

A Complex Landscape of Fun, Queerness and Desire in China: Introducing Three Films by He Xiaopei

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ABSTRACT

This article documents He Xiaopei's work as a film activist who contributes significantly to feminist and queer movements in contemporary China. Trained as a social scientist, He Xiaopei then went on to become the director of the civil organization Pink Space Research Center in the mid-2000s as well as an independent filmmaker. Since 2010, she has produced more than ten documentary movies. However, despite the greatness of her contribution, the range of the topics she has covered, and her position in the feminist and queer movement in China, she has yet to receive the attention she deserves in English-speaking academia. This article selects three movies by He Xiaopei, i.e., *The Lucky One*, *Playmates*, and *Bad Women of China*, and provides an intersectional analysis of gender, friendship, migration, sexuality and intimate relationships, as seen through the lens of an ever-changing China on the global stage. At first glance, the three movies focus on different figures and themes, but they share the same core spirit – breaking through boundaries and limits, maintaining humour and positivity even when facing predicaments, embracing desire and depicting humanity as it manifests in complicated modern life.

Keywords: independent film, feminist and queer movement, film activist, China

INTRODUCTION

This article introduces the work of avant-garde independent filmmaker He Xiaopei, an original voice in contemporary China, who has contributed significantly to feminist and queer movements. Based on a close reading of her films and several in-depth interviews with He Xiaopei, this article focuses on introducing three of her films at different stages of her career. This includes the *Lucky One*, *Playmates*, and *Bad Women of China*. These highlight fun, queerness, and desire as three major characteristics of her films. By paying attention to women, children, and marginalized groups, He Xiaopei's work challenges patriarchy and heteronormativity and puts desire onto the agenda of the feminist and queer movement in China.

He Xiaopei is a woman who has not chosen a conventional path. After she graduated from middle school, she was sent to the countryside as part of a group of Intellectual Youth (*zhishi qingnian* 知识青年) and worked as a shepherd for several years. After the Cultural Revolution, she enrolled in college and later became an economist at the State Council. She has also been on many adventures, taking part in different kinds of extreme sports, such as diving, mountaineering, and winter swimming. She even joined the National Team of Mountaineering in the 1980s and continues to practice her love of winter swimming to this day. In the early 1990s, she was involved in lesbian organizations (He, 2001). In 1995, she went to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, where she encountered feminist and queer activists. Inspired by this experience, she quit her stable, high-end job, to

pursue a PhD in Cultural Studies in the UK, which she completed in 2006. In 2007, she founded the Pink Space Sexuality Research Centre with three other bisexual and lesbian activists. This organisation focuses on promoting the rights of sexually disadvantaged groups. When working with marginalized groups, including women living with HIV/AIDS, wives of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, and people with disabilities, He Xiaopei found that filmmaking/video anthropology was a powerful way to not only document participants' lives, but also to empower them and let their voices be heard. Following this she taught herself filmmaking and went on to make many provocative films.

He Xiaopei is based in Beijing and has produced 11 documentary films since 2010. Despite her significant contribution and her position in the feminist and queer movement in China, she has yet to receive the attention she deserves in English-speaking academia. Her films cover a wide range of topics and themes, including diverse families (e.g., polyamorous family, arranged marriage between lesbians and gays), marginalized groups (e.g., women living with HIV/AIDS, people with disabilities), friendship, lifestyle choices, and womanhood.

While He Xiaopei's films depict diverse topics, they share some similar key characteristics: First, the space she gives to humour—there is a certain sense of humour embedded in all of her films even when He Xiaopei discusses rather grave issues, for example, illness, disability, death, divorce, and poverty. This use of humour is partially traceable to her character as a person; she is known to often make jokes about life. It can also be traced back to her viewpoint that both 'feminist and queer movements need humour and optimism to keep the activists moving forward' (He, 2017).

