

# THINKING QUEER ACTIVISM TRANSNATIONALLY

## Going public: Transnational Pride politics and queer grassroots activism in China

by Elisabeth L. Engebretsen

A note about this piece<sup>[1]</sup>

This paper reflects on queer grassroots activism in China, in the context of globally travelling queer and gender theory, politics and culture.<sup>[2]</sup> In particular, the importance and meaning of public visibility in activist struggles for rights and equality is examined in lieu of China's unpredictable political and social environment, and with a focus on exploring the creative and tacit strategies that are employed in order to (attempt to) circumvent official censorship. To illustrate, I draw on three public Pride events that took place in different decades and different cities. Whereas these events are not representative of broader changes in any straightforward way, I suggest that they illustrate shifting articulations of local agencies, transnational connections, and the structural limits posed by political authorities in China, and therefore serve as a counterpoint to scholarly literature and activist discourse taking democratic civil societies as starting point for analysing queer activism and Pride politics.

Whereas queer movements globally share the broad aim to achieve social acceptance, justice and liberation, locally specific strategies often differ substantially in ways that limit the usefulness of making all-encompassing generalizations about 'westernization' or 'globalization' as such. A growing body of scholarship has documented variegated local differences and convergences in ways that debunk the notion of a universal and monolithic sexual or gendered identity.<sup>[3]</sup> At the same time, a dominant narrative on the desired meaning of queerness and activism structures much media discourse as well as academic research. This globally travelling narrative rests on a specific articulation of appropriate identity politics defined by public visibility, especially the centrality of the 'out and proud' or 'coming out' discourse on sexual and gender identity, and annual Pride festivals. However, this 'global queering' process is not to be interpreted as a simple process of emulating western values and 'losing' local identity.<sup>[4]</sup> Jackson emphasizes the critical importance of neoliberal capitalism and market-based cultural appropriations of global flows of 'finance, goods, people, images, and ideas', but warns that these transformations are complex and always partial, with local differences and modalities. In this way, global queering involves some measure of 'Westernizing homogenization', but simultaneously 'produces hybridization in which local agency is as important as subordination to foreign influences.'<sup>[5]</sup> Still, expanding transnational circuits of queer liberation movements and cultures have generated considerable scholarly writing, much of which is critical of the 'globalization of the gay movement'<sup>[6]</sup> and the underlying hegemonic and 'western' centred paradigm that continues to frame much Anglophone scholarly literature and activist politics in this regard.<sup>[7]</sup>

Critical interdisciplinary scholarship on transnational sexualities and gender diversity does important work in pointing out the limited ability of hegemonic models to accurately describe and analyse realities beyond the cultural contexts in which they were produced.<sup>[8]</sup> In short, these models reproduce a Eurocentric and static version of sexuality, gender and liberation, and are therefore unable to convey the nuances and divergences of localized practices and priorities that are inconsistent with this framework. In particular, queer anthropology has offered ethnography-based critiques of how, in much of this scholarship, the quest for equality and liberation is folded back into a familiar narrative of identity politics, through the lens of western sexual modernity.<sup>[9]</sup> This perspective interprets sexuality according to a process of individual self-discovery and a journey toward self-acceptance and identity. This model is fuelled by a powerful rhetoric of pride and public visibility (being 'out and proud'), firmly territorialized within urban space. Its moral opposite is shame, being in denial, closeted, and silent, shaped by (residues of) tradition. But more than simply being critical and identifying shortcomings of dominant paradigms, these critical perspectives offer conceptual alternatives to thinking about sexual/gender difference and political possibilities. China offers a pertinent case study of global queerness in its local appropriations as it is not a democratic civil society.<sup>[10]</sup> What happens to public dissent and protest in countries where 'difference' is not legally protected, and dissent censored and persecuted? How can public Pride take place in such contexts, and what activist devices are designed accordingly?

In a country with neither formal recognition nor criminalization of homosexuality as such, activist movements are in a difficult position when negotiating social visibility, outreach strategies and media profiling. Public parades and other mass events are, not surprisingly, nearly impossible; censorship and arrests are common

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state-sponsored strategies. Finding alternative strategies that manipulate conventional modes of organizing and the meaning of public presence and the aims of activism tout court, and which simultaneously minimize the likelihood of government censorship and closure, are imperative.

