as they enact certain scenarios or perform designated roles, an identity gets enacted and translated into materiality. Apart from the body, two other factors help to bring identities into existence: affect, and the presence of the other, which I shall discuss in the following paragraphs.

Affect, as Sedgwick (2003) and Elspeth Probyn (2005) suggest, makes people come to their embodied identities. The repetition of bodily practices only reveals the physical form of identity; the internalisation of an identity also requires the mobilisation of emotions. As the brides and the grooms pretend to be wedded couples, they convey their joy and happiness, as well as their ease and confidence about their sexual identities, to the spectators and to themselves. As spectators watch the same-sex wedding scene, they are either surprised, or amused, or curious about the event, thus constructing their subject positions as straight, pro-gay, anti-gay, or even as gay in the process of watching. Even when some are convinced of the theatricality and even amused by the absurdity of the event, they still must acknowledge the existence of a group of people whose social identities are different from many others. In this field (*chang*) of emotional flows, connections and interactions, gay and lesbian identities became known and visible to the audience of the event.[1]

Emmanuel Levinas (1979) and Judith Butler (2005) remind us of the importance of the other in constructing self-identities. Indeed, the self is necessarily bound up with the other politically and ethically, through face-to-face encounters, and through practices such as hearing other people's names and stories. Being is necessarily being with others. In the wedding scene, the question of the other, namely, the audience, played a significant role. We may wish to ask here: for whom did the actors and actresses perform? What role does the audience play in the construction of gay identities?

Consider the following conversation, between Bride A (named Dana in the film) and a member of the audience:

Spectator: I want to see the bride.
Bride A: This *is* my bride.
Spectator: Hello, bridegroom. Can I take a picture of you?
Bride A: Haha. We are both brides.

By making statements such as 'this is my bride' or 'we are both brides', Bride A is clearly declaring their lesbian identity. The performance of an identity needs a witness. The spectators act as witnesses in this scenario. Wedding ceremonies speak as much to the brides and bridegrooms as to the ceremony participants. By holding a wedding in public, the couples in effect made a clear statement of the existence of queer identities and communities, as well as their demand for equal rights. In this process, they also bring queer identities into existence.

The other can be both visible and invisible. For instance, when Zhang Yi, one of the bridegrooms, spoke to the camera, he had his target audience in mind:

> In this society, there are different communities and different forms of love. It does not only happen to the two of us. You, and your friends, classmates, family members, colleagues . . . They may be gay, too, but you may not know about this.

The pronoun 'you' in this speech does not refer to a specific person, but a generic term to address the speaker's assumed target audience, the primarily heterosexual-identified audience. In bearing the other in mind when making speeches, the speaker actively constructs his own identity as gay.

The target audience, or the other, is addressed in a variety of ways: when people watch this event, they are addressed by the speakers and performers to be the target audience; when readers read the news from newspapers or websites, they become the target audience too. Moreover, when Fan Popo's documentary film is shown in various parts of China, the film crowd are also addressed as the target audience. Louis Althusser's (1969) concept of 'interpellation' is pertinent in this context. 'Interpellation', in the typical case of a police hailing 'hey, you!', necessarily requires the other to recognise the self. Although people may react differently to the hailing, and although we are not sure if there is such a powerful 'hailing' coming from an authoritative voice that conveys a clear message, 'hailing' still acts as a vivid metaphor for ideologies to have impact on people, and for identities to be attached to and internalised by people.

I invoke the trope of 'hailing' here to talk about the necessary existence of the other for identities to be recognised. In the wedding scene, spectators are needed to ensure the success of the show and the successful construction of identities. It is important to note that construction of identities takes place in multiple and contingent ways. As the performers construct their gay identities, some of the audience

may also construct their own identities, be they gay, straight, or bisexual, or liberal, or conservative, or even homophobic. It is thus useful to consider identity construction as a process subject to the interplay of different actors such as time, place and people.

'Coming out' or 'masking'?

Yinshen, (lit. concealing one's body, meaning staying closeted or hiding one's gay identity from others) and *chugui* (out of the closet or coming out as gay) are two commonly used terms in Chinese language to describe queer existence. These two terms have been translated from the English language via queer activists in Taiwan and Hong Kong. But they are understood and practised differently in each location. In this section, I consider the politics of 'coming out' in the PRC context.

As Eve Sedgwick (1990) argues in *Epistemology of the Closet*, homosexuality contributes to the formation of several binary oppositions in the Western culture, including secrecy and disclosure, the public and the private. One must be either 'closeted' or 'out'. Coming out' is often privileged in gay identity politics, as it directly speaks to the notions of 'truth' and 'authenticity' in the modern episteme. The importance of seeing and visibility is also raised in this context. Michel Foucault's (1979) discussion of the panopticon dramatises the relationship between light and the subject, and between being seen and being known. It seems that in modern society, only those that can be seen are considered to exist; anything out of sight would be considered as either non-existent, less authentic or less legitimate. The call for gay people to 'come out' to their families, friends and even the public in gay identity politics follows this logic. This rhetoric has also been picked up in China's LGBTQ movement with the globalisation of queer politics and neoliberal governance. As we examine the case more closely, we can detect more complex and nuanced situations than the simple visibility versus invisibility, as well as 'out' versus 'in' dichotomies, will allow.

Are the brides and bridegrooms out in the 'wedding' scene? Yes, in the sense that they made a public statement of their identities in a public space. Furthermore, after the news spread in cyberspace and print media, the volunteers were hailed as the 'harbingers of China's LGBT movement' (Yu 2009: 44). No, because they invariably used pseudonyms for this event.[2] Also, Tongyu, the organiser of the event, chose four strangers who did not know each other to perform the role of same-sex couples, as this would reduce their risk of 'coming out'. If any of the performers' parents, relatives or colleagues happened to be present at the scene, or hear news about the wedding, the performers could still deny their queer identities simply by insisting that they did not know the other person and that they were there only to perform assigned roles in a theatrical setting. In this context, gay identity ambivalently situates itself between being 'in' and 'out' of the closet, and between visibility and invisibility. Furthermore, it refuses certainty and definition by embracing ambiguity and ambivalence. In this sense, the type of gay identity constructed through the event of performing a same-sex wedding is queer.

Fran Martin's (2000, 2003) theorisation of 'masking' is helpful in conceptualising the implication of the case for Chinese queer politics. Focusing on the Taiwanese context in the 1990s, Martin examines the mask-donning practices in queer activism as a culturally specific way to understand queer subject formation. For Martin, mask-donning practices challenge the politics of visibility inherent in Western queer politics. Martin's discussion of voluntary mask-donning is worth quoting in full because of its relevance to the PRC context, where real or metamorphic masks are often used in queer cultures and activist practices:

> The voluntary donning of masks by Taiwanese gay men and lesbians in public seems more than anything else, then, to dramatise the very workings of the *tongzhi* mask, electrifying the boundary between showing and not showing the secret of the individual's *tongzhi* identity, because the mask, as the sign used to disclose that identity, is at the same time the paradigmatic sign of its continuing concealment. The mask tactic generates an unsettling alternating current between the *yin* [concealment] and the *xian* [disclosure] that effectively reproduces the social workings of the idea of the homosexual mask, which installs *tongxinglian* in just such an undecidable position in relation to visibility and knowledge. The mask tactic thus enables *tongzhi* to perform a theatrically exaggerated enactment of the position of *tongxinglian* itself.
>
> *(Martin 2000: 193)*

In the PRC context, masking is a strategy to shift between identities without hiding the body. Using a pseudonym in queer communities is a form of masking, and so is concealing one's gay identity under specific circumstances. Masking necessarily conjures up the image of theatrical performance and points to the performative nature of identities. Masking does not prioritise truth and authenticity; the boundary between what is reality and what is a staged performance is often blurred in a masked event. Masking offers people alternative ways to perform identities. Truth does not matter so much in the case of masking; it is the context, that is, wearing the right mask at the right time and place, that matters.

Inspired by Martin (2003: 189), I would also like to suggest thinking of Chinese queer politics with two Chinese-language phrases: *ruoyin ruoxian* (now concealed, now disclosed) and *shiyin shixian* (at times concealed, at times disclosed). We must note that the relationship between concealment and disclosure is not dichotomic ('either . . . or . . .', or 'neither . . . nor . . .'); rather, it is multiple, contingent and sometimes fleeting. For many queer people in China, one does not need to be completely 'in' or 'out'. Being 'in' and 'out' depends on the specific context and the person whom they meet. Hai Bei, one of the bridegrooms in the scene, captured the intricacy of the concealment/disclosure dynamics when he said: 'I am not married. Taking wedding photos was a staged event. I am a model. I am looking for my prince on a white horse' (Yu 2009: 44).

Public space and counterpublics

Since the publication of Jürgen Habermas' (1992) influential book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the notion of the 'public sphere' has generated heated discussions. China Studies scholars have debated about the applicability of such a Western term in the Chinese context (e.g. Yang 1999; Wang 2003; Lei 2017; Cheek, Ownby and Fogel 2018). They have also pointed out that the notion of *gong* ('public') has a specific history and different genealogy from its English or German counterparts. Many scholars agree that 'public sphere' is still a useful category for historical and social analysis, at least in contemporary China when new media play an increasingly important role in promoting citizens' rights. Notably, queer people in China are actively participating in China's public space. Here I use the term 'public space' instead to highlight the spatial dimension of the public sphere. A spatial perspective offers us new insights into queer culture and social change in China.

In the case of the same-sex wedding in Beijing, two factors are salient in relation to public space. First, the event was held in Beijing, the political and cultural centre of China. The organised event therefore has a pioneering role among queer communities throughout the country. Second, the event took place at Qianmen, the centre of downtown Beijing, which adds to its symbolic significance. However, it is its vicinity to Tiananmen that gives the event a political undertone. Although the organisers have reiterated that the event was apolitical, primarily to desensitise the event to avoid unnecessary trouble from the police, netizens and foreign correspondents can still read the political subtext into this event.

The Qianmen's geographic location is significant in this case. Qianmen is located south of the Tiananmen Square and the two places are next to each other.[3] Tiananmen is the place of the nation state. Monumental buildings surround the Tiananmen Square; they include the Forbidden City, the Great Hall of the People, the National Museum, Chairman Mao's Mausoleum and the Monument of People's Heroes. All these monumental buildings narrate a linear, progressive and triumphant national history. Ordinary people do not necessarily have a place in such a historical narrative. Only fifty metres away from Tiananmen, Qianmen reveals a different picture, a picture of the mundane and the everyday. Local people live in small alley ways (*hutong*) in the Qianmen area; tourists frequent the place with fascination and voyeuristic gazes. This is a place for bargain hunters; peddlers and tourists negotiate competitive prices. Ordinary people, rich or poor, find their favourite shops in the area. One can smell freshly cooked Chinese doughnuts or hotpot on the street, or watch the hustle and bustle of the market. National history seems insignificant; anything that happens in Tiananmen seems to affect little of what goes on here. Time appears to have stopped; the trading scenes here today appear like those from a hundred years ago. Tiananmen and Qianmen represent different aspects of today's China. Whereas Tiananmen represents the power of the state, the official history, the authority and the order, Qianmen, on the other hand, unfolds a picture of the everyday, the ordinary and the mundane. The juxtaposition of Tiananmen and Qianmen reminds people that behind the grand narratives of the

nation state, there are ordinary people's lives going on which tend to be overlooked. To get a better understanding of China and of China's queer movement, it is thus important to attend to the everyday lives of ordinary people, as well as to focus our attention on state policies, regulations, and landmark historical events.

The politics of space and place is also crucial to imagining indigenous forms of queer politics in China. The same-sex wedding took place at Qianmen. It did not have to be held in Tiananmen in the form of a political demonstration for LGBTQ rights. This is a type of queer politics that does not directly confront the state power. It is culturally sensitive and context specific. The organisers knew what price they would have paid if they had held the same-sex wedding at Tiananmen, and they were wise enough not to do so. They chose to hold the event at Qianmen, in the guise of taking wedding pictures and with the aim of publicising queer rights through the issue of marriage equality. The event took the form of a performance. Like a carnival, a performance only occurs at a given time and in a specific place. After the disruptive moments, everything goes back to normal. But such events are also performative, in that they not only have impact on the performers, but on the audience, on the spot or through media reports following the event.

It is not difficult to see a prevailing Western influence in this scenario. Valentine's Day, often considered as a Western holiday, has gained an increasing popularity among urban youths in China in recent years. Practices such as sending Valentine's Day roses, wearing Western-style suits and gowns and taking expensive wedding pictures form a sharp contrast with the traditional Chinese style wedding ceremonies characterised by elaborate bowing and kowtowing rituals, complete with a large banquet attended by friends and relatives. In the past decade, queer activist groups have been using Valentine's Day for various forms of queer activism, including a same-sex marriage rights advocacy campaign that took place in Beijing in 2012, in which queer activists disguised as same-sex couples walked into a marriage registration office to register for same-sex marriage, knowing that their request would definitely be rejected (Figure 5.3). These activists may have already anticipated the official response to their same-sex marriage proposal, but their real objective was to raise public awareness – including the awareness of those who work in government offices – to create media publicity round queer issues and to encourage public discussion of queer rights. In a country where family and marriage are at the centre of the national imagination of happiness, same-sex marriage functions as a seemingly non-political and non-confrontational form of queer activist strategy.

Michael Warner (2002) calls all the people who are conscious of their subordinate positions 'counterpublics'. Although the internal differences with the queer communities begs further investigation, many queer people feel that they are indeed marginalised in society. In this sense, we can see the queer communities as a 'counterpublic'. The question is: how do the counterpublics fight for their own spaces, or appropriate spaces of their own in a strategic way?

The case in question provides an answer: Qianmen Street is not a gay street; yet under such circumstances, it is appropriated by queer people to demonstrate their

FIGURE 5.3 Queer rights advocacy campaign on Valentine's Day, Beijing, 2012

Source: Courtesy of Fan Popo

visibility and to voice their opinions. This type of spatial strategy is called 'tactics', in Michel de Certeau's (1984) words. Indeed, urban spaces are not only politicians' or city planner's spaces. Once they have been designed, marginalised social groups may come up with creative ways to use them, to appropriate them and to subvert them. Space, as such, becomes a site for queer identities to be constructed and contested.

Conclusion

The 'soft' approach to activism at Qianmen is exemplary of many queer activist strategies in China today, ranging from reading clubs to film festivals, and from sports clubs to dinner groups. Most of these strategies involve bringing people together and doing things together as a collective. These collectives do not look political from the outside, and many are not motivated by political ambitions, but their activities are crucial to the formation of queer identities and communities. At critical moments, such energies can be mobilised for rights advocacy. For example, in March 2018, as soon as Weibo banned gay content on its social media platform, many individuals and groups began using the hashtag #Iamgay to protest the ban. This eventually led to the reversal of the ban. In discussing everyday queer politics in the PRC, William Schroeder observes: 'In *tongzhi* China, this politics of the everyday is frequently characterised by an emphasis on fun and does not seek to effect immediate structural change. Rather, it opens up an affective space in which change is potentiated or felt' (2015: 76).

Indeed, it is important to think along with, away from and even outside of the queer politics of pride, visibility and 'coming out' in transnational queer activism. It is also imperative to attend to the cultural specificities of each context. Engebretsen characterises this soft form of activism as 'mobile, transformative, multilingual and based on a multimedia platform' which 'feeds off the most unlimited speech and reach of new media technologies' (2015: 105). She also highlights the significance of recognising this type of activism as a de-Westernising and decolonial strategy in queer studies and politics, which tends to be Euro-American centric:

> a 'queer China' perspective complicates simplistic theories and politics of queer pride and liberation more generally. In turn, the emergent catalogue of queer activist world-making – the fractions, instances, *ad hoc* organising alongside digital archiving and story-telling of transnational reach – are likely to be better situated to organise meaningfully for justice and equality in lasting ways.
>
> *(p. 106)*

Indeed, Chinese queer activists are exploring innovative and culturally sensitive approaches to queer activism. They do not reject Western queer activist forms and practices such as the same-sex marriage, but they appropriate these forms and practices in their own way and for their own purposes, with meticulous attention paid to local contexts. These engagements do not necessarily presume the authenticity

of the self and the primacy of visibility. They work along with, beside, towards and sometimes even against the scripts from transnational LGBTQ movements. As such, the local subjectivation under the global queer hegemony is never complete; queer activist strategies involving appropriation, parody and subversion manifest the agency of local cultures.

Notes

1 I use the Chinese term *chang* here to describe an assemblage of bodies, emotions and affects that work together at a particular time and place to produce certain effects. In Taoism, *chang* is always associated with *qi* (free-flowing energies characterised by *yin* and *yang*) and refer to a terrain of such energies that accumulate, reform, transform and disintegrate. Please note that *chang* should be understood as multiple, contingent, and fluid. *Chang* affects people and things and is deeply affective.
2 Many gays and lesbians use pseudonyms, cyber names or English names in the queer communities. Only a few out public personas use their real Chinese names in queer public events. This is generally considered as understandable and necessary by people in the community. The politics of naming in relation to queer identities and communities is an interesting issue that requires separate treatment elsewhere.
3 Tiananmen literally means 'the gate of heavenly peace' and Qianmen 'the front gate' in English.

6

THE FORGOTTEN CRITICAL REALISM

Reification of desire in Mu Cao's poetry

> Mu Cao's language is simple but powerful. It is filled with anger as a result of hard struggles at the bottom of Chinese society. Meanwhile, it embodies a sense of transgressive pleasure in penetrating the social reality. Mu Cao's poetry reminds us of the long nineteenth century, and the forgotten literary tradition of critical realism.
>
> *Chen Zhongyi, literary critic, in* Selected Poems of Mu Cao

The story of queer China is about dreams, desires and aspirations, but it is also about who might have gained and who might have lost in the country's collective departure from socialism and its full-fledged endorsement of neoliberalism. While many middle class citizens are celebrating their transnational and cosmopolitan dreams, others – particularly those from rural, migrant and working class backgrounds – have been marginalised. But this does not mean that these rural, migrant and working-class people do not have their own dreams, and that they cannot express queer desires. Their queer desires are articulated differently, and often with a much heavier undertone. Devoid of its middle class pretentiousness and an elitist outlook, queer can be articulated with Marxist beliefs, socialist ways of life and unyielding critiques to capitalism, which are spirits in line with the critical realistic literary tradition. This chapter interrogates the impact of and resistance to neoliberalism in Chinese queer culture via a discussion of the Chinese queer poet Mu Cao and his poetry.[1] Adopting a cultural studies approach to literature and with an emphasis on the social practices of literary production and consumption, I examine queer literary cultures through my participant observation of a literary event in China, in tandem with a textual analysis of Mu Cao poems. In doing so, I explore the complex relationship between neoliberalism, queer subject formation, and poetry production in postsocialist China.

