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Jia Tan

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Aesthetics of queer becoming: Comrade Yue and Chinese community-based documentaries online

Jia Tan
Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, PRC

ABSTRACT
While many studies explore how digital technology influenced the production and consumption of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) media in the Euro-American context, few have focused on LGBT media in China despite its significant growth. Intersecting LGBT media studies with studies on Chinese communication technologies, this paper looks at videos made in community-based documentary workshops, including the Queer University (quez daxue) Digital Filmmaking Training Camp. Many of the videos are articulations and reinventions of multiple selves enacted through the construction of image and sound. Against the backdrop of neoliberalized governance of selfhood, this new wave of community-based queer documentaries, exemplified by Comrade Yue (2013), embodies the “aesthetics of queer becoming.” Specifically, the expressive personal histories in these videos contest the “authentic” homosexual subjects that function as objects of knowledge in mainstream media. The bodily corporeality on screen and the intimacy of the video apparatus operate as an interrogation of identity that intervenes in the ongoing discursive debate between the biological determinist and socially constructed views on homosexuality. Furthermore, video-making itself becomes an act of coming out through confessional or performative modes of sound–image relationships. Video is a vital medium to work through and within the process of identification and community formation. The medium of the video, with its capacity for dissemination online, functions as a unique format that gives rise to a new set of queer aesthetics and politics through first-person audio-visual constructions.

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In the last decade, aided by the development of communication technologies, feminist and queer media activists in China have been using a variety of forms such as filmmaking workshops, online campaigns, webcasts, webzines, and so on to promote sexual and gender diversity. In this process, digital technology has played an unprecedented role in assembling niuqian (feminist) or kuer (queer) discourses and practices in community building, public education, and advocacy against the backdrop of constant state surveillance and pressure. Despite the significant growth of feminist and queer media practices in China for more than 10 years, not much has been written about this subject. Research on feminist and queer media in China is disproportionately limited, while many studies explore how digital
Technology has influenced the production, circulation, and consumption of feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) media in the American, European, and other Asian contexts (Berry, Martin, & Yue, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Engebretsen, Schroeder, & Bao, 2014; Jackson, 2011; Ng, 2011, 2013; O’Riordan & Philips, 2007; Puente, 2011; Puente & Jiménez, 2009; Rodrigues & Smaill, 2008). Although research on communication technologies in mainland China, particularly media censorship (Chen & Zhu, 2009; Harwit & Clark, 2001; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011) and civic activism (Qiu, 2009; Yang, 2009, 2014) has flourished, the issue of sexuality remains marginalized.

Intersecting LGBT media studies and studies on Chinese communication technologies, this paper examines how digital technology shapes the development of queer activism in China. At the same time, it investigates how alternative media practices by sexual minorities shed light on the queering of digital technology by focusing on online videos produced by community-based documentary workshops. Following Wu Wenguang’s China Villager Documentary Project, LGBT non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China have been actively organizing community-based documentary workshops such as the Queer University (kuér dàxiào) Digital Filmmaking Training Camp and China Queer Digital Storytelling Workshop. Many of these videos are articulations and reinventions of multiple selves enacted through the construction of image and sound. These videos are mainly distributed online through major video websites while also playing an important role in organizing events within the LGBT community. The proliferation of these videos—online and offline—coincides with increasing attention to selfhood and the emergence of neoliberal technologies of governance. With the decline of social welfare and the increase in privatization in contemporary China, mass media such as the internet and television are replacing the state in governing the audience’s daily life, especially in cultivating a sense of the gendered and sexualized self.

Against the backdrop of neoliberalized governance of selfhood, this new wave of community-based queer documentaries, exemplified by Yue Jianbo’s video Comrade Yue (2012), embodies what I call the “aesthetics of queer becoming” in three ways. First, the expressive personal histories in these videos contest the “authentic” homosexual subjects that function as objects of knowledge in mainstream media. The bodily corporality on screen and the intimacy of the video apparatus operate as an interrogation of identity that intervenes in the ongoing discursive debate between the biological determinist and socially constructed views on homosexuality within the LGBT community in China. Second, video-making itself becomes an act of coming out through testimonial, confessional, or performative modes of sound–image relationships. Video is a vital medium to work through and within the process of identification and community formation. Third, the social self constructed in the video intersects with other social issues, which renders queer becoming as an ongoing project of undoing heteronormativity and homonormativity. I argue that the medium of the video, with its capacity for dissemination online, functions as a unique format that gives rise to a new set of queer aesthetics and politics through first-person audio-visual constructions.