Second, the centrality of queerness. Seemingly distancing herself from identity politics and refusing to label her films as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Trans) (He, Kehoe and Bao, 2019), He Xiaopei has embraced the concept of queer, which is more fluid and inclusive, and mobilising 'queer, as a verb (doing rather than being) ... to challenge normative knowledges, identities, behaviours, and spaces, thereby unsettling power relations and taken-for-granted assumptions' (Hunt and Holmes, 2015: 156 cited in Lee, 2019). He Xiaopei's films, for example, often pay attention to a group of people who could not simply fit into the binary gender categories, namely, 'non-conformist queers and alternative lifestyle advocates' (He, 2017), including two pairs of lesbian couples who shared an apartment and chose to enter 'heterosexual marriages' with gay men (*Our Marriages—When Lesbians Marry Gay Men*, 2013). In another film, there is an English transgender person who has had gender affirming surgery but refuses to conform to normative notions of a trans woman and instead chooses to dress boyishly (*Yvo and Chrissy*, 2017). This deliberate centring of marginalised and non-normative people is noted by He Xiaopei herself in a 2014 interview where she said: "I want to give voices to women, to the disabled, to transgender people, to the poor, the sick, and the homosexual. These people are underrepresented, misunderstood, and often unseen." The third key theme across He Xiaopei's films is desire. As the most private emotion, desire is usually hidden away or expressed in a delicate fashion. In contrast, He Xiaopei depicts the desires of her characters in a candid way. This connects to her worldview of human beings: she believes in a sense of agency and autonomy as the most essential qualities of human beings, and that desire and sexuality can empower people to be themselves (He, 2017).

In this article, I introduce the film activism of He Xiaopei by focussing on three films that offer an insight into the range of her filmmaking as they concern different topics and are produced in different years: *The Lucky One* (2011, 36 minutes), *Playmates* (2018, 46 minutes), and *Bad Women of China* (2021, 82 minutes). My focus is on illustrating how these films examine the intersectionality of gender, illness, friendship, womanhood, sexuality and intimate relationships, as seen through the lens of an ever-changing China on the global stage. At first glance, the three films focus on different figures and themes, but, I suggest, they share the same core spirit – breaking through boundaries and limits, maintaining humour and positivity through difficulties, embracing desire, and depicting humanity as it manifests in complicated modern life.

THE LUCKY ONE: WHO IS THE DIRECTOR?

The Lucky One is a film about the last few months of the life of a Chinese woman, Zhang Xi, who has AIDS and is also suffering from advanced liver cancer (Figure 1). Facing her upcoming death, Zhang Xi starts to audio-record the story of her life. On the one hand, she looks back upon her own life and reflects on her intimate relationships; on the other hand, she captures the current moment of her existence by audio recording her stories.

He Xiaopei got to know Zhang Xi through a community activity organized by the Pink Space Centre for marginalized women groups. At the time, many queer NGOs were set up with the help of international HIV/AIDS funds and often with the support of the Chinese government (Hildebrandt, 2013; Bao, 2018). He Xiaopei noticed that women living with HIV/AIDS had little voice within the HIV-positive groups and that their needs and desires were overtly ignored. In contrast, HIV-positive gay men had a much louder voice within the group and could mobilize many more resources. Thus, she decided to organize marginalized women so as to allow them to voice their needs and be able to support each other.



Figure 1. *The Lucky One* (2011, 36 minutes): An HIV-positive Chinese woman with only a few months left to live, reveals her hidden desires. Nominated for Best Documentary at the 9th China Independent Film Festival, the film was also available online where it achieved more than 100,000 hits (Picture authorized by He Xiaopei).

He Xiaopei organized a series of workshops to bring together women living with HIV/AIDS, lesbians, bisexual women, and wives of gay men (Jolly et al., 2013) to talk about their stories and discuss their desires. The workshops created a safe space for women to share their feelings and their desire to take care of each other. He Xiaopei was successful in receiving funding to purchase some digital recorders and distribute them to several women in order to encourage them and provide them with the means to document their feelings and stories in their daily lives. These interventions are an example of how the activism of her filmmaking reaches beyond the screen, beyond the subject matter of her films. Despite her efforts, Zhang Xi was actually the only one systematically using the recorder to audiotape her own stories. He Xiaopei was intrigued by her way of storytelling and decided to make a film about her.