In order to situate emergent queer visibility in regional and global contexts, it is necessary to rethink the orthodox view of the inherent link between visibility, empowerment and recognition. Hegemonic models tend to emphasize values such as spectacle, confrontation and occupation of urban central space, and do so in ways that direct themselves not just at the general public but specifically at political and moral authorities, for example the government, or Church officials. As Francesca Stella has noted on Russia,<sup>[11]</sup> and Jason Richie on Israel-Palestine,<sup>[12]</sup> these articulations may be well received internationally but are problematic locally, in some countries drawing hostile responses from traditional power-holders, even provoking outright violence. Homophobic currents in Africa and Eastern Europe have been discussed to some extent, linking homophobic violence to uneasy processes of post-colonial or post-Soviet transitions. In China, such levels of violence are absent, but there still exists profound discrimination, tacit violent retributions and rights deprivation including censorship, surveillance and intimidation tactics.

### Three Scenes of Public Activism

Chinese queer grassroots activists have developed coping and movement strategies aptly described by some as 'guerrilla' style, due to their ad-hoc, non-territorialized use of (parts of) public space. This concept also describes activists' communicative and outreach practices, which seek to minimize the likelihood of official censorship or closure rather than maximize confrontation and general public attention.<sup>[13]</sup> Anthropologist Lisa Rofel, in a recent essay on sexual politics and grassroots activism in China, discusses the spatial politics of movement, for example describing activists as 'nomadic subjects' due to their ad-hoc event organizing at shifting locations. China's nomadic queer activists are savvy in 'reading' government authorities; they 'experiment' with shifting strategies to avoid obstacles, and they 'maneuver within and around the various powers that shape subjectivities, socialities, political beliefs and economic inequality in China.'<sup>[14]</sup> In other words, activists are politically highly literate and creative agents, at once accommodating their strategies to hegemonic power structures and articulating alternative ones, some of which are successful and others that might be less so. This is what I call a strategic queer politics of contingency. On one level, this strategy appropriates tacit articulations of Pride politics and rights discourses. However, it also focuses on communication and outreach to the general public, allies as well as queers, instead of giving primacy to overt political confrontation directed at the government. In turn, this strategy prioritizes ad-hoc stunts, as opposed to lingering occupation, in urban public space on symbolically significant dates, such as the last weekend of June (Stonewall), 14 February (Valentine's Day), and 17 May (International Day against Homo/Bi/TransPhobia, IDAHOBIT).

### Celebrating Stonewall in Beijing

One of the earliest public queer events took place in Beijing in June, 1996. It was a party designed to celebrate the anniversary of the Stonewall movement. In a sense, this event was closely connected to international circuits of 'gay rights' activism, through its invocation of a symbolic global community rooted in the Stonewall movement. At the same time it was borne out of very specific local contexts and connections, some with regional, others with transnational reach. One of the leading activists since the mid-1990s and a co-organizer of this party, Xiaopei He, wrote about this milestone event; it aptly conveys the nuances of this important moment of going public:

The first time we organized a politically related activity was in a small bar, to commemorate the American Stonewall homosexual movement anniversary. In 1996 in Beijing, there was still no tongzhi bar. This time, we learnt from past experience, and told all the people we knew to go to a very quiet bar in a small lane, to take part in a 'birthday party'. We bought a birthday cake and little presents. Sixty people came, among them eight women. This was the first time this many women took part in a get-together. Wu Chunsheng [another central community activist at the time] quietly told me that there were plainclothes police in the bar. We thought of a way to get around that.

