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with He Xiaopei**

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‘I Want to Make Queer films, But Not LGBT Films’:

An Interview with He Xiaopei

He Xiaopei, Séagh Kehoe and Bao Hongwei

Despite decriminalisation in 1997 and partial depathologisation in 2001, homosexuality remains a sensitive topic in contemporary China. This is reflected in mainstream and online media where representation of LGBTQ-related issues are often subject to heavy censorship. However, despite the austere restrictions that exist, the past two decades have witnessed the emergence of ‘new queer Chinese cinema’ (Leung 2012; Yue 2012; Pecic 2016; Bao 2018). Led by a number of young independent queer filmmakers along with advancements in new media technologies, this underground movement of queer filmmaking have created new possibilities for imagining sexuality and gender as well as opportunities for community-building.

He Xiaopei is a leading queer feminist filmmaker, activist and director of Beijing-based NGO Pink Space, an NGO dedicated to promoting sexual rights and gender equality. Her films include *The Lucky One* (*Chong’er*, 2012), *Our Marriages: Lesbians Marry Gay Men* (*Yisheng qiyuan*, 2013), and *Yvo and Chrissy* (*Ruci Shenghuo*, 2017). *The Lucky One* tells the story of Zhang Xi, a HIV positive woman with only a short time to live. A kind of video diary of Zhang’s life, the film questions notions of fact and fiction, as well as the politics of representation when working with marginalised people. *Our Marriages: Lesbians Marry Gay Men* explores how two lesbian couples in Northeast China negotiate norms and expectations around marriage, and the possibilities for queer life in Chinese society. *Yvo and Chrissy* follows the lives of two people from England who gave up an inheritance of one million pounds as well as several properties, and reflects on questions of wealth, gender, sexuality and happiness. He’s work to date has demonstrated a distinctly anti-normative approach to gender and sexuality, while also highlighting some of the lesser discussed issues of class, precarity and marginality in China and elsewhere.

In February 2017, Séagh Kehoe (SK), PhD candidate from the University of Nottingham, spoke with He (HX) about her work and the place of documentary filmmaking in queer activism in China today.¹

SK: I’d like to begin by talking about how you came into filmmaking and your work with Pink Space. You were working for the Chinese State Council for fourteen years where you were involved with the task of healthcare reform. Can you tell us about your journey from there to becoming one of China’s leading queer feminist filmmaker and sexual rights activist?

HX: Before I joined the government, I was a shepherd in rural China and then a professional mountaineer in the Chinese national mountaineering team. I had never wanted to sit in

¹ We thank Tang Xingjian for video recording the interview and Phil Cowley for transcribing the interview.

an office, but the office was in Zhongnanhai and everyone thought it was a good job.² I was in the health care system reform team. For the job, I attended weekly meetings with state councillors and ministers. Everyone said it was an important job and of course healthcare reform was very important. During the time I was working for the government, I also joined the feminist movement before the 1995 UN Women Forum took place in Beijing, and then I also joined the lesbian organising.³ So that brought me to gender studies at the Institute of Development Studies in the UK. After that I studied for my MA in Sexual Dissidence and Cultural Change at Sussex and then I started my PhD in Cultural Studies. My research was on HIV/AIDS and I looked at how people lived with HIV/AIDS in China in the 1990s.

After I finished the PhD, I came back to China. Together with three other women—lesbian and bisexual women—we set up the Pink Space. All of us had grown up within the lesbian movement and we knew how important it was to work together, to share our experiences and to have a voice. From my studies I also learned that representation was very important. So we decided to focus on marginalised groups. This was because we had learned from our own organising in the 1990s how lesbian and bisexual women had become empowered through getting together, and we wanted to introduce a similar methodology to other sexual minorities. The very first meeting of the Pink Space involved lesbian and bisexual women meeting HIV positive women. All the Pink Space meetings were mixed meetings where sex workers, wives of gay men, HIV positive women and lesbian and bisexual women got together and shared their desires and stories. Storytelling and sharing desires among marginalised people became one important feature of the Pink Space.

Another feature of the Pink Space was the very positive approach in which we brought marginalised women together to talk about pleasure. This was because we felt there was too much negativities around questions of sexuality. From our lesbian organising, we knew how telling positive stories could be really empowering and encouraging. It was not that negative sexuality didn't exist; it was just that the space for positive sexuality had too little space. At our very first Pink Space meeting, HIV positive women, lesbians and bisexual women were sitting in one room and talking about positive sexual experiences. At the beginning, people didn't know how to start. I asked everyone to ask each other questions straightforwardly. One HIV positive woman asked the lesbian and bisexual women how two women could have sex. The lesbian and bisexual women asked the HIV positive women if people with HIV could have sexual desire. That was how we started. People shared lots of stories and sex jokes. I remember one woman with HIV told me that it was a very special meeting for her because, before that, all the meetings she had attended focused on sadness and the difficulties they faced; everyone would end up crying and weeping. At the Pink Space meeting, they could have a space to laugh and that was really important.