The proliferation of sexualized digital selfhood in neoliberalized China

Digital technology has facilitated the emergence of a new wave of audio-visual production online that is not related to film studios or TV productions resources. The proliferation of
these videos is described as China’s new “cinema of dispersion” that is marked by “digital technology, network-based media and portable media player platforms” (Johnson, Wagner, Yu, & Vulpiani, n.d., p. 1). Many have theorized this “new Chinese digital cinema” and its aesthetics that expanded on the New Documentary Movement emerged in the late 1980s. The New Documentary Movement, coined by Lü Xinyu, began “with rebellions both inside and outside the dominant media system” (Lü, 2010, p. 16), especially in opposition to the conventions of the “special topic program” (zhuan-niyipian), the model of Chinese television reportage (Lü, 2003). This “new Chinese digital cinema” reflects the notion of xianchang, being “here” and “now,” which crystallizes the urgency of these films in relation to social change and everyday life, and their capacity to bear witness to history (Zhang, 2007). Paola Voci used “lightness” to highlight the act of individual production and viewing of “smaller-screen” films in her book China on Video (Voci, 2010). Others find that this new wave of digitalized cultural production “treasures immediacy, spontaneity, and contact with lived experience over the high levels of manipulability associated with the special effects culture of mainstream cinema” (Berry & Rofel, 2010, p. 4).

In particular, scholars have pointed out the centrality of individuality in these audio-visual works. For example, “igeneration” is used to describe a new generation of (moving) image-makers in which the “i” indicates “an increasing concern with individual self-expression and self-realization, relying on oneself in uncertain times, and the preva-

lence of an increasingly solipsistic directorial style among independent film practitioners” (Johnson et al., n.d., p. 4) that aligns with what Yan Yunxiang has called “the individualization of Chinese society” (Yan, 2009). At the same time, the “i” signifies information technology in which the Internet and personal media technologies have facilitated a “post-cinematic culture of amateur production and transformed cinema” for online viewing (Johnson et al., n.d., pp. 4–5). Similarly, Wang Qi observes the rise of “personal filmmaking” across feature film and experimental videos, specifically in the independent filmmaking sector. Wang Qi identifies “a similar keen interest in the trope of personal memory, the intricate relation between past and present, and the inscription of the self in the representational text that sets to write history differently” (2014, p. 3).

The proliferations of audio-visual constructions of the self coincide with the increasing use of neoliberal technologies of governance. The relationship between neoliberalism and China is complicated. Though the Chinese government never uses neoliberalism to describe current conditions in China, neoliberal discourses and values have emerged in people’s daily lives. Many scholars, especially anthropologists, have observed dominant and prevailing neoliberal trends in contemporary China, such as a “neoliberal re-structuring,” or neoliberalism as a national project to imagine global reordering (Rofel, 2007; Yan, 2003). David Harvey (2005) contends that contemporary China is experiencing neoliberalization with “Chinese characteristics” through “accumulation by dispossession,” or a neoliberal shift that dispossesses the public of their money or land, centralizes wealth and power in the hands of a few, and thus restores class differences.

In neoliberalized China, with the decrease of social welfare and the increase of privatization, mass media such as television and film is replacing the state in shaping the audience’s daily life, especially in cultivating a sense of self and the governance of the self. Although the gender politics of mass media, especially television, are contradictory, it is important to recognize the structuring power of mainstream media in cultivating the
sense of neoliberalized selfhood that is aligned to the agenda of the state. This is salient when discussing the negotiating potential of independently produced videos and other UGC (user generated content) online.

