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In Queer Memory: Mediating Queer Chinese History in Digital Video Documentaries

Abstract:

This article examines the digital and cinematic mediation of queer memory in four independent Chinese documentaries: *Queer China*, “Comrade” *China* (dir. Cui Zi’en 2008), *Our Story* (dir. Yang Yang, 2011), *We Are Here* (dir. Shi Tou and Jing Zhao, 2016) and *Shanghai Queer* (dir. Chen Xiangqi, 2019). All these films have been made by queer identified filmmakers and have used the digital video documentary format as an activist strategy; all have strived to record China’s queer history in the post-Mao era. However, because of the filmmakers’ gender and sexual subjectivities, together with the historical and social contexts in which these films were made, the four documentaries remember China’s queer history in different ways. Together, these documentaries contest a heteronormative and a homonormative narrative of Chinese history by constructing alternative memories; they also insert queer people’s voices and experiences into that history. All these mediations testify to the heterogeneity of queer people’s experience, as well as the overdetermination of queer memory as a result of a contingent assemblage of factors such as time, place, technology and filmmaker’s gender and sexual subjectivities.

Key words: queer, digital, documentary, history, memory

At the end of the film *Shanghai Queer* (上海酷儿 dir. Chen Xiangqi, 2019), a 90-minute digital documentary about Shanghai's queer community history, filmmaker Chen Xiangqi is shown to be playing the harmonica on the edge of an empty, concrete drainage tunnel. The diegetic music sounds meditative and melancholic. Outside the tunnel, the sky turns dark. The moon ascends and casts its light on the tunnel, creating a crescent-shaped shadow. A rainbow flag drops down from the top of the tunnel. Then, three vertical lines of intertitle emerge on the right-hand side of the screen: "We are living in a transitional age. I am just a transitional person. Gao Yanning." (Figure 1) These lines come from the Shanghai-based public health professional, Professor Gao Yanning, who offered the first course in LGBTQ studies at a Chinese university. Interviewed in the film, Gao talks about Shanghai's queer history and his role in it. He is highly aware of the historical condition which enables and also delimits his own academic activism, noting the "transitional" nature of the times and suggesting that the future will be better. Using this line to conclude the film, the filmmaker seems to be expressing the same sentiment: the history under documentation is ultimately an incomplete one; although what an individual can do is limited, there is still hope as more people are joining the movement; this is what makes social change possible.



Figure 1. *Shanghai Queer* closing scene (*Shanghai Queer* screenshot).

Shanghai Queer is a digital video documentary directed by a queer-identified Chinese filmmaker to document Shanghai's queer history in the first two decades

of the twenty-first century. It is both an effort to document a vibrant urban life and a fast-disappearing grassroots history, and an endeavour to construct a collective memory for the local queer community. As the filmmaker and interviewees share their personal memories of Shanghai's queer scenes, the documentary also constructs a historical archive and collective memory for Shanghai's queer community. The community and collective memories that the film constructs challenge the official construction of memory in China, where LGBTQ people remain invisible.

This chapter examines the digital and cinematic mediation of queer memory in four Chinese digital documentaries: *Queer China*, “Comrade” *China* (誌同志 dir. Cui Zi'en 2008, 60 min.), *Our Story* (我们的故事 dir. Yang Yang, 2011, 42 min.), *We Are Here* (我们在这里 dir. Shi Tou and Zhao Jing, 2016, 58 min.) and *Shanghai Queer* (上海酷儿 dir. Chen Xiangqi, 2019, 90 min.). All these films were made by queer-identified Chinese filmmakers who use digital video documentaries as an activist strategy; all strive to document China's queer history and construct queer community memory in the post-Mao era. These films demonstrate the contested nature of memories in contemporary China. As “counter-memories”, these films offer alternative narratives to national and official memories; they also constantly revise, rewrite and reenergise the queer community memory. It is in the process of narrating and re-narrating memories that identities, communities and counter-hegemonic politics take shape.