After the meeting, people were saying things like 'we are the same! There is no difference between HIV positive and lesbians!' At another meeting with sex workers,

² Located in central Beijing and adjacent to the Forbidden City, Zhongnanhai serves as the central headquarters for the Communist Party of China and the State Council (central government) of China.

³ For an account of He's early engagement with feminist activism in Beijing in the 1980s, see He 2001; Milwertz 2002.

HIV positive women, wives of gay men and lesbian and bisexual women, I asked who everyone thought was the most oppressed group. Each group said that the other group was more oppressed. It was really encouraging that people could see each other's oppression. Another thing I remember was that a woman with HIV said she had no money for medicines, while she could not speak at all—It's not that she didn't want to share her stories, but that she was just too ill to talk. At that point, my colleagues and I started to think that we should really start to document these stories because people were dying out there. Of course, I couldn't make a film without people's permission; and at that time, no one was 'out' as HIV positive, and no one was 'out' as a lesbian either. At the time, lesbians and HIV positive women could organise and be out to each other.

To answer the question of how I got into filmmaking—it started when I met a woman with HIV who had been diagnosed with liver cancer. She was given three months to live, and she asked me what she could do in her limited life. So I gave her a video camera and a digital recorder, and told her to record her own life. After she had passed away, we edited the footages into a film. That film [*The Lucky One*] went to a film festival; we also uploaded it online and it got over 100,000 hits. Previously at the Pink Space, we had collected many stories from marginalised women, but we didn't know where to publish them. This film could reach out to so many people. We started to think that filmmaking might be a good channel for us to bring these stories to the public.

We also did a two-year project with HIV positive women and their children who were also infected with HIV from different villages in Shanxi Province. We gathered these families together and provided them with digital cameras and basic photography skills. During these two years, we visited them, and invited them to share their photo stories, which were about their houses, food, festivals, fields, fruits, weddings, animals, trees and family members. We then selected 36 photos from over 2,000 photos they had taken and submitted to an international photography festival, where these photos were exhibited. We also made postcards and T-shirts with their photos on them. These images reflected the main theme from my PhD thesis: HIV is not death; HIV is life. People with HIV work, cook and have families; they live a life. But in mainstream discourses, HIV is only represented as death or sadness.

However, we also learnt that photos do not talk; it is just one step forward in storytelling. We tried to invite the families of people with HIV to go to the photography festivals to share their stories, but no one liked to speak there. And people visited photography festivals, didn't usually ask questions. Instead, they just looked at the pictures and then left—we never knew what people were thinking about while seeing the photos, and what the pictures told them.

Because of this, I began to think that film could be a good approach. This eventually became how we work. Now we are doing films about poverty and sexuality. My next film is about race and class issues, and it will be released soon. Sexuality is our core issue, but we also look at the bigger social background, such as social norms, economy, development etc. and how would these affect marginalised people? So, we want to tell broader stories about gender, sexuality, class, race, disability and the economy.

- SK: Something that comes so clearly in your story is documentary making as a form of storytelling and as a way of recording people's own experiences. It can give people a lot of control over how they are represented. You've touched on how people living with HIV are represented in mainstream media. Can you tell us a little more about that? How do you feel the work that the Pink Space does challenges some of these ideas?
- HX: I remember when I was doing fieldwork for my PhD research, I interviewed a gay man who told me: 'I hate the public representation of HIV positive people. Our faces are always blurred, and they make us look like ghosts.' That really shocked me, because how can you blur a person's face? That's a person! When I made *The Lucky One*, I told the editor that there should not be one single image of the woman with a tube in her face or in her body. My editor said that there were so many shots like that and she asked me why I shot the footage like that. I said that even though I shot the footage, I didn't want that image to be the final product. I didn't want that image because HIV positive people told me that they are either represented in mainstream media as ghosts or as sick or dying, and they didn't want to be represented like that. So, as I was informed by people with HIV, I knew they didn't want that kind of representation and I knew that the mainstream media represented them as ghosts; I wanted to produce different images. I wanted to tell positive stories to give face and to give voice to the people living with HIV. I think that's why this film was quite well received by the community, as they were not represented as ghosts or as death. They were represented differently to that in mainstream media. I always want to represent people with HIV as lively and living their everyday life the same way just like others.
- SK: I'm thinking of another one of your documentaries *Our Marriages - Lesbians Marry Gay Men in China*, when you look at the weddings and lives of four lesbians who marry gay men to uphold expectations of womanhood and family life. This documentary raises so many questions and challenges a lot of assumptions about the institution of marriage as well as queer life in contemporary China. Can you tell us about why you decided to make the film and what the process was like?
- HX: When I started following those four lesbians to film their marriages with gay men and searching gay men to marry, my initial thought was that they were discriminated against by some anti-men people. I don't think these people were feminists, even though they said they were feminists; but I thought that they were anti-men because they think it was a bad thing to be a lesbian and then bring a man into your life. Then there were also some mainstream gay organisations who say you can't be gay if you get into a heterosexual marriage because it is like going into the closet. So it seems like there is only one way of being gay and that's the western way, like coming out and marching on the streets shouting 'I'm gay!' For those who believe in marriages, they think you have to consummate the marriage to make it real, or else you're cheating. And then for love, if you're not in love you are cheating too. There even have some queer theorists saying that it isn't queer because you are pretending to be heterosexual. But, many Western people don't understand Chinese culture; I don't know what they think they know, but they sometimes think that Chinese lesbians and gays are miserable, that they always have to pretend to be straight. This is the reason why the Pink Space wanted to get the voices of the more marginalised out there. So I thought that the lesbians and gay