As Alexandra Juhasz points out, YouTube’s design and ownership rely upon “popularity, humor, speed, shallowness, celebrity, and distraction” and weakens “the depth of dialogue, the ability to find and link data, the ability to sustain intimate and committed community, and structures of order and discipline” that are crucial to scholarly inquiry (Juhasz, 2009). Similar to YouTube, popular Chinese online video websites such as Youku and Tudou in China tend to be dominated by domestic as well as foreign TV drama and reality shows, while the user-uploaded items remain a limited portion of the mediascape. For example, the discourse of neoliberalism has been reflected in the matchmaking TV shows such as If You are the One via “market rationality in the dating market, the gendered restoration of class, and the techniques to improve the self” (Tan, 2015). Here, female participants are constantly evaluated and expected to transform into a “proper” candidate for the dating market under “professional” guidance. Television, together with other advice literature, continues to shape the sense of selfhood in terms of health, body, and gender as well as sexuality.

In the context of neoliberalized governance of predominantly heterosexual selfhood on mainstream media I turn to a specific online video Comrade Yue (Yue Jianbo, 2013). This video embodies the aesthetics of queer becoming that negotiate the neoliberalized regulation of sexualized selfhood. Comrade Yue is among a new wave of community-based queer-themed documentaries primarily organized by NGOs that promote sexual and gender diversity. Specifically, the filmmaker Yue Jianbo participated in the Queer University program, a weeklong documentary workshop organized by the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute (BGHEI), a Beijing-based NGO focused on research, training, counseling, and community support work relating to sexuality, gender, psychological health, and AIDS intervention. After completing the workshop, Yue’s proposed project on filming himself was selected and funded and he made the 30-minute documentary. This video was released online through Queer Comrades, a long-running LGBT video webcast in China also sponsored by BGHEI.

**Comrade Yue: audio-visual articulations of identity and selfhood**

*Comrade Yue* (2012) chronicles the life story of Xiao Yue, a rural miner who accepted his homosexuality and divorced his wife after a six-year marriage (Figure 1). Comrade, or tongzhi, is a term that used to describe revolutionary brotherhood and sisterhood, which has been actively used by the Chinese LGBT community to represent sexual minorities. The protagonist of this documentary lives in a small town in Shanxi Province, representing the largely overlooked group of gay men in rural China.

In a departure from the conventional approach of representing LGBT people as authentic subjects, this documentary is an “essay film,” which Paul Arthur sees as “a meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses” (Arthur, 2003, p. 58). This film is episodic in nature and filled with performative elements and lyrical expression. The film is structured into several black-and-white singing sequences. All of the film’s songs were written and performed by Yue except for the closing song, “All Punks are Sissies” by a Shanghai punk band called Top Floor Circus. The sequences feature facial close-ups
of Yue (Figure 2) performing the songs he wrote and at times looking directly into the camera.

Besides the physical appearance of Yue’s body on screen, the presence of his sense of selfhood is salient through the use of sound, particularly through the singing sequences and his voice-over. In between these singing sequences are images of different aspects of Yue’s everyday life, accompanied by his monologues in Shanxi dialect that create a loose narrative of his life. The narrative and the singing sequences create an interesting tension. The opening of the film consists of a series of shots in his apartment, such as a
close-up of his divorce papers, wedding picture, luggage, his wife eating noodles, etc. This is the moment when Yue’s wife is leaving their apartment after signing the divorce papers. The sequence that follows is of Yue repeatedly singing, “I want to cry.” Here image and sound have a complicated relationship, as the lyrics sometimes add new meaning to the previous sequence of images. The singing sequence here adds a subjective and emotional interpretation to the images.

This relationship between sound and image is also layered through the tension between the image and the emotionally charged voice-over. The scene chronicling Yue’s return to his rural Shanxi hometown to honor his ancestors includes mundane shots of him moving bags filled with coal. The voiceover tells of Yue’s complicated relationship with his father and how as a child he felt ashamed of his father’s occupation when he and his companions saw him covered with coal dust. The image and voiceover create tension, as Yue strongly desires to work in the coal business, yet the image shows him physically entrapped by heavy and repetitive labor, a commentary on the lack of social mobility in contemporary China. Here the video is, as Michael Renov points out, “a facilitator to self-examination” (2004, p. 214).