In what follows, I will first offer a brief historical context for the four documentaries by revisiting the development of queer identity, community and culture in post-Mao China, highlighting the role of digital media and films in constructing queer community memories. I will then conduct a critical analysis of the four films by focusing on the similarities and differences in terms of their narratives, aesthetics and politics. My analysis will emphasise the digital and technological affordances of digital video films in enabling particular types of memory-work. This article will end with a critical reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of these memory-works, highlighting the contingent nature of memory and the performative acts of remembrance.

The Use of Digital Video in Queer Activism

All four films were made between 2008 and 2019, which happened to be a historical period when queer identities, communities and cultures underwent a rapid development in the People's Republic of China (Bao, 2018). Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1997 and removed from the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (Fourth Edition) in 2001 (Kang, 2012). In the aftermath

of China's entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the Chinese government relaxed its control over civil society slightly. The relatively permissive social and political atmosphere gave rise to an increasingly visible queer public culture. At the same time, international HIV/AIDS funding helped establish LGBTQ community groups in different parts of China as part of the global HIV/AIDS campaign to reach vulnerable communities. Many of the queer community films were made in this historical context.

Technological innovation also facilitated the production and dissemination of queer films. Digital video cameras were introduced to China in the 1990s and helped usher a "DV generation" (Zhang and Zito, 2015) of filmmakers. Armed with digital video cameras, a group of young filmmakers whom I call the "queer generation" (Bao, 2019) started to document their own lives and the community life with which they were familiar. Queer filmmakers were among the first groups of people to embrace the digital mode of production and circulation, largely because of the community's early adoption of online dating and also due to the fact that traditional modes of filmmaking had been denied to them. Queer filmmaker Cui Zi'en (2009) once proclaimed that the age of celluloid film was over and that the age of digital video had arrived. Cui calls the type of film-related queer activism "digital video activism": "We do not think that we should advocate and promote those so-called standard, artistically refined and well-made films. We call for actions to change the world using digital videos." (Cui, 2009) The political and activist orientation of queer filmmaking is therefore clear.

Alongside the proliferation of queer film production also came the establishment of queer film festivals and screening events, such as the Beijing Queer Film Festival (2001-present), Shanghai Queer Film Festival (2017-present), Shanghai Pride Film Festival (2015-present) and China Queer Film Festival Tour (2008-2012). There were queer filmmaking workshops such as Queer University, which was designed for ordinary community members without filmmaking experience to learn filmmaking and later to showcase their films (Tan 2016; Bao 2021). In turn, these public or semi-public film screening events encouraged more community film production and exhibition. At the same time, the widespread use of smart phones in the 2000s and the proliferation of social media and video streaming platforms in the 2010s also encouraged more queer people to make and circulate their films online, on social media, and on 'small screens' (Voci 2010).

The making of a queer community history documentary is the outcome of a contingent assemblage of factors, or "stakeholder configuration" (Rhyne, 2009), including finance, technology, filmmaker, film crew and community

support. Such an undertaking often relies heavily on community resources and cannot be achieved by one person alone. These films are often made on a shoestring budget; much of the work is voluntary, undercompensated and is therefore a labour of love, both for the film crew and for the interview participants. The filmmaker is often a queer activist trusted by the community. They do not have to be a professional filmmaker with abundant filmmaking experience. However, it is essential that they have extensive connections and a wide social network to reach out to for necessary financial, logistical and technological support.

