



Documenting Transgenderism and Queer Chronotope in Postsocialist China

Along with economic reform and the reintroduction of a market economy, China has seen an increasing tension between the socialist regime and the capitalist agenda since the 1980s. In tandem with incongruities between the political and economic realms, China's postsocialist condition has also found expression in the cultural terrain. In particular, the formation of an "alternative public sphere" has been facilitated by a changing mediascape that includes practices and venues outside the state system (Zhang 30). Notably imperative to this alternative public culture is the growing strand of independent documentary filmmaking known as the New Documentary Movement. Launched by filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan, Zhang Yuan, and Jiang Yue in the 1990s, the New Documentary generally rejects the official tradition of newsreels and *zhuanti pian*—literally "special topic films"—which are characterized by footage compiled in accordance with pre-written scripts, and by directly addressing the audience from a grand, top-down perspective (Berry "Getting Real" 117). In opposition to these previous forms, the New Documentary highlights the "spontaneous and unscripted quality" of on-the-spot realism (122), conveying a deep concern for "civilian life" from a "personal standpoint" (Lu 14-15). Thematically, the New Documentary distances itself from official discourses, choosing instead to document the lives of ordinary people, especially those on the periphery of society, such as marginalized artists, migrant workers, miners, Tibetans, the disabled, the elderly, the poor, and those who are queer-identifying.

While lesbianism has been the focus of several films since the new millennium (beginning with *The Box* [Ying

2001] and *Dyke March* [Shi 2004])¹, female impersonation and transgenering are also salient queer subjects (arguably starting with *Miss Jing Xing* [Zhang 2000]) in this wave of independent documentary filmmaking. In this article, I would like to focus on two Digital Video (DV) documentaries of the latter category: *Snake Boy/Shanghai Nanhai* (Chen and Li 2001) and *Mei Mei* (Gao 2005).² I have chosen these two documentaries because of their main subjects' involvement with different forms of transgenderism³ that, taken together, incisively demonstrate the particular ways queer-identifying subjects in contemporary China negotiate their agency in terms of temporality, spatiality, individuality/collectivity, money/labour, and imagination. As will become clear, the often mutually conflicting political, economic, and cultural forces characteristic of China's postsocialist condition mediate these factors.⁴

1. For a discussion of lesbian documentary films from China, see Chao.

2. *Snake Boy* and *Mei Mei* were shown at the first and second Beijing Queer Film Festival in 2001 and 2005, respectively. For an insightful analysis of queer representation in New Documentary *vis-à-vis* digital technologies and queer bodies, see Robinson (112-29).

3. For an account of the history and practices of cross-dressing in Chinese theater, see Li. For a recent joint endeavor in the emerging "Chinese transgender studies" that brings to light a wide variety of transgender practices ranging from theatre to literature, to religion, and to popular cultures in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, see Chiang. Here, I follow Chiang's definition of transgender as "practices of embodiment that cross or transcend normative boundaries of gender" (7).

4. Chris Berry has argued for an understanding of Chinese postsocialism in parallel with Jean-Francois Lyotard's articulation of postmodernism, proposing postsocialism as a state in which "the forms and structures of the modern (in this case socialism) persist long after the faith in the grand narrative that authorizes it has been lost" ("Getting Real" 116). Meanwhile, Berry maintains the distinct material condition of Chinese

As the eponymous subject of *Snake Boy*, Coco is a talented, gay-identifying jazz singer based in Shanghai. Coco's persona, however, has drawn criticism by noted China Studies scholar Paul G. Pickowicz, for whom Coco appears to be little more than "a neocolonial invention and soulless plaything of the new and profoundly unattractive 'expatriate' community in Shanghai" (16). While Pickowicz's stance is informed by postcolonial criticism from a macro approach that unwittingly downplays the individual, my subsequent analysis on a micro level will point to the contrary, particularly the queer agency involved in Coco's self-fashioning of his stage performance and offstage persona. However, where Coco's performance enlists transgenderism through an emphasis on vocal style over attire, my discussion of stage artist Meimei (the central subject of *Mei Mei*) draws attention to her transgenderism as a performance that involves *both* attire and vocal style. As I will stress, Meimei's attire and vocal style vary according to the changing geopolitics interwoven with the subject's life trajectory

