

Interview - Popo Fan

Written by E-International Relations

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Born in 1985, Popo Fan is queer filmmaker, writer and activist. He is an alumnus of the Beijing Film Academy and the author of *Happy Together: A Complete Record of a Hundred Queer Films* (Beifang Wenyi Press, 2007). His documentary works include: *New Beijing, New Marriage* (2009), *Mama Rainbow* (2012) and *The VaChina Monologues* (2013). He has participated in film festivals across the globe, such as Taipei, Copenhagen, Los Angeles and Mumbai. In 2012 he received the Prism Prize of the 22nd Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. He is presently a committee member of the Beijing Queer Film Festival and a board member of the Beijing LGBT Center.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

Recently, an American friend asked me a similar question: what changes have taken place in the LGBT community in China in recent years? As an insider, it's hard to see the changes and differences; similarly to a man who looks at himself in a mirror every day and who wouldn't pick up on the small evolutions. But if we go back ten years, we can see that the LGBT society has changed a lot right across China. As a queer film director, I've noticed a tightening of government policy, which is even going backward in some ways. For example the increasingly strict control of the Internet means that a lot of LGBT news and information is now banned, so communication in the LGBT society has really been affected.

For me, the biggest change has been a new understanding of the relationship between art and politics. Until I went to university, I thought that politics were very distant from my own life, because both my family education and art education insisted that politics should be kept separate, otherwise it can cause trouble. But my experience in the last two years of university taught me that politics is everywhere. In 2005, the 2nd Beijing Queer Film Festival was held at Beijing University. I went to watch the films as an ordinary member of the audience, but the government cracked down on the festival during the opening ceremony. I was affected by this issue and felt pity and anger. It was then that I decided to do something for the community. Later, I joined the committee of the Beijing Queer Film Festival as a volunteer. As people began to recognise my working skills and ability, I became more involved in the activities and projects of the LGBT community. Now, looking back, I'm surprised at how closely connected politics were to my films and activities. Actually, as a Chinese person I can't ignore politics, it's impossible to escape.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Film has always been an important part of my life, although I didn't think of studying or making films before my college entrance examination. I chose it as my major because my mathematics was so poor! Someone told me that, as an arts' major, you don't need to sit in a single mathematics exam. However, I wasn't good at singing, dancing or painting, so I chose to study dramatic literature of film as my major. I thought I'd probably made the wrong decision when I listened to all my classmates talking about masters of cinema and film theory. The campus atmosphere was difficult, but discovering Queer Film was the turning point for me. At that time, I had a classmate who was particularly homophobic, but he later changed his point of view after watching some queer films with me. I also think this genre has a special meaning for me, and I became more and more engaged in it. I also used my knowledge of queer films in my homework and discussions in the classroom. Later, I used this knowledge to write *Happy Together: Complete Record of a Hundred Queer Films*, my first book. That was the early stage of my involvement in queer filmmaking.

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The Beijing Film Academy advocated an elite education, as far away from politics as possible. Yet with some influential teachers it was different, they looked at things in a different way. For example Zi'en Cui, who for some complex political reasons was never allowed to give us a lesson, taught me more than anyone else through friendship. Today we're still very good friends. Xianmin Zhang was another. He specialised in independent film and gave me some helpful and meaningful advice. After graduating, with the exception of the two of them, I have generally lost contact with teachers and classmates.

How would you describe and characterise the history of Chinese LGBT film production and your position in it?

The history and development of Chinese queer film has been a gradual process from ambiguous to clear, I would identify three steps. The first is before the 1990s when directors used ambiguous ways to deal with plots about same sex couples. One example is *Two Stage Sisters* directed by the famous Jin Xie, where the two female characters have a very blurred relationship that hints at lesbianism. Kaige Chen's well-known work, *The Great Military Parade*, also alludes to some same-sex passion but without any clear representation of it. The second step occurred around 1996, which is known as the first year of queer film in China. In this year the famous young director Yuan Zhang made the seminal *Behind the Forbidden City* a film about gays and their lives. Although at this time, very few queer films were made or shown publicly. The third step starts with the new millennium when more and more queer films were made and released using new film production technology. From 2001 to 2005, some documentaries about drag queens were released. Why drag queens? I think there are two main reasons: one is that very few gays or lesbians are 'coming out', another one is that drag queens worry less about showing their faces in documentaries because they always have exaggerated makeup on stage. But the subject matter was still limited and narrow until 2006-2010, when a stronger creative period produced a wider range of films and videos about gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual blowout types, and also in different forms including feature films, documentaries, MVs and animation.

