

# **‘We Are Here’: The Politics of Memory in Narrating China’s Queer Feminist History**

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# **‘We Are Here’: The Politics of Memory in Narrating China’s Queer Feminist History**

This article examines the politics of narrating feminist and queer histories in contemporary China. Focusing on Zhao Jing and Shi Tou’s 2015 film, *We Are Here*, a documentary made to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, I examine how the film represents queer women’s history in China and in what discourses such a representation is situated. I argue that the processes of remembrance and forgetting are intertwined in narrating queer women’s history in China. Indeed, while the film successfully recovers a hidden queer history, it also risks erasing the history of socialist and Marxist feminism, as well as China’s socialist legacies at large. I suggest that we should think about Chinese feminist and queer movements in terms of continuities and ruptures by paying attention to their articulations to different transnational discourses at specific historical conjunctures. While *We Are Here* convincingly addresses the transnational influence from liberal feminism, it is also necessary to call attention to the legacies of socialist and Marxist feminism in China and transnationally in contemporary feminist and queer historiography and mediated memories.

Keywords: activism; feminism; film; queer; *We Are Here*

## Introduction

In Zhao Jing and Shi Tou's 2015 film, *We Are Here* (Figure 1), a documentary film about the history of lesbian activism in the People's Republic of China (PRC), many interviewees, most of whom are China-based feminist and queer activists, trace the history of China's queer activism and feminist activism to the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women (UNWCW).<sup>1</sup> They point out how the ideas and practices that they had learned from their international counterparts at the conference informed the feminist and queer activism in which they subsequently engaged.<sup>2</sup> Such an undertone is also evident from the narrative structure of the film. The 58-minute-long documentary is divided into two parts: the first half of the film reconstructs the history and memory of the Fourth UNWCW through assembling together old photographs, historical footages and video interviews with those who experienced the event, with an emphasis on lesbian experiences at the conference; the second half of the film documents the history of queer activism from 1995 to 2015.<sup>3</sup> The message seems clear: the 1995 UN conference marked a milestone not only in international women's history but in China's queer history as well.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the *hanyu pinyin* style of transliteration in this article; Chinese-language names follow their original order in Mandarin — that is, family names preceding given names — unless a preferred spelling or way of ordering names exists.

<sup>2</sup> The Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women (UNWCW), held in Beijing on 4-15 September 1995, was a landmark event for the international women's movement. Over 17,000 participants and 30,000 activists from all over the world attended the conference (UN Women 2015). At the conference, 6,000 official delegates passed the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Levenstein 2018, 336). The 132-page document was signed by 189 governments and became one of the most important documents for women's rights and gender equality worldwide (349). The then US first lady Hilary Clinton made a famous speech titled 'Women's Rights are Human Rights' at the conference (UN Women 1995). The conference was the last, and the largest, of its kind since the first UNWCW held in Mexico City in 1975. It was a major milestone in the history of transnational feminism. The UN has reviewed and appraised each member states' implementation of the *Platform for Action* every five years since the conference, and the review processes are respectively called Beijing+5, Beijing+10, Beijing+15 and Beijing+20.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term for gender and sexual minorities such as LGBTQ people; it does not necessarily denote a post-identitarian politics unless otherwise specified. I suggest that the distinctions between gay/lesbian and queer, and between identity politics and queer politics are rather fraught in the PRC context, and that terms such as gay, lesbian and queer are often used interchangeably in China's queer communities.

[insert Figure 1]

This article offers a critical analysis of *We Are Here* by focusing on how the film represents queer women's history in China and in what discourses such a representation is situated.<sup>4</sup> I argue that as the film conjures up certain memories of the past, it also erases other memories. Indeed, while the film successfully recovers hidden queer histories, it also risks erasing the memory of Marxist and socialist feminism, and socialism at large.<sup>5</sup> I suggest that we should think about Chinese feminist and queer movements in terms of continuities and ruptures by paying meticulous attention to their articulations to different transnational discourses at specific historical conjunctures. While the transnational influence from liberal feminism has been adequately addressed by *We Are Here*, it is also necessary to pay attention to the legacies of socialist and Marxist feminism in China and transnationally.