The first-person audio-visual constructions about queer subjectivities in everyday contexts are significant in two ways. First, homosexuality had been heavily censored in mainstream media. It was explicitly prohibited in film, and publications containing homosexual content are also regarded as pornographic and obscene by the authorities. In recent years, however, as the HIV virus is increasingly treated as a major social health issue by the state, more and more news programs interview people who are HIV-positive, including a number of gay men. These homosexual men are usually seen as the “authentic” homosexual subjects that function as objects of knowledge in mainstream media. In the art cinema realm, although films such as Farewell My Concubine (1993) stimulated public attention and scholarly discussion about homosexuality (Leung, 2010), few of these more established films deal directly with the reality and everyday lives of homosexuals in China. At the same time, other scholarship focuses on fandom and the consumption of
popular culture intersecting with gender and sexuality in popular media phenomena such as the Super Girl singing contest (Yang & Bao, 2012; Yu & Yue, 2008). Although much fan literature such as BL (boy love) stories or drawings increasingly use homosexual acts as narrative tropes, they carve out a fantasy space that remains distant from the reality of the everyday struggles of LGBT-identified individuals.

By way of contrast, in the independent sector a body of documentaries about sexual minorities began to emerge around the turn of the millennium. Zhang Yuan’s Miss Jing Xing (2000), Chen Miao’s The Snake Boy (2002), Zhang Hanzi’s Tangtang (2004), and Jiang Zhi’s Xiang Pingli (2005) focus on transsexuals or cross-dressers. Ying Weiwei’s The Box (2001) is considered to be the first documentary about lesbians in China. These documentaries made by straight filmmakers often portray their subjects as isolated individuals. Later works such as Shitou and Ming Ming’s Dyke March (2004), Cui Zi’en’s Queer China, Comrade China (2008), Fan Popo’s Chinese Closet (2009) and Rainbow Mama (2012) have much stronger expressions of LGBT subjectivities and emphasize communal efforts to promote sexual and gender diversity. In particular, veteran queer filmmaker Cui Zi’en has continued to make a series of fictional films such as Men and Women (1999), Enter the Clowns (2002), Feeding Boys, Ayaya (2003), and My Fair Son (2005). Similarly, Cheng Suyu, another openly gay filmmaker, made Shanghai Panic (2001) and Welcome to Destination Shanghai (2003) using a digital video camera (DV). Cui’s films, among other works that utilize DV technology, exemplify queer Sinophone cinema within China, which “questions the ontology of kinship and the new neo-liberal queer subjectivities that are produced by the global reordering of Chinese modernity” (Yue, 2012, p. 105). Comrade Yue can be seen as an expansion on this later wave of queer-themed documentary.

The expressive personal histories articulated in the video is also significant because Comrade Yue’s articulation of queer subjectivity cannot be simply subsumed under the discourse of coming out. In the scene when Yue is talking about his hobby of marathon running, the voice-over transforms the meaning of the images. It is not until the middle of the marathon scene, when Yue talks about his fantasy of men helping him reach the end of the marathon, that the audience gets the clear message that Yue is sexually attracted to men. In the singing sequence that follows, Yue moans loudly, and this leads to a scene where the camera films him and his lover lying in bed and chatting. Then the camera records Yue having sex with another man. A filter is added to create a shaking and blurring effect so the video can be uploaded for online viewing and entered in documentary competitions such as the Phoenix Documentary Awards organized by Phoenix Satellite Television. This scene demonstrates a mediated intimacy in which Yue self-consciously uses the camera to manifest his sexuality on screen, which is a queer tactic beyond identitarian category by deemphasizing the identity of gay men and presenting a complex yet poetic representation of his life.