The Lucky One documents the interaction between He Xiaopei and Zhang Xi, and their main discussion about whether Zhang Xi should tell her son about her illness and the fact that she was approaching her death. Zhang Xi insisted that the stigma of AIDS would ruin her son's future, and to protect her son, she is willing to make sacrifices and choose not to see him one last time. He Xiaopei tried hard to convince her to tell her son 'so that he would have the chance to come and see his mother one last time and avoid any regrets later' (He, 2014). Even during Zhang Xi's last birthday party, her son did not show up. After Zhang Xi's death, He Xiaopei in a strange turn of events found out that her friend never actually had a son.

In this film, He Xiaopei has created a counter-normative character who serves as an image of a female AIDS patient. In the era when HIV/AIDS was filled with stigma, women living with HIV/AIDS were often described as miserable, isolated, and victimized. However, Zhang Xi did not fit into any of these descriptions. In fabricating her own life story, and inventing a son, she challenged and pushed the boundaries of the documentary genre. 'Lucky' was the word that Zhang Xi used at her birthday party to describe her life by acknowledging 'the love she received by friends and by her partners'. Even though she was illiterate, unemployed, addicted to drugs, and living in a detention centre for a long time, she did not feel self-loathing or self-pity. She drank, smoked, laughed, and loved. She had regular sex with her partner and was stubborn and argumentative towards him, even reaching the point of beating him up at times. Zhang Xi's unconventional nature could not help but leave a deep impression on any audience watching her story.

A unique element of this film is how the power dynamics of the director and subject/participant were reversed. This reversal raises two core questions: firstly, what is reality? Traditional documentary films set out to depict people and things in a truthful and accurate way. *The Lucky One* challenges this one-dimensional reality. Both the director and the film's participants had their own version of what they perceived to be real. The film media itself allowed both to capture their co-constructed realities and have them depicted on a screen. The second question that arises is: who has the right to tell the story? Of course, He Xiaopei was the director who initially decided to

film a woman not afraid of dying. However, Zhang Xi managed to seize the power of storytelling and switch the storyline to her own desires: she decided which figures would appear in her story and even arranged or fabricated some dramatic events for that purpose (He, 2014). The more He Xiaopei tried to steer the narrative in her desired direction, the more methods Zhang Xi employed to steer away from it. By adopting this strategy, Zhang Xi 'expressed her deepest, most suppressed, and to this day unsatisfied desires' (He, 2014). In the last scene of the film, Zhang Xi was credited as the director, while He Xiaopei only as a camera woman. *The Lucky One* is a 'process-driven' documentary. At the beginning, He Xiaopei was a participatory activist researcher who used visual ethnography in her community work and Zhang Xi was a participant in the documentary. During the process, the participant was empowered and liberated to create her own stories and become a credited 'director'. Compared to *The Lucky One*, the other two films, *Playmates* and *Bad Women of China*, are ethnographic films. In these, the director documents friends and families in their daily lives over a long period of time.

PLAYMATES: EIGHT YEARS OF CHILDHOOD FRIENDSHIP



Figure 2. *Playmates* (2018, 46 minutes): The story follows two boys' relationship through time. One is from rural China, and one is from a small town in the UK. Filmed over eight years, we witness how young children perceive differences in colour, nationality, class, culture, gender and sexuality. Released in Beijing, Shanghai, UK, and India, the film was presented at film festivals, cinemas, universities and galleries (Picture authorized by He Xiaopei).

Playmates is a humorous film that vividly captures the spirit of youth and the carefree nature of a childhood friendship between two boys (Figure 2). He Xiaopei was fortunate to be a close friend of both families the children belonged to and thus got a first-hand opportunity to witness and document the friendship between the two boys from 2010 to 2018. One was Kai, an English boy of mixed-race, of Afro-Caribbean and white European descent from a middle-class family. Kai's mother Susie used to be a project manager of an international research foundation based in Beijing. The other was Zihao, a rural Chinese boy from Sichuan province whose mother Xiao used to be Kai's nanny. In the beginning, He Xiaopei did not have a clear theme or objective in mind; she just took the opportunity to act as a filmmaker and document the two boys' daily lives and interactions. The film emerged as if 'time went by and created a miracle' by itself (He, 2022).