### **Articulating feminist and queer activism in postsocialist China**

Feminism in the PRC context did not start with the Fourth UNWCW. It has a long history and can be traced to China's enlightenment thinkers such as He-Yin Zhen at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Liu, Karl and Ko 2013). Nor does Chinese feminism follow a single trajectory: what is a woman and what kind of womanhood is desired have been subject to constant debates and ideological

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<sup>4</sup> *We Are Here* was commissioned by the Ford Foundation Beijing Office to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth UNWCW and to document the progress of women's rights in China since 1995. The two filmmakers who made the film are Zhao Jing, editor-in-chief of the Beijing-based and now-defunct lesbian community magazine *Les+*, and Shi Tou, China's leading lesbian artist and filmmaker.

<sup>5</sup> Marxist feminism and socialist feminism, sometimes known as state feminism, are frequently intertwined discourses in modern Chinese history. I therefore use the compound term 'Marxist and socialist feminism' as a shorthand to convey their mutual imbrication in the PRC context. For more discussions, about socialist feminism in China, see Spakowski, 2018.

contestations in modern Chinese history (Evans 1997; Hershatter 2007; Barlow 2006; Edwards 2008). Overall, in the Mao era (1949-1976), Marxist feminism was prioritised while liberal feminism was seen as bourgeois, decadent, and therefore rejected. In the post-Mao era (1977-present), liberal feminism has triumphed over Marxist feminism, with the latter being seen as obsolete and irrelevant to contemporary women's lives (Song 2015; Min 2017). It is therefore important to recognise the Chinese feminism which is not 'one' (Chen 2011) and ask which strands of feminism are remembered and which ones are forgotten in feminist historiographies and public memories.

In contrast, queer movements in the PRC have a relatively short history, although same-sex intimacy has been in existence for a long time in Chinese history (Hinsch 1990; Sang 2003; Kang 2009; Chiang 2018). The Fourth UNWCW is featured prominently in China's queer historiography. In the interviews with queer activists featured in *We Are Here*, many interviewees suggested that the Fourth UNWCW not only brought the NGO type of grassroots mobilisation and self-organising to China; groups of international gay and lesbian activists who came to Beijing for the conference also brought queer activism to China (Tongyu 2011; Zhao and Shi 2015; Wei 2015). Indeed, the Fourth UNWCW had a great impact on feminist and queer movements in China, especially through the concept of the non-governmental organisation (NGO). After all, it was through NGO work that grassroots mobilisation became possible (Hsiung, Jaschok and Milwertz 2001; Wesoky 2002; Wang and Zhang 2010; Li S. 2014; Min 2017).

The relationship between feminist and queer movements in the PRC is rather volatile. As queer activist Xian, director of the lesbian NGO Common Language (*Tongyu*), points out in the film, feminists, especially those working for the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), a nationwide and government-supported women's

organisation in China, does not seem eager to address sexuality and queer issues because of their overall sex-negative attitudes and internalised homophobia (Xian in Zhao and Shi 2015). This situation started to change after 2010 with the emergence of a group of young women who identify themselves as feminist activists (*nüquan zhiyi xingdongpai*). They have used a ‘flash mob’ type of street activism to protest against gender inequality. Their activist strategies include: occupying men’s toilets to highlight the imbalance between men’s and women’s toilet spaces in architectural and urban designs; wearing blood-stained wedding gowns to draw attention to the issue of domestic violence; and shaving their hair to speak against preferential policies for men in university entrance examinations and job market requirements. Many of these feminist activist campaigns have in fact been carried out by queer-identified women. Feminist scholar Li Sipan (2014) confirms the role of lesbian participation in contemporary Chinese feminist activism:

The lesbian movement is the only ‘wild’ feminist movement that does not fall within the remit of official feminist bureaucracy and agenda. Because of this, lesbians have developed their own organisations, networks, media and activist strategies. They led the campaigns against domestic violence among partners and for same-sex marriage rights [...] Behind many feminist activists’ campaigns, lesbians have played an important role [...] Queer people also brought issues such as sexual autonomy, same-sex intimacy and sex work to public attention.