The 'live scene' of poetry reading in Beijing

I was doing fieldwork on gay identity and community in Beijing in the summer of 2012, when a gay activist friend of mine asked me to join him in a queer poetry reading event. He also announced that it was a free event and the poet was a 'working class queer'. The friend certainly knew how to advertise the event to me: gay, poetry and working class form an interesting configuration in post-millennium Beijing. Ever since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997 and its depathologisation in 2001, there was no shortage of queer community events in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, most of which were film screenings, sporting events, as well as dinners, clubbing and parties: that is, more activities centred on fun and entertainment. There was also a proliferation of queer individuals 'coming out' to the public, most of whom were young professionals from middle class backgrounds. After all, in a predominantly middle class and urban queer culture in Beijing, who wants to be labelled as 'working class'? And in an age of the Internet, who still reads and writes poems? Whence my intense interest.

In her work on modern poetry and new media in China, Heather Inwood (2014) highlights the importance of the 'live scene' (*xianchang*) in contemporary China's cultural production. In the new millennium, China's cultural workers (*wenyi gongzuo zhe*), including poets, writers and filmmakers, have been increasingly active in meeting the public. They attend poetry readings, book launches, literary festivals and art exhibitions; they appear at Communist Party conferences, business dinners, on public television and participate in online chats. Some of them become 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci 1971) who address social concerns in public; some become media celebrities who possess considerable cultural, economic and even political capital; some turn themselves into 'cultural entrepreneurs' who busy themselves with selling cultural products to a growing number of middle class consumers. What they all have in common is a refusal to sit in an isolated study and produce 'art for art's sake'. Instead they have a strong commitment to praxis: literature is no longer seen as something sacred and distant from life, or something that solely expresses individual sentiment whilst pursuing artistic perfection; it is connected to society and relevant to ordinary people's lives. Indeed, poetry has acquired political and commercial values in the context of China's rise to the status of a global power and the boom of the creative industries all over the world. Participating in the 'live scene' to make poetry socially relevant is therefore a politically and ideologically complex practice.

The poetry reading event took place at the Dongjen Book Club, a cultural centre situated in an old-style courtyard in downtown Beijing. It was not surprising that a queer poetry reading event should take place here. The book club was home to a grassroots NGO dedicated to the rights of ethnic minorities and marginalised social groups. The queer community webcast 'Queer Comrades' (*tongzhi yi fanren*) had leased an office space in the courtyard and Li Dan, director of the book club, was also an organiser of the Beijing Queer Film Festival. The event was one of the

public education programmes jointly organised by the Bianbian Reading Group (a queer reading group) and the Dongjen Book Club.

Even though the organisers had prepared more than thirty chairs, less than ten people showed up for the event: most of them were in their twenties and thirties, and they looked like university students and young professionals. Most of them had got the information from the group emails sent by the Beijing LGBT Centre and the Dongjen Book Club, and some from the queer community blogs or online chat groups or by word of mouth. Nobody seemed surprised at the low turnout of participants for the event: most queer people in urban China were busy enjoying all the conveniences and opportunities that the market economy and social media bring to them in imagining a transnational and cosmopolitan sexual citizenship. Neither 'poetry' nor 'working class' in the event publicity sounded appealing to the popular taste.

A man in his late thirties walked in with a rucksack. He was slim, clean shaven and had short hair. Both his clothes and the rucksack looked plain and slightly out of fashion. The organiser greeted him and took him to the front of the room. He took out a pile of books from his rucksack and put them on the desk. He did not chat with anyone, perhaps indicating an introverted personality. From the way he was dressed and how he behaved, people might have guessed that he probably came from the countryside or a small town, displaying as he did a type of *habitus* easily noticeable in the urban and fashion-conscious queer communities in Beijing.

The organiser welcomed the audience for attending the event and introduced the poet briefly. The poet was known as Mu Cao (literally 'grass on the grave') – hardly a cheerful pen name, indeed one that is even slightly disturbing in a folk culture that seems obsessed with auspiciousness and good fortune. The organiser described his poetry as 'a rare and authentic voice' from the working class queer communities. This way of framing was interesting, as Beijing's queer social movements had been criticised for being urban, middle class and consumption-oriented. The local queer communities thus needed an exemplar from a different class background to showcase the diversity and inclusiveness of the community. Would Mu Cao be able to bear the heavy burden of representing the diversity of the community? Would he be able to speak for himself where he was often spoken of and for in the context of China's emerging queer social movements?

Narrating the homosexual subject

After thanking the organiser for the introduction, Mu Cao picked up a book from the desk in front of him and started reading one of his poems. He read slowly, in standard Mandarin with a northern accent, a poem called 'A Brother Walking on My Right Side':

> When the sun rose,
> a brother was walking on my side.
> He was younger than me.

His shoes were covered with the fragrance of rapeseed flowers.
While he hurried on with his journey,
my face was covered in his shadow.

Mu Cao made a pause and took a quick glance at the audience after finishing the first stanza. The audience seemed interested enough, and this encouraged him to continue:

The sweat on my forehead became ice-cold;
The crow's feet on my eyes were expanding.
I smiled at him.
Our conversation was as sad as flowers from the Chinese scholar tree.
I knew he wouldn't stop.

I knew I wouldn't stop.
When the sun went down,
the brother was walking on my side.
He was probably thinking about a brother as nice as me.
While he hurried on with his journey,
he was covered in my shadow. (Mu Cao 2009: 22)

By the time he finished reading the poem, my interest had been aroused. I liked his poems: they were simple but very expressive. The short poem narrates a brief encounter between two men heading to different destinations and with their shadows overlapping each other for a moment. The poem captures a fleeting memory and conveys a subtle homosocial and homoerotic feeling. I was not a frequent reader of modern poetry and was at times daunted by the abstract language and imagery used by many modern poets. Mu Cao's poems, however, struck a chord in me and I could see that other members of the audience were touched too.

Without much explanation of the background information, Mu Cao moved on to a few other poems, some of which were more explicitly homoerotic. A poem, titled 'Xihaizi Park' depicts a gay cruising scene:

Where there are parks in China,
there are homosexuals' footsteps.
This is a tiny park in a small country town.
There are no flowers but stones and trees.
They say that all men here are horny.
Not far from the public toilets,
they stroll, gaze, sigh, and feel melancholic;
They stand still, release their energies before going back to loneliness.
I am like you; I am like him.
All of us have been abandoned by life.
Where there are dark corners in China,
there are groans from these marginalised people. (Mu Cao 2009: 136)

The cruising scene was familiar to many gay people in China, but few had put it in words, and in such a poetic form. Public cruising had become an unspeakable trauma in urban China's queer communities: people knew about it, but few felt comfortable enough to talk about it. The middle class members of Beijing's queer communities had tried to dissociate themselves from the cruising scenes in public spaces and from the once criminalised and pathologised homosexual identity. The poem reminded people of the continuing existence of the marginalised and stigmatised homosexual subject at the bottom of contemporary China's social hierarchy and in increasingly gentrified queer communities in urban China.

The poetry reading was followed by a Q&A, where the poet answered a few questions from the audience. From his replies I was able to piece together a biography of him. Born in the countryside in Henan province in 1974, he had no formal secondary school qualifications. He has been a farmer, a dustman, a porter, a hotel cleaner, a kitchen hand, a barber, a storekeeper, a flea market vendor and a web editor. He has done various odd jobs to make a living. At the time of the reading I heard, he was working as a boiler attendant in a factory in a Beijing suburb. His daily job involved feeding the hot water boiler with fossil fuels and supplying hot water to the workers in the factory. He writes poems and novels in his spare time and saves money to have them published. He has self-funded the publication of several anthologies and novels.[2] Some of his poems have been translated into foreign languages. He is not, and probably cannot become, a member of the Chinese Writers' Association, a state-funded literary establishment. He remains obscure outside Beijing's queer communities. It is unlikely that he will receive any public funding for the publication of his books. Most of his books are sold on occasions such as poetry reading events or through online sales. In a country where homosexuality is still a social taboo, the events he can attend and the publicity he can get is very limited.

I thanked him and bought a few books from him. We did not exchange many words. He was shy and introvert, and I did not know what to say to him except thanks. This was one of the strangest encounters I have experienced in Beijing's queer communities. It reminded me of the situation of queer culture in China: however much queer people in urban China imagine themselves to be global citizens with transnational sexual citizenship, the stigmatised homosexual subject continues to frequent the public spaces after dark and fight for survival. Neoliberalism in China has produced diverse types of queer subjects, and not every one of them has the same right to public spaces and public recognition.

In my discussion of the queer culture in Shanghai (Bao 2012), I described three types of queer subjects: the homosexual or stigmatised sexual subject who occupies the lower strata of Chinese society; the gay subject or *tongzhi*, the middle class subject who subscribes to gay identity politics and 'gay lifestyle'; and the 'queer' subject who benefits the most from transnational mobility and elite knowledge economy. They occupy distinct types of urban spaces: public parks and cruising grounds, local queer community centres, and 'pink' commercial venues such as gay bars and clubs. The boundaries between the three types, among many others, of same-sex subjectivity are not clear-cut, and the various types of queer urban spaces

often converge with one another. However, it is the intersectionality of sexuality with class, among other categories such as geographical differences, urban-rural divide, regionalism and transnationalism, that structures marked differences in sexual subjectivity. The Dongjen Book Club that I described in the last section was predominantly frequented by middle class gay and queer subjects, who consider going to the book club a lifestyle choice and a performative act of affiliation with transnational queer politics. The disruption of the space by a working class homosexual subject such as Mu Cao and his poems depicting homosexual lives thus came as a shock for many listeners at the reading.

Life of a poet in postsocialist China

The stratification of China's queer communities was largely a result of China's adoption of neoliberalism in the postsocialist era, marked by nationwide waves of de-collectivisation and privatisation of public sectors, in tandem with the commercialisation of public culture. Poetry, China's oldest literary form, was not spared from the nationwide drive of privatisation. China prides itself on being a 'nation of poetry' (*shi de guodu*) and its earliest classical poetry anthology dates back to the first millennium BCE (Knight 2012: 29). For over one thousand years in ancient Chinese history, poetry was part of the imperial exam system and, as a result, imperial China was ruled by poet-cum-officials. Being able to compose and appreciate classical poetry marked a well-educated person and an enlightened government. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the last imperial Chinese dynasty was replaced by a modern nation state, classical poetry slowly gave way to modern poetry written in an unrhymed vernacular language. Literature was used by the Chinese Communist Party during the socialist era for pedagogical purposes and as part of the proletarian revolutionary hegemony. Although 'critical realism' (*pipan xianshi zhuyi*) was widely considered to be the privileged form of literary style at the time, even the then Chinese leader Mao Zedong composed rhymed classical poems to express his national concerns and personal ambitions. In the postsocialist era, diverse forms of literary styles and aesthetics emerged with China's government-led 'reform and opening up' policy. Poetry informed by modernist and postmodern aesthetics has flourished.

China's entry into global capitalism from the early 1980s was accompanied by the gradual privatisation of literary institutions and the commercialisation of literature. Literature lost its 'aura' (Benjamin 1969: 221) in a commercialised Chinese society. As popular novels slowly secured a market among middle class readers, poetry increasingly lost its readership and was pushed to further marginalisation. China's attainment of membership in the World Trade Organisation in 2001 marked the Chinese government's full endorsement of neoliberal economic policies and ideologies. This was followed by the boom of the 'creative industries' (*chuangyi chanye*) or 'cultural industries' (*wenhua chanye*) in order to transform China's economy from an agricultural and industrial economy to an information-driven and service-oriented economy. This transition has also meant that 'culture', which used to be associated

with the 'essence' of the 'national spirit' (as in the notion of 'Chinese culture') or the source of education and entertainment guided by a vanguard party and produced for the ordinary people (as in the case of 'proletarian culture'), has become a commodity to be given an economic value and to be produced, sold and exchanged *en masse*.

In the wave of the nation-wide privatisation and commercialisation of culture, poetry has not remained unaffected. Many poets lost their full-time employment at public cultural institutions such as writers' associations, journal editorial offices, publishing houses, or government bureaus. They must now work part-time or freelance. Some poets take advantage of their cultural and social capital to gain fame, money and even political power. Many poets frequently appear at business dinners, state banquets and media events; they contribute their verses generously to business events and real estate development projects. Mu Cao's dream to become a poet started at this time when poetry became a commodity in the market economy and poets became 'cultural entrepreneurs', an untimely dream.

Living in a society where 'group after group of poets are busy/ planning cultural brands' (Mu Cao 2009: 236), Mu Cao was disillusioned with China's intellectual and literary scenes:

> Poetry editors are busy with getting promotions;
> People's spokesmen are preparing themselves for civil servant examinations;
> Investors, publishers, and directors are laundering money;
> There are also large numbers of
> celebrities without feelings,
> and intellectuals without intelligence.
> Am I a dream walker?
> Why can't I find a home in Beijing? (Mu Cao 2012)

The publication of Mu Cao's poetry collections was mostly self-funded. Because of his obscurity and the homoerotic nature of his poems, rejection of his book manuscript was common. In a poem titled 'On the Train', Mu Cao describes his feelings of sadness and despair after his manuscript met with rejection from a publisher. A stanza of the poem also makes references to his pen name Mu Cao ('grass on the grave'):

> I hold in arms my unpublished poetry anthology,
> as if I was holding my own unburied cremation urn.
> I cannot wait to see my grave covered with green grass and flowers.
> Yet self-pity doesn't make me feel any more relieved. (Mu Cao 2009: 26)

He describes himself as a 'sleepwalker' who obstinately clings to his dreams:

> Oftentimes,
> I don't ask much from life.

I don't even need a lamp.
I can walk in the darkness.
All roads lead to my dream.

Oftentimes,
I don't ask much from life.
I don't even need a bed. (Mu Cao 2009: 62)

In writing about dreams, he paints a picture of a developing society from the perspective of an ordinary Chinese living at the bottom of society:

I dreamed of becoming a farmer.
I wanted to plant wheat and cotton with my own sweat.
But when I thought about natural disasters,
and the numerous taxes levied on farmers,
My dream broke.

I dreamed of becoming a worker.
I wanted to create wealth with my brain and hands.
But when I thought of ruthless exploitations from factory bosses,
along with unemployment and long overdue backpay,
My dream broke. . . .

I dreamed of being an honest and hardworking person.
But I was so poor that I had nothing to my name.
How can I stop dreaming?
I can only dream of a spring night,
when all the sad flowers are lit in the bright moonlight. (Mu Cao 2009: 184)

Mu Cao's poems reveal the harsh lives of the working class people in China's post-socialist era. Upon China's rise to a global economic power and the emergence of a middle class, many ordinary people, farmers and workers included, did not benefit from China's economic boom. They were pushed further into poverty and social margins. The 'Chinese dream', proposed by the Chinese president Xi Jinping, seemed very remote from many ordinary people's lives.

In an age when China pursues the glamourous 'Chinese dream' and when critical realism seems to belong to a bygone era, Mu Cao's use of the critical realist style and aesthetics serves as a reminder of the precariousness of the 'Chinese dream', as well as the wretched lives of millions of people who have been left behind by, and fallen victim to, the nation's dream.

Reification of desire in a sweat factory

Having worked in sweat factories himself, Mu Cao often depicts the harsh work conditions in China's sweat factories in his poems. Besides disclosing the drudgery

of the manual work under poor working conditions, Mu Cao gives the scene a queer twist, as can be seen from the following poem titled 'Working in a Sweat Factory':

> This is a privately owned
> sweat factory.
> The boss keeps everybody's ID cards and wages.
> Well-fed and well maintained,
> the boss relaxes for eighteen hours a day,
> while sixty dress making workers
> busy themselves with never ending hard work.
>
> Male workers bend their back like starving dogs.
> Female workers have eyes as red as rabbits.
> They work and live together.
> The female workers' hips often brush
> the male workers' thighs.
> But they don't seem to have any sexual desire for each other.
>
> In the breakfast kitchen,
> the honest bachelor cook
> busied himself with masturbation.
> He shot his full load into the porridge pot.
> That was spotted by the boss.
> Instead of getting fired,
> the cook got a pay rise. (Mu Cao 2009: 160)

By juxtaposing the boss's comfortable way of life and the workers' long hours of hard work, Mu Cao paints a picture of the class division of labour in the process of 'accumulation of capital' (Marx 1990: 762) in contemporary China. As studies of the garment factories in South China demonstrate, the exploitation of the workers' surplus labour in these factories testifies to the cruelty of capitalism (Ngai 2005). Mu Cao is by no means the only poet to document the ruthless exploitations going on in these factories. Xu Lizhi, a poet who committed suicide at the age of 24 by jumping out of his dormitory window because he could no longer endure the work pressures at the Foxconn factory, also wrote poems to disclose the harsh life in the global corporations' outsourced factories. In 2010 alone, the media reported 18 attempted suicides, resulting in 14 deaths, at the Foxconn factory; many more cases have gone unreported (Nao 2014). Both Mu Cao and Xu Lizhi launched a contemporary *j'accuse* against the unjust system of capitalist exploitation with their poems. Behind China's success story as 'the workshop of the world', in an epoch where 'made in China' is found at almost all corners of the earth, the human cost of the 'Chinese dream' has also been enormous.

Against the backdrop of the harsh working conditions in the sweat factories, Mu Cao also paints an odd picture of corporeality and carnality: male workers

and female workers frequently have close physical contact with each other without being sexually aroused; the cook ejaculates into the porridge pot and gets an unexpected pay rise. This is a Rabelaisian world in which the profane and the carnivalesque parody the established social orders and cultural norms (Bakhtin 1965). The poem serves as a reminder of the absurdity of capitalism, and a strange call for social justice: bodily fluid would become food for the malnourished and grotesque bodies; and queer bodies would constitute 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) in the capitalist regime of bodily discipline. Mu Cao brings queer and perverse pleasures into the drudgery of the factory life. The cook's unexpected pay rise further dramatises the unfairness of the capitalist system of work and pay.

The juxtapositions – the boss's high income and effortless way of life versus the workers' underpayment, delayed payment or even non-payment as the outcome of their hard work, as well as the workers' lack of sexual desire under the capitalist regime of corporeal discipline versus the cook's secret pleasure – denaturalise both capital and sex. They also remind us of the close relationship between capital and sex under capitalism. As Michel Foucault's (1990) history of sexuality demonstrates, sex and sexuality were turned into discourses under capitalism, and this happened in a modern age when bodies had to be trained and disciplined not only to meet the requirement of the capitalist production but to be exposed to diverse types of scientific gazes. Sex and sexuality are therefore far from natural. They are manifestations of 'a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body' (Foucault 1984: 83).

In this poem, we can also see the 'reification of desire' (Floyd 2009) under capitalism. Reification, in the Marxist sense, refers to the 'turning into things' of social relations or those involved in them. Reification is a problem of the capitalist society obsessed with the commodity form (Lukács 1976). In the sweat factory, human beings are turned into objects in order to facilitate capital production. Human lives are evaluated in monetary forms and thus lose their autonomy and vitality. Even bodily fluids such as sperm are given an economic value. Desires are far from spontaneous; they are constantly being conditioned, disciplined, and commodified under different regimes of governance.