seeking to marry each other should speak for themselves, and tell their stories, so that is what I should document.

In China, the ‘contract marriages’ are really booming.⁴ In every big city or small town, there are lesbians marrying gay men; they are not just young people, but also people in their 50s seeking contract marriages. So even if we were doing nothing more than just recording history, I thought ‘let’s document it’. So we started filming. Once we finished filming and started editing, we had a lot of discussions about the institution of marriage and the big cultural and social backgrounds behind the marriages. We felt that contract marriage was the best marriage, as all marriages are a kind of contract and performativity, including straight marriages. In this case, contract marriage is the best marriage because women can have a voice, can declare and claim their desires, and can say before marriage ‘I don’t want to have sex with you; I don’t want to share finances; I don’t sleep with you; and I don’t want to have children with you’. What a feminist arrangement and announcement! And in this situation of getting together, people also have to come out to themselves. The coming out is not to the public—it’s more to yourself, because when you decide that you are a lesbian or you are gay, you are seeking this contract marriage in order to keep your sexual identity and that’s the way to do it. Lesbians and gays also have to come out to each other. It is really a form of coming out, a way to decide this is who they are. Rather than coming out to people you don’t know, you come out to yourself, and you come out to your partner. So, I think that is really a coming out. These four lesbians are really articulate. They can play jokes and tell their stories. The audience can see they are not just some ‘poor’ Chinese lesbians. We are choosing our way of living and our way of being lesbians in China. So, they are not miserable; it’s all happy; there are parties etc. It was quite an amazing experience to film them. Six years on, we went to film them again last year. I would expect the sequel to be better, because now we are more experienced filmmakers and have made other films. I would expect a better film to come out soon.

SK: Thinking about LGBTQ+ issues and your work with the Pink Space, what do you think has been the most significant change to have taken place in China in recent years in relation to sexual rights for all and who do you feel is still being left behind?

HX: When I started, no one reported on lesbians marrying gay men. There was discrimination. But now, it’s becoming a public issue. People have started to acknowledge it, possibly still quite negatively, but it’s there. Also, the issue of wives of gay men—this was something that the Pink Space first picked up and then *The Economist* reported our work. It might not have been the first time, but official publications never had any reference to homosexuals in their reports. But if they wanted to talk about our work with wives of gay men, then they had to talk about homosexuality. They had to make reference to gay men—it had to appear, so I was really happy about that. It was really good that Cankao Xiaoxi (*Reference News*)—one of the top five media outlets in circulation globally at that time reported it, because *The Economist* reported it.⁵ It was important for this to appear in the public eye so that

⁴ For a discussion about ‘contract marriages’ between lesbians and gay men in China, see Engebresten 2014.

⁵ Cankao Xiaoxi (*Reference News*) is a Chinese-language national daily newspaper in China published by the Xinhua News Agency. It publishes Chinese translation of news articles from the world’s major news agencies and news journals.

people would know, and also to hear about wives of gay men—many people had never heard about homosexuals before and couldn't understand why their husbands were not interested in their wives. It's very important for a lot of people to recognise there are people with homosexual desires. As for lesbians, no one recognised them because there were no representations of lesbians in China. So I think that was a success because the words of homosexuals could at last appear in the official newspaper.

When I made the film on disability and sexuality, there were no references to this issue. I tried very hard looking through Chinese and Western publications, but I couldn't find anything in 2009. So that's one reason I designed this project. I worked with an artist who live with disability. We relied on one paragraph of a working definition of sexuality by the World Health Organisation. We worked for four weeks to design this art project, and then we spent three weeks implementing the project in a residence for people with learning difficulties in a suburb in Beijing. Now lots of organisations have picked up on disability and sexuality issues. I think we made some changes and we contributed to the change in a bigger society. I think there are many issues that are less discussed. For instance, mental health issues. This will probably be my next project. But there are also some areas of work that I can't mention. There are some groups who are very deeply oppressed, and I will have to find a way to represent their stories.