Li’s account captures the conditions and significance of lesbian activists’ interventions into feminist issues in the past decade. Similar to the ‘feminist sex wars’ in the US context, Chinese feminism can also be loosely divided into ‘sex positive’ and ‘sex negative’ camps: while some lesbian activists resolutely stand on the ‘sex positive’ side to celebrate women’s sexuality, sexual autonomy and pleasure, other lesbian activists side with radical feminists to fight against sexual harassment and exploitation. The

relationship between queerness and feminism is therefore highly complex, fragile and contingent.

Perhaps one of the most significant moments for feminist and queer activist articulation was the ‘Sailor Moon Lalas’ (aka ‘Pretty Fighters’) debate in China’s queer communities in 2012-13. It started as an online debate on China’s social media site *sina weibo* between Aibai, a gay men’s organisation, and some *lala*/lesbian identified queers regarding the applicability of queer theory in the Chinese context (Bao 2018, 85). The lesbian-identified queers called themselves Sailor Moon Warrior *Lalas* (*mei shaonü zhanshi lala*). They resolutely defended the use of queer theory in Chinese queer activism against the homonormative gay identity politics advocated by Aibai. The debate subsequently involved more community members and became one of the largest queer community debates in China to date. It also accelerated the formal separation between gay identity politics and queer politics in the PRC. This debate saw lesbian activism gradually divorced from gay activism. Disillusioned by some gay men’s hegemony and homonormativity in China’s LGBTQ movement, many lesbian activists subsequently turned to the international women’s movement for inspiration and support. This led to a surge in queer feminist activism in China in the new millennium, represented by the campaigns carried out by the ‘Feminist Five’, that is, the five young feminist activists arrested for their public campaigns against the sexual harassment of women just before the International Women’s Day in 2015 (Hong Fincher 2018). While it goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss the ‘Feminist Five’ case in detail, suffice it here to say that in popular representation of the group, the activists’ feminist identity has been emphasised, whereas the queer sexuality of some members has been erased. For example, to be accepted by feminists and to gain wider public support, lesbian activists including Li Maizi had to temporarily conceal or downplay their sexual

identities. As Guo Yujie (2015), a lesbian activist from China *Lala/Lesbian Alliance*, remarks:

[L]esbians face a double marginalised and voiceless problem after joining the feminist movement. They seem to become ‘normal’ women, where their sexual identity is no longer important. The fact is that gender and sexuality cannot be the same in a lesbian’s personal experience and political advocacy. Even though more lesbians become visible through feminist activities, we have to protect our marginal identity in this marginal group. And we have to believe that marginal identity is powerful and strong, and that this can bring about a serious challenge and change to the patriarchal system.

From the schematic account of the complex relationship between feminist and queer activism outlined above, it is clear that feminist and queer articulations are highly contingent. Most of the time, there are separation and conflicts between the two, although under particular circumstances, the two issues can be brought together to articulate specific political concerns and activist demands. It is when, why and how such articulations are possible that is of our concern here. The documentary *We Are Here* can be seen as a self-conscious effort to bring together feminist and queer issues and make them engage in critical dialogues with each other. Through this documentary, we can imagine a possible future for an intersectional and coalition politics in the long and arduous struggles toward gender and sexual equality. The imagination of what the future may look like is intimately linked with how the past is remembered.

### **Remembering the Fourth UNWCW**

In *We Are Here*, participants of the Fourth UNWCW remember the conference in different ways. While many accounts in the film confirm the official history of the conference, some anecdotes they share also shed light on interesting and often forgotten histories. According to the organiser Liu Bohong who is interviewed, the preparation



for the conference did not go smoothly. Liu describes how the UNWCW consisted of a formal conference, attended primarily by delegates representing different governments, and an NGO Forum, encompassing all the grassroots activist groups. At that time, the notion of NGO was relatively new for the Chinese government. In the interview, Liu also claims that the government feared the consequence of the idea of civil society being displayed to the general public in China; it therefore took a number of precautions to ensure that everything would be under control. In addition, even before the conference began, there were rumours that sex workers and lesbians would be holding naked parades during the conference, and this was considered to be ‘at odds’ with the ‘socialist morality’ at the time. According to Liu, the Chinese government took two emergency measures to solve the problem: first, the NGO Forum was moved at the last minute from the Beijing Workers’ Gymnasium in central Beijing to the premises of a high school in Huairou, fifty kilometres away from downtown Beijing, to limit its potential negative impact on Chinese society. Second, a team of heterosexual and married policemen were dispatched to escort the women’s march at the NGO Forum, ready to wrap up any exposure of naked body or ‘inappropriate behaviour’ with white bedsheets or blankets (Liu Bohong interviewed in Zhao and Shi 2015).