First we sang 'Happy Birthday' and cut the cake. Then I said to everyone, 'Can you guess whose birthday it is today? Come and whisper it in my ear, and if you get it right, you will get a present (which were condoms and sweets wrapped up). Everyone started to ask each other whose birthday it was. People who knew about Stonewall told those who did not, who then came and whispered to me. Everyone one by one came to me and said 'Today is the American homosexual movement commemoration day'. One boy when he heard the story ran over to me and said 'I know! I know! Today is the birthday of all of us!' When I heard his words, I was very moved, and my heart skipped a beat. I whispered what he said ... to other tongzhi. I thought, that's probably what the tongzhi movement means. We unite together, we have a common birthday,

From that day, this bar became the first homosexual bar in Beijing. This backstreet bar was always empty, so we decided to make it our hang-out. The owners were never fully welcoming, but needed the clientele. It became almost 100 per cent tongzhi every night. (51)

The Beijing Stonewall party was a milestone event for several reasons. First, it brought local queers together in a decidedly public – if not overtly visible – backstreet bar, which in itself marked a significant achievement and sense of collective empowerment. Second, the party hosted several women (eight) in addition to sixty men, and this was the first time that this many women participated in community activism. Due to the prevailing patriarchal social order at the time, women often lacked the degree of autonomy and resources required to participate; their access to urban leisure space was often limited to family-oriented activities, and participating as an individual would be suspicious; in some contexts it still is.<sup>[15]</sup> The third issue is that the many published accounts of the birthday party have been vital to generating a collective cultural memory and archive of queer existence and grassroots activism. Archived memories of a history and origin, such as He's

description of the Stonewall anniversary party in 1996, function as starting points and sources of inspiration for activist achievement and community building today, as younger queers enter activist networks both in real life but especially online, in much larger numbers than before.

And fourth, the broader context in which the party took place is important: small nondescript bars downtown were already sites for regular, low-key get-togethers, mostly attended by men only. This growing informal public presence helped generate sufficient trust to enable the Stonewall celebration to attract a critical mass of participants. Think, for example, of the community spirit exhibited by the whispering contest of whose birthday it was, combined with the correct answer ('all of us'). Demographically, the participants included a diverse combination of foreigners living and working in Beijing, local men and women engaged in tongzhi social activism, and their friends.

The Beijing birthday party was an early instance of public queer community activism. The simultaneous presence of references to Stonewall and foreign participants, alongside savvy locals who knew how to manipulate the authorities, demonstrates a China-specific queer activism that cannot meaningfully be understood merely to emulate 'the west'. By this point, economic reforms had enabled a growing market for commodity- and consumer-based leisure practices, such as bars. Beijing queers utilized this newly emergent capitalist sensibility to gain access to mainstream leisure spaces, by using the bar owners' need to generate revenue. As He put it, managers were not so much supporting queers as they 'needed the clientele.'<sup>[16]</sup> Similarly, during my own fieldwork in Beijing eight years later, where I studied emergent lala (lesbian) social communities and activism, the weekly women-only bar events benefited from mainstream venues' desire to make a profit. Hence, lala organizers were able to host 'special interest' events in downtown venues.<sup>[17]</sup>

In the years since the Stonewall anniversary party, and especially after the turn of the millennium, alternative articulations of visibility and grassroots activist strategies have emerged with some urgency. Mediated by generalized and inexpensive access to social media, including the Internet, cell and smart phone communication technology, variegated voices within the broad category of the queer community have emerged. Some of these voices are orienting toward transnational practices of Pride for inspiration. To illustrate key issues of these transformations and emergent tensions and conflicts of interest, I will discuss two more events, starting with China's 'first ever Pride festival'.

The 1st Shanghai Pride, 2009



Shanghai Pride 2009: Being Bay in China." Video by Aritz Parra for The VJMovement

The first Shanghai Pride Festival (Shanghai Jiao'ao Zhou) took place during the second week of June, 2009. The organizers – a mix of foreigners and Chinese – labelled the extensive bilingual (Chinese and English) promotional material that appeared both online and offline with the catchphrase 'China's first ever Pride festival.'<sup>[18]</sup> Shanghai Pride – which has become an annual event since – generated considerable global media exposure, and a string of high-profile English language media reported on it, including the New York Times, Newsweek, the BBC and the Huffington Post<sup>[19]</sup>. The dominant media narrative presented a sparkling picture of glitzy cosmopolitan liberation and celebration whereby China's queer population finally came out proudly in public. This news even made it to the state-run English-language newspaper China Daily, which hailed the festival as a sign of China's successful social reforms.<sup>[20]</sup> Notably, however, news of the festival was absent from the Chinese-language edition, Zhongguo Ribao. When authorities closed down some of the scheduled events – including a film screening and a play – the overseas media resorted to the familiar story of governmental repression and lack of civil rights progress.