Snake Boy and *Mei Mei*, I argue, express queer agency as negotiated through a spectrum of gender performance. By queer agency, I refer to the will and life-force that is often perceivable in and through queer subjects' resistance to, or negotiation with, heteronormative institutions and expressions, be they gender-based or otherwise. In tension with Judith Butler's articulation of "gender performativity" as a totalizing heteronormative mechanism, the queer agency animated by Coco and Meimei is made visible and audible through the subjects' "refusal to repeat" heteronormative gender ideals (Straayer 176). Additionally, their queer agency is notably played out against the parameters of both temporality and spatiality. Borrowing (and queering) Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of "chronotope" ("time-space"), my use of "queer chronotope" shares the emphases in current queer scholarship on queer temporalities and sexual geographies that prove to be so foundational to the subject formation of various sexual dissidents.⁵ Coco and Meimei's negotiation of their dissident subjectivities, I contend, is further imbricated in China's postsocialist economy. To some measure, it contributes to what Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel call an "alternative archive" that, as a feature of the New Documentary and a crucial part of the aforementioned "alternative public sphere," houses unofficial documents and affects that are unrecognized or marginalized by the official discourse.

postsocialism characterized by the "contradictions" between economic force and ideological control, which simultaneously exercise substantial influence on public discourse and cultural expressions ("Staging Gay Life" 168).

5. This growing scholarship on queer temporalities and sexual geographies includes writings by Carolyn Dinshaw, John Howard, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and Elizabeth Freeman, among others.

Filed in 2001, *Snake Boy* presents a vivid portrayal of Coco, a then-twenty-four-year-old jazz singer who, since age seventeen, had been performing in Shanghai nightclubs. Trendy and fluent in English, Coco is nonetheless not a Shanghai native, but originally from Shaoyang, a remote county in Hunan Province in central China. While the word "snake" in the film's English title refers to both the sign of the Chinese zodiac Coco belongs to and the mystical image of the snake to which Coco likens his own persona, the film's Chinese title—literally translated as "Shanghai boy"—indicates Coco's intimate blending of himself into Shanghai's cosmopolitan culture and glamorous nightlife. Aside from shots that follow subjects or showcase settings, the film is, for the most part, composed of original interviews conducted with Coco, his parents, his former teachers, and those who befriend him either personally or professionally. These interviews are interspersed with video footage, photos, and print materials from Coco's past.

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The film offers a portrait of Coco, who was born in 1977 to parents who were both professionals in local Chinese opera. Coco's musical talent was apparent from a young age, and in 1994 at age sixteen he became the youngest student at the prestigious Shanghai Conservatory of Music. The first years of Coco's study in Shanghai coincided with a prospering of city nightclubs that featured musical performances. Here, Coco encountered jazz for the first time; enthralled by this particular musical genre, he soon began performing jazz in nightclubs. At this stage, he modeled his singing style after Billie Holiday. In the meantime, Coco also came to terms with his gay identity. The film goes on to recount his first relationship—an interracial one—in France in 1997, following his decision to drop out of school while pursuing a career as a stage and recording artist.

Two themes are fundamental to this narrative: one centres on Coco's performance, and the other concerns his sexual orientation. Not only are these themes inseparable from one another, they are interwoven by a sense of queer agency. Notably, Coco's immense attraction to jazz involves layers of self-fashioning in his subject. As a musical genre that underlines the performers' improvisation and personal



Coco performs “The Girl from Ipanema” at a fashionable Shanghai club

expression, jazz is often recognized for its “spontaneity,” expressive freedom and an emphatic sense of “individuality” (Berendt 371).⁶ This characteristic, in a postsocialist setting, potentially resonates with a deep-seated sensibility that overtly rejects the previous generations’ forceful renunciation of any individualism in favour of the collective interest under socialist nation-building. This, in short, can be taken as “a defiance of the hegemony of collectivism” characteristic of socialist China (Chen and Xiao 148).

Indeed, as an artist who grew up in post-Mao China, Coco associates his own pursuit of a musical profession with his father. In Coco’s view, his father possessed great musical gifts but “his times [the socialist era] did not allow him the full opportunity to showcase his talent and fulfill his dream.” Given that Coco sees his artistic pursuit as a succession of his father’s ambition, Coco’s performative aim inextricably involves a negotiation of personal expression that, while bearing the temporal ramifications of postsocialism, finds its clear voice in jazz performance.