Due to the Chinese government's censorship of queer issues and film productions, making queer films involves considerable political and financial risks for the filmmakers. Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Chinese law in 1997, queer films have consistently been put into a negative light in the official eyes, equated to promoting sexual perversion, advocating unhealthy lifestyles and propagating Western ways of life. Although the representation of sex is overall seen as taboo in Chinese media because of the lack of a film classification system in China, the representation of "sexual perversion" such as homosexuality is an alarming red line that many filmmakers dare not cross because of the pedagogical role that arts and culture are expected to play in creating and promoting a "socialist spiritual culture". The National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA, formerly the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) frequently issued official bans on queer representation on screen and digital media (Shaw and Zhang 2018). The latest wave of such bans took place in 2021 when the NRTA issued instructions to remove "effeminate" men from all streaming platforms (Wang and Bao 2023). The Chinese government's hostility towards queer issues means that queer films cannot receive official production permission; no official funder is willing to fund these films and no official distributor can distribute these films due to the risks involved.

As a result, the majority of Chinese queer films can only remain independent or even underground productions, funded by individuals or non-governmental organisations, and distributed through individual, community and online networks. This funding, production and circulation model has shaped the aesthetics of queer films in specific ways: these films are mostly digital video documentaries made individually by amateur filmmakers with home digital video cameras and at a low production cost. Most of them adopt an interview technique or follow an observational mode (Robinson 2015). They are often screened at queer community spaces, queer-friendly business venues and queer (or independent) film festivals. It is the existence of queer community organisations, spaces and networks that make these films possible. Because of this, the target audienc-

es of these films are often queer-identified community audiences, rather than the general, heterosexual public. These audiences are often self-selected, more activist-oriented and risk-taking urban youth who are willing to put up with poor technical qualities and the lack of a strong narrative arc and appreciate the historical and social values of the films. Despite this, these queer film events are extremely vulnerable to changing government policies, frequent police raids, and constant shortage of staff and resources. For example, Beijing Queer Film Festival (now Love Queer Cinema Week) has had to fight a “guerrilla warfare” with the police and the censors by frequently changing its name, screening venue and programme (Bao, 2019). Organising a queer film festival in China thus becomes a form of social and political activism.

Documentary films play an important part in constructing memories for the queer community. In *Screening Queer Memory*, Annamarie Horvat (2021) pinpoints the lack of and the need for queer screen memory research; she also argues that screen media play a vital role in constructing queer community memory because the “postmemory” (Hirsch 2008) passed down from generation to generation in other communities is rarely possible within the queer community. Dagmar Brunow (2019) makes a strong case for the use of amateur films, including lesbian home videos and queer digital video documentaries, in constructing queer memories when queer people are under-represented or non-existent in official records. Christopher Pullen (2006) and Thomas Waugh (2011) have highlighted the importance of queer documentaries for the formation of queer communities in the North American context. The making of queer documentary is therefore not only urgently needed but also absolutely essential for a community which has been long denied a history and its own memory.

Making a community history documentary is a challenging task also due to the high stakes involved concerning the politics of representation. Kobena Mercer (1990) calls this “the burden of representation”; that is, artworks about minority subjects are often riddled with the question of representability. Whether they represent the community truthfully and comprehensively is a major question in the viewers’ mind. This is often a challenging, if not impossible, task because a community has multiple segments, and all of them lack recognition and therefore all need representation in media and culture. But the length and scope of a film is ultimately limited; this means that there will inevitably be selections and prioritisations, gaps and omissions. How to represent queer community history and how to construct queer memory is therefore a contested question. There is often no consensus about what this history and memory should look like. Under these circumstances, the filmmakers’ subjectivity, experience and politics

play a vital role. With these caveats in mind, I shall now turn to each one of these films to examine their representational strategies and queer politics which have a direct impact on the type of memory-work they produce.

Queer China, “Comrade” China: In Search of Chinese Queerness

As one of the first “out” gay celebrities in China, queer writer, filmmaker and activist Cui Zi’en was undoubtedly a suitable person to be tasked with China’s first queer community documentary. To be the “first” one entailed both opportunities and challenges. A previously closeted community would finally have its history written and memory recorded, and the significance of this could not be underestimated. Archival research and oral history seemed to be the most appropriate methods to uncover this hidden history and memory. There were challenges in finding interviewees and research materials, because a large part of this history remained hidden or even lost, and only a limited number of people were brave enough to “come out” to the public and speak in front of the camera. Fortunately, Cui is a well-respected community leader and has extensive connections, through which he was able to locate important archival materials and secure necessary contacts for interviews.