Mu Cao's poems also remind us of the performative and transformative power of writing. As J. L. Austin (1975) reminds us, language is not simply descriptive, and it does not merely 'represent' the 'reality'; rather, it brings the social realities and identities into existence; moreover, it can be transformative insofar as it has the potential to change people's lives and social realities. Mu Cao's poetry participates in the regimes of desire as resistance. Poets such as Mu Cao and Xu Lizhi compose nationally and transnationally circulated poems. When these poems travel across national borders through translation, they create scriptural and libidinal economies that combine to critique the exploitation of the Global South by the transnational capitalism and the Global North.

It would be wrong to assume that Mu Cao only paints a pessimistic picture of Chinese society. Judging from the cook's secret pleasure, and seen from the poet's 'queer eye', who can say that the disciplined bodies are not capable of

resistance and rebellion, and that queer desires are not able to transgress and subvert the rigid regimes of capitalist alienation?

Conclusion

What do queer communities and identities in urban China, the life of a poet who struggles to make a living in Beijing, and migrant workers who work in China's sweat factories have in common with each other? I suggest that they are all situated in the historical context of China's departure from state socialism and the country's entry into global neoliberal capitalism. They are all bodies, lives and desires located in the Global South but transformed by invisible forces of which individuals may be unaware and about which they can do very little. Neoliberalism is a global project: it originated in the Global North and was cooped and reworked by the economics of the Global South in peculiar and specific ways. This is summarised succulently by Vijay Prashad as 'Neoliberalism with Southern Characteristics', i.e. 'with sales of commodities and low wages to workers accompanying a recycled surplus turnover as credit to the North, as the livelihood of its own citizens remain flat' (2012: 10). Indeed, many 'Southern' and developing countries including China seem less concerned about enhancing social justice and improving ordinary people's lives; neoliberalism has thus benefitted the social elites in these countries and turned them into transnational desiring subjects. Gay identity in urban China is thus a largely classed subject based on consumption, lifestyle and middle class distinction, and it threatens to marginalise and erase other types of queer existence.

Under the transforming forces of global neoliberalism, queer bodies and desires have been classified and stratified to correspond to the needs of different social classes; poetry becomes a 'brand' of the creative and cultural industries and a privileged form of cultural capital possessed by an emerging group of the urban new rich; meanwhile, migrant workers' bodies and desires are disciplined and objectified in manufacturing factories, and bodily fluids can acquire a commercial value in an unfair system of work and pay. Neoliberalism has transformed bodies, emotions and desires in commodified forms. Under these conditions, Mu Cao, a queer poet from a working class background, articulates his critical concerns about social injustice and his resistance to the status quo. His voice, however, appears very weak in the consumerist and lifestyle oriented urban queer communities and a profit and fame driven literary scene.

Even though his life has often been commodified and politicised in a way of which he has no control, Mu Cao talks of leading a free and pure life as a poet:

> Let me talk in my black mother tongue.
> If this is not possible,
> let me rest within the black square characters.
> And I shall dissolve
> in the transparent time.
> Let me die clean in the bright moonlight. (Mu Cao 2009: 222)

This poem should be read as a protest to the reification of literature and the human body by neoliberal capitalism. By conjuring up the 'pure' existence of a poet, Mu Cao articulates his rebellion against the system of injustice and commercialisation. The lonely 'grass on the grave' seems to await, quietly and patiently, the arrival and the collective consciousness of the 'grave diggers' (Marx and Engels 1967) of neoliberal capitalism.

Notes

1 Mu Cao is the pen name of Su Xianghui.
2 Mu Cao's publications include poetry collections *The Age of Transsexuals* and *The Bible of Sunflower*, novels *Outcast* and *The Lake for Outcasts*, and collections of short stories *Says An Old Man* and *A Hundred Lan Yu's Screams*. Some poems have been translated into Dutch, English, French, Japanese and Slovenian. One of his poetry anthologies, *Selected Poems of Mu Cao*, is bilingual, translated into English by Yang Zongze. His novel *Outcast* (*Qi'er*) has been translated into English by Scott Meyers, titled *In the Face of Death We Are Equal* (Seagull Books 2020). Excerpts of the novel can be accessed from the *Words without Borders* website www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/june-2016-the-queer-issue-vii-outcast-mu-cao-scott-e-myers (accessed 1 January 2019) and some translated poems can be accessed from the *Pen America* website: https://pen.org/two-poems-mu-cao/ (accessed 1 January 2019). See van Crevel (2017) and Ming (2017) for an account of the contemporary Chinese poetry scene of which Mu Cao plays a part.

PART IV

Queer migration

7

'SHANGHAI IS BURNING'

Becoming trans in a global city

> Youth culture is developing really fast in Shanghai, and a lot of young people are catching up to the idea of being free and expressive of their individuality. To us, I think that's the essence of being queer.
>
> *Will Dai from CINEMQ in an interview (Chen 2018)*

> Walls are Our Screens; rooftops and basements are our cinemas; queer is our purpose.
>
> *CINEMQ website*

9 pm, 8 July 2017, the Pearl Theatre, Shanghai. A four-hour-long drag performance named *Extravaganza* lifted its curtain.[1] The one-night show gathered twelve of the city's drag performers, 'the fiercest kings and queens in town' (Baren 2018: 2), who gave brilliant performances to an audience of 350 people. It was the first drag performance of its scale in Shanghai in recent years and was hailed as a 'milestone' for Shanghai, which 'set a new standard for what drag in Shanghai could mean' (p. 3). British filmmaker Matthew Baren, a resident of Shanghai at the time, made a 45-minute documentary film called *Extravaganza* to document the event (Figure 7.1). The film was edited from nine hours of video footage covering the pre-performance preparation, the show itself and the post-performance celebration. The film is a record of the evening.

This chapter brings together critical perspectives in queer theory and film studies to examine *Extravaganza*, an independent documentary about Shanghai's drag scene made by a British director. Assembling a critical analysis of the film and interviews with the filmmaker and the performers, I discuss the politics of queer representation and new modes of filmmaking in a globalised world. The chapter asks the following questions: what is the national identity of the film *Extravaganza*? What are the political economies, power relations and affects that shape such a representation? And most important of all, how can a queer perspective

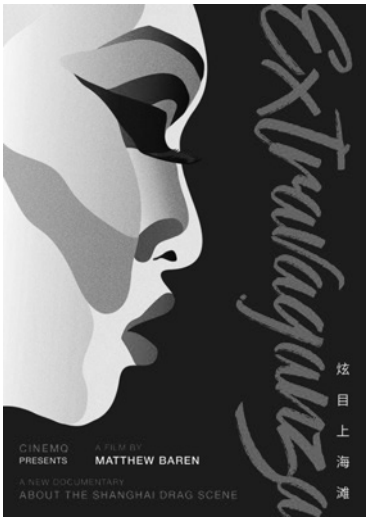


FIGURE 7.1 *Extravaganza* film poster

Source: Courtesy of Matthew Baren and Will Dai

help us better understand new types of cinema and innovative modes of filmmaking in a transnational context? By interrogating the meanings of the prefix 'trans' shared by transgender and transnational cinema, I identify ways of 'becoming trans' in an inter-connected world of queer identities, bodies, affects and filmmaking.

In this chapter, I will start my discussion with an introduction of the queer film culture and the drag scene in Shanghai to contextualise the film *Extravaganza*. I will then analyse the representation of the drag scene in Shanghai in the film by focusing on the politics of 'backstage', affect and modes of 'becoming'. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of 'becoming' and Song Hwee Lim's (2007) discussion of 'trans', I will discern new modes of filmmaking under capitalist globalisation and 'minor transnationalism' that can be called transnational cinema. By bringing together transgender studies and transnational film studies, I highlight the critical potential of thinking about national and gender identities and emergent modes of film cultures with the critical concept of 'becoming trans'.

Queer film culture in a global city

Shanghai has changed a great deal in the past decade, and so has Shanghai's film culture. As the birthplace of Chinese cinema, Shanghai has had a vibrant film culture since the Republican era (Lee 1999). The Shanghai Film Studio, founded in 1949 and now part of the Shanghai Film Group Corporation, is one of the largest film studios in China. Launched in 1993, the Shanghai International Film Festival has become one of the biggest and most important film festivals in Asia. The Expo 2010 marked an important moment for Shanghai to imagine itself as a global city. Creative and cultural industries have been identified as a key area of development

for the city (Rong and O'Connor 2018). Shanghai has increasingly become an international and cosmopolitan city that rivals Hong Kong in East Asia.

Queer culture, although still semi-underground due to the ambiguous legal status of sexual minorities in China, has re-emerged in the city during China's economic reform since 1978. It has also shaped Shanghai's film culture in significant ways. At present, the city hosts two queer film festivals, the ShanghaiPRIDE film festival and the Shanghai Queer film festival, which articulate different modes of film aesthetics and sexual politics. Meanwhile, there are dozens of multiplex cinemas and independent film clubs all over the city; the latter includes CINEMQ, a queer film collective dedicated to regular film screenings. CINEMQ also publishes an online zine on social media.

In an interview, the director of the film *Extravaganza* Matthew Baren describes the queer film culture in Shanghai in the following way:

> Shanghai is one of the best cities in China for LGBTQ people, but there's very little queer cinema coming out of here right now. I think it's important for people to see what Shanghai is made of and to hear about the people who have built our community. Being queer isn't just an identity you wear at the weekend – it's something you live every day. I hope people see this and are proud to be part of a city where people like the kings and queens featured in *Extravaganza,* live their truth and art to the fullest.
>
> *(Baren in Thede 2018)*

For Baren, a booming queer culture is in line with the image of Shanghai as a global city. He seems to identify more with Shanghai as a city than with China as a country. He uses the word 'our' to suggest a sense of collectivity and solidarity, and to claim a sense of belonging to the city. As a relatively recent newcomer to the city and a foreign expatriate, Baren certainly identifies with the queer communities in the city in the way that local queers do. National identity becomes less relevant here; it is a shared sense of identity and community that gives him and other queer people in the city a shared 'sexual citizenship' (Weeks 1998).

In my interview, Baren also remarks on the Shanghai government's relatively hands-off approach to queer events such as the Shanghai Pride and the Shanghai Queer Film Festival:

> Government policy is always so grey and strange, but Shanghai does seem to exist in a weird bubble. It's not easy to organise queer events in Shanghai but we don't encounter the problems that Beijing does or a lot of other places around the country do. I don't really know why, I'm happy that we haven't, but I don't know. We'll see how that changes.

The relatively liberal attitude of Shanghai vis-à-vis queer events forms a sharp contrast with the government intervention of queer community organising in other Chinese cities. This should not be read as a defence of laissez-faire capitalism, but rather be understood as a call for the Chinese government's more active and consistent support for queer people. As the city brings a sense of freedom and

even cosmopolitan exceptionalism, it also carries with it a sense of precarity and uncertainty. This reveals the feeling of uncertainty in a global city under neoliberal capitalism. At the end of the interview in *Extravaganza*, Miss Jade has the following to say about Shanghai:

> People come and go; that's what I hate about Shanghai. Every time there is a queen leaving, we thought: oh, this is the end; we are falling apart, and everything is gone. But look at the Shanghai drag scene: it's not going down for anybody's absence. It's still going up because Shanghai is full of talented people; we just need to discover them.

Miss Jade is talking about the rapid changes in the drag scene; she is also commenting on the fast transformations of a global city.[2] In such a city, talented people from different parts of the world gather, find each other and work together. Their talents make the city's creative and cultural industries prosper, and this further creates favourable conditions for the city to become a global city and an attractive place for more people. A global city is constantly changing, and it is necessarily so in order to facilitate the fast accumulation of capital. Because of the fast changes, there are always welcomes and farewells, happiness and regrets, uncertainties and precariousness. A global city leaves little time and space for people to be sentimental. Emotional resilience on the part of each individual and an understanding that no one is irreplaceable are key to survival in such a city. Miss Jade's words thus best summarise her ambivalent attitudes towards Shanghai as a global city, situated in the constant flows of capital, people, media and popular culture.

Both cinema and queer identity converge in a global city. They combine easily together as 'queer film culture' which affords 'flexible citizenship' (Ong 1999) that people can acquire and assemble at their own will. After all, flexible forms of citizenship constitute the 'cultural logics' of transnationalism in neoliberal capitalism. In such a context, queer and cinema are attributes, or 'capitals' (Bourdieu 1984), that serve specifically a young, urban, middle class, transnational and cosmopolitan group of people living and thriving in a global city. Eventually, they facilitate the flow of capital across national borders.

'Shanghai is burning'

China has a long history of crossdressing performance on stage, represented by the *dan* character, or male-to-female crossdressing performers, in Peking Opera (Li 2003), and the female-to-male cross-dressing characters in Yue opera popular in and around the Shanghai area (Jiang 2009). This tradition was largely disrupted during the socialist era and was never fully revived in the postsocialist era. Today's commercial drag scene in Shanghai mostly takes the form of a Western type of stage performance, with a strong emphasis on glamour, individualism and character building. The RuPaul type of drag also finds its popularity in China through live

streaming websites such as bilibili.[3] Some foreign expatriates living in Shanghai, represented by two drag king performers Ennis F. W and Dorian T. Fisk, were among the waves of people who introduced the Western style of drag to Shanghai's nightlife (Short 2018). Together with a Chinese drag queen named Fantasia Valentina, Fisk also co-founded DKNSTRKT (read 'deconstruct'), a gender-fluid collective aimed at creating a safe space for people to experiment with drag as a way of self-expression and to learn different skills relating to the art of drag such as makeup and movement (Fisk 2018). Miss Jade, a Chinese drag queen living in Shanghai at the time, brought together eleven drag performers to put on the first edition of the *Extravaganza* show in July 2017. In June 2018, Fisk organised the second edition of *Extravaganza*. The 2018 show was advertised as one of 'the biggest and baddest [sic] drag shows the city has ever seen' (Martin 2018). *Extravaganza II* featured a more balanced number of drag kings and drag queens and showcased a wider variety of drag styles; it also introduced a few new drag artists who made their debut on the night (interview with Fisk, 1 July 2018).

One cannot help but notice how quickly the Western style of drag culture has emerged and developed in Shanghai: In just a few years, Shanghai's drag scene has grown from being underground and unknown to starting to capture a considerable amount of media attention. It is also noteworthy how international and cosmopolitan this scene is. There were twelve performers at the 2017 *Extravaganza* show: Miss Jade, Fantasia Valentina, Erica Balenciaga, Wu Wu Yan, Ennis F. W., Dorian T. Fisk, Mo Meaux, Miss Uni Verse, Mandala, Ariana Grindr and the Flyer sisters. In the group, there were four Chinese, two Americans, two Brazilian, one British, one Indonesian, one Korean and one Russian. The group's working language was English, and they sang or mimed English-language songs at bars, nightclubs and cabarets frequented by international expatriates and tourists as well as young Chinese urbanites. In the film, Miss Jade describes jokingly Miss Uni Verse as being 'kicked out' of Russia because of her sexuality. As an international metropolis and a harbour city, Shanghai has been a haven for gender and sexual minorities from different parts of the world, in the same way that it provided shelter for many stateless people during wartime (Willens 2013). Shanghai as a global city is therefore a perfect place to develop a transnational form of drag culture.

It is tempting to see the drag scenes in Shanghai as a replica of the drag scenes in other parts of the world, especially those in the West. After all, drag is not simply a form of performance; it is also a flexible form of identity produced in the context of global capitalism and against the backdrop of Shanghai's booming creative and cultural economies. Such an environment has created a 'global gay' identity (Altman 1997), a type of 'modern' sexual and gender identity originated in the West and spread to different parts of the world. Like the 'global gay' identity, this type of drag can be called a 'global drag' identity. The 'global drag' is often found at commercial venues frequented by an international clientele. Their practitioners and consumers are usually young, urban, and English-speaking Chinese nationals and foreign expatriates. The 'global drag' identity sometimes threatens to replace, marginalise

and overshadow homegrown or indigenous forms of queer identities, including crossdressing performers on Chinese opera stages and the low-income transgender sex workers who wander around Shanghai's city streets and cheap nightclubs.[4]

One does not have to be rich or middle class in order to do drag in China.[5] With a passion and some do-it-yourself advice acquired online and from friends, one can buy the costumes and cosmetics needed for drag performances on *taobao*, a Chinese-language online shopping platform, at a relatively affordable price. China's position as a developing country and as a 'world factory' (Ngai 2005), with its labour intensive manufacturing industries and its cheap delivery cost, makes drag a less class-distinctive practice. As a young independent filmmaker doing freelance work, Baren was almost broke when he went to Shanghai to take up a job as an English teacher at a local high school (personal communication with Baren, 17 June 2018). Fisk arrived in Shanghai for a teaching job but shortly afterwards worked in hospitality, and for a while in the charity sector (interview with Fisk, 1 July 2018). Most drag performers in the group have regular day jobs – some are teachers and others work in small local firms. They are not on big salaries, and usually must squeeze their time after work to attend rehearsals. Fisk and Valentina's DKNSTRKT group is open to participants for free. When the drag performers get a chance to perform on stage at commercial venues, they are usually paid a few hundred *yuan* for a show, which hardly covers the cost of their make-up, costumes, food and transport (personal communication with Baren, 17 June 2018). In the film *Extravaganz*a, there is a sense of bohemian and even anarchistic fun in these non-commercial drag communities.

Whether in terms of its subject matter or its cinematic style, *Extravaganza* invites the audience to make associations with Jennie Livingston's 1990 film *Paris is Burning*, an American documentary about the ball culture of New York City, attended by people from different ethnic, gender and sexual minority communities. Queer theorist Judith Butler (1993) uses the film to develop her theory of gender performativity. The *Extravaganza* trailer uses the tagline 'Shanghai is burning' to parody *Paris is Burning*. Baren explains the differences between the two films as:

> *Paris is Burning* is a much longer timeline – I think that's the major difference – and draws in voices from several subjects, whereas the *Extravaganz*a is more compact. Also, I think that the experiences of the cast are different. For example, people in *Paris is Burning* drew inspiration and developed their art from 'straight' culture, whereas the *Extravaganza* cast (and myself as a filmmaker) draw from an existing queer vernacular, with influences like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Paris is Burning*.
>
> *(personal communication, 28 May 2018)*

In the same way that the drag queens in Livingston's *Paris is Burning* could only afford to look good by hustling and stealing from the Clinique counter, the drag queens and kings in *Extravaganza* took inspirations from the Western drag culture, appropriated the style, used cheap goods from online shops, and invented their

queer pleasure. They are essentially 'queering' the 'global drag' identity originating in the West and dominated by consumer capitalism by giving drag different meanings.