Further, Coco’s jazz singing involves multiple boundary-crossings. When Coco sings like Billie Holiday or Lena Horne, he—as a non-black male jazz vocalist—virtually crosses the boundaries of race, gender, and culture on a phantasmatic level. The phantasmatic, according to Butler and Slavoj Žižek, is characteristic of human subjectivity, in that it involves the constant writing and re-writing of identificatory boundaries, and which comes into being through fantasy staged against the *mise-en-scène* premised upon the exclusion of certain expressions rendered illegitimate or unintelligible in the Symbolic (Butler

6. Joachim-Ernst Berendt defines jazz as a form of art that originated in the United States through the confrontation of African American and European music. He argues that jazz differs from European music in that the former has a “special relationship to time defined as ‘swing;’” it involves “a spontaneity and vitality of musical production in which improvisation plays a role;” and it contains a “sonority and manner of phrasing which mirror the individuality of the performing jazz musician” (371).

93-119, Žižek). Here Coco engages in a kind of “sonic drag” (Koestenbaum 165) that, by crossing the boundaries of race, gender, and culture through singing, recreates the *mise-en-scène* for his subject formation. This recreation is key to Coco’s staging of a subjectivity that is different from the Chinese mainstream, and that is primarily marked by gender ambiguity and queerness. While Coco’s particular performance style allows him to exercise his queer agency, it also provides Coco with a strategy to negotiate his gay identity in public, where he can strategically act out—but not specifically spell out—his queer identification. This strategy was especially significant before March 2001, when homosexuality was finally removed from the list of mental disorders issued by the Chinese Psychiatric Association.

When Pickowicz criticizes Coco as a “neocolonial invention and soulless plaything” patronized by Shanghai’s expatriate community, he reductively assumes a macro approach by trying to critically define Coco’s performance in relation to a cultural framework dominated by the West (16). His criticism somehow neglects Coco’s gay identity, along with Coco’s negotiation of his queer subjectivity through musical performance. In his critique of Coco’s lack of agency, Pickowicz also conveniently ignores the fact that Coco does not stop at imitating Billie Holiday or being what Pickowicz describes as a “lesser version of the original” (16). As the film shows, Coco and his band have been avidly experimenting with fusing jazz to a variety of music, ranging from Chinese percussion music, to Chinese folk song, to bebop. These musical experiments point to yet another layer of negotiation in Coco, who—against the pitfalls of Western cultural imperialism or neocolonialism—is first and foremost a self-conscious musical artist in addition to being a gay vocalist.

In sum, Coco fashions his queer subjectivity through artistic performances marked by self-conscious musical experiments, in addition to his blurring of gendered, racial, and cultural boundaries. Against the pitfalls of Western cultural imperialism, Coco’s queer agency emerges from his defiance of both heteronormative institutions and socialist collectivism. His self-fashioning against the socialist era, together with his willed migration from Shaoyang to Shanghai (China’s most culturally inclusive metropolis profoundly influenced by the open-door policy in the post-Mao era), notably registers the temporal-spatial ramification of Chinese postsocialism, embodying the kind of queer chronotope at stake in this essay.

Like Coco, the titular subject of *Mei Mei* is not native to the metropolis, but was born and raised in Dandong, a small border city in Northeastern China.⁷ However, unlike Coco, Meimei’s transgender performance, incorporates

7. For a more detailed discussion of *Mei Mei* along with Zhang Hanzhi’s *Tang Tang* (2005), see Chao.



Meimei in her flamboyant costume in a Beijing bar

both vocal style and costuming. Shot between late 2003 and early 2005, *Mei Mei* is divided into three sections: the first leads to Meimei's "farewell concert" before her marriage to a man, which turns out to be short-lived; the second revolves around Meimei's attempt to return to performing life, which is eventually cut short by her illness; and the third depicts Meimei's sojourn in Dandong with her parents. While the film involves the subject's travel between Beijing and her hometown, it notably sheds light on certain aspects of cross-dressing that are mediated by changing geo-politics. For instance, when in Beijing, Meimei sometimes chooses to wear skirts even when she is offstage. However, when Meimei leaves for Dandong, she must wear trousers instead, so as to eschew the scrutiny and gossip of the locals. Clearly, Meimei enjoys greater autonomy in

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regard to her appearance in Beijing, a metropolis, than in her hometown, a small and remote city. As a small-town sexual dissident whose personal desire contradicts public expectation, Meimei could have sought relative autonomy in Beijing. Yet, by the film's third act, Meimei cannot help but acquiesce to the regulatory constraints of her hometown after losing her mobility due to poor health and economic distress. Not only must Meimei give up her preferred feminine apparel and long hair, she also loses the stage for cross-dressing performance in her desired fashion.