In Desiring China: Experiments in neoliberalism, sexuality, and public culture, Lisa Rofel (2007) argues that neoliberalism gives rise to new subjectivities centered around desire, including gay identities. The emergence of these new subjectivities enables a new set of identity politics in contemporary China concerning the circulation of terms such as kuer and LGBT by sexuality-related NGOs since the 2000s. In particular, there are conflicting views of “naturally born” homosexuality versus “socially constructed” homosexuality. Organizations such as Aibai.com and PFLAG China (Parents, Friends, and Family of
Lesbians and Gays China) proclaim that sexual orientation is “naturally born,” “unalterable,” and “similar to one’s race or skin color.” They advocate that homosexuals are naturally born and thus unchangeable as a reaction against reversion therapy that forces homosexuals to “return to normal.” In contrast, Chinese Lala Alliance uses kuer to signify gender/sexual fluidity, boundary crossing, and the challenging of gender/sexual categories, as opposed to the “homosexuals are naturally born” discourse. Against the backdrop of this ongoing debate between the biological determinist and socially constructed views on homosexuality within the LGBT community in China, the bodily corporality on screen and the intimacy of the video apparatus in Comrade Yue operate as a multi-dimensional articulation of identity through sexual fantasy narrative and corporal sex acts, rather than a simple discursive confirmation.

**Personal as communal: community-building through video-making and circulation**

The making and circulation of Comrade Yue are sponsored by the community-based documentary Queer University and the webcast Queer Comrade, both under the NGO BGHEI. Wei Xiaogang, Fan Popo, and Yuan Yuan are the three major actors in the Queer University project. Wei Xiaogang is the director of the BGHEI, which hosts a series of media-related projects such as China Rainbow Media Awards (2011–), Queer Comrades video webcast (2007–), and Queer University documentary workshop (2012–). Both graduates of the Beijing Film Academy, Fan Popo and Yuan Yuan are filmmakers with extensive practical experience and active community engagement. Fan Popo has made several documentaries on themes such as transgender sex-workers, parents of gay and lesbians, and Vagina Monologues performances in China. Fan’s films are shown at international LGBT film festivals. He has been actively involved in the Beijing LGBT Center and Beijing Queer Film Festival, among other groups. Yuan Yuan has been working closely with the Pink Space Sexuality Research Centre on using images to explore non-normative sexualities. In collaboration with He Xiopei, Yuan’s most recent work Our marriages: When lesbians marry gay men documents four relationships between lesbians and gays who face tremendous social pressure to get married. Like other LGBT NGOs, BGHEI secure funding primarily from international foundations or organizations such as the Ford Foundation, European Union, Oxfam, and Amnesty International.

Queer University recruits eight to 12 students each year. The students pair up and collaborate to make a short film by the end of the class. Many of them come to the training camp with a proposal in mind. More than 40 people have participated in the program, and around 20 short films have been made over the last three years at Queer University. These works are available online on the Queer Comrades video webcast as well as major video websites. They have also been circulated in a network of queer subcultures highlighted by Beijing Queer Film Festival or China Queer Independent Films screenings.

Participating in the Queer University (QU) has been a transformative experience for Yue. He divorced his wife one week after finishing the workshop and started to film every aspect of his own life and come out to many of his friends and family. With the help of QU instructor Yuan Yuan, Yue managed to select from his abundant footage and edit it into its current form. For Yue, video becomes a medium through which he
identifies and articulates his identity. After its completion, the full-length documentary of *Comrade Yue* was released online on the website of *Queer Comrades*. The *Queer Comrades* website is a long-term platform for LGBT videos and it also uploads videos on major Chinese video websites such as Youku, Tudou, or 56.com. These websites are the Chinese equivalents of YouTube, whereas foreign media services including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are blocked in China. The viewing numbers for videos on these mainstream websites has exceeded 30 million, and the website of *Queer Comrades* alone can reach 15,000 per day (Wei Xiaogang, interview, May 29, 2015). For example, Fan Popo’s *Rainbow Mama* (2012), a documentary about gay parents co-produced by ss, attracted 100,000 views through video websites such as Youku and 56.com before it was taken down in December 2014. In recent years, LGBT-themed videos have been flourishing online. Among them are the reality webisode series *Gay Lab Show* (*gaoji shiyanshi*, 2014–), the sit-com video series *Rainbow Family* (*yiwu zanke*, 2014–), podcast *Gay Lab Report* (*gaoji shiyan baogao*, 2013–). The proliferation of online audio-visual products is also reflected in a decline of website views for *Queer Comrades* since around 2009. There was a time when one video could achieve 100,000 views in one day, but now there is an increasing number of videos available via various LGBT websites. The censorship was also tightened in recent years as some popular videos were taken down by major video websites, which is allegedly instructed by SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television).