Starting at a birthday party, the two boys begin the journey of their friendship. Their class differences are depicted by contrasting images: Their homes are different. Kai lives in a 2-bedroom house in a reconstructed traditional Chinese courtyard, while Zihao lives in a rented small room at the end of the long and twisted lane. They also go to different kindergartens, with Kai enrolled in a state kindergarten with modern and fancy facilities. In contrast, Zihao goes to a small private nursery run by a retired woman. They spend their Christmas and New Year in the UK and a rural part of Sichuan province in China, respectively. Despite all their differences, they play, fight, laugh, cry, and spend plenty of time together having fun. Even after Xiao quits her job and returns to her

hometown in Sichuan to take over the family pig farm, the two families keep in touch. They visit each other during the summer holidays. One thing stood out from mainstream childhood documentaries—*Playmates* candidly documents how young boys start to explore their bodies, their gender, and their sexuality. They witness big fish being caught in the river, a sheep getting killed, and a litter of pigs being born on the farm. They brag about the length of their penis, try on skirts and wigs, and discuss the differences between boys' and girls' private parts.

This film is about class, but there is much more to it than that. It is about how people achieve mutual understanding despite class difference: two boys formulate a friendship over time, while two mothers develop their own sisterhood. On the one hand, they were different as regards their ethnicity and nationality, their social and economic background, the status of their family, and the cultural backgrounds they were brought up in; on the other hand, we witness two boys having so much fun together and sharing similarities throughout their lives—their parents getting divorced and both having a younger sister to look after. Class is a challenging topic for independent films. It easily falls into the trap of blaming one class for victimizing the other. He Xiaopei skilfully avoids this trap and depicts class distinction through the expression of emotion, and in particular through the relationship between mother and son, between Xiao and Zihao. On a bustling street in Beijing, Xiao was picking up both boys from their according kindergarten to take them home. Though Zihao was the younger of the two, Kai was the one closely kept by Xiao's side. It seems that she had put Kai's needs and safety above Zihao's. This was also the reason why Zihao cried quite often when he lived in Beijing, since he felt ignored by his own mother. His mother needed to take care of someone else's child, over her own, no longer making him her first priority. As such, Zihao was much more at ease when in the countryside, where he was allotted more attention from his mother and Kai was only there as a guest. The anxiety and jealousy felt by the young boy are vividly captured in the film and serve to foreground the tensions of class. Queer and feminist activism in China have been mainly situated in the metropolitan cities among the well-educated middle class, and class itself as an important agenda has often been neglected. He Xiaopei's subtle treatment of the complex issues of class echoes an intersectional approach in exploring gender issues within the matrix of personal emotion and social-structural factors of rural-urban division and migration.

BAD WOMEN OF CHINA: REBELLION IN THEIR VEINS



Figure 3. *Bad Women of China* (2021, 82 minutes): The film tells the story of a Chinese grandmother, mother, and daughter from the 1920s-2020s. Their lives and desires are shown with humour and emotion as they experience political and social revolutions, break the rules, and give each other both trauma and love. Screened at Beijing Queer film festivals in 2021, as the closing film (Picture authorized by He Xiaopei).

Bad Women of China is a film documenting the stories of three generations of women in one family, that of the grandmother (Li Yunqin, Li for short), the mother (He Xiaopei), and the daughter (Xiaoqiao), covering the

timespan of the last century (1920 to 2020). This is an autobiographical film in which He Xiaopei is both director and main character (Figure 3).

This film revolves around complicated mother-daughter relationships, not only the relationship between He Xiaopei and her mother, but also about the relationship between He Xiaopei and her daughter. It is also a film about the intergenerational dynamics between three women; when mother-daughter relationships turn sour, a granddaughter figure serves as the sweet and cute element that smooths things out. The overall theme focuses on finding a way to put aside bias, listen to each other, reconcile, and achieve mutual understanding across generations. Through this process, three exceptional women, who represent rebellion, independence, and free spirit are vividly depicted. Even more importantly, this film weaves personal stories into the social and political history of China's development over a century. The crucial historical moments, for example, the liberation and establishment of New China (1949), the anti-rightist movement (1958), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the economic reform (1978), and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), are all embedded in these women's personal lives. At time they serve as the background of the characters' stories, at others, they become the impelling social forces that push the characters forward and shape their path through life. In each situation, one witnesses the three women trying their best to seize the opportunities presented to them and use their own means to become the masters of their own fate.