There were also other obstacles, some of which were logistical: Cui was based in Beijing at the time and had limited time and funds for the documentary production. This meant the film could only primarily focus on the queer community and culture in Beijing instead of other Chinese cities. This led to the Beijing-centrism, and North-centrism, of such a queer history. Also, Cui had more access to the gay men’s community, and thus lesbian, trans and other communities were underrepresented in the film. Logistics aside, there were also epistemological challenges; they concerned how to conceptualise queerness and Chineseness, as well as how to see history, which I explain below.

First, what is queer, and whose history is the film representing? In an interview with the filmmaker, Cui expressed that the film was a product of its time and was therefore not able to incorporate some recent concepts and identities:

Queer China, “Comrade” China, produced in 2009, was essentially a piece about 2009. It could not have included anything from 2010 or 2011, not even a concept. For example, concerning the concept LGBTQ, now we have the addition of “I” [intersex], but the idea didn’t even exist at the time. There wasn’t much of a queer part to that work, as it dealt more with the movement. (Cui in Fan 2015, p. 247)¹

¹ The year of production for *Queer China, “Comrade” China* is contested. The film was completed in 2008 and screened in 2009. Most academic accounts identify the production year to be 2008 (Bao, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2021; de Villers, 2017). This chapter follows the convention.

Because of Cui's understanding of LGBTQ at the time, the film serves to consolidate rather than disrupt identities, rendering gender and sexual identities more fixed than fluid. Also, Cui chose to use the Chinese term *tongzhi* (literarily comrade, meaning gay or queer) to encompass all the gender and sexual minorities, hence the title of the film *zhi tongzhi* (documenting *tongzhi*). First proposed by Hong Kong gay activists as a decolonising strategy, *tongzhi* has been used by queer people in the Chinese-speaking world to denote "Chinese" LGBTQ people; in its actual use, the term has a strong emphasis on gay men (Chou, 2000; Engebretsen and Schroeder, 2015; Bao, 2018). In other words, in emphasising queer decolonisation, the term *tongzhi* can in fact reinforce the gay male hegemony in the LGBTQ community. As a result, the film interviewed more gay men than other gender and sexual minorities, and a documentation of queer history risks becoming a gay history. In a way, the strategic adoption of the term *tongzhi* also predicts the weaknesses of queer representation in the film.

Second, what is Chinese? This film is obviously about a "Chinese" queer history, but what is culturally specific about this history? Through interviews, Cui points to some aspects which may be thought of as "Chinese". For example, in the film, sociologist Pan Suiming is invited to explain the ancient Chinese conception of gender and sexuality, which celebrates diversity and fluidity along the *yin-yang* mutation; queer activist Xian introduces the flying rainbow kite initiative as a Chinese queer activist strategy when a Pride march is deemed too Western and too risky; interview footage taken from a mainstream Chinese TV programme explains the history and meanings of the term *tongzhi*. All these seem to support Cui's efforts to construct a "Chinese" queer history with its distinct genealogies and cultural sensibilities. However, throughout the film, the transnational linkages of Chinese queer activism are also unmistakably clear. For example, many international expats who had worked in China and contributed to Chinese queer activism are interviewed in the film, as are activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora. They are all seen as queer activists and allies who have contributed significantly to China's queer movement. The documentary has both Chinese and English subtitles. The international dimension of the documentary challenges an essentialised understanding of Chineseness and Chinese queer cultural specificity.