SK: So what would you say the role of documentary making is in queer activism in China today? What can it contribute?

HX: I think the filmmaking itself is the main thing. In the process you identify issues, you find people, and that is organising. Then screening: when you do a screening, you gather people, you have discussions, and you form communities. It's all part of the process. Documenting itself can be really powerful. It can be a movement; it's a kind of evidence; it is a collection of voices; it is a process; and it is the movement itself.

SK: Where do you see your own work in relation to other examples of queer filmmaking going on in China? Where do you think you fit in? Do you think there is something unique about the work you and the Pink Space does?

HX: I think I want to make queer films, but not LGBT films. I feel that the LGBT movement is not really a queer movement, because it tries to fit into mainstream society and that is not queer. Queer wants to be different, while the mainstream LGBT movement are trying to be the same and that is not a revolution. If you want to make a queer film, you have to see that society is wrong and I am not going to fit into that. The other thing is that 'queer' as a term is starting to become a little like 'LGBT', but it's not. Just think about the gathering of HIV positive women telling their sex stories: it was so queer. When you see people with different desires, and they are really different from heterosexual missionary sex—there are so many different kinds of sexualities that are not recognised—those are queer and those are the things I want to talk about and give representation to. These days, there are so many lesbians and gay men who want to get married and stay in loving relationships, but that's not queer. I want to make queer films just to differentiate from those normative lesbians and gays who are trying to fit in.

SK: Speaking of the normative gays and lesbians, the assimilation of LGBT people into mainstream society and the kind of mainstream LGBT movement, there is a lot of talk

about the pink economy in China, or seeing LGBT people as consumers described in terms of their buying power. What does it mean for funding films like yours? Is that something you benefit from? How about the people in your documentaries: how do they fit into the pink economy, or do they?

HX: I don't think queer films can make money. I don't know about others, but my films cannot make money. I want my films to be about how money affects our lives. In my new film from last year, *Yvo and Chrissy*, I really wanted to talk about money and how money affects us. But when I showed this film in China, there were two extreme types of responses. Some people felt this woman was mad: she [Yvo] gave up three houses—she had inherited lots of money and then she bought three houses along the Brighton seafront—she gave them all up and became a performer, swimmer and writer living in poverty. The other person [Chrissy] also chose to live a life in the mountains as a traveller after publishing her thesis. With these choices, they separated their lives from the money-making society, and that was inspiration for me. You don't like the capitalist society, and you don't know what to do about it. Everyone around you is making money, and then you start to feel like I want to make money too. But when some people make money, they want more money. Then all of this becomes a norm—having a job, getting promoted—for what? Money, money, money. But in this film, you see a different life: she got her money and then she just gave it all up and chose to live a different life. I want to inspire people to see that there are different ways of living and that there are ways of not being trapped in the capitalist system. I also see different arguments: some people say they are mad, and that they just can't understand why people should give up money because the meaning of life today is just for making money; there are other people who hate this capitalist system, and for them the film is an inspiration. A lot of people who have money live in depression and have no way to get out of it; there are a lot of people who love the life depicted in the film, even though they themselves cannot do the same. But still it is a kind of inspiration, because it shows that one can live a life outside of the capitalist system.

SK: What would you say is the most rewarding part of your work?

HX: When the people, or the communities, I've filmed say they love my films, I feel really rewarded. I filmed Yvonne and she loved the film. Someone who was HIV positive came to me after a screening and asked if I could film them. These people are all marginalised people. They like my work and they felt empowered by the film, and this has made me very happy.

SK: One final question. what are you working on at the moment and what kind of plans do you have for the future?

HX: I have made four films that I haven't edited yet. Several people have suggested that I should make a film about myself because of my unique experiences: I turned from being a mountaineer to being a government official, from being a feminist and lesbian to being an activist and a filmmaker. All these changes have taken place in a changing Chinese society. Some film scholars have suggested that I should make a film about my own life, and that I should film myself. For this film, I filmed my mother, myself and my daughter. I had planned to make a film about the three generations in my family; now I want to make a film about myself, with my mother and my daughter being a part of my

story. Among the four films I have already filmed, there is one about a woman from a rural area who came to Beijing and became a cleaner, nanny and sex worker. She then went back to the countryside and became a pig farmer. She raised several hundred pigs, but she didn't have enough money to feed all the pigs. So she had to go back to the city and became a sex worker again. She happened to be married to a gay man. She didn't use the term 'gay' but from all the descriptions he was obviously gay. That was one of the four films that I am waiting to edit. So I have four films waiting to be edited and one in progress.

SK I wish you all the best with all of your work. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us and we look forward to welcoming you back to the University of Nottingham soon. Thank you again Xiaopei.

HX Thank you all very much.

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