Clinging to a strong desire to improve their communication and rebuild the relationship with her mother, He Xiaopei asks her then college drop-out daughter Xiaoqiao to interview her grandmother in the early 2000s. With the granddaughter, Xiaoqiao as a mediator, grandmother Li starts to tell her story. Li was born in 1926 in Tangshan, in Hebei province. When Li was still young, she fought with great stubbornness for the chance to go to school. Because of her determination, Li went from Tangshan to Beijing all on her own when she was only 12 years old, to take the entrance exams, and later to study at the Beijing City Teacher School. It was in the early 1950s, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to establish a Foreign Language Institute and for this purpose recruited students who were training to become future diplomats. Li was quick in taking advantage of the chance to attend a revolutionary university to learn Russian, which opened up the door for a number of new opportunities. She first became a teaching assistant for experts from the Soviet Union, and later became a university teacher. This led to her becoming the department head of the university. Just when everything seemed perfect, Li was denounced as a rightist in 1958 and sent to the countryside to reform herself through labour. At this time her daughter, He Xiaopei, was only two years old. Education became the inner drive for Li to achieve career development and social mobility. Li embraced the ideal of the new independent student and woman, who devoted herself to the course of the revolution and the reestablishment of the nation.

The film narrates the stories of three women, but also their complicated relationships as well. He Xiaopei grew up in a big loving family with a father, grandmother, auntie, and an elder brother. When she was very young, she was often puzzled by the absence of her mother, who chose to live in the university dorms and only came home on weekends. Most of her childhood was spent during the period of the Cultural Revolution. One of her favourite activities was reading the little red book by Chairman Mao in order to get a free bus ride, together with her friends. Over time, He Xiaopei became used to her mother's absence, while at other times, the absence seemed unbearable and disappointing. The longing for her mother's love and attention eventually becomes He Xiaopei's unfulfilled lifelong desire. He Xiaopei never grew close with her mother.

In contrast, the relationship between He Xiaopei and her daughter Xiaoqiao seems close and intimate. They hug, kiss, cook, and tease each other. When Xiaoqiao was a teenager, she came to the UK with He Xiaopei. She attended middle school while Xiaopei pursued her postgraduate study. Over the years, Xiaoqiao experienced He Xiaopei's divorce with her father in the form of a slow but certain process. She also witnessed He Xiaopei proceed to form all kinds of romantic relationships, such as her same-sex marriage which also led to divorce. At first glance, it seems that they have established a perfect modern democratic mother-daughter relationship. However, to He Xiaopei's surprise, her daughter, just like herself, felt neglected by her mother. In the end, He Xiaopei comes to realise that she has grown to become similar to her own mother. The subtitles of the last scene are spoken out of the depths of He Xiaopei's heart, "A thank you to my mum for not teaching me to be a wife and mother. A thank you to my daughter for wanting me to be her mate and friend."

The Chinese sociologist Liu (2014) characterises the intimate relationships of each of the generations portrayed in He Xiaopei's film in three keywords - '*Jiandan*' (simple) for the grandmother's generation (in which marriages tended to be arranged by parents), '*Danchun*' (innocent) for the mother's (in which 'free love' is associated with marriage), and 'rational love' in the youngest generation (in which pragmatism trumps romantic love). The disjuncture between these ideal types, and the three women portrayed in this film suggests all three are rebellious, in their own way.