A second significant observation here is that the development of queer film was a process for homosexual participation as a method of comrades' self-empowerment. Before 2005, most queer films were made by heterosexual male directors who had an interest in LGBT themes. Because they, from the patriarchal logic point of view, were the group that had access to social capital – power, fame, money. But in 2005, that changed when director Zi'en Cui made a queer film after coming out himself. After 2006 an increasing number of queer directors produced works for their own community. Then after 2010, the movement of self-empowerment in the community moved forward again to a new stage with more community non-professionals getting involved with film and video production. This movement was facilitated by new technology and supported by advocates from the LGBT's non-government organisations such as NGO's workshops for film-making skills, Queer Digital Storytelling Workshop, and the Queer University Documentary Training Camp. It's a democratisation and decentralized movement of queer film.

The last trend is the diversification of communication modes. Queer films were banned from public cinemas, the only opportunity for screenings were in small salons, pubs or coffee shops. But now the internet has become the main platform for queer film diffusion. Also the internet has had a big impact on queer film production, for example some new network television series are specifically made to be shown online.

One of your most popular documentaries, *Mama Rainbow*, follows six mothers from different cities as they forge relationships with their gay and lesbian children; the parents in the film are very optimistic and supportive. How does this compare with the real situation for LGBT youth, and why did you choose to portray the mothers in this particular way?

Indeed, the parents in my films are too positive and accepting, this doesn't reflect the real situation in China. But for me, my documentary is just one of the narratives. There is no single narrative to provide the whole story/ reality. I never said these parents are representing all of China's queer parents, just some parents I met. If they were against the idea of being queer parents, they would refuse to be interviewed. It's one of the important issues we faced during the filmmaking period, also why did we choose these six parents for my story?

For me, it's a common question often asked by Western people, because the image of these queer parents is

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different from the way they imagine it to be in China. This question comes from a post-colonial vision of China. I would say why can't Chinese queer parents be like this? In this way my documentary breaks the stereotype of the way Chinese families are seen or imagined from a Western point of view.

One time, after a screening of *Mama Rainbow* in America, a member of the audience told me he liked the documentary very much and thought it was an important film worth showing to more Americans. He thought it would let people know how positive and supporting Chinese queer parents are and persuade American queer parents to accept their own queer children. Sometime I think maybe it's the reason why this documentary is so popular in America; it seems to break the American impression of China as a 'backward' country. However, at the same time I fell into another trap, because American audiences tend to use it as an example to show that their own society should be doing better than China.

When I'm interacting with the audience, I'm very careful discussing the narratives in the film, I try to emphasise on the fact that it's just a story about some of families I met and it doesn't represent all of China's families. Also the purpose of the documentary is to launch a topic, and build a public discourse space.

In addition to being a director, you are also on the board of the Beijing LGBT Centre. From your observations, what is the most significant change that has occurred in the LGBT society in China recently?

In my experience, there is an important sense of a gradual awakening of identity. In the very beginning, when I joined some queer events and projects, I just thought I should work for the group for myself and others. But later I started thinking about why (queer) identity is so important. Does identity have to be single, immutable and frozen? Once, we screened a transgender film at a film festival. A member of the audience who identifies as gay found me after the viewing and said, "Transgender films aren't good for the gay's social image, we're normal and decent people. We shouldn't let others think we want to transform our sex or cross-dress." It's hard for me to understand why some gays refuse to accept the idea of transgender. Why should gay discourse exclude or belittle the transgender issue, creating a separate community? So I told him 'Do you know that the way other people think about homosexuality is similar to the attitude that you are having towards the transgender group?'

In 2010, I developed this idea and made the documentary about transgender and drag queens, called *Be a Woman*. They are very sociable and friendly group, some of their activities are more interesting than their gay counterparts. I also have some lala friends (the common nickname of lesbian in China), and my gay friends also joke about them. One asked me 'You're so close to lala, so you're one of them, right?' These encounters made me examine another aspect of identity politics: can we really think beyond the limitations of our own identity? During the production of the film, I slowly realised we do a lot of things that are not related just to our own identities; not all gays will participate in the gay rights movement, and participants in this movement are not all gays. For example, of the seven people on the organising committee of the Beijing Queer Film Festival, three are heterosexual. We're working together from the same common starting point: we are against inequality, and we are working for a greater freedom. It's also the reason and motivation for me to stay in the LGBT society and to participate in so many activities.

I learned to use the western term 'community' from the activities I was involved with over these years, but I didn't really understand it until the Beijing LGBT Center was established. At the start, I just thought it was a place for gay people to have fun, but later I realised it's also a social sphere where we are very dependent on its spirit and psychology, a community with social interaction and inherent relevance.

Today I don't worry about the different factions of the LGBT society; groups need their own space in any community. In my experience, the community needs to work towards the same target, but also make space for different elements. Because there can be no single space that is suitable for all people, no movement can engage everybody in the same way. Actually the consistency is very scary, like the political lesson we learned in childhood, there's no such thing as individualism all must 'be united as one', and that's impossible for 13 billion Chinese. There is no 'Chinese dream' for everybody. The members of the Chinese LGBT group can't share the same values and targets, if we could it would be great. But it's also great for groups to follow their own goals in their own ways; it's very important for the whole

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community. Furthermore, the 'internal division' is useful for avoiding personal heroism in a society that has made everyone follow the same leader. It's another type of hegemony.