Besides online distribution, *Comrade Yue* is also shown in various contexts offline. In addition to being shown in queer subcultures highlighted by Beijing Queer Film Festival or China Queer Independent Films screenings, the video is also used to organize more grassroots community gatherings, particularly in second or third tier cities. As film screenings are usually regarded as cultural events and thus as less political by the authorities, the circulation of videos like *Comrade Yue* offline are increasingly a crucial part of community-building. Offline screenings for videos produced by Queer University such as *Brothers* (2013) and *Magic* (2015) are particularly important as they cannot be uploaded online at full length for reasons of privacy and sensitive content. *Magic* (2015), for example, another documentary produced by QU, presents the everyday life of male-to-female transgender sex workers in Shandong Province (Figure 3). Queer University student Michael Liu, a volunteer in a local AIDS-related NGO, cross-dresses in real life with his filmmaking subjects. A short trailer is accessible online, but offline screening events are important for these films.

Twenty to 30 screenings are held in various cities every year. As explained by Wei Xiaogang, the director of BGHEI, the QU project is more than a medium to disseminate information and is rather “a platform for creation.” For BGHEI, the QU project fits into the activist agenda of BGHEI, which formed after 2010. When Xiaogang participated in the 4th Regional Conference in Surabaya, Indonesia in March 2010, organized by ILGA-Asia, the Asian branch of International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), the conference was forced to cancel because local religious groups were protesting outside of the conference hotel and many of the participants had to flee. This experience led to a shift of content programing on *Queer Comrades* from lifestyle to more attention to rights-related issues.

The format of community-based documentary and online dissemination is used by other NGOs concerning issues of sexuality. Numerous LGBT-related NGOs proliferated
in the 2000s against the backdrop of a much larger development of the NGO scene concerned with a variety of social issues from the environment and criminal justice to religious rights. Among those concerned with issues of sexuality and gender are Common Language (2005–), Beijing LGBT Center (2008–), Pink Space Sexuality Research Centre (2008–), PFLAG China (2008–), and Chinese Lala Alliance (2008–). The media play an increasingly important role, not only in disseminating information and organizing activities but also in generating creative content by these NGOs (Engebretsen et al., 2014). Among them, community-based video workshops are widely used for diverse purposes. Chinese Lala Alliance, for example, organizes a China Queer Digital Storytelling
Workshop that seeks to empower Chinese LGBT communities through self-expression and video production. As indicated by the Chinese name of the workshop, The Journey of Self-Discovery, the workshop facilitates the creation and articulation of selfhood through the creation of video shorts. Similarly, Common Language, another NGO focusing on queer women, has hosted a video workshop called We Want to Speak Out that is aimed at promoting gender diversity and equality. A participatory workshop held in various cities in China in recent years, it has provided a platform for participants to master video production skills and discuss gender diversity and equality advocacy.

These community-based video workshops are often conducted in affordable hotels where tutors and students can gather for intense training sessions. These workshops are also geographically diverse. Besides major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, many workshops have also taken place in cities such as Hangzhou, Wuhan, and Xi'an. These workshops are similar to what Faye Ginsburg has called “cultural activism” to describe how indigenous and minority peoples use a range of media to respond to “structures of power that have erased or distorted their interests and realities” (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002, p. 7). In this process, video-making itself becomes a personal as well as communal act of coming out through different modes of audio-visual construction. Video is a vital medium to work through and within the processes of identification and community formation.