The media discourse's selective emphasis on Shanghai Pride as 'a first' in China carried certain side effects that have political consequences for activist concerns in a transnational perspective. Most importantly, this discourse effectively erased knowledge regarding previous local initiatives that played with alternative, roundabout definitions of 'Pride' and 'the public'. Earlier years of Pride month activities such as flying rainbow-patterned kites (fang fengzheng de huodong) on the Great Wall and in public squares in numerous provincial cities, despite vigorous online and social media publicity and archiving of images and narratives, were invisible to a hegemonic, transnational and predominantly Anglophone archive of queering China. In short, the violence of the discursive claim to a 'first' is to eliminate pre-existing practices from the emergent archive. It reproduces a familiar binary understanding of queerness and/in China: being out and proud can only happen in the cosmopolitan public, by utilizing globally travelling Pride symbolism and LGBT rights discourse, and by being organized and supported by foreigners.

At the time of Shanghai Pride I was in Beijing for a research project, and I could not help feeling intrigued by the festival organizers' promotion of it as 'China's first' such festival, given the vibrant recent history of similar festivals, festive events and other annually held community markers of 'Pride Month' within LGBT communities. I wondered what definitions of Pride they had developed for their festival and how they considered Shanghai Pride's relationship with the broader queer grassroots activist initiatives in China. How different and new was Shanghai Pride, really, when set against the longue durée of low-key queer activism

prior to its inception? Indeed, many earlier events, some of them held ritually every June with explicit references to 'Pride' and Stonewall used Rainbow and Pink Triangle symbols, such as flags, kites, wristbands and buttons. Contrary to what the overseas media reports seemed to suggest, Chinese queers were already deeply immersed in globally traveling queer pop culture and rights politics, organizing festivals and similar activist events on a regular basis, and they had been for years. In light of this, I contacted the festival organizers to find out more about Shanghai Pride and the organizers' thinking around this discourse. Eventually, I got in touch with Jake, a Shanghai resident originally from another country in the region and one of the organizers of 2009 Pride. When I asked him about their use of the 'China's first Pride' catchphrase, Jake was quick to correct me. More than a slogan, this wording was simply a description of a known fact. To illustrate what he meant, he went on to define Pride:

[It] should be multi-dimensional, multi-day, it should cut across various spheres: celebration, education, arts/cultural, sports, etc, and most of all, it should be an opportunity for a collective coming out for the LGBT community as a whole. This coming out element is a key crucial element: if I and my friends waved rainbow flags in the privacy of our own homes, that would not be pride. If we organised a one-off hush-hush event at some back alley local bar preaching to the converted (as has been done many times before), that would not be pride. If we organized a pride event that is not out in the press, and not known to anyone else in the world but the local gay community, that would not be pride, too.<sup>[21]</sup>

Our conversations allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the politics of Shanghai Pride at that time and what distinguished it from previous events. Their intention was to organize a public event over several days, spanning both fun and politics, both satisfying a seasoned existing queer community and 'showing off' to the rest of society. With almost limitless enthusiasm, overseas connections and experience, and considerable local support, they succeeded in many ways with their 'first' Pride festival, despite suffering a few setbacks caused by the local police.<sup>[22]</sup> Shanghai Pride has since become an annual event, continuing to draw considerable overseas media attention.