The unflinching queer gaze from the backstage

Baren is a young British filmmaker who has been making films since 2011. He has made about ten titles so far and most of his films are shorts and have a slightly dark tone, represented by *Exquisite Corpse* (2012), a 72-minute fiction film about death. Baren has lived in Shanghai since 2014. As a young filmmaker, Shanghai has offered him ample opportunities and challenges. Baren works in Shanghai as a high school English teacher and as a commercial film professional working on projects for clients. But his passions are independent filmmaking and being a film festival programmer. From 2015 to 2016, he directed and programmed the ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival. In 2015, he founded CINEMQ, a queer film collective that organises monthly film screenings and publishes a zine on social media. He is also involved in Shanghai's drag scene, often hanging out with 'the fierce and the fabulous, the kings and queens of Shanghai's genderfluid and genderfuck drag glitterati'. Baren has adopted a drag persona 'Mx Qu'eera Genda' and describes her as 'trashy' (Baren 2018). As an insider of the gender-fluid communities in Shanghai, he is well positioned to make a documentary about the drag scene in Shanghai.

In an interview I conducted with Baren, the filmmaker explains the origin of the film as resulting from a casual conversation with two of his drag friends:

> We were talking to the main organiser Miss Jade. She said she was often approached by photographers who wanted to take photos of her. They wanted to do a series on drag in China. They often said, we want one photo of you half-in and half-out of drag. There would be a shadow on you. She said that she felt like their message was always like: since you're a drag queen in China, you must live on the fringes of society; nobody likes you; your lives must be bad and depressed. Bullshit, she said, that's not what it's like; we are backstage; we are laughing; there's joy and sisterhood, and we are always throwing shade on each other. So we said cool and we came backstage and filmed it and made this documentary.

Baren identifies a common problem in representing gender and sexual minorities: Western media often cast an orientalist gaze on queer life in China. Queer life in China is often treated as a 'national allegory' in 'Third World' texts (Jameson 1986), and queer people are often portrayed as poor victims living under the communist dictatorship and struggling for freedom and survival. This type of Western gaze is intrinsically orientalising and objectifying. Drag performers in China are aware of the problem. Instead of catering to the Western gaze, they decided to look back,

and make their own representations to reveal to the world what they think their life is about. This act reverses the objectifying and orientalising gaze; it becomes a kind of 'unflinching gaze' (BRAG 2017) that challenges the global order of image and knowledge production permeated by unequal power relations. Such an unflinching gaze is best demonstrated by the fact that the drag performers gaze straight at and speak directly to the camera in the film (Figure 7.2).

Rather than directly featuring the four-hour show, the film focuses on the backstage scene. The 45-minute documentary primarily documents the preparation for the show backstage in a crowded dressing room, where the performers dress themselves up for their stage appearance. There is a great deal of fun, friendship and camaraderie in the process. In my interview, Baren explains the reason for focusing on the backstage as:

> The film focuses just on the backstage. We don't really see much of what's going on front-of-house. Well, that's because everything she was talking about was the backstage: the way they speak with each other; the way they get ready; it's all about their interactions so that's what we wanted to see. We spoke with people; we interviewed people; we were just like a fly on the wall, observing what was going on. It was great fun, and a real pleasure.

While Baren uses the 'fly on the wall' metaphor to describe the widely believed objectivity of a documentary filmmaker in documenting an event, and the assumed detachment of the filmmaker from the filmed subjects, he is not obsessed with 'objectivity'. Although Baren's physical body is not present in the film, the audience can hear his voice and can easily detect his presence. They make casual conversations with and even play jokes on each other. The performers sometimes speak to the camera in a friendly and humorous way, fully aware that they were talking to someone with whom they are very familiar. This often reminds the film viewers of the presence of the filmmaker and the mediated nature of the show. The drag performers seem comfortable enough with the filmmaker's presence and they even tease each other during filming. The camera does not seem intrusive or voyeuristic, as was the case in some of the earlier independent Chinese documentaries about drag made by heterosexual identified filmmakers (Chao 2010a, 2010b; Robinson 2015). Baren describes the filming process in another interview as follows:

> There were two of us – me and my producer Will Dai – on camera the night of the show. The dressing room backstage at the Pearl is tiny and we had twelve performers, plus a bunch of other people squeezed in there – and a lot of costume changes. It was nine hours of half-naked, sweaty queens throwing shade at each other in a box room. Filming around that was fucking insane but a lot of fun.
>
> *(Baren in Thede 2018)*

FIGURE 7.2 *Extravaganza* film still

Source: Courtesy of Matthew Baren and Will Dai

Miss Jade explains her reason for having an interview with Baren and having the show documented:

> What people can see is just the frontstage under the spotlight. But there are more interesting stimulating factors behind the scene. I want people to know that that's the root of everything. That's basically why I agreed to do this interview.
>
> *(Miss Jade in Baren 2018)*

The 'front stage' and 'backstage' metaphors remind us of Erving Goffman's (1973) dramaturgy, also discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to the same-sex wedding in Beijing. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman compares people's management of identities in their everyday life to acts of theatrical performance: 'frontstage' is where a coherent sense of self is presented to the public according to the needs and requirements of specific social contexts; whereas 'backstage' is where the self is constructed, managed and negotiated. While the 'frontstage' is important for the public knowledge, the 'backstage' often offers a deeper insight into the complexity of the self. 'Backstage' is a useful metaphor to understand queer life in China. On international media, people often see the 'frontstage' aspect of queer life in China: the glamourous and frustrating moments. Media events such as the Shanghai Pride and China's social media ban of queer issues dominate the international news agenda and global imaginaries about queer life in China. Whilst this 'frontstage' information is indispensable, it is often easy to miss the backstage: that is, how ordinary queer people live their everyday lives. Through this documentary, drag performers reveal the complexity of the 'backstage'; that is, what's going on in the everyday for queer people living in China. They are doing this self-consciously: by selecting the filmmaking they trust and by setting their own agenda, they 'look back' at the dominant discourses in mainstream international media in the hope to challenge and change the stereotypes.

Although the film *Extravaganza* primarily captures the backstage scenes at the Pearl Theatre, the setting of the show in a global city is unmistakable. It is only in a global city such as Shanghai that one can find such a transnational group of performers and audience; it is also in such a global city that such gendered embodiments and transformations are celebrated with relatively few political constraints. In Beijing, for instance, the Beijing Queer Film Festival has been fighting 'guerrilla warfare' against authorities that have tried to shut down the festival for years. Queer film festivals in Shanghai, on the contrary, have adopted a more relaxed and apolitical approach to fun and entertainment to build identities and communities. This is in line with the city's reputation of being 'bourgeois' and pragmatic. Queer cultures in Shanghai thrive amidst the booming creative and cultural industries and pink economies, sometimes beyond the city's strategic planning. Although this raises concerns about homonormativity and pink economies in the local queer communities, it offers a way for Chinese queers to imagine a future that is based on

lifestyle, consumption and entertainment on the lines of identities and communities but without evoking the discourse of political rights.

Queer affect, kinship and gender performativity

It is the fun backstage that Baren tries to capture in his documentary. This sense of playfulness, fun and pleasure counters the dominant narrative of queers living in the shadow and in sadness often portrayed on international media. It also disrupts the distance between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects, as the filmmaker and the drag performers were clearly interacting with each other during filming. This type of happy and collective queer representation differs vastly from the early representations of queer people in East Asian queer cinema as 'lonely' and 'sad' young men and women who have no homes or families to turn to (Berry 2000). The politics of pleasure also undermines the reification of identities alongside the lines and categories such as nation and gender. As David Halperin discusses Foucault's distinction between pleasure and desire:

> Unlike desire, which expresses the subject's individuality, history, and identity as a subject, pleasure is desubjectivating, impersonal: it shatters identity, subjectivity, and dissolves the subject, however fleetingly, into the sensorium continuum of the body, into the unconscious dreaming of the mind.
>
> *(Halperin 1995: 95)*

For Foucault, pleasure embodies a desubjectivating potential that challenges fixed identities and stable relationships. Backstage, through chatting, teasing, feeling and touching, drag performers were engaging in affective communication. In the process, national identities and cultural differences started to dissolve; gender and sexual categories became blurred and dissolved. Queer affect thus becomes a transformative force that creates queer modes of friendship, family and kinship (Foucault 1997; Halperin 1995; Young and Weiner 2011).

'Family' is usually understood in heteronormative terms in contemporary China and personal 'happiness' is often defined in relation to heterosexual notions of family, marriage and kinship (Wielander and Hird 2018). The strong emphasis on Confucian family values in official and popular discourses has alienated many single men and women (Hong Fincher 2016). Meanwhile, as the international discourse of same-sex marriage enters China, monogamy and same-sex marriage have dominated the imaginary of the queer communities in China. Contrarily to the homo- and heteronormative imaginations of family, Miss Jade paints a picture of a queer family, made up of twelve drag kings and queens. This queer family crosses gender and sexual boundaries as well as national and cultural differences; it also challenges heteronormative and homonormative modes of intimate relations. It is a queer family full of pleasure and vitality, and supported through friendship, camaraderie, mutual help and community spirit.

In the group, each performer has their own drag personalities and performance styles. For example, drag king Fisk (Figure 7.3) usually puts on a persona of a cowboy, a truck driver or a rock band performer. In the words of Ennis, Fisk's masculinity can be deceptive to outsiders:

> He is so freaking masculine. To the extent that people misgender him all the time at our shows. Especially when he first started appearing, people would be like: who was the dude working in the show? . . . He is just muscular, and he has a very angular face. Even though he performs drag with his natural hair, which is hilarious, his natural waist length hair, yeah, he reads as male, which is kind of cool.

Fisk describes how he developed his personality in my interview:

> Dorian is a concentrated dose of hypermasculinity wrapped up in different packaging. I realised early on that I have way too much hair to pile under a wig, so Dorian is essentially a mishmash of long-haired guys in rock bands I liked in the 80s with a smattering of the vampires in the Lost Boys and Johnny Depp. He has also evolved since I started performing about two years ago. I have taken him on a journey of self-discovery and sexual awakening through the performances over time.
>
> *(Interview with Fisk, 1 July 2018)*

Fisk confesses in the film that he is not allowed to wear the artificial nipples that look like a man's real nipples 'because they looked too realistic'. He has to wear

FIGURE 7.3 Dorian T. Fisk

Source: Courtesy of S-Ma

glitter nipples instead to remind the audience that he is simply a drag performer and is merely there to perform a show. Fisk's story reminds us of the discussion of drag in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Butler uses the example of drag to illustrate the performativity of gender. The practice of drag challenges the notion of an original or authentic gender identity. A drag king such as Fisk can be as masculine as a man. '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*.' (Butler 1990: 187, original emphasis) In other words, Fisk's masculinity reveals the constructed nature of being a man and being masculine: anyone can be a man, and anyone can act like a man; it is simply social norms that assign masculinity to men and femininity to women. The nipple story also reveals our society's cultural anxiety towards gender: drag performers must 'perform' gender in an exaggerated manner, so that the traces of imitation can be detected easily by the audience. If such a performance or 'imitation' appears too realistic, the society then feels obliged to police such a 'performance' to make it appear 'unreal'. Drag performers must constantly negotiate with the notion of authenticity in relation to gender. In making such negotiations, they reveal the fictional and arbitrary nature of gender norms and open up imaginations for the resignification of gender. The example of drag, therefore, becomes an apt illustration for the social construction of gender through the performance of gendered embodiments.

Drag king Ennis (Figure 7.4) is someone who refuses to conform to gender binaries and thus truly crosses gender binaries. Miss Jade comments on Ennis' gendered embodiments:

> Ennis is a pioneer. She is the only one who blurs the boundary between genders. I will never define this person Ennis F. W. as male or female. I constantly call Ennis 'her' because she is a very feminine guy.

Despite knowing Ennis is in drag, Miss Jade still refers to Ennis as 'her' to suggest the Ennis' embodiment of both masculinity and femininity. This can be read as a slip of the tongue or a recognition that femininity can also be possessed by a man, and masculinity can be possessed by a woman (Halberstam 1998). But I want to venture a more radical reading of Ennis' gender identity. Ennis' gender identity should be regarded as neither male nor female, or both male and female; in fact, it should not be defined in restrictive binary terms. By performing drag, Ennis becomes other gender that does not conform to conventional gender norms; Ennis subverts gender norms.

Warning against a reductive reading of seeing drag as intrinsically subversive, Butler glosses possible subversive potentials of drag practices in *Gender Trouble*:

> The perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggest an openness to resignification and recontextualisation; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities. Although the gendered meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture,

FIGURE 7.4 Ennis F. W.

Source: Courtesy of Tiffany Star-Ware

> they are nonetheless denaturalised and mobilised through their parodic recontextualisation.
>
> *(Butler 1990: 188)*

Butler was talking about the seemingly obvious resubscription to gender norms often seen in drag culture. Fisk is a good example of recontextualising masculinity in his drag performance, as he performs and presents perfect masculinity. However, in the case of Ennis, such a decontextualisation becomes more radical, as Ennis refuses to conform to traditional gender norms of being either a man or a woman. Ennis, in this context, is neither a man or a woman; Ennis becomes something other than a man or a woman; Ennis is becoming trans. This understanding of 'becoming trans' informs my following discussions of transnational cinema.

Becoming trans

The notion of 'trans' has been well studied and debated in the field of transgender studies (Aizura 2006; Aizura et al. 2014; Burns 2018; Chiang 2012; Halberstam 2005, 2018; Martin and Ho 2006; Stryker 2017; Stryker and Aizura 2013; Stryker, Currah and Moore 2008; Stryker and Whittle 2006). It might seem odd, and even contentious, to refer to drag performers as trans in this chapter, but there are also good reasons for doing so. Following Jack Halberstam (2018), I use the term 'trans' in a broad and generic sense to refer to a wide range of gendered embodiments including what are often variably referred to as transgender, transsexual, crossdressing and drag. In other words, trans is used less as an identity category or a form of personal and collective identification than as a critical concept to unsettle fixed gendered identities, identifications and embodiments. In his recent book *Trans**, Halberstam uses 'trans*' to open discussions about the multiplicity and undecidability of trans representations. 'It's not a matter of whose gender is variable and whose is fixed', Halberstam explains, 'the term "trans*" puts pressure on all modes of gendered embodiment and refuses to choose between the identitarian and the contingent forms of trans identity' (2018: xiii). This type of understanding also echoes with other scholarly discussions of trans issues in Asian contexts (Aizura 2006; Aizura et al. 2014; Chiang 2012; Jackson 2010; Leung 2012; Martin and Ho 2006; Stryker 2012). Noting a critical tendency in theoretical discourse to go beyond the nominal understanding of transgender as an identity and as the naming of a specific group of people, Leung suggests seeing the study of transgender representation in Chinese language cinema as 'an exercise in locating moving targets' (Leung 2012: 185). I follow these scholars in understanding trans as a verb and a critical method, applied in critical analysis to interrogate how gendered embodiments are assembled, disassembled and reassembled under certain power configurations and with intersections of other determinants. I am aware of the potential problems of collapsing different forms of gendered identities and identifications, but I hope that by problematising gendered identities, we can open up discussions about the multiplicity and fluidity of gendered embodiments rather than foreclosing it for the sake of identity politics.

In an article titled 'Is the Trans- in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?', Lim (2007) considers the convergence between transnational cinema and transgender.[6] Lim's use of the term 'trans' goes beyond identity categorisation of gendered embodiments; it points to forms of transitioning, changing and becoming, and to the notion of passing. In Lim's article, mainland Chinese actresses Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li and Michelle Yeoh's 'ethnic passing' as a Japanese geisha in a Hollywood produced film *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) is an example of such a 'becoming' that defies a fixed concept of national identities: 'they are neither Chinese or Japanese but in and in-between space embodying both and neither ethnicities. They are *in the process of passing* from Chinese to Japanese, or they are literalising the process of a Chinese performing as a Japanese' (p. 49, original emphasis). Such a notion of passing as 'becoming', controversial as it may seem, has the potential to unsettle the myth of origin and authenticity in the study of cinema in relation to the nation.[7]

Lim's discussion of trans brings nicely together transnationalism and transgender. Indeed, if we see trans as a 'processes of passing' or 'modes of becoming', then we can depart from the conventional type of identitarian thinking that structures many discussions in terms of gender, sexuality and cinema. 'Becoming', for Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is a process of change, flight or movement within an assemblage, or any number of things put together into a single context. 'Becoming' is a constant and dynamic process that cannot be contained by any fixed categories. It produces new and unexpected effects rather than reproducing old paradigms; it also challenges ideas of imitation, analogy and fixed identities and generates new assemblages.

Seen in this insight, in performing genders at *Extravaganza*, trans performers are 'becoming' something that departs from where they started. Fisk is 'becoming male' and Ennis is becoming both male and female, or neither male nor female. In fact, Ennis is becoming something else; Ennis becomes Ennis. 'Trans' should not be understood as becoming things that are already there; it should be seen as creating new, unexpected and unpredictable social relations, affects and intensities. After all, trans is transfer, transition, translation and transformation at the same time; it refuses to be pinned down to single entities and fixed categories.

Similarly, *Extravaganza* should be seen as neither a Chinese film nor a British film. It is a transnational film on its own merit. It is in the process of 'becoming transnational'; and in this process, it challenges fixed geographic and cultural boundaries of national identity. It is true that the condition of such transnationalism is created by capitalist globalisation. However, after such a condition is fulfilled, the types of activities that occur may not be entirely dictated by neoliberal capitalism. There can emerge anti-capitalist impulses, sentiments, friendship and connections. It is a form of 'minor transnationalism', a transnationalism neither grand scale nor hegemonic, but nonetheless significant for people and communities involved. In this sense, *Extravaganza* is becoming trans.

Conclusion

I have so far offered a critical analysis of the film *Extravaganza*. By focusing on the drag characters represented in this film, in tandem with an analysis of the social

and industry contexts of the film, as well as my interviews with the filmmaker and performers, I problematised the gender identity of the performers and the national identity of the film. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming' and Song Hwee Lim's discussion of 'trans', I proposed to think about certain modes of transnational production with the critical concept of 'becoming trans'. 'Becoming trans' offers a productive way to conceptualise new modes of 'minor' transnational cinematic connections in a globalised world without having to resort to identity politics. It also points to possible autonomy, agency and creative resistances to fixed gender and sexual categories in the Global South.

Notes

1 For more information about the film, please visit https://matthewbaren.wixsite.com/filmmaker/extravaganza (accessed 18 December 2018)
2 This chapter follows the convention in the local drag community to use the gender pronouns of the performers' drag personalities. It is a common practice in local drag communities to refer to a drag king as 'he' and a drag queen as 'she', regardless of their assigned biological sex. Neither Fisk nor Ennis identifies with being they/them/theirs.
3 RuPaul (full name RuPaul Andre Charles) is an American drag queen and TV celebrity, known for being the producer and host of the reality competition series *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Fisk commented that the RuPaul show 'focuses on a very narrow slice of drag culture and does not include drag kings' (personal communication, 18 November 2018). Baren points out that drag existed long before RuPaul, and whilst the RuPaul show has an important influence, it is not the only or defining influence on drag cultures in Shanghai (personal communication, 18 November 2018).
4 For a cinematic representation of the life of transgender sex workers in Shanghai, see Wang Leijun (Yutian)'s 2009 documentary *Lost in Shanghai Lan* (*Shanghai Shanghai lan*).
5 I thank Matthew Baren for pointing out the bohemian nature of Shanghai's drag scene, which does not always map nicely onto a fixed 'class' structure of a society.
6 The prefix 'trans' in transgender and transnational carries different meanings. While it is important to recognise their differences, this chapter places emphasis on their similarities, i.e. how they all index a post-identitarian mode of thinking and how they can be used to think about and beyond identity categories. Also, as two modes of identities or ways of being, transnational and transgender are not just paralleled but also intersected in complex ways.
7 I am aware of the possible controversy regarding the dismissal of identity politics for racial, ethnic, gender and sexual minorities. My post-identitarian politics is not a universal one; instead, it is situated in specific historical and social contexts: in this case, the intersections of gender/sexual and racial/ethnic identities may produce specific configurations and unexpected effects.