Third, what is history? And whose history is it? *Queer China, "Comrade" China* adopts a traditional, book chapter-style structure, moving chronologically from one chapter to another, thus constructing a linear, progressive historical narrative, in which the "age of intolerance" eventually will give way to

the “age of acceptance”. The film charts important historical events and offers a “who’s who” of queer or queer-friendly celebrities. These celebrities include sociologists, legal scholars, medical experts, health professionals, media professionals, writers, filmmakers, artists and community leaders (Figure 2). Many of these celebrities are heterosexual identified; their appearance in the film thus represents the queer community’s acknowledgement of their contribution to the public understanding of the issue of homosexuality. Ordinary LGBTQ people’s voices seem missing from this account. In the film, we see the cinematic construction of a “monumental history” (Foucault, 1991) for China’s queer community; this history demonstrates how the hegemonic power relations in post-Mao society have produced the *tongzhi* discourse and subject.



Figure 2. A collage of interviewees (*Queer China*, “Comrade” China screenshot).

Responding to the above questions, Cui explained to me in an interview that he had wanted to make a display window but ended up making a sieve (Bao, 2021, p. 80). A display window reveals hidden stories; the multiplication of these windows adds to the richness and complexity of history. A sieve, in contrast, leaves things out: as one yields some facts and perspectives, one loses others. In other words, the more one tries to capture, the more one may end up leaving out. Cui’s “window” versus “sieve” metaphors are illuminating, and

his dilemma is a philosophical and epistemological one. It is useful to understand a film as an audio-visual archive of history and reservoir of memory. Commenting about the relationship between memory and the archive, Jacques Derrida (1995) writes:

Because the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilised so as to take on a signification, will never be either a memory or anamnesis as a spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of ordinary and structural breakdown of the said memory. *There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.* (Derrida, 1995, p. 11, original emphasis)

In other words, the representation of queer memory on screen inevitably stabilises and objectifies that memory, creating hierarchies of visibility and legitimacy for various types of memory. As people remember things, they inevitably forget or omit things – such is the nature of all memory-work. The only solution is to acknowledge these weaknesses and continue working on them, in the hope that the next work, or the revised version, will be better but also with the understanding that a perfect representation is unachievable. Cui's regrets would be addressed, to some extent, by subsequent filmmakers with alternative queer histories, but none of them can produce a perfect memory due to the imperfect nature of memory-work.

Cui has adopted an objective stance in *Queer China*, “Comrade” *China*, where the filmmaker's voice and subjectivity is not clearly articulated in the film. The entire film is structured in a book format and divided into nine chapters, with each chapter dedicated to a specific topic, giving the audience a sense of historicity and authority. The filmmaker's subjectivity is largely absent from the film. Cui's documentary technique draws heavily on the “direct cinema” tradition which emphasises objectivity and discourages subjectivity, and which was widely used in China's “new documentary movement” (Berry, Lu and Rofel, 2010). Such a representational strategy would be disrupted by queer women filmmakers, who resolutely inserted their voices and subjectivities into their films.

Our Story: The Personal is Political

The film *Our Story: The Ten Years “Guerrilla Warfare” of the Beijing Film Festival* (*Our Story* for short) begins with the filmmaker Yang Yang's soliloquy when

she was visiting Peking University in 2011, recalling how the first Beijing Queer Film Festival had started there ten years before:

How does my story start? I can't remember clearly. That year, we didn't have a poster, neither did we have a film catalogue. I was a second-year student at Peking University at the time. We had a student Film and Television Society which maintained contact with Chinese independent cinema. In mid-November, Cui Zi'en, Zhang Jiangnan from the Film and Television Society, and I sat in a café on Peking University campus and planned the festival. A month later, the film festival took place. (Yang Yang in *Our Story*)

As one of the founders and organisers of the film festival, Yang was in a good position to direct a film about the first decade of the festival. The film is narrated from the first-person point of view, and Yang's subjectivity is clearly manifested throughout the film. Yang's female voice is calm, reflective and even nostalgic, giving the audience a sense of her personality and subjectivity. But Yang soon shifts the narrative voice from "I" to "we" (hence the title "our story"). What the collective pronoun "we" refers to is not clear and often shifts according to contexts: from the Beijing Queer Film Festival collective to all the queer people in China and even to everyone who fights for freedom of expression in China. However, one thing is clear, this film constructs Yang's personal memory as a collective memory shared by many people.