The event of the 2009 Shanghai Pride illustrates broader tensions regarding the role and purpose of grassroots activism in light of competing ambitions and the transnational and regional travelling of people, resources, and media cultures. The stakes involved are particularly high in locations such as China, where social and activist movements are illegal or at the very least politically problematic, where personal risk is considerable, and formal protective legislation is absent or minimal. To illustrate, let me highlight three interrelated concerns regarding the 2009 Shanghai Pride event: spatial location, public visibility and the limits of identity politics. First, the public urban spatiality necessary for Pride reaches beyond 'the privacy of our own homes' and communities, into the hyper-visible general public. It thus transcends the discrete visibility of the private, personal sphere – to which backstreet bars belong – to enter public space marked by qualities such as being mainstream, hypermodern and cosmopolitan. This kind of ideal definition, however, equates Pride with a very particular and narrow narrative of urban citizenship and queer belonging: one that excludes certain groups of people and experiential domains that must be included in a queer demography. This erasure is perhaps most poignantly related to socio-economic class: poorer people not only have less money but also less free time, they face greater risk and greater consequences of exposure (because they have less social capital that might influence authorities), and they have less access to transnational cultural capital, including English language proficiency. Participating in big events like Shanghai Pride is thus more risky and less fun for some members of the queer community. Nonetheless, this hegemonic politics – by preferring to highlight commonalities and assimilate into a dominant Pride politics – forecloses the possibility of a co-existent discursive space to articulate needs and make visible a broader array of queer lives, voices and desires.

The second issue concerns media visibility that extends beyond 'the local gay community' into mainstream society and creates a media event of global reach. This implies that public Pride festivals connect to global circuits of queer activism and justice-seeking movements. Finally, according to the Shanghai Pride narrative, being out and coming out is a categorical – and implicitly identity-based – collective event that connects individuals to local and transnational communities of like-minded people. This Pride definition aspires to represent the 'LGBT community as a whole', inside and outside of China's national borders. Simultaneously, however, this discourse goes a significant way toward reproducing certain structural power inequalities, whereby 'local' events that do not readily translate into established transnational gay and lesbian rights and identity discourse are made invisible, implicitly dismissed, for instance for being too secretive, small-scale, and internal – located in 'back alley bars' and being 'hush hush' one-off events.

The Pride narrative that emerges here could be considered a hegemonic Pride politics, in that it instructs on the desirable ways to celebrate queer life in the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai. I would suggest that this interpretation of public Pride activism aligns in important ways with the 'global queering' discourse, whereby alternative articulations of Pride and visibility strategies risk being side-lined, discredited, or even erased. By taking a closer look at Shanghai Pride and situating it alongside different versions of Pride that pre-dated it, the picture that emerges is one of multiple strands of generative activist events and narratives; some actively re-appropriate the globally circulating Pride concept, others do not. What we could usefully take away from these interpretive tensions is less the observation that different communities articulate public Pride politics differently, than the recognition of coexisting queer activisms, some of which align more closely with global activist ideologies than others.

My final case study turns to public Pride parades, and considers how a parade occupies urban space temporarily to celebrate sexual and gender diversity. In this way, local activist strategies may be said to be joining – at least for a moment – a global community of contemporary 'out and proud' activist practice through the lens of annual Pride parades.

From Hunan with Love: A Public Pride Parade, 2013

## Changsha LGBT Pride Takes Place, Organizer Detained 长...



Changsha LGBT Pride Takes Place, Organizer Detained." Video by Queer Comrades

On May 17, 2013, more than one hundred queers and allies gathered in Changsha for a public parade near a scenic university campus, demanding equal rights and protesting against discrimination. Participants carried rainbow flags, large banners and signs demanding rights and equality. The organizers titled it the 'Mainland China (Changsha) Anti-Discrimination Summer Event'.<sup>[23]</sup> Many commentators within Chinese queer communities deemed it a successful event because happened peacefully and without incident, and because it was considered the first public parade in the country. The location and timing of the parade are both interesting. Changsha is Mao Zedong's birthplace; thus the city is deeply invested with political symbolism. Moreover, alongside the dates associated with Pride and Stonewall, May 17 is gaining global activist significance as the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), and celebrated in many countries worldwide and in China since 2008. While the event itself did not trigger official interference, police detained four people later that day. All but one were released after a few hours, but the main organizer, affiliated with Changsha LGBT group 'Hunan with Love', was held for twelve days before the police released him without charges.