8

LIFE OF A BUTTERFLY

Subjectivation and autonomy in Xiyadie's papercutting art

> I am from Northwest China. It is very cold there and people's ideas are very traditional. It is like Siberia there. The cold air froze my wings and I couldn't fly. So I call myself Siberian Butterfly.
>
> *Xiyadie in* The Siberian Butterfly

> Having survived a long winter with numerous disasters, this butterfly is finally able to fly with abandon.
>
> *Li Huashan (2018) 'Half a lifetime's suffering in exchange for a short moment of freedom'*

Celebrated as 'China's Tom of Finland' (Fan 2018), Xiyadie is probably one of the best-known queer artists living in China today.[1] He uses the traditional Chinese handcraft of papercutting to express homoerotic themes and personal feelings. His works often depart from a metropolitan gay experience to explore queer people's lives in rural China (Rofel in Zonkel 2012). His identity as a gay man from rural China and his method of using the Chinese folk art of papercutting for queer artistic expression make him a unique figure in contemporary Chinese art. As the first scholarly study of the artist and his artworks, this chapter examines Xiyadie's transformation of identity in life and the representation of gay identity in his papercutting art. In doing so, I delineate modes of subjectivation under transnational market forces and explore possible ways of desubjectivation and artist autonomy in neoliberal capitalism.

Xiyadie, literally 'Siberian butterfly', is the pseudonym that the artist chose for himself. He was born in 1963 in Heyang County in Northwest China's Shaanxi Province, which has a long history of and rich tradition in folk art. He attended the local Special Arts and Crafts School, and, with his skills, worked for the crafts department of the Xi'an Film Studio for several years. He married a woman in an

arranged marriage and later had two children, a son and a daughter. The son was born with cerebral palsy and could not speak or walk. Against all odds and with great tenacity, Xiyadie brought the child up to the age of 26 when the son eventually died. Now, Xiyadie lives in Beijing as a migrant worker, doing odd jobs here and there. He has made a living as a security guard, a cook, a handy man and a rubbish collector, among others. In his spare time, he cuts patterns out of paper with a pair of scissors, employing the traditional Chinese handcraft of papercutting. But the homoerotic themes that Xiyadie depicts is far from conventional. He is known as the first queer papercutting artist in China (Guo 2016).

Despite his long-time obscurity, Xiyadie's papercutting works have attracted some domestic and international attention in recent years. In China, he is primarily known within urban queer communities. His works were first exhibited at *Difference-Gender*, China's first queer art exhibition organised by the Beijing LGBT Centre in 2009. His papercutting-style stamp design, *Harmony*, won the first prize in China's first LGBTQ-themed stamp design competition hosted by the Dutch Embassy in Beijing on the IDAHOT Day (International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia) in 2016 (Figure 8.1). Outside China, his name is primarily known within a small circle of international queer artists and curators. He was a participant artist in *Spectrosynthesis: Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now* (2017) at Taipei MOCA, and his works have been shown in art galleries in America, Asia and Europe.[2]

In many ways Xiyadie is an atypical gay man and artist, both of which often carry strong urban and cosmopolitan connotations. What is remarkable about Xiyadie's life is his transformation from an ordinary Chinese farmer and folk artist whose name was little known inside China, to a contemporary queer artist who has recently launched an international career. This chapter focuses on Xiyadie's life story and artworks. Using a critical biographical approach, in tandem with an analysis of his representative artworks, I examine the transformation of Xiyadie's identity from a folk artist to a queer artist, and ask what types of power relations have made the transformation possible. I suggest that the transformation of Xiyadie's

FIGURE 8.1 *Harmony*, 2016, a set of gender and sexuality themed stamps

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

identity from a folk artist to a queer artist, and his papercutting artworks from folk art to queer art, has been facilitated by the articulation of his gay identity and his homoerotic-themed papercutting to a transnational LGBTQ movement and an international art market. His experience speaks to a postsocialist context where class politics gives way to identity politics in cultural production. This chapter calls for a reinvigoration of Marxist and socialist perspectives for a better understanding of contemporary art production and social movements; it also considers the role of art as possible modes of desubjectivation under neoliberal capitalism. By studying the transformation and reification of human subjectivity and creativity under transnational capitalism, I seek possible ways of desubjectivation and human agency. After all, as we are shaped by discourses and power relations, there are also 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) through which human autonomy is manifested.

Papercutting as an art form

The artist chose the pseudonym Xiyadie ('Siberian Butterfly') for himself to launch his career as an artist because of his imaginary identification with a butterfly living in a harsh environment, a metaphor for the difficulty of living a gay life in a sexually conservative society. Xiyadie primarily uses the metaphor 'Siberian Butterfly' to refer to his life of growing up in a small village in Northwest China, but the metaphor is often interpreted by journalists as a 'national allegory' (Jameson 1986) to refer to the situation of being gay in China. 'Tradition is no less frigid than the Siberian air,' said Xiyadie, 'it is depressing to be gay in China – and even more horrifying in a village. It froze my wings, and I was unable to fly' (Xiyadie quoted in Sebag-Montefiore 2012).

Following Simone de Beauvoir (1949), one can say that one is not born a queer artist; one becomes both queer and an artist. This is particularly true in Xiyadie's case. Xiyadie could have been called a 'farmer' or 'migrant worker' in China's work classification system; he is now labelled as an artist in the international art market. The works that Xiyadie creates could have been called 'folk art' or 'craft' by Chinese officials or art historians; they have now been elevated to the status of 'art' and, furthermore 'queer art'. It is worth noting that the category 'folk art' or 'craft' is often situated at the lower rank of the artistic hierarchy, with popular associations of reproducibility, lowbrowness, lack of artistry and creativity, limited potential of marketability, as well as merely speaking to an often geographically and culturally bound audience. In contrast, 'queer art' is seen as a different category: to call an artwork 'queer art' would often give it a contemporary, modern and postmodern feel, an international and cosmopolitan outlook, and an appeal that is both universal and particular, both mainstream and niche. Where does craft end and art start? Where does the fine line between 'folk art' and 'contemporary art' lie? When is papercutting a form of art, and when does a paper cutter become an artist? And furthermore, what does the signifier 'gay' or 'queer' add to art? How does sexuality mediate human subjectivity and artworks? Throughout this book, I have suggested

that we understand 'queer' as a verb to mean: (1) to add sex and sexuality to something that is normally not directly linked to sex and sexuality; (2) to defamiliarise, to make things strange, to subvert and challenge certain social and institutional norms. If Xiyadie 'queers' papercutting as an art form with his sexual identity, is his identity also 'cut' or 'crafted' like a piece of paper? Can one think about both sexuality and art as innovative forms of artistic engagement? This chapter takes up the challenge of thinking of human subjectivities as artworks, 'cut', 'crafted' and shaped by a myriad of social forces and power relations, and art as a metaphor for human subjectivity and a 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1988). It asks what forms and possibilities of subjectivation and de-subjectivation are possible in contemporary society in the context of neoliberalism, a global art market, and a transnational LGBTQ movement.

Before we look at Xiyadie's life story, let us take a detour and have a brief look at papercutting as an art form in China. Papercutting has been practised in China for more than two thousand years since the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 BCE) (Nome Gallery 2018). The skill is usually practised by rural women and passed on from generation to generation. In folk religion, papercutting is believed to possess a magical power of dispelling evil and bringing about good luck. Papercutting is often used for household decoration on festive or ceremonial occasions such as weddings, birthdays, anniversaries and the Spring Festivals (Guo 2016).

Papercutting was not recognised as an art form until the socialist era, when there was a greater recognition of 'folk art' (*minjian yishu*) and 'mass art' (*qunzhong yishu*) under Mao's guideline that literature and art belong to and should therefore serve ordinary people (Mao 1942). In the 1980s, papercutting attracted the attention of a group of young Chinese artists in pursuit of indigenous forms of modernism and postmodernism. They travelled to the countryside in Northwest China to collect raw materials (*caifeng*) and look for creative inspirations (Guo 2016). This is the part of China where Xiyadie grew up and where he learned his trade. Papercutting serves as a fine example of indigenous art form that fuses Chinese tradition with modern and postmodernist themes, thus providing inspirations for contemporary Chinese art.

In recent decades, papercutting has been recognised by the Chinese government as a form of intangible cultural heritage in need of preservation (Guo 2016). State-recognised papercutting artists, Xiyadie included, are entitled to a monthly allowance of a couple of hundred *yuan* (roughly 20 pounds) from the local government to carry on with their artistic creations. All these attempts have not stopped this art form from decline. There are generational reasons: when an older generation of village women pass away, they often take their skills with them. Very few young people find the motivation to learn these traditional and undervalued skills. This coincides with changing housing conditions, festival cultures and popular aesthetics as a result of China's rapid processes of modernisation and urbanisation. Papercutting seems increasingly out of place in a world dominated by urban and transnational cultural forms, aesthetics and tastes. Papercutting as an art form is on the brink of distinction.

Xiyadie is one of the few living papercutting artists in China, following Northwest China's rural tradition of papercutting. In a trade traditionally dominated by women, a male paper cutter is a rarity. As a child, Xiyadie learned the skills from his mother, who often remarked that he should have been born into a woman's body (SexybeijingTV 2012). Even less common is the themes of his works: unlike many paper cutters who follow conventional patterns and themes denoting symbols of happiness and prosperity such as flowers and birds, Xiyadie depicts his own life: his wife, children, boyfriend and more, with intense personal feelings and a great sense of artistic freedom. What is more, he depicts homoerotic themes such as gay men cruising and having sex. Xiyadie's rural identity, his unusual life experiences, as well as his queer desires all lend a highly individual style to his artworks.

Becoming Siberian butterfly: processes of transformation

Looking at Xiyadie's life story and career trajectory, one cannot help but notice several key moments when his life took dramatic twists and turns: (1) the moment when his artistic talent was recognised by a folklore expert and Xiyadie subsequently became a folk artist; (2) the moment when he was encouraged by Sha Qing and Ji Dan, two independent documentary filmmakers, to use papercutting as a form of self-expression; (3) the moment he was recognised as a 'queer artist' at the Beijing LGBT Centre, thus signalling the start of his career as an international queer artist. All these moments witnessed dramatic transformations of Xiyadie's identity; they also testified to the making and remaking of subjectivities in a post-socialist, neoliberal and transnational context, in which human life ceases to be *zoe* (Agamben 1998), or natural life, and creativity becomes increasingly reified and commodified in identity politics and an international art market.

When Xiyadie was working for an art and craft shop in Shaanxi, he was introduced to Professor Shi, a Chinese folklore expert, who was the first person to discover Xiyadie's talent. According to Professor Shi, Xiyadie did not merely follow the tradition by making copies of traditional patterns, but created new themes and content using papercutting as a medium, and this quality distinguished a creative artist from an ordinary craftsperson (SexybeijingTV 2012). In a *Sexy Beijing* video interview, Professor Shi made no mention of Xiyadie's homoerotic artworks, partly because this was considered an embarrassing topic, and partly because Xiyadie was too reluctant to show the teacher his homoerotic artworks. With Professor Shi's help, Xiyadie gained recognition from the local government as a folk artist producing artworks worthy of state preservation and subsequently received a modest amount of artist subsidy every month. He also became a member of the China Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art, as well as the Shaanxi Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art. In this way, he turned from being an ordinary farmer possessing an unusual skill to being a folk artist; he also became a subject of the nation state and its history by producing artworks of national and historical value. Creativity and skills ceased to be individual properties; they became

properties of the state. In Giorgio Agamben's (1998) words, his life turned from natural life, or *zoe*, to a form of politicised life, *bios*.

While Xiyadie was taking care of his disabled son, he met two documentary filmmakers, Sha Qing and Ji Dan, two pioneer figures in China's New Documentary Movement. The couple lived with Xiyadie and his disabled son for several months, during which they documented the father-son relationship with a digital video camera. The result was an award-winning documentary of Xiyadie's life titled *Wellspring* (*Zai yiqi de shiguang*, dir. Sha Qing 2012).[3] The filmmaker couple encouraged Xiyadie to continue with his artistic creation and to pursue artistic freedom. After seeing Xiyadie's queer-themed artworks and realising Xiyadie's sexual identity, they even encouraged Xiyadie to make more such works and with a stronger sense of individual style. 'Sha Qing was very excited and kept on saying "wonderful". He pointed at the big penis in an artwork and said: "this is great! Make it bigger".' (Guo 2016).

With their video camera, the two filmmakers inscribed Xiyadie's life story into China's collective memory. In *Wellspring*, Xiyadie's life is seen as an example representing the tenacity of millions of ordinary Chinese who battle in life against all odds and who refuse to give up hope. The two filmmakers also instilled a sense of artist agency and autonomy in Xiyadie. From them, Xiyadie learned that art can transcend individual life and sufferings, and that it can speak to a collective cause, such as the destiny of a nation. In an interview, Xiyadie admits, 'I suffered a lot by living in the closet, but my art allowed me to show my feelings. My art is an expression of my emotion, about my desire for freedom, including freedom of artistic expression and freedom to live honestly' (Zonkel 2012). The belief in the power of art gives Xiyadie hope and strength in life. His life ceases to be dominated by mundanity or drudgery and it has started to become bright and meaningful.

Despite the official recognition of his papercutting works as 'folk art' and the gaining of artistic agency and autonomy inspired by the two filmmakers, Xiyadie artworks would not have become 'queer art' and gained an international reputation without the recognition of his gay identity by the transnational LGBTQ movement. The Beijing LGBT Centre, a Beijing-based LGBTQ non-governmental organisation played a crucial role in the process. In 2005, Xiyadie went to Beijing and became one of China's hundreds of millions of migrant workers. Living in China's capital city and working on odd jobs did not make Xiyadie financially better off, but it offered him unprecedented freedom as a gay man. He soon found himself in Dongdan Park, one of China's biggest public cruising venues, where he met his current boyfriend. During a visit to the Beijing LGBT Centre for a voluntary HIV/AIDS test, Xiyadie showed a community centre volunteer some pictures of his papercutting. 'Guang [the community centre social worker] repeated three times: my God. We have finally had the opportunity to see a living Chinese queer artist in our own times!' (Guo 2016). This dramatic moment marked the formal recognition of Xiyadie as a 'living Chinese queer artist', and his life took a dramatic turn from then on. The Beijing LGBT Centre not only included Xiyadie's works in *Difference-Gender*, China's first queer art exhibition. They also introduced him to

art curators from all over the world, including Jan Montoya, creative director of the Long Beach LGBT Centre, who subsequently introduced Xiyadie's work to the Flazh!Alley Art Studio in California (Sebag-Montefiore 2012). At this point Xiyadie's life began as a 'Chinese queer artist' in the international art market and has continued ever since.

Faced with his newly acquired fame as a Chinese queer artist, Xiyadie was extremely modest: 'I never thought about becoming an artist. Some people saw my work and then called me one. I'm only a farmer, belonging to my yellow soil land' (Xiyadie in Harrity 2012). This modesty seemed to have increased his charm as an authentic and unpretentious artistic genius. American gay magazine *Advocate* described his artwork as carrying a sense of 'sweet innocence' (Harrity 2012). The Beijing-based magazine *Gayspot* described Xiyadie's entry into the international art scene in an exaggerated and even slightly patronising tone: 'What is remarkable about him is that he does not know, nor does he ever need to know, that his paper-cutting works can be exhibited and even sold for money' (Guo 2016). The image of an unsophisticated indigenous Chinese queer artist with childlike innocence and whose works are untainted by consumerism and capitalist modernity have emerged in these journalistic accounts.

Xiyadie has learned to be gay by learning to use the popular jargons from national and transnational LGBTQ activist discourses. In an interview, he described his past experience as a homosexual in a small town: 'I had never heard of it [homosexuality] in my hometown. Sometimes I thought I was a *liumang*/hooligan. Only after coming to Beijing did I see that there are so many of us' (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012). In this narrative, homosexuality either did not have a name (through the use of euphemisms such as 'it' or 'so many of us') or carried a criminalised and pathologised connotation ('*liumang*'). After he was accepted by the queer communities in Beijing, Xiyadie changed his choice of words: '*Tongxinglian* is a term used to describe a pathology. You should have used the term *tongzhi*/comrade. It expresses equality.' and 'If I had known I was gay, I wouldn't have got married' (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012). He also learned to use English terms such as LGBT and gay, expressing the wish that he would like to visit the 'gay *qu*' (gay district) in Los Angeles.

As discussed in Chapter 6, *Liumang*/hooligan, *tongxinglian*/homosexual, *tongzhi*/comrade and gay: these are not simply different words to refer to sexual minorities; they are different types of sexual subjectivities constructed in multiple discourses and under various governing regimes. The rejection of stigmatised identity labels such as *liumang* and *tongxinglian* and the embrace of the *tongzhi*/comrade and gay identities signals Xiyadie's changing understandings of sexual and social identities: from an illegitimate sexual subject without a proper name to a nationally and transnationally recognised sexual citizen. This transformation also has class connotations: the transition from *liumang* and *tongxinglian* to *tongzhi* and gay is characterised by upward social mobility, as the latter terms are usually used by middle class citizens in China's increasingly commercialised and homonormative LGBTQ movement to refer to themselves.

The 'discovery' of a queer Chinese artist was situated at a critical historical juncture, when China's LGBTQ movement was in full bloom after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997 and its depathologisation in 2001. This coincided with a relatively relaxed political atmosphere since China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the flooding of HIV/AIDS-related international funding into China, which lent support to mushrooming LGBTQ grassroots organisations and social movements. The fast developing LGBTQ movement in China increasingly called for more indigenous queer representations and intersectional modes of queer politics. Papercutting as a traditional Chinese art form gave the queer communities a sense of indigeneity; and a gay artist from a rural and migrant working class background also offered the communities a much-needed example of intersectional queer diversity. Xiyadie could thus be introduced as an 'indigenous queer Chinese artist' to the outside world to showcase that queer, art and queer art can be rural, working class and Chinese too.

In an international context, Xiyadie has increasingly been labelled a queer Chinese artist representing China's 'suffering' queer communities. His name 'Siberian Butterfly' has often been invoked in journalist writings to connote an individual's desire for freedom under a repressive political regime. During his exhibition in the United States, an American journalist reported: 'in China, Xiyadie is a closeted artist. So he came to America to be "out"' (Zonkel 2012). Even the BBC commented on Xiyadie's works as 'revealing the troubled psyche of China's homosexual community' (Sui 2017). Willingly or unwillingly, Xiyadie and his artworks have been endowed with a specific meaning of 'Chineseness'; they participate in shaping a post-Cold War popular narrative of freedom and repression. Sexuality and gay identity stand at the centre of such a narrative.