Figure 3. A "memory map" of the Beijing Queer Film Festival, 2001-2011 (*Our Story* screenshot).

In the film, the filmmaker presents a memory-map, showing the screening locations the festival had used in the past decade on an official map of Beijing and marking them with pictures from the festival (Figure 3). The festival's screening venues are located in different parts of the city, testifying to how difficult it was to find screening venues, together with the "guerrilla warfare" (Bao, 2019) strategy that the organisers had to adopt in order to circumvent government censorship. The queer memory map effectively rewrites Beijing's official city map by inscribing queer people and their memories on it. On the map, all the heteronormative spaces have been turned into queer spaces and all the lifeless placenames have been brought to life through the memorable moments from the festival.

Our Story was made in 2011 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Beijing Queer Film Festival. This was also a time when the festival took place again in the city centre against all odds. Yang's narration takes a slightly pessimistic and nostalgic tone, suggesting that she was aware of the difficulty in keeping the festival going. At the end of the film, when Yang finishes her story, she leaves the hot ashes of a campfire glowing in the darkness, indicating that there is still hope despite all the challenges that are going on.

We Are Here: Articulating Queer Feminist Politics

In 2015, to mark the 20th anniversary of the United Nations World Conference on Women (UNWCW), the Ford Foundation commissioned a documentary film about the impact of the UNWCW on Chinese feminism. The film, titled *We Are Here*, was directed by Chinese women filmmakers Shi Tou and Zhao Jing, both of whom are queer identified. Shi Tou is one of the most prolific lesbian artists, filmmakers and activists in mainland China. Zhao Jing (aka Sam) was co-editor of *Les+*, China's longest running and now defunct zine for queer women. How did two lesbian filmmakers remember the history of Chinese women and Chinese feminism?

The Fourth UNWCW, which took place in Beijing in 1995, was the largest of its kind. The *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* passed at the conference has become an important document in global women's history. At the Non-Governmental Organisation Forum accompanying the main conference, a lesbian tent was set up for the first time in UNWCW history (Figure 4). At the conference, delegates from different nations debated heavily on whether to include lesbian rights in the conference resolution. Hilary Clinton made the famous speech on "lesbian rights are human rights" (Levenstein, 2018). The conference is a milestone in both women's history and queer history; it therefore

makes sense to connect queer memory with feminist memory in the film. *We Are Here* can thus be seen as the filmmakers' efforts to connect queer history with women's history and to write Chinese queer women's experience into the history of Chinese feminism.



Figure 4. The lesbian tent at the United Nations World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995 (*We Are Here* screenshot).

There are also conceptual difficulties to connect queer and feminist issues in the Chinese context. This is because there are different strands of feminism and queer activism, not all of which can comfortably coexist with each other. For example, state feminism represented by the All China Women's Federation, China's biggest women's organisation supported by the state, often takes a heteronormative, homophobic and anti-sex stance. At the same time, China's LGBTQ movement, dominated by gay men and gay identity politics, is often oblivious to women's issues and feminist politics. Situated at the intersection of the two camps, queer feminists must struggle to find their own space and articulate their politics. *We Are Here*, made by two queer feminists, can be seen as an effort to locate a lesbian space and articulate a Chinese queer feminist politics.