Changsha Pride happened simultaneously with other public events to support IDAHOBIT in China: In southwestern Chengdu members of local groups LES Chengdu and Tongle Chengdu organized a flash mob dance to Kelly Clarkson's 'Stronger' outside a Starbucks coffee shop in a shopping mall. In southern Guangzhou city, local activists handed out IDAHOBIT fliers to passers-by outside a shopping mall. Police approached them, took some of the activists away for questioning, and released them later that day. According to published reports, the police's main concern was distribution of fliers without official permit, not the fliers' content. And in Beijing, renowned film maker and activist Fan Popo, wearing a t-shirt saying 'We want to see gay movies', demanded that the State Press and Publication Administration of Radio, Film, and Television overturn the ban on queer topics (alongside 'pornographic and vulgar' topics) and called for transparency in their review processes.

These public Pride events demonstrate the growing confidence of local and regional queer activists to articulate their needs and show their existence in public space. The Changsha Pride Parade in particular turned a corner in terms of public activism. By holding the Parade on the scenic riverside streets in Changsha's university area, the organizers appropriated the meaning of 'public space' in a way that probably allowed it to take place without being shut down. Had they attempted a Parade at the public square downtown, the outcome would likely be quite different. After his release, the main organizer stated that the Parade was worth being detained and questioned, and he would gladly risk it again.

Taken together, the diversity of this day's events in their appropriations of urban public space – including the use of compelling global LGBT rights symbolism, all the while demonstrating their keen awareness of local political constraints, and playing queerly with the grey area of holding unauthorized events and public visibility – show the contingent politics and practices of queer activism across China today.

### The Contingencies of Queer Activism in Public

The three snapshots of grassroots queer activist organizing that I have discussed here make clear that the modes of organizing and ideologies of activism are becoming increasingly diverse, inspired as they are by regionally and globally circulating discourses and practices regarding sexual rights and diversity cultures. Moreover, it is important to note that this form of activism – mobile, transformative, multilingual and based on a multi-media platform – feeds off the almost unlimited speed and reach of new media technologies. This 'time-space compression' inspire new ways to connect and imagine life and love for those traditionally disenfranchised by hegemonic national structures, especially in non-democratic locations like China.<sup>[24]</sup> At the same time, the discussion also shows that the structural constraints that shape and, ultimately, limit activist visibility remain dominant, and local and regional activists show tremendous creativity and strength in continuously adapting to, and (usually) staying a step ahead of censorship and closure. Therefore, experimenting with alternative and shifting notions such as the 'public', 'Pride', and alternative forms of 'activism' is critical to China's queer movement and its future.

Queer community events in China, then – whether they are categorically out in public or they take place in semi-private space such as community centres or online micro-blogs – do important work of intervening and interrupting dominant cultural and political representations of sexual and gender minorities as morally deviant, mentally ill and infected (as carriers of HIV). On a local level, these events help to push queer voices up from the underground and into the social consciousness of those taking part in queer communities, in other activists directed at other kinds of minority life in the country, and sometimes into mainstream society.

Accounts of such activist strategies – as they, too, travel transnationally in the mainstream media as well as via digital media channels such as the Queer Comrades webcasts documented by Stijn Deklerck and Xiaogang Wei<sup>[25]</sup>, and documentary film making by such prominent artist-activists as Popo Fan<sup>[26]</sup> and Cui

Zi'en<sup>[27]</sup> –challenge dominant versions of gender and sexuality theory and queer politics more broadly. Queer theorist Petrus Liu has insightfully shown how Anglo-American queer theory typically sees China as a relevant concern 'only as the producer of differences from Western queer theory.'<sup>[28]</sup> The referent of Chinese specificity, Liu suggests, often has the effect of establishing China as existing in the past and lagging behind in progressive queer development. Alternatively, he offers, China is placed as exceptional and unique, and therefore categorically outside of (and hence irrelevant to) queer theory proper. A 'Queer China' focus, Liu proposes, adds local knowledge to the existing body of transnational queer studies and academic-activist politics; not only that, but a 'queer China' perspective' complicates simplistic theories and politics of queer pride and liberation more generally. In turn, the emergent catalogue of queer activist world-making – the fractions, instances, ad hoc organizing alongside digital archiving and storytelling of transnational reach – are likely to be better situated to organize meaningfully for justice and equality in lasting ways.

