

10 YEARS OF QUEER CINEMA IN CHINA

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The photographs celebrating “10 Years of Queer Cinema in China” document two important cultural events that have been rarely mentioned in the discussions of Chinese underground cinema in the U.S. – the 1st Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival at Beijing University in November of 2001 and the unofficial screening of Andrew Cheung’s SHANGHAI PANIC in Shanghai during February of 2002. They were taken during the festival and at the screening, at restaurants and at parties connected to these events, and while I was meeting with some of the directors. The film festival and screening coincided with the year I was on sabbatical leave teaching English in the Journalism Department of Communications University of China. This was not the first time I had been to China, nor are the photographs of these events the first I had taken of

Chinese involved in the arts. I had been doing this in Beijing and Shanghai for two summers. Becoming friends with Chinese writers, artists and film people, I felt comfortable and at ease whenever I was around them or their friends. Consequently, I did not consider myself as a complete outsider when I attended film events and met new people in Beijing and Shanghai during my sabbatical.

In fact, I was beginning to feel more at home and freer in China than I had been in the U.S. for decades. I am of the generation of 1968. My personality has been shaped by the intensity of the struggle for racial equality, the anti war movement, the confrontational spirit of left wing politics and the excitement of living in San Francisco during the mid and late 1960s. Therefore, I experienced the important cultural events in China during 2001 and 2002 as a return to my roots – 1st New Image Festival at Beijing Film Academy (shut down by the government after two days), 1st Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival at Beijing University (shut down by the government after one day), Wu Wenguang’s unofficial screening of *DANCE WITH FARM WORKERS* in a corporate building, and Wen Hui’s naked dance rehearsals. And while this was happening, Jia Zhang Ke’s *PLATFORM* was shown in local bars, and later, during my semester break, I participated in events celebrating the screening of Andrew Cheung’s *SHANGHAI PANIC*. Later in the spring, I attended the unofficial book party for *MY CAMERA DOESN’T LIE* at Beijing University with members of the “urban generation” of young

film directors in attendance and met with writers and artists in their new studios in 798 factory which was just emerging as an important cultural site.

What is important about this period is that many Chinese were attending the same events. People heard about them on the internet or by word of mouth. Some traveled long distances to attend them. Consequently, there was an emerging sense of community and at times a collective feeling of euphoria about embracing a new culture that was openly challenging repressive social boundaries. Everyone believed something important was happening, and in some way, they were participants. While Chinese were not allowed to see any of the “outlaw” films in public, reporters wrote about them in national magazines. As a result, many Chinese knew about them and some were eventually screened in universities and bars all over China.

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Sometimes one event or a sequence of events can define an important cultural moment that will have far reaching consequences. We now know that the 1st Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Beijing and the screening of Andrew Cheung’s SHANGHA PANIC in Shanghai mark the moment in China when gays and lesbians were beginning to organize their own events and make their own film culture, and these efforts were connected to a broader movement for artistic and personal freedom which is still on going. In China, state sponsored film archives and museums do not collect underground films and are not committed

to preserving its history. Consequently, the memory of an emerging tradition - queer cinema - will fade away and disappear unless those involved or who witnessed its beginnings bring attention to it. This is what I hope to do through my selection of photographs.

The first three series of photographs cover the events connected to the 1st Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival at Beijing University. One was taken during the festival, a group photograph of the organizers and photos of the audience (F1, F2, F3). In these photos, there are three of China's leading underground film directors: Shi Tao, a lesbian artist and experimental film director, Cui Zi'en, an internationally acclaimed gay film director and Zhang Yuan, a director from the "urban generation" whose groundbreaking film EAST WEST PALACE was the first Chinese film to focus on gay life. Another series is made up of photos of some of the film directors who screened their films: Li Yu (F5), director of ELEPHANT AND FISH, Liu Bingjian (F6), director of MEN AND WOMEN, and Ying Weiwei (F7), director of THE BOX. There is also a photo in this group of Xiao Lu (F4), a journalist who wrote about underground film events for LIFE WEEK (sheng huo zhou kan), and there is a series of photographs (F 8, F9, F10, F 11) of a private party after the festival was shut down by the government. Shi Tao and Cui Zi'en appear in these photos along with their friends and actors and actresses from the films that were screened. What stands out in these photographs is the intensity and excitement everyone felt. We all understood the historical

importance of the festival and the events which celebrated it.

The last series of photographs document several events surrounding the unofficial screening of SHANGHAI PANIC. There is a photo of Mian Mian (F12), the novelist, dancing in her apartment. She was an underground cult figure at the time whose writing had been banned by the government. She wrote the short story SHANGHAI PANIC is based on and acted in the film. There is one of Andrew Cheung (F13), the director of the film who went on to make other films about the gay subculture in China, and there are photos of Casper and her girlfriend (F14, F15) at the party Mian Mian gave for the opening. They also had parts in the film. Everyone in this circle knew about the underground film festivals and screenings in Beijing and saw their activities as linked to them and to a counter culture which had been in existence since the early 1990s.

What was I feeling while I was taking photographs? Exhilaration by the communal sense of solidarity and the belief that culture can change people's lives!



F1 First Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, 2001. Second row. Shi Tao (L1), Cui Zi'en (L2), Zhang Yuan (L4)



F2 First row Zhang Yuan. Second row Shi Tao



F3 First row Zhang Yuan. Second row Shi Tao



F4 Xiao Lu



F5 Li Yu



F6 Liu Bingjian



F7 Ying Weiwei



F8 Cui Zi'en (L1) and friends



F9 Cui Zi'en (R1) and friends



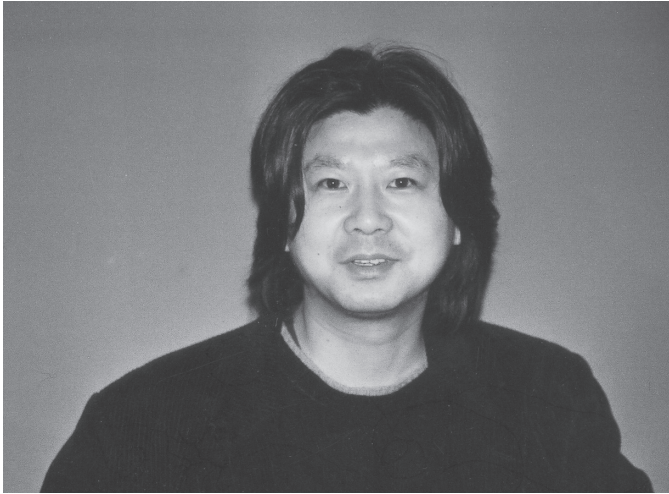
F10 Shi Tao (center) and friends



F11 Shi Tao (L1) and friends



F12 Mian Mian



F13 Andrew Cheung



F14 Caspar and girlfriend



F15 Caspar and girlfriend

CONTRIBUTORS

Norman A. Spencer is a professor of English at S.U.N.Y. Nassau. He edited with Yan Li an “unofficial” book on Chinese underground art and poetry movements in Beijing during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. An interview with him was published in Bei Dao’s TODAY / JINTIAN in 2007. He is currently working on a photography journal that documents his experiences among Chinese writers, artists and film people.