**Queer becoming as undoing heteronormativity and homonormativity**

Besides *Comrade Yue*, other shorts produced in QU manifest a great variety of themes and styles that depart from the Direct Cinema style privileged in early films in the New Documentary Movement. These shorts are provocative and challenge the idea of heteronormativity that sees sexuality as compulsorily heterosexual (Rich, 1980; Warner, 1991). Specifically, *Breaking news from a homosexual China* (shendu baodao, 2014) mocks heteronormativity by deploying an interesting twist on the convention of news reporting. In China, although programs are increasingly commercialized in genres such as TV drama and reality TV shows, news reporting remains highly formulaic, as journalism is still seen as the “mouthpiece of the Party” in the state-owned television industry. Under the supervision of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT), news reporting in China remains highly censored, and propaganda conventions persist. Every night at 7 PM since January 1, 1978, CCTV (China Central Television), China’s national TV station, has aired the news program *Xinwen Lianbo*, which has maintained a consistent reporting style for more than 30 years. Many provincial TV stations have to air this program as well, and the program has maintained high ratings nationwide. In order to resist the conventions of TV journalism, early works of the New Documentary Movement departed from these conventions. Most TV journalism programs, in particular “special topic programs,” rely heavily on voice-over narration that interprets the images and events on screen. In contrast, a Direct Cinema style with minimal voiceover is used in many early works by filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan, and Jiang Yue.

Departing from these earlier aesthetic choices, *Breaking news from a homosexual China* mocks investigative journalism by reporting heterosexuality as a new “social phenomenon” emerging in Chinese society. Using footage of real news reportage with dubbed
voiceovers, the video shows journalists "discovering" heterosexuality. The short film stages an interview with a lesbian couple on the street voicing their concerns regarding the "strange" phenomenon, and with an expert who presents possible theories and statistical data on how heterosexuality came to be, revealing the mechanism of compulsory heterosexuality as well as the specific TV journalism conventions that reinforce it. This short video can be seen as a sarcastic mocking of heteronormative media culture from the point of view of and for the queer community.

Besides challenging heteronormativity, these short films also negotiate with a new gay-dominated cyber culture that reflects what Lisa Duggan has critiqued as homonormativity in the context of neoliberalism. China's Criminal Law in 1997 removed the category of "hooliganism," which was previously used to punish same-sex behavior between men. In 2001, China’s health authorities eliminated homosexuality from the list of mental disorders. In this context, gay-oriented media platforms such as websites and social media flourished. However, these media platforms are increasingly commercialized, and gay men dominate cyberspace in China (Ho, 2010). Danlan, for example, a major Chinese website for gay users, has attracted millions of users online. In collaboration with the Beijing Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Danlan has launched a series of services besides its website, including Blued, a gay men's social app modeled on Jack'd that has generated around four million US dollar investment. More recently, social websites and apps such as Zank and Blued have also started to produce online videos. Rainbow Family (2012–), for example, an ongoing sitcom sponsored by Zank, features the story of three consumption-oriented gay men, one straight man, and a straight woman in a generic middle-class apartment in urban China. Most of these videos focus exclusively on middle class or upper-middle class lifestyle in an urban setting, with little reference to the countryside or migrant workers in the city. In contrast, as previously mentioned, in Comrade Yue, the image and voiceover create tension in the scene that captures Yue working outside the coal-mining field. While the image shows him physically entrapped by heavy and repetitive labor, his voiceover expresses his strong desire to establish another career. The tension between the image and the voiceover is a commentary on the lack of social mobility in contemporary China. In the case of Comrade Yue, Yue's working-class background is poetically presented and central to understanding his life. Here, the social self or selves constructed in the video intersects with issues of class and other social categories and renders queer becoming as a never-ending project of undoing both heteronormativity and homonormativity.