In the film, one of the most amusing scenes is the comparison of the three women's preferences and dating choices. Grandmother Li describes in the film her type as 'revolutionary hero'. Li met her husband at a revolutionary university. He used to be an underground communist party member and organized protests against

the Kuomintang before the liberation took place. As Li describes, she was attracted by his heroic spirit. They started dating of their own free will, got married and only informed her family after the fact. Her story was not 'jiandan' as her peers and her marriage was her own choice instead of an arrangement by her parents or a matchmaker. For He Xiaopei, her preferred type, as she states in the film, is 'fat with saggy breasts'. In contrast to her 'danchun' peers, He Xiaopei had her first sexual experiences when she was working in the countryside as a shepherd. This was the first time she was away from home and had a girlfriend. As she explains in the film, the corresponding political awakening for her would be during the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. In the film she describes how she discovered the lesbian tent on the conference site, and then soon came to terms with the idea that being lesbian is not a problem. Later she divorced Xiaoqiao's dad and started to live openly as a lesbian. Xiaoqiao describes in the film her type as 'clean and good looking'. The film narrates that Xiaoqiao was popular among boys and started dating and became sexually active earlier than most. She did not maintain a stable relationship as her peers did and had a long list of boyfriends and flings from various countries. In the film she is seen as taking control of her dating and sexual life: willing to try things out but also not hesitating to give things up.

The interaction between the three women brought a lot of laughter into the film. Sometimes, their relationships are triangular, with Xiaoqiao in the middle as a mediator to ease the relationship. Though it seems that Xiaoqiao is not willing to play the role of peacemaker all the time, being naughty from time to time and using the word 'pervert (*biantai*)' about He Xiaopei's homosexuality to create tensions in the relations between her mother and grandmother. At other times, the three of them are divided into two opposing sides with the two of them sided together to tease the third. There is an amusing scene revolving around showing a postcard titled *The Great Wall of Vagina* (designed by Jamie McCartney) to the grandmother. He Xiaopei wants to show it to her mother but asks Xiaoqiao to do it. They debate this and neither of them really wants to be the one to show it to Li. Later, Li looks at the postcard very closely but is confused about what it is. At another point in the film, the only time He Xiaopei and her mother are on the same side, the grandmother attempts to emphasize the importance of schooling to Xiaoqiao. Her grandmother believes in the significance of schooling since her whole life revolved around schooling and her striving to move upwards. However, Xiaoqiao emphasizes seeking happiness by dropping out of school. At this point, the two generations fail to reach an agreement.

Through focusing on three women within one family, *Bad Women of China* brings women's voices to the forefront, in order to create a landscape of images of courageous women over a century. In a way, one could say that the three women in this film represent progressive women pioneers in the socialist era, post-socialist era, and cosmopolitan era, respectively. In each historical period, they each encountered similar and yet different predicaments and challenges. They demonstrate their resistance and agency in solving problems and finding their own way.

MAKING HE-STYLE QUEER FILMS

He Xiaopei believes in the power of documentary films. In her opinion, 'Documentaries are an integral part of social movements, and they should inspire people to continue their work' (He, 2017). It often took He Xiaopei a long time to make a film. It took her eight years to complete *Playmates*, over fifteen years for *Bad women of China*, and an additional two years for the production of *The Lucky One* after all the shooting had been completed. Her extended engagement over long periods of time gave her the opportunity to look back upon her work and ruminate on the overall progress and depiction of what she was aiming to achieve. During the entirety of her work, He Xiaopei maintained a very intimate connection with her films and did not hesitate to be present and appear on camera. Of the three films mentioned, she is least seen in *Playmates*, though her voice can often be heard in the background, reminding the audience of her presence. In *The Lucky One*, she is a supporting character, while in *Bad Women of China*, she is one of the main characters. In traditional documentary films, the directors are often invisible and attempt to document objective stories with holistic perspectives. In contrast, He Xiaopei's presence within these films, is her way of taking up a unique and changing position. She is the director who brings out her own personal perspective and queer sensibilities in the most straightforward manner to reach her audience.

BREAKING THROUGH BOUNDARIES AND LIMITS

All three films discussed here are about breaking through boundaries and limits. *The Lucky One* is an unusually candid dialogue with a dying woman living with AIDS and cancer. Despite having death approaching, the dying woman was still busy searching for the meaning of life. She made a deliberate decision about fabricating a son for herself in order to make her life more fulfilled. This story crosses the boundary of life and death, reality and fiction. *Playmates* depicts the friendship between two entirely different boys in terms of nationality, ethnicity, and class.