'Gay' or *tongzhi* is probably one of the most influential sexual identity categories that have shaped Xiyadie's identity. Xiyadie not only becomes an 'artist' but also becomes a 'queer artist', a term that connotes universal humanity, cosmopolitan outlook and artistic avant-gardism. Becoming Siberian butterfly, becoming Xiyadie . . . all the forces and power relations have made these modes of becoming possible. Following Gayatri Spivak's (1988) question, can Xiyadie speak? If so, what do his artworks say about sexuality, desire and identity?

Documenting queer lives on paper and with scissors

When Xiyadie's works were first exhibited at *Difference-Gender*, China's first queer art exhibition organised by the Beijing LGBT Centre in 2009, the exhibition was shut down by the authorities on the charge of obscenity and lack of official approval. All but Xiyadie's works were confiscated by the police. Without noticing the homoerotic themes in Xiyadie's works, a policeman even encouraged the use of papercutting as a means of artistic expression (Guo 2016). This anecdote manifested Chinese authorities' conservative attitude towards homosexuality and art; it also raised questions about the use of traditional art forms to explore transgressive themes and topics.

On a quick glance, many of Xiyadie's papercutting works may not differ much from traditional papercutting practised in rural China. He often cuts patterns out of red banner paper, using traditional motifs such as flowers and animals that symbolise happiness and prosperity (Figure 8.2). On a closer look, however, one can see more details emerging from the abstract lines and shapes; one could even be shocked at the audacity of these works: they are often highly graphic images that portray explicit sex and same-sex intimacies between men. In Figure 8.2, a man is sitting on a chair performing fellatio on himself in the centre of the frame. But this detail can easily escape from a viewer's attention, as the man is surrounded by traditional papercutting motifs such as flowers, a bird and even a cat. The traditional motifs, as well as the colour scheme, all contribute to the obscuring of the central message. Xiyadie does not deliberately do so to confuse the viewers. The implicit appearance of his queer representation is often attributed to the abstract nature of papercutting as an artistic language, which relies solely on abstract lines and shapes and do not usually offer a realistic rendition of people and objects being represented. It often takes a trained eye to interpret these abstract visual codes. The fact that these homoerotic images survived the police raid of the *Difference-Gender* exhibition serve as

FIGURE 8.2 *Joy*, 2019, papercut on banner paper, 28 × 28 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

a good illustration of the specificity of the artistic language. For this reason, along with the legitimacy of papercutting as an officially recognised and widely accepted folk art form in China, the police only noticed the form but missed the content of Xiyadie's works. Indeed, while the form of papercutting is important, and people often take it for granted that the content should be in line with the form and thus be conventional, one needs to pay close attention to the content of Xiyadie's works. Form and content constitute a dynamic unity in Xiyadie's papercutting.

Most of Xiyadie's recent work is cut out of the soft, thin and fine-textured Xuan paper (or rice paper) instead of the thick and hard-textured type of banner paper.[4] This gives him an opportunity to dye the images and their backgrounds. Xiyadie uses water colour made of Chinese pigments, often used for decorating steam buns in rural Shaanxi, to dye the pictures. He frequently uses blue or black as the background colour, along with a combination of red, yellow, blue and green as primary colours of his works. Xiyadie described the cutting and dying process as follows:

> The paper is a form of traditional rice paper, Xuan paper, which feels a bit like cloth. It's very absorbent and easy to flatten, but because it's so thin, you have to cut several papers at the same time, so they are done in editions. I ink them all at once, from the top, but sometimes the colour is not as vibrant at the bottom, so I have to remove the layers and add more colour, which can take a lot of time. The large ones take about a month or more just to cut. Though I cut all of the works free form, I often make a composition first as a small papercut and use it as a model for making a larger one.
>
> *(Xiyadie in Cordray 2018)*

This procedure bears a striking resemblance to the 'print and dye' (*yinran*) technique used in the traditional cottage textile industry in rural China, something that Xiyadie may have been familiar with through his life experiences in Northwest China's countryside. It also draws our attention to the materiality of paper and dye: both materials are highly indigenous and locally available in rural Shaanxi. Despite the hard work and the long time it takes to complete a piece of work, Xiyadie's account shows the care he takes and the passion he cherishes for the creative process. Through these materialised and embodied artistic practices, Xiyadie situates himself in the long genealogy of artisans and craftsmen in rural China and places his works in dialogues with traditional forms of papercutting in history. His artworks thus carry with themselves a sense of 'aura' (Benjamin 1968), often associated with an unreproducible process of creative practice and an un-reified form of human labour.

Xiyadie draws on a multiplicity of traditional themes from Chinese painting and papercutting, including flowers and birds, double happiness, lanterns and flower vases (Figure 8.3). They all display various degrees of symmetry, as papercutting artists usually work with folded paper. But Xiyadie often breaks the symmetry by giving each side some variations. The butterfly is a common theme in Xiyadie's

FIGURE 8.3 *Flying*, 2019, papercut on banner paper, 28 × 28 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

FIGURE 8.4 *Butterfly*, n.d. papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

traditional papercutting (Figure 8.4). Given Xiyadie's artist name 'Siberian Butterfly' and his wish to pursue freedom like a butterfly, this is hardly surprising. What is common to these traditional themes and motifs is that Xiyadie invariably 'queers' them: that is, placing homoerotic experience at the centre of the images. Men kiss

and have sex with each other unabashedly in the midst of flowers, animals and utensils. This seems to suggest that homoeroticism can be compatible with Chinese tradition, contrary to the common perception that homosexuality in China is a Western import. As Xiyadie 'queers' the Chinese tradition, he also indigenises homoeroticism.

Xiyadie's works often seem obsessed with the motif of life and vitality. Flowers, animals and humans are all vital beings, and they all exemplify the vitality of life. Sex is not used for erotic titillation; instead, it serves as the ultimate manifestation of life and life forces. In *Disco* (Figure 8.5), the two naked men are juxtaposed with chirping birds and blooming flowers circled around them. This symbolises the unity between human and nature and conveys the belief that same-sex desire is also part of nature and is therefore perfectly normal. In *Flowerpot* (Figure 8.6), penetrating and penetrated human bodies grow out of a flowerpot. Drawing on Daoism, a folk religion deeply rooted in Chinese society and belief systems, Xiyadie interprets sex and sexuality not as individualistic desires and identities that can reveal the truth about a person, but as ubiquitous vital forces which constitute the entire cosmos. In doing so, he does not privilege human beings over animals or plants. In his universe, everything consists of vital energy, and they exchange energies with one another, thus making the world a vibrant one. The life force that Xiyadie depicts thus resembles *qi* in the Daoist philosophy or *élan vital* in Henri Bergson's (1911) vitalism. They share and inspire a post-identitarian and post-anthropocentric way of thinking.

Xiyadie often weaves his own life story into artworks. Papercutting functions as a form of visual diary for Xiyadie to tell his life story, to express his love for his son and boyfriend, and to articulate his frustration as a closeted gay man living in a loveless heterosexual marriage. *Fish* (Figure 8.7) portrays his relationship with his wife at the beginning of their married life: despite the allusion to sex through

FIGURE 8.5 *Disco*, n.d. papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

FIGURE 8.6 *Flowerpot*, 1991, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176 × 176 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

FIGURE 8.7 *Fish*, n.d. papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 28 × 28 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

the imaginary of the fish, a meat cleaver and a chopping board before the pillow, together with a snake under the bed, seem to foretell the misfortune of the couple's marriage. In *Gate* (Figure 8.8), Xiyadie reveals what lies behind the façade of his heterosexual marriage: while the wife is feeding the baby at home, Xiyadie is having oral sex with a man. A gate divides up the picture, symbolising the double life that Xiyadie lives: one as a married man living a closeted family life, and the other as a gay man seeking pleasure outdoors. The animated moon and the kitchen god depicted in a picture hung in the house look on quietly, with their eyes half open, as if they were seeing through and laughing at the comedy of the human world.

Xiyadie lived a double life for a long time before he came out to his wife. The couple did not get a divorce, but Xiyadie felt a deep sense of guilt towards his family, and in many of his artworks there is a tortured soul. In *Wall* (Figure 8.9), a brick wall separates himself from another man as he is trapped indoors. A rambling vine connects his penis and tongue with the mouth of another person sitting on the other side of the door. In *Sewn* (Figure 8.10), he attempts to sew up his penis with a needle and thread, as if this would provide the ultimate solution to curb his homoerotic desire. In the same picture, he is looking at the picture of a man in uniform. The man in the picture is his first boyfriend.

Xiyadie met his first boyfriend, a train attendant, on a train to Xi'an (Li 2018). This romantic encounter is documented in his work *Train* (Figure 8.11). We know the location of their encounter because of the locomotive, the driver, the carriages, the wheels, the railway tracks, and even a train company logo dotted around the picture. We also learn about the time of their encounter: the two men probably

FIGURE 8.8 *Gate*, 1992, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176 × 176 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

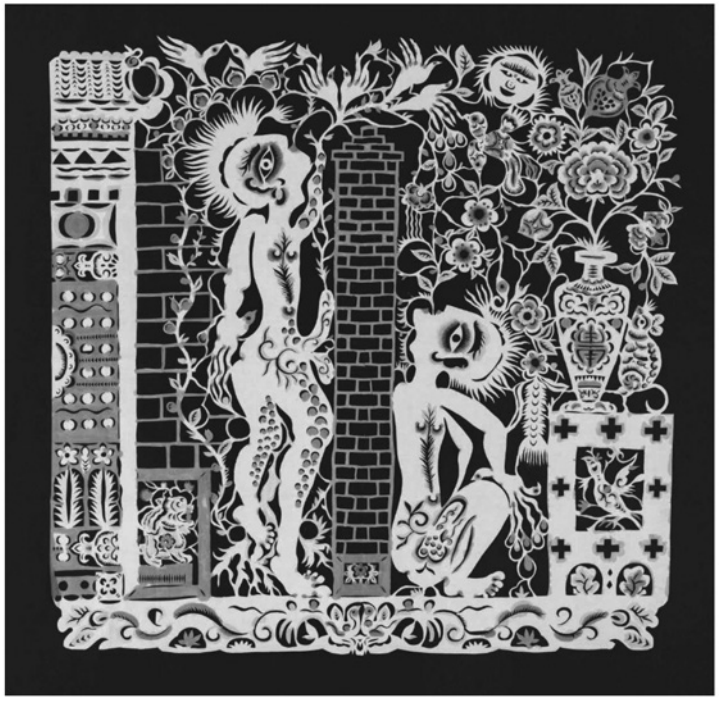


FIGURE 8.9 *Wall*, 2016, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176 × 176 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

FIGURE 8.10 *Sewn*, 1999, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176 × 176 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

FIGURE 8.11 *Train*, 1985, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 140 × 140 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

met between the Year of the Tiger (top left of the picture) and the Year of the Rabbit (bottom right of the picture). Xiyadie uses a large number of symbols in his works, many of which only make sense to those familiar with his life story, as many of these works are highly autobiographical.

After their encounter on the train, Xiyadie and his boyfriend led a few years of happy life together. Their idyllic country life was documented in his work *Gardening* (Figure 8.12), with childlike innocence. Many of Xiyadie's works feature happy lives with his boyfriend, and they were mostly made after the two men had broken up with each other. But happiness was always too short: Xiyadie was already a married man then and the boyfriend had to marry a woman because of increasing pressures from his own family and society. Papercutting became a way for Xiyadie to articulate his deep feelings, emotions and desires.

Xiyadie not only kept a visual diary of his life through papercutting; he also documented a burgeoning gay scene in China at the turn of the century and into the new millennium. In *Gate* (Figure 8.13), he depicted a cruising gay scene in urban China. Two men on the right-hand side of the picture are tattooed, one of whom is a skinhead type. The man standing in the middle acts flamboyantly, and another man on the left-hand side is trying to hush him, pointing to a door

FIGURE 8.12 *Gardening*, n.d. papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

FIGURE 8.13 *Gate*, 1999, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176 × 176 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

behind. In *Tiananmen* (Figure 8.14), Xiyadie portrayed two men kissing each other in front of the Tiananmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace) in central Beijing.[5] The image of two naked gay men having sex in front of the symbol of China's state power captures a sense of political subversion and queer transgressive pleasure, a scene also reminiscent of the lesbian kiss near Tiananmen in Shi Tou's *Women Fifty Minutes* (see Chapter 2).

With paper and a pair of scissors, Xiyadie has documented an important period of queer life in China, with a vibrant outdoor community life centring on public cruising grounds. This forms a sharp contrast with the middle class queer life in

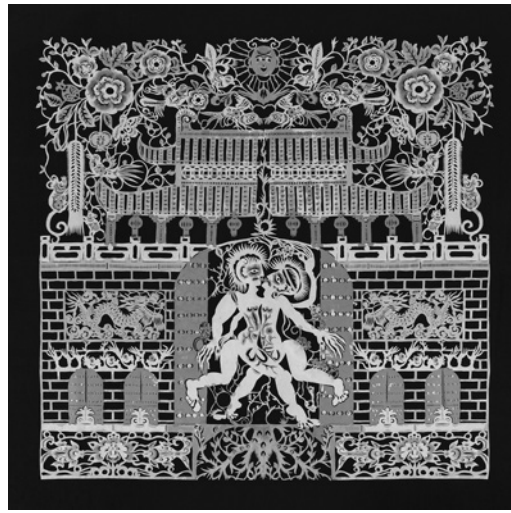


FIGURE 8.14 *Tiananmen*, 2016, papercut with water-based dye and Chinese pigments on Xuan paper, 176 × 176 cm

Source: Xiyadie, courtesy of the artist

Chinese cities, which mostly take place in commercial venues and private homes. The gay men cruising in parks, toilets and other public spaces may not be what gay activists in China wish to publicise and advocate; nor are these men seen as proper subjects of identification for middle class gay men living a cosmopolitan life and frequenting gay commercial venues. They however remind people of the hierarchies of desires and desiring subjectivities in a neoliberal China, where demarcating legitimate from illegitimate desires becomes a way for people to construct their classed identities (Rofel 2007: 103–6). As mentioned earlier in this chapter and also in Chapter 6, the homosexual subjects cruising in public spaces are in fact different sexual subjects from the middle class 'gay' or 'queer' identified people. Xiyadie's artworks can be seen as social critiques, addressing directly the brutal inequalities and injustices in a society that puts 'harmony' at the centre of its political ideology.

Sexuality and class: a postsocialist allegory of modernity

While queer communities and the international art market mostly see Xiyadie as a queer artist representing gay identities and queer desires in contemporary China, his other works are often neglected, largely because they do not carry homoerotic themes. Some of these works deploy a socialist realism approach. They reveal the inequalities and injustices in contemporary Chinese society, as well as the harsh realities of everyday life in China for poor and socially marginalised people. Indeed, a lot of his homoerotic-themed artworks also carry with them a distinct 'class'

sensibility; they portray the lives of the rural, migrant and urban poor living on the fringes of Chinese society. Most of them struggle for a living and have to use public cruising grounds to find sex partners. These queer representations distinguish themselves from the middle class 'queer mainstream' in urban China, which often feature well-educated and cosmopolitan gay and lesbian subjects who can afford the luxury of queer commercial public spaces (such as gay bars and clubs) and private spaces (such as an apartment with a great degree of freedom and privacy). Sexuality in a neoliberalising China should thus be examined in conjunction with class, as gay or queer is often used to denote identities and desires with class distinctions, demarcate social classes and define legitimate and illegitimate desires (also see Chapters 3 and 4).

While Xiyadie was working for the Li Xianting Film Archive in Beijing, he made a large piece of artwork (Figure 8.15). This work was created around the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, so there are a lot of references to the Olympics, such as the Olympic mascots and torch. The picture primarily features happy households, blooming flowers and flying birds. This can look like a piece of government propaganda until one looks closely: the bottom of the picture shows an underground coal mine, with people toiling inside and some skeletons lying around. Xiyadie explained the meaning of the picture in an interview:

> In China, there are a lot of mine workers. At the age of seventeen or eighteen, they can't go to school because they have to work in mines to make a living. They don't get paid much for their hard work; a lot of them even die in these mines. The bosses of these coal mines get rich because of the workers' sweat and blood. They drive private cars and enjoy a happy life. I think this is unfair.
>
> *(Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012)*

FIGURE 8.15 Xiyadie and his artwork *A Harmonious World*, Songzhuang, Beijing, 2008

Source: Courtesy of the artist

This was Marxian capitalist exploitation and class theory narrated from the perspective of a Chinese queer artist. Despite having only had a high school education, Xiyadie understood the central tenets of Marxism through his life experiences at the bottom of the Chinese society. Having struggled through life himself and having witnessed the sufferings of many poor people, Xiyadie was able to translate his understanding of the world into the language of papercutting. By juxtaposing the happy lives of the rich above ground and the miserable working class lives underground, Xiyadie's work launched a Marxian critique of capitalism in China: whilst capitalism benefits certain social classes and a few people by making them economically better off, a lot of people coming from rural, urban poor and migrant backgrounds are in fact worse off in China's economic reform of privatisation. Explaining the etymology of the word *tongzhi* in an interview, Xiyadie reminisced:

> During the time of Chairman Mao, everyone used to call each other 'comrade'. At that time, *tongzhi* means 'revolutionary comrade'. Comrades are people who work in the same enterprise and who share the same ideals and aspirations.
>
> *(Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012)*

In the same interview, Xiyadie even sang a folk song from the Mao era. His socialist nostalgia should be understood as an unconscious and spontaneous critique to contemporary China where socialist ideals are rejected, and egalitarian promises fall short (also see Chapter 3). Along with his social critique, Xiyadie explained the cosmopolitan motif in his works and expresses hope for international solidarity from the perspective of 'harmony' (*hexie*):

> Although I am a farmer, I also want to make art. So I use a farmer's perspective and method to express myself on the theme of harmony. I feel that there is a lot of discord in this world, and people from all nations should hold hands and stop fighting.
>
> *(Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012)*

Unfortunately, Xiyadie's works of social critique have not received much critical attention to date: queer communities and the international art market seem more interested in celebrating the emergence of a Chinese queer artist, whose creative energies and potentials are believed to have been unleashed by his gay identity and a capitalistic art market. After all, words such as class, exploitation and capitalism hold little appeal in a highly commercialised art market and a global 'pink economy' in a post-Cold War world that has recently witnessed the 'end of history' and the ultimate triumph of neoliberal values.