It remains true that, due to the political situation in China, queer public participation remains dependent on compliant – or assimilationist – strategies, at least on a (sur)face level. Despite the general absence of confrontational political rhetoric, queer modalities of public visibility and participation are decidedly political. As we have seen here, activists use nuanced modes of articulation and develop meaningful ways to further their political agendas while minimizing the risk of censorship and violence. These communicative strategies convey messages of difference and sameness, or of transgression and compliance, depending on the perspectives of the audiences. In this way, they contribute toward creating powerful, and complex, and yet paradoxical discourses of what it means to be Chinese and queer, in a comparative, geopolitical perspective.

The examples discussed highlight complex intersections in the practice and imagination of queer grassroots activism in China. Here, I have set out to show how local nuances and variations in the appropriation of Pride rhetoric and public visibility strategies as well as creative uses of urban space, speak to the importance of situated visibilities. I would argue that seemingly insignificant events defined by being semi-public/semi-private, intra-community and 'preaching to the converted' are in fact the foundation for creating community; they foster aspirations for future collective events in public that blur categorical public/private distinctions. The fact remains that in China, social stigma, violence and exclusion are the norm for sexual and gender minorities: no formal legal protection exists, heterofamilial norms dominate, and public awareness remains at a minimum. In light of this, the hard work of basic consciousness-raising is ongoing and essential.

The Stonewall Birthday, Shanghai Pride and Changsha Parade demonstrate that it is quite possible to engage in celebration and communication openly and publicly without provoking the kinds of confrontation that sometimes accompany direct speech acts and parades in city space. As Rofel writes: 'Government officials' close monitoring of these activities derives from their anxiety about any social movement that might create social instability as well as from their own felt need to uphold the dominant moral order. Since the government has no legal grounds for outlawing gay life, they often cleverly use commercial laws or procedural regulations to harass gay activists.'<sup>[29]</sup>

It is in light of this unpredictable reality, and the risks involved for those seeking change, that queer grassroots activists have developed a perceptive repertoire of strategies to best manipulate the organizational terrain. These 'nomadic' and 'guerrilla' strategies are, however, not simply to be read as necessary responses to local political circumstances, or even as acts of complicity or assimilation that indicate shortcomings of agency and power. What contemporary queer grassroots activism in all their diverse manifestations demonstrate, rather, is the nuanced ways in which they challenge rigid models that prescribe how queer justice movements should act in order to incite systemic change.

Through the conceptual lens of Pride and public visibility, I have sought to highlight these diverse ways of thinking about activist struggles and their sensibilities – they shift our attention to ad hoc commonalities, strategic alliances, and expose the continued challenges posed by hegemonic structures and inequalities at the heart of activist movements.

#### Footnotes

1. This is an adapted version of a paper previously published as "Of pride and visibility: The contingent politics of queer grassroots activism in China"; in Elisabeth L. Engebretsen and William F. Schroeder (eds.) *Queer/tongzhi China: New perspectives on research, activism and media cultures*, NIAS Press, 2015; pp. 89-110. I am very grateful for the kind permission granted by NIAS Press to reprint the chapter here in a slightly shortened and adapted version. [\[Return to text\]](#)
2. I apply 'queer' as an umbrella category that incorporates a variety of subjectivities, identities, practices, and collectivities related to gender and sexual non-normativity. [\[Return to text\]](#)
3. Tom Boellstorff, "Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology" *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 36 (2007): 17–35. [\[Return to text\]](#)
4. Peter Jackson, "Capitalism and Global Queering: National markets, parallels among sexual cultures, and multiple queer modernities," *GLQ* 15:3 (2009) 357. [\[Return to text\]](#)
5. *Ibid.*, 386-387. [\[Return to text\]](#)
6. Martin Manalansan, "In the Shadow of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma," *GLQ* 2:4 (1995), 427. [\[Return to text\]](#)
7. See Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan IV, eds. *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2002), and Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) for excellent critiques in this regard. [\[Return to text\]](#)
8. By using the term 'Western' I mean to refer to the dominant body of English-language discourse and scholarship originating in the Western European and North America academy. [\[Return to text\]](#)
9. See Boellstorff (2007) for an overview of this literature. [\[Return to text\]](#)
10. Wan Yanhai, "Becoming a Gay Activist in Contemporary China," in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson, eds., (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2001), 47–64. [\[Return to text\]](#)
11. Francesca Stella, "Queer Space, Pride, and Shame in Moscow," *Slavic Review* 72:3 (2013), 458–479. [\[Return to text\]](#)
12. Jason Richie, "How Do You Say 'Come Out of the Closet' in Arabic? Queer activism and the politics of