Instead of illustrating children as innocent and passive, as most films tend to do, this film portrays the two boys as active agents that explore their gender and sexuality. The issue of class has been artfully embedded into the storyline and into the means by which the main character expresses emotion. This story talks about class but also moves beyond it. *Bad Women of China* is about three women who belong to the same family. This case can be interpreted as the historical progression of women in China. Before the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, the new women's image was guided by the grandmother figure. This was a model based on a group of revolutionary and educated women patriots. He Xiaopei represents a second wave of feminists in China who were inspired by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Finally, Xiaoqiao symbolizes a group of young women in an era of globalization and cosmopolitanism who believe in seeking happiness through their individual life choices. Pivoted around depicting mother-daughter relationships, this story raised the philosophical question of 'who am I' for all women of all ages in China.

LAUGHTER AND TEARS: MAINTAINING A HUMOROUS OUTLOOK AND DEPICTING PREDICAMENTS

In relation to queer films and related academic work in China, Bao (2018: 30) once commented that most, 'works of art and academic writings seem abstruse, if not depressing, for community consumption, because of their theoretical density and aesthetic avant-gardism'. He Xiaopei's films never belonged to this type of queer film. Humour is the core characteristic of her films. He Xiaopei's technique is distinctive – an amateur look that combines the famous 'on the spot' style of Chinese 'xianchang(现场)' independent cinema with a more relaxed humorous outlook and commentary not usually found in such films¹.

A key aesthetic I have highlighted here is how He Xiaopei builds contrasting surprises between scenes. For example, in *The Lucky One*, at the end, we are surprised to find out that Zhang Xi's son never existed. In *Bad Women of China*, there is a line, "I thought when chairman Mao died the sky would fall, but over the course of the next few days, universities reopened, and the youngsters took their college entrance exams." In another scene Xiaoqiao is selected as one of 'top 50 young British designers' but this is contrasted in the next scene, where she becomes a 'full-time seamstress in a factory'. The contrasting lines and scenes often catch the audience by surprise and create a unique sense of humour.

Both *The Lucky One* and *Bad Women of China* touch upon suffering and trauma. However, the characters often briefly mention their suffering and even smile with tears in their eyes. This is He Xiaopei's way to express she does not want to ignore the suffering and trauma, yet she believes strongly in all women's power to deal with predicaments of any kind. Across all her films, she shows faith not only in the strength of women, but also in the strength of marginalized diverse individuals.

Furthermore, the music used in the films adds to their humour. Especially in *Playmates*, the background music is cheerful and light-hearted, produced by Kai's dad Orvil Layne. Sometime the rhythm of the music and the content of the scenes (for example, both Susie and Xiao getting a divorce) creates a contrast, thereby producing He-style entertainment and humour. As He Xiaopei said in an interview, "One can use different art forms to express ideas. It is the ideas behind these forms that matter. I want to express my ideas in a way that speaks to the audience. Therefore, the stories have to be interesting. In this case, it should be more visually acceptable, not in terms of being pretty, but in terms of being more audience-friendly" (Bao and He, 2019).

EMBRACING DESIRE AND DEPICTING HUMANITY

He Xiaopei regards documentary films as a medium to allow the desires and experiences of characters to be expressed, recognized, and understood. He Xiaopei refuses to regard women, children and other disadvantaged groups as powerless victims, and she has faith in capturing desire as the powerful engine that moves human beings.

The three films capture the desires of everyone alike, including women, children, and marginalized groups of people. The dying woman Zhang Xi in *The Lucky One* had the unfulfilled desire of having a son and being a mother. The two little boys in *Playmates* desire to have a giant penis and dress like pretty girls. The three women in *Bad Women of China* show different types of desire: what the grandmother Li values most is independence as a woman, He Xiaopei is searching for her true self at all times, while Xiaoqiao places happiness as the most valuable goal in life.