It is necessary to recognise the connection between sexuality and class in transnational neoliberal capitalism in order to understand the rise of a Chinese queer

artist and his works. As we celebrate Xiyadie's creativity, let us not forget the fact that papercutting has a long history, and is deeply rooted in folk and socialist traditions in China's history. Let us also remember the fact that Xiyadie has been doing papercutting for the last few decades, and it is only until very recently that he was labelled as a 'Chinese queer artist' and his artworks began to receive international attention. The cruising 'homosexual' subjects in Xiyadie's papercutting works are often seen by some as orientalised and sexualised spectacles and by others as documents of a bygone community history. For Xiyadie and many other queer people from underprivileged backgrounds, they are realistic depictions of their ordinary lives, as these queer people have to struggle between their family responsibilities and personal desires, as they have to cruise in public spaces because of their lack of access to queer private and commercial spaces, and as they continue to be faced with different forms of discrimination: as sexual minorities, migrant workers, and people coming from rural, migrant and urban poor backgrounds. In this sense, Xiyadie's papercutting works should be seen as an allegory for a neoliberal China, where class and sexuality are mutually imbricated, where working class history is replaced by middle class identity narratives, and where different forms of social inequality and injustice are concealed by an obsession with identity politics and individual desires. In this sense, we should look at Xiyadie's homoerotic images from the perspectives of socialist realism and social exposé, with the aim of rethinking and unsettling the neoliberal status quo from the locus of the Global South.

Becoming butterfly: locating artist autonomy and agency

Although increasingly recognised as an artist, Xiyadie often rejects such a label himself: 'I never thought about becoming an artist. Some people saw my work and then called me one. I'm only a farmer, belonging to my yellow soil land.' (Xiyadie in Harrity 2012) Xiyadie also rejects political and commercial interpretations of his works. He often claims that he does not produce artworks to help gay activism; nor does he do it to make money. He cuts paper simply as individual expression (Jao 2012; Sebag-Montefiore 2012). The following interview is a good example to illustrate his apolitical stance:

> I don't care about whether it is private or public. . . . I do these things for myself. . . . I lived in Beijing for eight years, I don't have a television or a radio. I don't know what's going on outside with the politicians. I just do my artwork. . . . I never complain about the government because I don't have experience with the government.
>
> *(Ávila 2012)*

While it is possible that he made these statements to avoid politicising his artworks and getting himself into unnecessary trouble, his words can also be read as an implicit critique that 'doing politics' is often a middle class privilege and that poor people struggling for livelihood often do not have the luxury of engaging

with political debates in a public sphere. It would, however, be naïve to think of Xiyadie's works as completely apolitical: desires and their public expression are always politically issues and often subject to state control and regulation. In a country where explicit expression of homoeroticism and gay rights is limited, making queer-themed artworks has significant political implications. As Chapter 5 has demonstrated, art and performance can function as culturally sensitive and context-specific forms of queer political and social activism in contemporary China. Also, at the international art market, Xiyadie is framed as a 'Chinese queer artist', and his life has been irrevocably entangled in global geopolitics in a post-Cold War world order. In this sense, even though Xiyadie may be unaware of these political implications, his life and artworks have been unequivocally politicised, and are intrinsically political.

Still, in his signature style of unpretentious simplicity, Xiyadie attributed his creative energy to autonomous expression of personal feelings and emotions: 'I suffered a lot by living in the closet, but my art allowed me to show my feelings. My art is an expression of my emotion. It is about the desire for freedom: freedom of expression and freedom to live honestly' (Xiyadie in Zonkel 2012). In Xiyadie's self-account, there is a strong sense of individual autonomy brought about by artistic expression: 'Papercutting is my own spiritual world. It is my world. In that world there are no worries and sorrows, only peace and free imagination' (Xiyadie in Jao 2012).

Perhaps we should not dismiss Xiyadie's lack of political consciousness as 'false consciousness' (Marx and Engels 1974). After all, his life and feelings are no less real than those of others, such as Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist whose life and artworks cannot help but be overtly political. After all, they are two different types of artists living in their respective worlds. And furthermore, art does not always have to be overtly political or politicised; there can be contingent moments of revealing and concealing in relation to politics. An artist can probably locate a certain degree of agency and autonomy in the process of artistic engagement. In such a process, they may temporarily lose themselves and their lives may escape domesticity, mundanity, drudgery and ideological control. Xiyadie emphasised the role of imagination in his artistic creation processes: 'To do papercutting, I need to have a lot of imagination. Through my imagination, I am the creator; I'm the king.' (Ávila 2012)

The analogy between a creator and a king shows a great deal of self-confidence and autonomous freedom. It also points to the potential of the artist's agency and autonomy. In a world where individuals often have little control over their own lives, let alone over national and international politics, agency and autonomy, however limited, is what ordinary people need for survival. Through imagination, Xiyadie conjures up a 'queer autonomous space' (Brown 2007) and a longing for utopia. Oscar Wilde's (1891) famous quote on utopia is relevant here: 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at'. Refuting the 'anti-social' turn and the 'no future' (e.g. Edelman 2004) rhetoric in Western queer theory, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) points out the limitations of contemporary queer theory: 'The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belongings, normative

tastes, and "rational" expectations' (p. 27). Drawing on Ernst Bloch (1988), Muñoz further argues for the importance of utopia for queers of colour who have often been excluded from the Western, metropolitan gay life: 'Queerness is utopian; there is something queer about the utopian' (p. 26) and 'queerness is not yet there; and thus we must always be future bound in our desires and designs' (p. 185). In many ways, Xiyadie is articulating his longing for a utopia where he can express his queer desire and where he can create his own queer world. This process of articulation is manifested in the process of papercutting and in his artworks.

Xiyadie described the process of papercutting in this way: 'When I cut paper, I forget about everything around me. With my scissors, I can reach everything out of my reach, and I can get hold of all these things' (Xiyadie in SexybeijingTV 2012). He also expressed that he does not think of the audience or critics when he creates artworks by conjuring up the butterfly metaphor: 'When I cut paper, I don't think about what other people want to see. I don't care about how people think of my works. I just focus on how I feel and what I want. I am like a butterfly, flying anywhere I want to go (Xiyadie in Ávila 2012).

Like the ease with which a master chef carves an ox described in ancient Chinese philosophy (Chuang Tzu n.d.), Xiyadie has also gained remarkable dexterity with paper and scissors.[6] The process of papercutting becomes an access to personal autonomy and emancipation from worldly constraints. Probably we should think of the papercutting process not as how Xiyadie the human subject engages with the objects of scissors and paper, but as how Xiyadie the human subject interacts with other agents such as materials (including scissors, paper and dying colours) and technologies (which include designing, cutting and dyeing colours). This process does not necessarily privilege the human subject; rather, scissors and paper have a life and mind of their own and they shape the human subject in specific ways. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987)'s notion of 'assemblage', we can think of the papercutting process as a hands-scissors-paper assemblage, shaped in and interacting with specific social and cultural contexts. This assemblage is never static; nor is it predictable and structurally deterministic, thus pointing to the potential of disrupting power relations of domination and subordination in global capitalism. It is through this contingent and forever changing assemblage that Xiyadie's autonomy and agency are best manifested.

Notes

1 'Tom of Finland', the pseudonym of Touko Valio Laaksonen (1920–91), was a Finnish artist known for his highly stylised homoerotic art depicting male hypermasculinity and fetish cultures (Ramakas 2004).

2 Xiyadie's works have also been shown at Flazh!Alley Art Studio, San Pedro, USA (2012); Museum of World Culture, Gothenburg (2013); Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm (2012); Galerie Verbeeck-Van Dyck, Antwerp (2015); Topenmuseum, Amsterdam (2015); Para Site, Hong Kong (2017); 'Cut Sleeve, Split Peach' exhibition, Berlin Nome Gallery (2018) and the 12th Gwangju Biennale: Imagined Borders, Gwangju, South Korea (2018) (NOME Gallery 2018).

3 The film *Wellspring* (*Zai yiqi de shiguang*, dir. Sha Qing 2012) won the Shinsuke Ogawa prize in the New Asian Currents Section at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. The jury commented, 'The cooperation and conflicts that the family experience while taking care of a disabled child under economically difficult conditions invite empathy' (quoted in Berry n.d.).
4 Xuan paper, or rice paper, is a type of paper originating in ancient China and often used for writing calligraphy and painting traditional Chinese painting; it is soft, thin and has a fine texture. Banner paper is a type of paper often used for decoration or advertising; it is usually hard and often has a smooth surface.
5 In the 1980s and 1990s, the public toilets on both sides of Tiananmen were often used by gay men as cruising grounds, and they were often referred to as 'East Palace' and 'West Palace' in local gay slang, hence the title *East Palace, West Palace* for Zhang Yuan's 1996 gay film (Wang and Li 2006). The biggest cruising ground for gay men in Beijing, Dongdan Park, is situated east of Tiananmen.
6 This is a reference to a classic tale from the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu (Zhuang Zi), which is about the exemplary skills acquired by a master chef in carving an ox through years of practice (see Chuang Tzu n.d.).

EPILOGUE

All the case studies presented in this book are different forms of queer literary and artistic practices in contemporary China. They are primarily concerned with different modes of queerness and 'Chineseness'. I have followed a post-identitarian trajectory of thinking to study queer Chinese culture. Chineseness and queerness are seen not as essentialised categories but as flexible and contingent assemblages. To make my argument, I have brought together queer cultural texts and community practices, and delineated multiple and flexible ways in which queer cultural texts and practices are produced, circulated and consumed. I have also examined textual and discursive mediations of queer identity, community and desire to see how they are lived, experienced and practised by ordinary queer people in China. In doing so, I have explored modes of queer desubjectivation, autonomy and agency under neoliberal governmentality in the Global South.

What brings all these case studies together is different modes of queer subjectivation and desubjectivation. I argue that these simultaneous processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation are often closely intertwined with each other, constituting what I call 'postsocialist metamorphosis'. The potentiality and undecidability of these processes reveal the conundrum of China's postsocialist condition, along with its ambivalent relationship to neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, as identities come into formation in the context of neoliberal subjectivation, they also deterritorialise, disintegrate and fall apart. I hope that I have demonstrated that there is an 'outside' to identity and to neoliberal subjectivation. As Elspeth Probyn (1996: 8) suggests, if we have to think about identity and belonging, perhaps we are already situated 'outside'. This 'outsideness' should work to disrupt any totalising, deterministic and pessimistic myth of global neoliberal capture.

In my decade-long process of researching and writing this book and in my constant travels between the Global South and the Global North, I have met many queer people and my world has been lit up by their dreams, aspirations, enthusiasm

and struggles. It is also surprising to see how young these people are: many are in their twenties and thirties, are either students or NGO workers, and most do not come from privileged social backgrounds and some do not have a stable job. They all, however, have something in common: they hold on to their dreams and beliefs without giving them up; they refuse to accept the status quo of the neoliberal present; they dare to challenge political and social norms; they see sexuality as more than about who one has sex with and how one has sex; they see community and society as larger than the individual; and they act up and live out their dreams. They have taught me how to live, love and write with passion and conviction. I therefore dedicate this book to them.

APPENDIX

Queer history, culture and activism in postsocialist China: a brief chronology (1981–2019)[1]

1981 Zhang Mingyuan published an article in the medical journal *Dazhong Yixue* (*Popular Medical Science*) discussing the representation of homosexuality in the Chinese literary classic *Hongloumeng* (*Dreams of the Red Chamber*).

1983 Zhang Kesha underwent sexual reassignment surgery and became known as the first trans person who changed sex legally in the post-Mao era.

1985 Ruan Fangfu published an article titled 'Tongxinglian: Yige weijie zhi mi' ('homosexuality: an unsolved mystery') in the medical journal *Zhuni Jiankang* (*To Your Health*).

Ruan also published *Xing Zhishi Shouce* (*Handbook of Sexual Knowledge*), in which homosexuality was listed as a type of sexual perversion.

Chen Zhonggeng published *Biantai Xinli Xue* (*Psychology of Perversion*), in which homosexuality was described as an alternative lifestyle.

1991 Wan Yanhai, whilst working at the National Health Education Institute, started a research project titled 'Research into Gay Men and Knowledge, Faith, Attitude and Behaviour Relating to AIDS, and AIDS Education Studies'.

1992 Wan Yanhai launched the first HIV/AIDS hotline in Beijing.

On 22 November, Wan organised the first 'Men's World', a support group for gay men, with 35 participants.

Wan started the Aizhixing Project for HIV/AIDS education and support. The project published *Aizhi Jianbao* (*Love Knowledge Newsletter*).

Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo published their sociological research into homosexuality, *Tamen de Shijie* (*Their World*).

1993 A charge against two co-habiting lesbians was dropped. The Ministry of Public Security cited lack of legislation on homosexuality in China.

On 14 February, a special Valentine's Day celebration organised by 'Men's World' took place at the Seahorse Dance Club (*Haima Gewuting*) in Beijing.

Liu Dalin from Shanghai University published a 'sexual civilisation' (*xing wenming*) report based on a survey of 20,000 gay people from fifteen Chinese provinces. This was celebrated as 'China's Kinsey Report'.

Pan Suiming and Wu Zongjian surveyed 810 lesbian and gay people from eighteen Chinese cities.

Chen Kaige completed the film *Bawang Bieji* (*Farewell, My Concubine*), starring Leslie Cheung, Zhang Fengyi and Gong Li.

1994 Zhang Beichuan published his medical research into homosexuality, *Tongxing'ai* (*Same-Sex Love*).

Susie Jolly started to organise lesbian and gay parties in her Beijing flat.

Susie Jolly and other feminists started the East Meets West Feminist Translation Group in Beijing.

In December, Qiu Renzong organised a research workshop on HIV/AIDS and homosexuality, proposing gay-friendly policies to the Chinese government.

1995 Sociologist Liu Dalin published *Dangdai Xing Wenhua* (*Sexual Cultures Today*).

Sociologist Pan Suiming published *Zhongguo Xing Xianzhuang* (*The Status Quo of Sex and Sexuality in China*) based on a survey of 180 gay men from four Chinese cities.

Journalist Fang Gang published *Tongxinglian Zai Zhongguo* (*Homosexuality in China*).

In June, a Beijing-based queer group named Zhongguo Caihong (Chinese Rainbow) sent an open letter to international media calling for China's gay liberation.

On 4-15 September, the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women (UNWCW) took place in Beijing. The conference passed the *Beijing Declaration* and *Platform for Action*. Representing the IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission), Palesa Beverley Ditsie from South Africa gave a speech at the UNWCW conference, urging all the states to recognise lesbian rights. Lesbian activists set up their tent at the NGO Forum in Huairou and participated in a women's march there. During the conference, Wu Chunsheng organised a 'Night-Woman' party at the Nightman Disco, bringing together Chinese and international lesbians. The police later arrested Wu for having organised the party.

Jin Xing underwent sex reassignment surgery and became China's first trans celebrity.

1996 Li Jing started a national letter-writing network for lesbians.

In June, He Xiaopei led a 'birthday party' celebration to mark the anniversary of Stonewall at the Half and Half bar in Beijing.

Zhang Yuan completed *East Palace, West Palace* (*Donggong Xigong*), the first explicitly gay-themed feature film in the PRC.

On 6-8 December, the first international Chinese *Tongzhi* Conference took place in Hong Kong. The conference passed a Chinese *tongzhi* manifesto.

1997 *Liumangzui* ('hooliganism') was officially removed from China's Criminal Law. This marked the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the PRC.

Li Yinhe published *Nuelian Yawenhua (The Subculture of Sadomasochism)*.

Cui Zi'en published queer novel *Taose Zuichun* (*Purple Lips*).

Zhang Beichuan conducted a survey of 486 gay men from 1997 to 1998.

Jingshen Weisheng Tongxun (*Journal of Mental Health*) published a special issue on homosexuality and mental health, in which Zhang Beichuan clearly stated that homosexuality is not a mental disorder.

The Ministry of Health and UNAIDS published a project report titled *Yingzhan Aizibing* (*Fighting AIDS*), advocating a positive attitude towards homosexuality.

Susie Jolly and Ah Ping started a lesbian and gay pager hotline in Beijing.

(*Continued*)

On 1 September, the Chinese Society for the Study of Sexual Minorities (CSSSM) was established in North America and its first annual meeting was held in Los Angeles.

1998 In March, Zhang Beichuan founded the Friend (*Pengyou*) Project for HIV/AIDS intervention inside China's gay communities. The project started to publish and distribute a monthly magazine *Friend Exchange* (*Pengyou Tongxin*).

In May, The *Hope* (*Xiwang*) magazine launched a 21-page feature on homosexuality.

On 30 May 1998, *People's Daily* published a short article reporting the cancellation of unjust Nazi laws in Germany and mentioning the persecution of homosexuality in Nazi Germany.

In August, the first PRC-based Chinese *Tongzhi* Conference took place in Beijing.

In October, the first PRC-based Chinese *Lala*/Lesbian Conference took place in Beijing.

In October, Beijing Tongzhi (pseudonym) published the queer novel *Beijing Gushi* (*Beijing Story*) in an online magazine called Huazhao. The novel was soon reposted on other websites and disseminated widely (see Chapter 3 of this book).

Li Jing, Shi Tou and others co-founded Beijing Sisters, a lesbian NGO. The group organised regular meetings and discussions; it also ran a lesbian hotline.

A queer café called *Ningmengshu kafeiwu* (Lemon Tree Café) opened.

Many queer or queer-friendly websites (including Aibai, Guangtong and Yangguang didai) appeared on the Internet.

1999 Lesbian website *Lala Shenghuo Guangchang* (*Life Guide for Lesbians*) was established.

On 27 March, gay website *Aiqing Baipishu* (*White Paper on Love*, *Aibai* for short) was established. From 9 November, Damien Lu (aka Dr Xing Xing) started an advice column on the website.

The first lesbian bar in Beijing, Fengba (Maple Bar), opened.

Liu Bingjian completed a queer film titled *Nannan Nünü* (*Men and Women*).

In August, Mu Cao published his anthology *Mu Cao de Shi* (*Mu Cao's Poems*) (see Chapter 6 of this book).

Qiu Renzong organised a research workshop titled 'Women Toward the Twenty-First Century: A Conversation between Feminists and Gay People'.

Lesbian magazine *Tiankong* (*Sky*) was first published.

A lesbian couple held a Chinese-style wedding in Shanghai.

Fang Gang was charged with libel for his book *Homosexuality in China*. The court removed the line 'homosexuality is a type of sexual perversion' from its final ruling.

2000 A gay and lesbian online forum, *Yilu Tongxing*, was set up on the Tianya website.

Shi Tou took part in a talk show on Phoenix Television and became the first 'out' lesbian celebrity from the PRC.

Geng Le founded the gay website danlan.org.

In April, The Ministry of Public Security issued a guideline, clearly stating that it is a citizen's right to choose their own gender.

In November, singer Mao Ning was stabbed. This news triggered much debate regarding homosexuality in Chinese media.

On 20 December, Li Yinhe, Cui Zi'en and Shi Tou participated in the talk show *Face to Face with Homosexuals* (*Zoujin Tongxinglian*) on Hunan Satellite Television, openly discussing queer issues in the PRC's mainstream media for the first time.

Li Yinhe proposed to the National People's Congress to legalise same-sex marriage in China. (The proposal was resubmitted in subsequent years but with no success.)

