Queer History, Culture, and Activism in China

A Conversation with He Xiaopei

BAO Hongwei

PC: Huffpost

Queer History, Culture, and Activism in China

A Conversation with He Xiaopei

BAO Hongwei

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

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

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

He Xiaopei

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

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

The Lucky One (宠儿, 2012)

owner was happy for us to hold a party there, but we did not tell him what kind of party it was. We told the participants that it was a birthday party. On that day, many people turned up, including eight women. It was after the Fourth UN Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in 1995. Gary had already been arrested and expelled from Beijing during the Conference, but he secretly returned to the city. After he had entered the bar, he told me that there were plainclothes policemen inside. He said that he could not say anything because he was not allowed to stay in Beijing, and asked me to host the party instead. I agreed. I told everyone that it was a birthday party and I asked people to guess whose birthday it was. People whispered in each other's ears, one after another. One cute guy ran up to me and said he knew whose birthday this was: it was 'our' birthday because it was the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. The word went around the room in whispers and people got extremely excited. It was a very touching moment. We cut cakes and had a great time. After that day, people just went there, and the bar eventually became the very first gay bar. It was called Half & Half.

BH: Half & Half was quite well known in Beijing at that time.

HX: Yes. There were three well-known gay bars: Half & Half, On & Off, and the Dragon. They did not say 'Dragon': they said 'Drag-On', because the bar had drag shows. The three bars were all on the Sanlitun Bar Street and they were all about a ten-minute walk from each other. People would walk out of one bar and into another. When they met on the way, they would ask one another where they were going. I asked one of the managers: 'Aren't you afraid of business competition?' He answered: 'I wish the whole street was full of gay bars.' He did not care about business; he cared about the community and wanted the community to grow. There was a strong sense of community at the time, and it was really good.

BH: Were all the bar owners gay-identified?

HX: Not at Half & Half, it was never gay-owned. They wanted business but they did not like us. Once they even beat up a gay guy who was a waiter at another gay bar. After that, some people started to boycott Half & Half. But the bar was too famous, so despite the ownership situation, many people still went there.

After the bars had been established, there came gay and lesbian hotlines. One of the members of the community left China and donated his pager to us so that we could start a pager hotline. We began talking about how to run it. We needed a phone to call back and it was not safe back then. Another

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He Xiaopei

an office and published a lesbian magazine called *Sky* (天空). The group, which was called Beijing Sisters (北京姐妹小组), disintegrated after a few years.

After that, Xian (a lesbian activist) founded the Common Language (同语). Xian was also a founding member of the Beijing LGBT Centre and the Beijing Lesbian Centre. I went back to China after my study in the UK and founded Pink Space. Then a lesbian magazine, *Les+*, came out, and it was quite popular. They hosted a huge donation party, where people placed very high bids for a complete collection of the magazine.

On the part of gay organisations, Bing Lan (a gay activist) founded Aibai (爱白) a gay NGO. At an LGBT leader training meeting, Bing Lan suggested that we need to come out of the Internet and go into real life. Lesbian leaders said that we should go online and become our 'true' selves. Lesbian groups and gay groups were very different. They were talking about the same thing (of 'coming out'), but in very different ways. It was an interesting time.

Bing Lan later collaborated with Xing Xing (Damien Lu), an American-Chinese guy who had certain specific ideas about what it was to be gay (as he was a firm believer in the Western type of gay identity politics). Aibai was very much influenced by him. On their website, Xing Xing had a special column, denouncing bisexuality and non-monogamy. Aibai grew very fast. At one time, the organisation rented a whole floor of a building in Xintiandi, but they all work from home now. We had community leader training programmes, and at the time I worked with Guo Yaqi (founder of the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute 北京纪安德健康教育研究所), Bing Lan, Ma Tiecheng (founder of Aizhiyuanzhu 爱之援助, a gay organisation that has been running for over twenty years), and Tan Qin (founder of Yunnan Tonghuashe 云南同话舍, a lesbian group). We had different ideas about community work and its priorities. The AIDS Alliance decided that the best strategy to tackle HIV/AIDS was to work with at-risk communities. It wanted to focus only on gay men, as they believed that only gay men were affected by HIV/AIDS; it did not think that women could also be affected. But I always tried to include lesbian activists in our trainings.