- visibility in Israel-Palestine," GLQ 16:4 (2010) 557–575. [Return to text]
13. See Yang (2011). [Return to text]
14. Lisa Rofel, "Grassroots Activism: Non-Normative Sexual Politics in Post-Socialist China," in *Unequal China: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Inequality in China* in Wanning Sun and Yingjie Guo, eds., (New York: Routledge, 2012), 158. [Return to text]
15. Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography*, London and (New York: Routledge, 2014). [Return to text]
16. He Xiaopei, "Chinese Queer (Tongzhi) Women Organizing in the 1990s, in Ping-chin Hsiung," in *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, feminists, Muslims, queers*, Maria Jaschok and Cecilia Milwertz, eds., (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 41–59. [Return to text]
17. Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography*, London and (New York: Routledge, 2014). [Return to text]
18. See the Shanghai PRIDE 2009 website: <http://www.shpride.com/pride2009/>. [Return to text]
19. Emily Rauhala, "Shanghai Pride: China Gay Pride Festival Its First Ever," *The Huffington Post* (first published by Global Post, July 16, 2009, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/15/shanghai-pride-china-gay\\_n\\_215785.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/15/shanghai-pride-china-gay_n_215785.html) accessed July 20, 2009; Jacobs (2009). [Return to text]
20. Jacobs (2009). [Return to text]
21. Personal communication with Jake (email 26 October 2010). [Return to text]
22. Police appeared at many festival locations and demanded closure of events. They could frequently be pacified, but not always. The setbacks included having to cancel one film screening and halt the performance of a play based on 'The Laramie Project,' which chronicles the life and the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in the U.S. [Return to text]
23. The Changsha event was a feature of a Queer Comrades webisode in June 2013 titled 'Changsha LGBT Pride Takes Place, Organizer Detained'. I draw mainly on information presented here in my discussion. The webcast is available from <http://www.queercomrades.com/en/news/china/长沙同志反歧视活动/> (last accessed June 10, 2014). [Return to text]
24. Harvey, David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, (New York: Verso Books, 2012). [Return to text]
25. Stijn Deklerck and Xiaogang Wei, "Queer Online Media and the Building of China's LGBT Community," in Engebretsen, Elisabeth L. and William F. Schroeder, eds., *Queer/tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism, and Media Cultures*, (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015), 18-34. [Return to text]
26. Popo Fan, "Challenging Authorities and Building Community Culture: Independent Queer Film Making in China and the China Queer Film Festival Tour, 2008–2012," in *Queer/tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism, and Media Cultures*, Elisabeth L. Engebretsen and William F. Schroeder, eds. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015), 81-88. [Return to text]
27. Popo Fan, "Interview with Cui Zi'en," in *Queer/tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism, and Media Cultures*, Elisabeth L. Engebretsen and William F. Schroeder, eds. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015), 245-266. [Return to text]
28. (Liu 2010: 297). [Return to text]
29. Lisa Rofel, "Grassroots Activism: Non-Normative Sexual Politics in Post-Socialist China," in *Unequal China: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Inequality in China* in Wanning Sun and Yingjie Guo, eds., (New York: Routledge, 2012), 158. [Return to text]