The documentary is divided into two parts: the first half is an oral history account of Chinese participants' experience at the 1995 UNWCW. Many peo-

ple, including government officials and non-governmental organisation workers, were interviewed, showing that most of them – including those working for the All-China Women’s Federation at the time – supported queer rights and therefore refuted the claim about the possible incompatibility between feminist politics and queer politics. The second half of the film documents queer women’s activism in Beijing between 1995 and 2015, with a strong focus on queer women’s participation in feminist activism. Examples include the “feminist five”, the five women who were arrested by the Chinese police for their anti-domestic violence campaign that year (Fincher, 2018). Although mainstream narratives about the “feminist five” emphasise these activists’ feminist identity, their queer identity is often underplayed. By drawing attention to the intertwined relationship between feminist and queer issues, the film makes a strong statement about the necessary imbrication between gender and sexuality, and between feminist and queer politics.

Inserting Chinese queer women’s voices in the global history, *We Are Here* also conveys a sense of international solidarity between women and queer people across the world. Made at a time when there was growing nationalism in different parts of the world and increasing antagonism in global geopolitics, the memory of the 1995 UNWCW is a much needed one: it reminds people of the intertwined relationship between China and the world, and the solidarity between women and queer people who suffer from gender and sexuality-based discrimination and injustice. The title *We Are Here* moves the memory-work to the present, articulating an uncompromising queer feminist stance and testifying to the contemporary relevance of that memory.

Shanghai Queer: The Importance of Being Local and Ordinary

Shanghai Queer, a documentary about Shanghai’s queer history from 2003 to 2018, starts its narrative with a historical event. In April 2018, China’s queer community launched a social media campaign, using the hashtag #Iamgay to garner mass public support, and this eventually led to the social media website sina.com reversing its ban on LGBTQ issues (Liao, 2019). The beginning of the film shows a gay activist using a loudspeaker to make a public speech about LGBTQ rights in a park in Shanghai (Figure 5). This was a rare instance of public protest and community defiance. Starting the film with a political speech gives a sense of historical significance and political urgency.



Figure 5. A gay activist makes a public speech in a park in Shanghai in 2018. (*Shanghai Queer* screenshot).

As the film title suggests, *Shanghai Queer* is about queer people, community and history in Shanghai. The importance of *Shanghai Queer* can be best understood in the genealogy of documenting queer community history, especially in contrast with *Queer China*, *“Comrade” China*. *Shanghai Queer* and *Queer China*, *“Comrade” China* have a lot in common, but they also have significant differences. One is a local history, and the other attempts to create a national history (although this national history ended up being Beijing- and North-centric). Both films interviewed celebrities and experts, but *Shanghai Queer* interviewed ordinary citizens as well as scholars and activists. Most of the *Shanghai Queer* interviewees are LGBTQ identified and this differs from *Queer China*, *“Comrade” China*’s predominantly heterosexual-identified expert panel. These differences were created partly by the filmmaker’s intentions and partly by time: China was more open in the 2010s than in the 2000s, with more queer people brave enough to “come out” in front of the camera. An important thing to note about the two films: No “masking” techniques such as blurring of faces on screen or using voiceover are used, showing a great sense of openness and authenticity. The two documentaries therefore constitute the collective “coming out” of the Chinese queer communities, through documentary mediation and digital memory.



Teacher Li
82 years old
frequent guest of
Lailai Ballroom

Figure 6. Older gay men come out on screen and share their stories. (*Shanghai Queer* screenshot).



Chenchen
Transgender-
woman
Costume designer
Japanese language teacher

Figure 7. A Shanghai-based trans woman (*Shanghai Queer* screenshot).

In many ways, *Shanghai Queer* offers a more democratic and decentralised version of the community history and memory. The queer history depicted by *Shang-*

hai Queer seems more local, mundane and grassroots-oriented. Besides celebrities and experts, ordinary queer people also appear on screen, telling their stories and sharing their memories. These include three old men revisiting the local gay venue Lailai Dancehall and reminiscing about the old days (Figure 6). Also, *Shanghai Queer* manages to represent a wider spectrum of gender and sexual identities. The film covers the lives of drag queens, trans people, sex workers, the elderly and queer people living with disabilities. In the film, a trans woman teacher talks candidly about her identity, relationship and work (Figure 7). These vivid personal stories make the city feel real and the community relatable. These stories bespeak the complexity of identities and experiences; they also challenge the entrenched heteronormativity in Chinese society and the emerging homonormativity in China's LG-BTQ community.