Yvo and Chrissy
(如此生活, 2017)

BH: There were also other gay organisations and pioneers, can you talk about some of them?

HX: In the late 1990s, when there were almost no 'out' gay people in China, the activist Wan Yanhai invited psychiatrists to talk to members of the gay community. This helped to depathologise homosexuality which eventually led to the removal of homosexuality from the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (CCMD-3) in 2001. In May 1990, the World

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

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

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

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

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

HX: That's true. Li Yinhe and Meng Lin also clarified that this was not gay men's fault but a wider societal issue. It was the society that pushed gay people into heterosexual marriages. But I was also thinking about challenging marriage as a social institution. This was why in 2013 I made the film *Our Marriages: When Lesbians Marry Gay Men* to reflect on the social institution of marriage.

BH: *Our Marriages* is about 'contract marriages' (形式婚姻) between lesbians and gay men. Some people call them 'fake' marriages; others call them 'cooperative' or 'mutual-help' marriages.

HX: There was a lot of criticism about contract marriages at the time, and it was framed as a form of cheating yourself and cheating your parents. The PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) China (同性恋亲友会) refused to show my film at their meetings. A critic of the film talked about the downsides of filial piety. I accept their argument, but you cannot expect all the gay people to continuously fight against their parents. Most people love their parents and do not want to fight with them. Ordinary gay people generally like my film. Some gay people even proudly show my film to their parents to achieve a better understanding between the two generations.

BH: I guess we are talking about the cultural specificity of queer cultures in China.

Our Marriages (奇缘一生, 2013), by He Xiaopei.

HX: Fei Xiaotong, the renowned Chinese sociologist, said that Western culture is individual-based and Chinese culture is family- and kinship-based. I take his point. Also, there are geographical differences. I only looked at four lesbians' lives in my film. They really have a good relationship with their parents. The four lesbians can marry gay men and live a happy life because of their social environment. In some big cities, people are becoming more Westernised and individualistic. Children's lives are increasingly cut off from the lives of their parents. They can live without thinking about their parents' needs. But in smaller cities, people have to think about their parents because your life is not yours; your life belongs to your family as well. An AIDS activist told me that even after his father passed away, he couldn't come out as HIV positive. He feared that people would point at his father's grave and say that your son gave the family a bad name. He would never let this happen. He had more concerns about his father's reputation than his own. So he had to hide his HIV status from his family. Coming out is a difficult issue even for a very famous AIDS activist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

express ideas. It is the ideas behind these forms that matter. I want to express my ideas in a way that speaks to the audience. Therefore, the stories have to be interesting. In this case it should be more visually acceptable, not in terms of being pretty, but in terms of being more audience-friendly.

BH: What do you think is the future of queer China? Are you optimistic?

HX: It is easier to live as an individual than before, and it is also easier to be gay and to organise in China today. But I do not necessarily think that coming out has to be the only strategy, or gay marriage has to be the only form of queer kinship. Coming out is not easy for most gay people in China. Diversity is more important. I hope that in the future there will be more diversity rather than simply one way of being.

BH: Film obviously plays an important role in queer community building and activism. How did you get into filmmaking?

HX: I accidently got into filmmaking by getting to know a woman living with HIV/AIDS. My PhD thesis at the University of Westminster was on HIV/AIDS in China, and I founded the organisation Pink Space after I finished my PhD. The very first meeting of Pink Space was to arrange lesbian and bisexual women to meet HIV positive women to talk about positive sex. Participants either did not know about lesbianism or had never met women living with HIV/AIDS. The meeting was to share their sexual desires and practices. People had a good laugh together and the conclusion was that there were no differences between lesbians and women with HIV. We all have desires and we all want good sex: this was a nice discovery. At one other meeting with wives of gay men, HIV positive women, and lesbians, I asked people whose life was more difficult. Each group said that the other group's life was more difficult, unlike at gay meetings where gay people thought they were the most oppressed group.

Each Pink Space meeting had a newsletter, but I did not know where to distribute them. I met this woman who was living with HIV/AIDS and liver cancer with only three months to live. She came to Pink Space meetings regularly. She asked me what she could do with her limited time left. I gave her a digital voice recorder and a video camera and told her to tell her life stories. I also went to see her every day after work and started to film her life. I found out that she had not told her son that she was HIV positive or dying of cancer. I felt that it was my job to persuade her to tell her son that she was dying. But she said that

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

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