Neither Chinese Confucian culture or communist central ideology encourage people to talk about desire, especially pleasure-based desire related to our body and our sexuality, particularly not in public. In contrast, advertising is a very public discourse on the desire for material goods. It is often the case that sexuality is used to

¹ This argument is inspired by the anonymous reviewer.

sell things and it is women's bodies which are objectified through this process. The industry of pornography and of sex workers, creates the space for some people to talk about bodily desire, although this usually happens in stereotypical ways which further enhance the patriarchal system². The avoidance of a public discourse about desire is also reflected in the women's movement in China, which has mainly focused on women's liberation in the public space, including obtaining rights to jobs and education in the socialist era (1949-1978) and fighting against gender-based violence in the private domain during the reform era (1978 till now, especially after 1995) (Wang, 2017), leaving discussions about desire, body, and sexuality largely marginalized within the feminist movement. Against this background, He Xiaopei's work is especially valuable in recognizing desire as a human right, challenging mainstream culture, tradition, commodified discourses, and pushing forward, expanding the frontiers of the feminist and queer movement (Jolly, 2022).

PUSHING FORWARD FEMINIST AND QUEER MOVEMENT

He Xiaopei is a film activist who contributes significantly to feminist and queer movements in contemporary China. "The history of global feminist and queer activism has often been dominated by Western perspectives" (Jenzen and Lewin, this issue), and most of the time global movements set up the agenda and strategies for developing countries to follow. The rising of the second wave of the feminist movement after 1995 in China has also been deeply influenced by the transnational feminist movement which includes placing anti-gender-based violence as the key element of the agenda. As a feminist, He Xiaopei belongs to the generation of the second-wave feminist activists directly influenced by the 1995 World Women's Conference. Instead of following a conventional path of fighting against gender-based violence like other peer feminists, He Xiaopei chose to come out as a lesbian and work in the domain of desire and sexuality. In China, discussions on desire and sexuality are often perceived as challenging and oftentimes they are regarded as dangerous and even forced to be hidden. He Xiaopei's work on the other hand often make use of the 'participatory approach' (Bao, 2020) which aims to lift the veil, engage with marginalized groups, and challenge patriarchy, heteronormativity, and the victimization of women.

Her films have been well received among the new generation of young feminist groups in China. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the current young feminist groups is that, like He Xiaopei, many of their members identify themselves both as women and as lesbian or bisexual. Some of them cross the boundaries as both feminists and queer activists. Many of them are urban women in their twenties or early thirties who have benefited from the one-child policy, being well-educated, single, and working in NGOs for women's rights (Wang, 2017), while others hold white-collared jobs. He Xiaopei's work strongly resonates with them, in speaking to a desire that is usually hidden away. Moreover, many queer figures in He Xiaopei's films have become their role models which encourage them to pursue their true identity in their 'precarious' daily lives (Huang, 2017).

Despite the fact that homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and depathologised in 2001 in mainland China, the Chinese government still adopts strong censorship and silences public discussion and representations of LGBTQ+ issues (Huang, 2017; Zhao, 2020; Guo and Evans, 2020). Under such circumstances, the Chinese LGBTQ+ community follows the Western strategies of activism, namely increasing 'visibility' through being outspoken and full of 'pride', an approach that sometimes may seem counterproductive or even problematic. The position of queerness, in He Xiaopei's films bring an acute sense of 'ambiguity, playfulness and non-determination' (Chiang and Wong, 2017), and may give birth to an alternative space for activism. A queer positionality has given He Xiaopei the opportunity to manifest a more inclusive perspective and to pay attention to topics and people which the mainstream feminists and LGBTQ+ movement ignored, i.e., wives of gay men, lesbian and gay formulated contracted marriages, people with disabilities, and so on. By listening to and documenting their stories, He Xiaopei's films create a special space of participation and emancipation. They even address the issue of 'active queer-feminist interventions into global politics' (Bao, 2020). Using stories of desire as an entry point, the queerness of He Xiaopei's work challenges and questions the 'fundamental assumptions and the power structures embedded in mainstream cultures and values such as race, marriage, intimate relationships, kinship, class, ableism etc.' (Zhao, 2020). The films make people laugh, cry, think, and act. In *Bad Women of China*, Xiaoqiao asked He Xiaopei, 'mom, what do you want to achieve?' He Xiaopei replied, 'I do not want to achieve anything. I just want to tell a story.' A story can be very powerful.

² This paragraph is inspired by the anonymous reviewer.

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