The filmmaker Chen Xiangqi is a community leader, having successfully founded a queer website, led a queer women's group, run an LGBT Centre and participated in some feminist activist campaigns. In a post-screening Q&A, Chen introduced her motivations to make the film:

I've led an LGBTQ NGO for 15 years. I often feel that very few people in today's China are documenting the history and activism of marginalised groups. When we look at these historical events, they are not simply moments of memories or nostalgia. They are inspirations for us. We can learn from them about how our predecessors lived their lives despite all the social prejudices and what they did in response. (DOCO 2019)

Chen highlights the necessity of documenting the history and memory of marginalised groups such as queer people. She also refuses to dwell on nostalgia and emphasises the contemporary relevance of the memory-work instead. Chen is keenly aware of her gendered subjectivity as a female filmmaker, and of the importance of having women's voices in filmmaking and memory-work:

Women have played a crucial role in history. If we are not aware of their contributions, this may have to do with the ones who write history. We need to document our own history, and history should be written by us. Only in this way can we see more women's perspectives represented in history. (DOCO 2019)

Shanghai Queer therefore presents as many female as male interviewees. The interviews were conducted in a friendly and supportive manner, like everyday chats between friends. The documentary is gently paced, intercutting between interviews, old photos, Shanghai's cityscape, and the filmmaker's poetic voiceover narration. Chen's female subjectivity and politics are clearly manifest-

ed in the film through voiceover narration and through her embodied presence in front of the camera.

Celebrating the local, the ordinary and a female filmmaker's perspective, *Shanghai Queer* showcases a wider and more diverse range of queer histories and memories that cannot be reduced to a singular narrative; it also demonstrates the conditions and possibilities of mobilising queer memories for political and activist purposes.

Conclusion

In summary, this article has examined four queer community history documentaries produced in the PRC between 2008 and 2019. All these films were made by queer identified filmmakers who used digital video documentaries as an activist strategy; all strived to document China's queer history and construct a queer community memory in the post-Mao era. Despite using traditional broadcasting techniques such as interviews and talking heads, all have inserted queer people's histories and memories into China's national narratives. They "queer" the traditionally heteronormative documentary genre (Deklerck, 2017); they also showcase a multiplicity of queer people's voices. In doing so, they help imagine and construct a collective queer identity (Robinson, 2015).

However, because of the filmmakers' gender and sexual subjectivities, together with the historical and social contexts in which these films were made, the four documentaries remember China's queer history in contingent ways. *Queer China*, "Comrade" *China* narrates China's queer history from an academic perspective, focusing on gay men's experience and expert voices and with a slightly optimistic tone; *Our Story* is an autobiographical historical account made by one of the organisers of the Beijing Queer Film Festival on its tenth anniversary; *We Are Here* was made by lesbian identified filmmakers interrogating the relationship between queer history and women's history, celebrating Chinese lesbian history and articulating a queer feminist politics; *Shanghai Queer* focuses on Shanghai's queer community history, but the film takes a more defiant stance as it was completed in the immediate aftermath of China's social media ban on LG-BTQ issues and the queer community's protest to the ban. Together, these documentaries contest a heteronormative construction of China's collective memory by constructing alternative memories; they also insert queer people's voices and experiences into that memory.

The making of digital video documentaries can be seen as a form of cultural and political protest. According to John Berger, one protests in order to "save

the present moment, whatever the future holds” (2015, p. 80). The four documentaries, as historical archives, have tried to capture the living memories of the present before these memories are put under erasure or amnesia. These various types of memory work testify to the heterogeneity of queer memory; they also manifest the overdetermination of queer memory as a result of a contingent assemblage of factors such as time, place, technology and the filmmaker’s gender and sexual subjectivities.

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