The theories in gender and sexuality studies have predominantly been written by scholars in the European and American academic institutes. They very often claim universalism to a certain degree. Having toured around the world and spoken at various events like the Cologne Pride event in Germany, could you say anything about the differences in the LGBT cultures globally?

That is a very interesting question for sure. I feel that LGBT societies are becoming more and more similar in the different countries I've visited, for example many different countries' LGBT societies are focusing on same sex marriage rights, including China. I wonder if the reason for this connected movement is the influence of Western and global culture, or a need to follow someone's lead in the Chinese LGBT society.

Recently, there was a discussion about China's queer movement on Facebook, with people leaving their comments under a video that was posted. A doctor and teacher of a well know American university said even after just watching five minutes of the video that he was filled with anger about China's queer movement which was following the Western counterpart's footsteps too closely. I replied to his words from my side, "How often do you come to China? How close are you to our LGBT society? If you were close enough to us you would know that we are different from Western LGBT groups, and your basic judgment is wrong. What is the West, is Europe the same as America? Do you think China only has one voice?" I disagree with this binary opposition. "And the developments of society and culture are very subtle. It's hard to say how much interactivity there might be. For example, all civilizations have cooking skills. Who influences who? Or has each developed technologies for their own needs and ways." For example, how do you treat a laddish lesbian who is wearing trousers and a tie? Is she imitating a man's clothing style, or is this a creative performance of her sexuality?

It's same for the same-sex marriage rights campaign in China. Everybody knows that we have no chance to collect enough signatures to bring about a bill at the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. But the advocacy is working for the LGBT group's social visibility more than for the rights of same sex marriage.

With globalization we have to watch out for two things: the destruction of the local culture and creating a false sense of division between East and West.

The Chinese government has announced a new policy for NGO groups, especially those that have ties with 'Western' countries. Do you foresee any particular impact for LGBT groups and for the works of freelance artists like yourself?

Last year, my documentary *Mama Rainbow* (2012) was removed from video-hosting websites and from the Chinese internet. I was told that it had to be deleted as a new government's requirement. In accordance with the information publicity law, I applied for further information about this action to China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), but I was informed they had never banned the film. I can't find the right information about this, or sort out the problem. The biggest challenge from the rules and laws of government is that nobody knows where the red line or boundary lies. It's like being in a game where the players don't know the rules. If we had access to such information from the government our attitudes wouldn't be so negative at this moment.

I heard some friends who work in NGO groups discuss the new Foreign NGO Management Law. It's a serious development for NGOs; their work will become extremely difficult under the new law in its current draft form. There are active groups working with and in Chinese society, seeking to alleviate poverty, eliminate discrimination and conduct other activities that benefit the average citizen.

Two very well-known NGO groups, the Transition Institute and the China Rural Library have been forcibly closed by the government, and this has deeply affected grassroots actions. I can't even imagine the closure of the Beijing LGBT Centre, which is a place we used to visit every weekend for social activities and communication. For many people,

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it's a unique place to help establish their individual identity.

What was the most difficult part of your career?

In my career, there are two big problems I have always had to face. The first one is financial. Even now, I am still suffering from financial pressures. When I graduated from university, I only had five thousand pounds in savings from my part time jobs and from the book royalties. In the beginning, raising funds for my films was difficult. In 2008 I borrowed two thousand pounds from my boyfriend and wasn't able to pay him back until 2010. During those years, I always had to be very careful with money, even in my daily life. I would buy duck bones with a bit of meat when others could buy the famous Beijing roast duck for its delicious crispy skin. I was lucky, I survived, and through those early lessons I became a good film producer.

Basically, I have tried all kinds of different ways to raise money for films, starting out self-funded, and later relying on private donations. For example I made *Chinese Closet* with a friend's investment in 2009, but I could also apply for funds from NGO groups or foundations that support human rights or LGBT societies. My experience is mirrored by most Chinese independent filmmakers.

The second problem has been film distribution. Until recently queer films could not be publicly released in China. I was always embarrassed when people asked me where they could see my films, especially after they were banned from the Chinese Internet. I couldn't even say "Please search my work online"!

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations, interested in gender and sexuality theories?

For young scholars who are interested in Chinese LGBT groups, either Chinese or foreign, the most important thing is a contact within the LGBT community, by participating in the movement, even just through a small involvement such as translating Chinese articles or helping with event publicity. Also it's the best way to conduct research, getting close and involved with your subject, understanding the group, keeping up to date with real and important issues and stories from inside.

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This interview was conducted by Huili Meng and Caroline Cottet, and translated by Huili Meng. Huili is a visiting scholar at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, University of Leeds. Caroline is a Commissioning Editor of E-IR.