Meimei's life trajectory, to a large extent, coincides with the logic of what Judith Halberstam calls "metronormativity" (36). This refers to the tendency in many normalizing narratives of LGBTQ subjectivities to conflate the urban with the visible, while treating the rural as what John Howard terms a "geopolitical closet" that renders queer subjectivities invisible (xix). Constrained as she is during

her protracted recovery at home, Meimei nonetheless starts to practice Peking opera, demonstrating her queer agency. In a broader sense, the viewer must take into account that, in Peking opera, a matrix of "formulated" (*chengshi hua*) skills associated with various role-types (*hangdang*) and an abstract signifying system of stage installation have been developed over the centuries.⁸ While the gender system in the Peking opera is not fully subject to the principles of reality, operatic transgenderism is also justifiable as an artform. The fact that Meimei practices Peking opera while stranded in Dandong can thus be understood as an expedient through which she can moderately channel her desire for female impersonation, while simultaneously distancing herself from the negative imaginaries associated with "gender inversion" (*xing daocuo*). In so doing, a sense of queer agency nevertheless emerges from her denied queer subjectivity.

Just as Coco's jazz performance registers a postsocialist ramification in its emphasis on personal expression and a Westernized outlook considered illegitimate in socialist China, Meimei's cross-dressing performance in Beijing is likewise inflected by postsocialism on at least two levels. On one level, Meimei justifies her transgender performance by arguing that she earns a living by her own labour (*kao ziji de laoli zhuanqian*). Meimei's argument acutely blends the concepts of money and labour, respectively the two valuations most foundational to capitalism and socialism (Rofel 96-127). Chinese postsocialism, as has been noted, is exactly marked by the uneasy coexistence of capitalism and socialism.⁹ On another level, Meimei's rendition of Chinese pop songs from Hong Kong (particularly late queer icon Anita Mui's "Woman as Flower" [*Nuren hua*]) further indicates a cosmopolitan dimension in her queer subject formation that desires a phantasmatic transcendence of the local by way not so much of the West (as in Coco's



Meimei performs Peking opera in plain clothing in a local community centre in Dandong. The characters behind indicate the centre's political affiliation with the Communist party.

8. For an account of the history and practices of Chinese theatre, see Mackerras.

9. See, for example, Dirlík and Zhang.

case), as by way of the regional. For Meimei, gender arguably forms, to quote Butler, the very “vehicle for the phantasmatic transformation of ... class” (130). In other words, cross-dressing performance animates the fantasy of becoming a woman—a “real” woman—in order to find an imaginary man who represents the promise of permanent shelter from homophobia and poverty. For some Chinese female impersonators, the consumption of transnational mass media thus involves the negotiation of a trans-local imaginary mediated by gender, where gender is always embedded in class and inseparable from sexual orientation. It is through the transgression of gender norms that a trans-local imagination free from poverty and homophobia is simultaneously activated. Such processes, I suggest, configure a crucial dimension integral to the subject-formation of numerous male-to-female gender-crossing practitioners in postsocialist China.

Snake Boy and *Mei Mei* foreground queer agency as it is negotiated through the spectrum of transgender performance as played out against the parameters of temporality—namely postsocialist vs. socialist eras—and spatiality, particularly the urban/rural divide, and the local-regional-global nexus. The subjects’ negotiation of their dissident subjectivities also brings into focus China’s postsocialist economy, as exemplified by the way in which subjects come to terms with such valuations as individuality vs. collectivity, and labour vs. money. Together, they shed light on the intricate dynamic between queer agency and queer chronotope in a postsocialist environment. These two documentaries manifest a crucial part of the queer experience that is socially grounded yet marginalized in mainstream discourse. With the commitment of the filmmakers and their queer subjects alike, such queer experiences also become an indispensable dimension of the expanding alternative archive contributed by China’s New Documentary films.

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