2001 Homosexuality was partially removed from CCMD-3 (*Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders*, Third Edition), in which the 'ego syntonic' (*ziwo hexie*) type of homosexuality needs no treatment. This marked the depathologisation of homosexuality in the PRC.

In May, the police shut down the first lesbian cultural festival in Beijing.

In December, Zhang Jiangnan, Yang Yang and Cui Zi'en organised the first Beijing Queer Film Festival (then called China Homosexual Film Festival) at Peking University.

Stanley Kwan's 2001 film *Lan Yu*, based on the online novel *Beijing Story*, was shown at the first Beijing Queer Film Festival.

Cui Zi'en's short story, 'Jiujiu de Renjian Yanhuo' ('Uncle's Past'), won the 2001 Radio Literature Award in Germany.

Li Yu directed China's first lesbian feature *Jinnian Xiatian* (*Fish and Elephant*), starring Shi Tou and Pan Yi. The film won the Elvira Notari prize at the Venice Film Festival in 2001.

Andrew Yusu Cheng completed his queer feature *Women Haipa* (*Shanghai Panic*).

Historian Zhang Zaizhou published *Aimei de Licheng: Zhongguo Gudai Tongxinglian Shi (An Intimate Journey: A History of Homoeroticism in Premodern China)*.

2002 The queer NGO Beijing Gender Health Education Institute (*Ji'ande*) was established.

Cui Zi'en completed his queer films *Choujue Dengchang* (*Enter the Clown*) and *Jiuyue* (*The Old Testament*).

In June, a Chengdu-based LGBT NGO, Guan'ai, was founded.

2003 Queer communities in China and the Sinophone sphere commemorated Leslie Cheung, a Hong Kong queer icon who committed suicide on 14 February.

Andrew Yusu Cheng completed his queer feature *Mudidi Shanghai* (*Welcome to Destination Shanghai*).

Shanghai Tongxin Hotline was founded.

Professor Gao Yanning started China's first LGBTQ studies course in the School of Public Health at Fudan University in Shanghai.

Chi-Heng Foundation set up its Shanghai Office dedicated to HIV/AIDS intervention.

Tony Zheng founded the Shanghai CSW & MSM Centre (SCMC), an NGO providing support for sex workers.

The first national survey on sexual minorities in China was conducted.

The Chengdu-based NGO Guan'ai started to print a community zine titled *Tongxin*.

2004 In April, the SARFT (State Administration of Radio Film and Television) started a campaign to clear violence and sexual content from Chinese media.

In May, a Yunnan-based community zine, *Qicai Tiankong*, started to print.

On 12 June, the pride month was celebrated across China. Queer activists in several Chinese cities flew rainbow kites to mark the occasion. The second Sunday of each June was designated as the China Rainbow Day.

In November, Xian and An Ke started Beijing Lesbian Salon.

In December, China Central Television broadcast *Tongxinglian: Huibi Buru Zhengshi* (*Homosexuality: Better Face It Than Avoid It*).

The Ministry of Health released official statistics of China's HIV/AIDS infection rate and the Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) population.

(*Continued*)

2005 In January, Xian started Tongyu, a lesbian NGO, in Beijing.
In April, the Second Beijing Queer Film Festival was forced to close on its first day. The screening events had to move their locations overnight from Peking University to the 798 Modern Art District.
In June, Tongyu organised PRC's first lesbian activist conference.
In July, Aizhixing, Tongyu and Aibai co-organised the first summer camp for queer university students.
In August, China Central Television broadcast *Yi Shengming de Mingyi* (*In the Name of Life*), a news feature on HIV/AIDs and homosexuality.
The first LGBT Cultural Festival took place in Beijing.
Shanghai Nüai, a lesbian NGO, was established.
The lesbian website *Huakai de Difang* organised regular meet-ups in Shanghai.
In December, Sam and Gogo co-founded *Les+*, a lesbian magazine, in Beijing.
Liu Dalin and Lu Longguang co-published *Zhongguo Tongxinglian Yanjiu* (*Studies on Chinese Homosexuality*) (see Chapter 4 of my book *Queer Comrades*).

2006 The lesbian website *Shenqiu Xiaowu* organised regular offline meet-ups in Shanghai.
Shanghai Nüai made a lesbian documentary titled *Shanghua*.
'Happy Together' (Rainbow Association), an LGBTQ student society, was established at Sun Yat-sen University.
Shi Tou completed the documentary *Women Fifty Minutes* (*Nüren Wushi Fenzhong*) (see Chapter 2 of this book).
Tong Ge published *Zhongguo Ren de Nannan Xing Xingwei: Xing yu Ziwo Rentong Zhuangtai Diaocha* (*Men Who Have Sex with Men in China: A Survey Report on Sexuality and Self-Identity*).
In December, Fatiaocheng521 ('Clockwork Orange 521', pseudonym) started to publish *Feiseshi* (*Pink Affairs*) in instalments in the online forum *Feise chaonü ba* (Pink *Super Girl* Club) (see Chapter 4 of this book).

2007 On 14 February, queer activists distributed flowers on a street in Beijing to campaign for same-sex marriage rights.
He Xiaopei, An Ke and Eva co-founded Pink Space Sexuality Research Centre (Pink Space for short), a queer women's NGO.
In March, the first issue of the *Gayspot* (*Dian*) magazine went to print.
In April, the *Tongzhi Yi Fanren (Queer as Folk Beijing*, later renamed as *Queer Comrades*) webcast was started.
In May, the *Tongzhi Shafa* (*Queer Sofa*) webcast was started.
In June, Aizhixing organised a trans workshop attended by over thirty trans people from different parts of north China.
In July, Tongyu organised *Lala Ying*, a summer camp for lesbian activists, in Zhuhai.
Tong Ge published *Zhongguo Nannan Xing Jiaoyi Diaocha* (*A Survey Report on Sex Work Between Men in China*).
Guo Xiaofei published a monograph on homosexuality and law, *Zhongguo Fa Shiye Xiade Tongxinglian (Homosexuality in the Purviews of Chinese Law)*.
Fan Popo published *Chunguang Zhaxie: Baibu Tongzhi Dianying Quan Jilu (Happy Together: A Complete Record of a Hundred Queer Films*).

2008 On 14 February, Beijing LGBT Centre was established.
The SARFT issued guidelines to censor queer content on Chinese media.
In March, the China Independent Queer Film Group was established.
In April, the China Queer Film Festival Tour started.

In April, under the direction of the National Centre for HIV/AIDS, 61 cities in China launched community-based studies of MSM and HIV/AIDS.

On 28 June, PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) China was founded in Guangzhou.

In October, Chinese *Lala*/Lesbian Alliance (CLA) was established.

In November, *Friend* celebrated its ten-year anniversary.

In November, community documentary *Queer China, 'Comrade' China* (*Zhi Tongzhi*), directed by Cui Zi'en, was premiered in Songzhuang.

Feng Xiaogang's film *Feicheng Wurao* (*If You Are the One*) triggered debates in China's queer communities over its stereotyped representation of homosexuality.

2009 Shanghai Nüai published an oral history book *Tamen de Ai zai Shuo: Koushu Lishi 1* (*Their Love is Speaking: Oral History 1*).

On 14 February, two same-sex couples took wedding photos at Qianmen, Beijing, campaigning for same-sex marriage rights (see Chapter 5 of this book).

In March, Eva and Xiao Hei co-founded the Wujiexian ('Without Border') Group for bisexual and transgender people.

On 27-28 March, the First Chinese *Tongqi* (wives of gay men) Conference took place in Qingdao.

On 17 May, Tongyu and Aibai organised events to celebrate IDAHOBIT (International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia) in Beijing.

In May, *Chunfeng Chenzui de Yewan* (*Spring Fever*), a queer film directed by Lou Ye, was premiered at the Cannes Festival and won the award for Best Screenplay.

In June, the *Bie/Xing* (*Difference-Gender*) Art Exhibition took place in Beijing.

On 7-14 June, the first Shanghai Pride took place.

In July, representatives from China's queer community attended the second World Outgames held in Copenhagen.

On 25 August, around 100 gay men protested against the police raid on gay cruising areas in the People's Park, Guangzhou (see Chapter 7 of my book *Queer Comrades*).

Mu Cao published *Mu Cao Shixuan* (*Selected Poems of Mu Cao*) (see Chapter 6 of this book).

In November, Beijing Lesbian Salon and Beijing Gender Health Education Institute co-organised a workshop on lesbian community development.

Beijing Lesbian Salon published anthologies titled *Zuji* (*Footprints*) volume 1 and 2.

Zhou Dan published his monograph on homosexuality and law titled *Aiyue yu Guixun: Zhongguo Xiandaixing zhong Tongxing Yuwang de Fali Xiangxiang* (*Love and Discipline: The Legal Imaginations of Homosexual Desire in Chinese Modernity*).

PFLAG started to organise annual national LGBTQ conferences in different Chinese cities.

A local Centre for Disease Control (CDC) sponsored a gay bar in Dali, Yunnan.

2010 On 15 January, police closed down the first Gay China Pageant that took place in Beijing.

On 17 May, Hou Haiyang started the Smile4gay campaign online, calling for straight allies to support queer people.

On 26 September, police raided a gay cruising spot in Mudanyuan, Beijing.

Friend published its last issue.

The SARFT issued a guideline banning same-sex representation on television.

In June, Wang Zizheng (pseudonym) sued Red Cross China for banning gay men from donating blood.

Shanghai Qing'ai became the first and only officially registered NGO dedicated to gay men's health and HIV/AIDS intervention in Shanghai.

(*Continued*)

2011 Tongyu published the oral history project *Beijing Lala Shequ Fazhan Koushu Shi 1: Shequ Lishi* [*Oral History of Beijing's Lala Communities 1: Community History*].

In April, police raided a gay bar in Shanghai and detained at least 60 people overnight.

In May, Damien Lu (aka Xing Xing) published an article titled 'What is Queer Theory and How Does it Relate to China's *Tongzhi* Movement?' on the Aibai website, accusing queer theory of jeopardising China's LGBTQ movement.

On 15 June, Beijing Queer Film Festival celebrated its tenth-year anniversary and premiered *Our Story* (*Women de gushi*), a film directed by Yang Yang documenting the ten-year history of the Beijing Queer Film Festival.

In June, queer communities boycotted films by celebrity couple Lü Liping and Sun Haiying for their homophobic public speech in the media.

In October, Aibai published two statements, 'Position Paper on Homowives and Homohusbands in Mainland China' and 'Position Paper on the Importance of Establishing Scientific Attitudes and Propagating Science at Work', to support Damien Lu's gay identity politics.

On 9 December, the first China Rainbow Media Award took place in Beijing.

On 11 December, the 'Sailor Moon *Lalas*' (aka 'Pretty Fighters', *Meishaonü Zhanshi Lala*) account appeared on Weibo. This marked the beginning of the 'Sailor Moon *Lalas*' debate on queer politics versus gay identity politics in China's LGBTQ communities.

On 26 December, Chinese *Lala* Alliance published a declaration to support 'Sailor Moon *Lalas*'.

2012 In January, a fire in Qingdao turned Daxige, a trans person from the urban poor, into a media celebrity.

On 14 February, two same-sex couples walked into a marriage registration office in Beijing to register for same-sex marriage. Their request was rejected.

On 17 February, the lesbian play *Tuzi Dong* (*Rabbit Hole*), produced by *Les+*, premiered in Beijing.

The Beijing Gender Health Education Institute hosted the first National LGBT Community Leadership Conference.

Feminist activists staged performance art *Wo keyi sao, ni buneng rao* (I can be slutty but you can't harass me) to protest against sexual harassment inside the subway in Shanghai.

Sinner B, a feminist activist group, started their 'occupying men's toilets' performance art in Guangzhou.

Geng Le launched the gay dating app Blued.

On 26 July, 'Sailor Moon Lalas' quit weibo after their last tweet.

Queer filmmaker Fan Popo's film *Mama Rainbow* (*Caihong Ban Woxin*) was taken down from several video streaming websites.

Queer University (*kuer daxue*) video training workshop started.

Sociologist Wei Wei published a research monograph titled *Gongkai: Dangdai Chengdu Tongzhi Kongjian de Xingcheng yu Bianqian (Going Public: The Production and Transformation of Queer Spaces in Contemporary Chengdu)*.

Anthropologist Fu Xiaoxing published a research monograph titled *Kongjian, Wenhua, Biaoyan: Dongbei A Shi Tongxinglian Qunti de Renleixue Guancha* (*Space, Culture, Performance: An Anthropological Observation of the Gay Communities in a Northeastern Chinese City*).

Qingnian Dianying Shouce (*Youth Film Handbook*) published a special issue on Chinese queer cinema titled *Huayu Tongzhi Dianying Ershi Nian* (*Twenty Years of Chinese Queer Cinema*).

2013 Fan Popo sued the SARFT over the censorship of his film *Mama Rainbow*.
On 17 May, an LGBT Pride took place in Changsha. The police detained the organiser Xiang Xiaohan after the event.
Queer feminist online magazine *Queer Lala Times* was founded.
Trans celebrity Jin Xing served as a judge in China's first season of *So You Think You Can Dance* reality TV show.

2014 On 19 December, Peng Yanzi won China's first lawsuit against gay conversion therapy in Beijing.
In December, Li Yinhe blogged about her own sexuality and her long-term relationship with her transsexual partner Daxia in response to online rumour and criticism.

2015 On 6 March, the 'Feminist Five' were detained by the police for their public campaign against sexual harassment of women.
Sun Wenlin sued the Bureau of Civil Affairs of Furong District in Changsha for refusing to grant him the right to marry his same-sex partner, Hu Mingliang. Sun lost the court case in the following year.
Sun Yat-sen University student Qiu Bai sued the Ministry of Education for the latter's permission to publish university textbooks containing pathologised and stigmatised representations of homosexuality.
The first ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival took place during the Shanghai Pride.
Lilian Shen founded Queer Talks in Shanghai.
Trans celebrity Jin Xing started her own television chat show *The Jin Xing* Show on Dragon TV.
On 31 December, the China Television Drama Production Industry Association issued new guidelines banning representation of queer relationships on television.

2016 In February, the popular Chinese gay web series *Shangyin* (*Addicted*, aka *Heroin)* was banned from online video streaming sites in China.
On 28 April, the National People's Congress standing committee passed the 'Overseas NGO Law' (short for 'Law of the People's Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organisations in the Mainland of China'), tightening control over China's civil society.
On 17 May, China's first LGBT Stamp Design Contest Exhibition took place at the Dutch Embassy in Beijing. The stamp series, *Hexie* (*Harmony*), designed by queer papercutting artist Xiyadie won the top prize (see Chapter 8 of this book).
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published *Being LGBTI in China: A National Survey on Social Attitudes towards Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression*.
Queer University collaborated with African queer organisations and started video training workshops in Africa.
Trans celebrity Jin Xing started her dating show *Chinese Dating* on TV.

2017 On 1 January, the 'Overseas NGO Law' came into effect.
On 24 February, queer artist Ren Hang committed suicide in Beijing.
China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) banned service providers from representing queer issues.
Chinese authorities shut down dating apps including Zank and Rela.
On 8 July, drag show *Extravaganza* took place at the Pearl Theatre in Shanghai (see Chapter 7 of this book).

(*Continued*)

In July, a gay man from Henan Province, identified as Yu, won a court case against a mental hospital over gay conversion therapy.

On 16–24 September, the first Shanghai Queer Film Festival took place in Shanghai.

The National People's Congress amended Chinese law to allow 'legal guardianship' (*yiding jianhu*), which enables same-sex partners to make important decisions for each other regarding medical and personal care, death and funeral, and property management.

In November, Chinese government delegates stated at the third Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council held in Geneva that China respects the health rights of LGBTQ people.

2018 On 1 January, Beijing Aeronautics and Astronautics student Luo Qianqian accused university teacher Chen Xiaowu of sexual harassment. This marked the beginning of China's #metoo movement.

On 4 February 2018, a Chinese court made the clear statement that gender identity and expression is protected against discrimination under Chinese law in the verdict of China's first transgender employment discrimination case.

In April, *Looking for Rohmer* (aka *Seeking McCartney*), a French-Chinese co-production that features gay love, was released in China's commercial cinemas.

On 13 April, Chinese-language social media Sina weibo announced a ban on queer content.

On 15 April, *People's Daily* published an article on its social media account calling for respect for gender and sexual difference.

On 16 April, Sina weibo reversed the ban on queer content after public outcry.

On 2 June, the first Trans Pride, organised by Shanghai Pride and Trans Talks, took place in Shanghai.

On 22 June, gay activist and NGO worker Liang Ma died in Beijing.

In July, the first Rainbow Law School took place in Beijing.

In September, a kindergarten teacher sued his employer for dismissing him because of his sexual orientation.

Gayspot (*Dian*) published *Yu* (*Island*) a special issue on *tongzhi*/queer literature.

Ah Shan started an oral history project for older gay men in Guangzhou.

2019 In January, *Caixin* magazine published an article accusing gay dating apps including Blued of helping to spread HIV/AIDS.

In January, in an activist campaign called 'Lover' (*lianren*), three lorries covered with slogans drove past health clinics in Nanjing and other cities to protest against gay conversion therapy.

In February, queer film *Zaijian Nanping Wanzhong* (*A Dog Barking at the Moon*), directed by Xiangzi, won the Teddy Jury Award at the 69th Berlinale.

In March, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, a biopic of the queer singer Freddie Mercury, was released in Chinese cinemas with significant cuts to gay content. Queer activists rallied against film censorship.

On 8 May, a gay civil servant attempted suicide because of his sexuality. His open letter, published online, triggered community debates about mental health issues for queer people.

On 17 May, several IDAHOBIT public campaigns were banned in Chinese cities and on university campuses.

In June, community documentary *Shanghai Queer* (*Shanghai ku'er*), directed by Chen Xiangqi, was premiered in Shanghai.

On 5 August, Beijing Guoxin Notary Public Office announced on WeChat its first notarisation of mutual guardianship agreement requested by queer people.

Several notary offices across China certified legal guardianship for same-sex couples.

On 21 August, a National People's Congress spokesperson said at a press conference that marriage will still be defined as the union between a man and a woman in the newly drafted civil code due to China's social and cultural traditions.

In September, Beijing LGBT Centre collaborated with social media Tencent and launched a campaign to raise public awareness on queer issues. Eighteen trans-identified people came out on social media.

On 3 December, the Binjiang District Court in Hangzhou heard a case concerning transgender employment rights.

On 20 December, a National People's Congress spokesperson acknowledged that the legalisation of same-sex marriage was among the most popular requests for revisions to China's civil code.

Note

1 This chronology only includes selected key queer community events in mainland China in the post-Mao era. It does not include queer events in Hong Kong or other parts of the Sinophone world. In compiling this chronology, I have primarily referred to Cui 2009; Gao 2006; Guo 2015; Hou 2014; Tongyu 2011; Nüai 2009; Wei 2015; Zhao and Shi Tou 2015) and numerous online sources.

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