The sponsorship of Comrade Yue is an effort made by the QU video workshop to elucidate how sexuality intersects with issues such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc. Queer University also tries to enlarge understanding of sexual diversity through curriculum design and student recruitment. The curriculum combines an introduction to LGBT movements, gender/sexuality, feminist theory, film aesthetics, cinematography, editing, video production and management, and relevant film screenings. Also, QU strives to recruit students from different backgrounds and geographical locations, especially those with lower incomes and those who identify as transgender. Among the 12 students in 2014, for example, three students were from smaller cities rather than provincial capitals. Moreover, one participant came from Tibet and another from Chongqing, a city in central-western China. About half of the participants lived in non-coastal areas that are less economically developed.
Conclusion: politics of queer becoming

In March 2015, five young feminists were detained and accused of inducing social instability for their plan to circulate anti-sexual harassment messages on public transportation. These media-savvy feminists constantly rely on social media such as Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, to disseminate information on their public actions regarding sexual and gender issues. Wei Tingting, one of the feminists arrested, is an employee of BGHEI who works for the QU project. Around the same time, Taobao, China’s largest online marketplace, sponsored a contest to “get your gay wedding in the USA,” in which people can vote online for gay or lesbian couples to receive support to get married in Las Vegas. At first glance, these two incidents may seem conflicting; they are very telling examples of the contradictory reality of how media technology is under heavy state surveillance on the one hand, but is capable of generating profit through neoliberalized pink economy on the other hand. If we look beyond this techno-utopia/dystopia binary, or what Wendy Chun has called the binary of freedom and control (Chun & Keenan, 2006), a more contextual understanding of the relationship between technology and culture should be employed. Throughout this article, I use the aesthetics of queer becoming to describe how community-based queer videos such as Comrade Yue operate as an articulation of identity that intervenes in the ongoing discursive debate between the biological determinist and socially constructed views on homosexuality. At the same time, video-making itself becomes an act of coming out and video is a vital medium to work through and within the process of identification and community formation. More importantly, the social self and selves constructed in the video intersect with issues of class and other social categories and renders queer becoming as a never-ending project of undoing heteronormativity and negotiating with homonormativity. It is in this sense that the aesthetics of queer becoming could be understood as what Kara Keeling calls the “Queer OS,” a Queer Operating System “at the interfaces of queer theory, new media studies, and technology studies.” This interdisciplinary endeavor aims to understand sexuality and media technologies as “mutually constitutive with” other “historical, sociocultural, conceptual phenomena that currently shape our realities” such as race, gender, class, citizenship, and ability. Queer is thus “an orientation toward various and shifting aspects of existing reality and the social norms they govern, such that it makes available pressing questions about, eccentric and/or unexpected relationships in, and possibly alternatives to those social norms” (Keeling, 2014, p. 153).

The medium of the video, with its capacity for dissemination online, functions as a unique format that gives rise to a new set of queer aesthetics and politics through first-person audio-visual constructions. Nevertheless, the notion of queer becoming does not suggest a teleological and linear progression that arrives at an end product or “complete” identification. Rather, it is a process of queer becoming in which the formation of individual as well as communal articulation, and the configuration of audio-visual forms are mutually constitutive.

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Notes

1. For more information about the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, see http://bghei.org/.
2. Film Censorship Regulations issued by the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television in 1997 prescribe that plots, language, or images specifically portraying sexual promiscuity, rape, prostitution, or homosexuality should be deleted or modified. The General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) issued the Provisional Regulations Concerning Appraising Obscene and Sexual Publications in 1988 as the administrative regulation that instructs the press and publication sector to identify pornographic and obscene publications. According to the provisional regulations, such publications include “salaciously and concretely describing homosexual acts or other perverted acts, or concretely describing violence, abuse, or humiliating acts related to perversion.”
3. For more, see http://www.aibai.com/advice_pages.php?linkwords=queer_theory.
4. See http://www.queercomrades.com/videos/queer-comrades-videos/queer-comrades-documentaries/%E5%90%8C%E5%BF%07/.
5. For example, Fan Popo’s documentary about several mothers and their lesbian and gay children, Mama Rainbow (2012), which gathered more than 100,000 views on major video websites, was taken down by those video websites in 2014. For more, see https://theinitium.com/article/20150916-dailynews-fanpopo/.
6. For more information, see http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1760151175.
8. Alibaba’s Taobao, China’s largest online marketplace, is sponsoring ten gay and lesbian couples to travel to the US to get married through an event called “We Do.” For more, see http://techcrunch.com/2015/02/11/alibaba-we-do/.

References