Despite Huairou’s remote location and the organiser’s lack of experience in organising an NGO Forum, the activists who attended the forum and interviewed in the film still confirmed that they had a productive ten days of intense discussions, both at formally scheduled NGO forums and in loosely structured ‘diversity tents’ programmes. It was estimated that ‘thousands of panels, meetings, cultural events, protests, and plenaries on a wide array of topics’ took place at the forum, making it the biggest ever UNWCW NGO Forum (Levenstein 2018, 337). The lesbian activists even organised a lesbian march which drew 500 women from thirty countries (359). They paraded down

the main street in Huairou chanting ‘lesbian rights are human rights’ and ‘*liberté, égalité, homosexualité*’ (ibid) (Figure 2), escorted by a group of nervous policemen armed with sheets and blankets.

[insert Figure 2]

[insert Figure 3]

According to interviewees who participated in the conference, one of the most controversial issues at the Fourth UNWCW was lesbian rights. Before the conference, more than two hundred organisations had signed an IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission) petition for recognition of sexual rights, and more than thirty countries expressed support for the recognition of sexual orientation or sexual rights (Wilson 1996, 217). The NGO Forum granted lesbian activists a tent, which marked the first formal recognition of lesbian rights at a UNWCW. The lesbian activists wanted more: to write lesbian rights into the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Their campaigning and lobbying efforts yielded some positive results: representing the IGLHRC, Palesa Beverley Ditsie from South Africa gave a speech at the UNWCW conference that year, urging all the participating member states to recognise that lesbian rights are human rights and that ‘no woman can determine the direction of her own life without the ability to determine her sexuality’ (2007 [1995], 409). Although lesbian rights were ultimately not written into the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* due to opposition from some sexually-conservative countries, China included, the Fourth UNWCW still marked the first time that lesbian rights were officially recognised and openly discussed at a major UN conference.

Many conference participants interviewed in the film cherished fond memories of the lesbian tent (Figure 3). The tent, as the film depicts it, was hugely popular among the NGO Forum attendees. It hosted both formal workshops and informal discussions

including a ‘lesbianism for the curious’ meeting (Wilson 1996, 215). At the same time, the tent also functioned as a hub to bring lesbians and their allies together. Although most of the participants were from other countries, there was at least one participant from the PRC: He Xiaopei, then a civil servant working for the Chinese State Council. He Xiaopei describes her experience at the lesbian tent in the film:

The lesbian tent was very active. It was like a gathering centre. Many women went there during breaks, or to attend special events [...] I did not understand many topics discussed at the forum. I only paid attention to pretty and sexy women. (He Xiaopei in Zhao and Shi 2015)

According to He Xiaopei and Susie Jolly, two queer activists interviewed in the film, Chinese queer activists also made special efforts to connect to the international queer communities through this conference. They recall that gay activist Wu Chunsheng (aka Gary Wu) hired two coaches, taking the international lesbian activists who attended the conference to Nightman, a gay club in Beijing, for a ‘Night Woman Party’ (Figure 4). Despite being closely followed and watched by the police, the lesbian guests still had a great time dancing in the club, making contact with local queer people, and later having sex in some locals’ homes (Susie Jolly interviewed in Zhao and Shi 2015). Accused of ‘illegal organising’, Wu was later arrested by the police and sent back to his hometown in Guangdong.

[insert Figure 4]

[insert Figure 5]

Inspired by her experience at the UNWCW, He Xiaopei, interviewed in the second half of the film, engaged in some queer community work, including hosting a Stonewall anniversary celebration event disguised as a birthday party, operating China’s first lesbian hotline, and founding Pink Space, a queer NGO dedicated to the exploration of women’s sexual pleasure. In a rare photo included in the film, three

lesbian activists — Susie Jolly, Shi Tou and He Xiaopei — were having a picnic in Beijing in the 1990s, and this demonstrated the international nature of the queer activism in China at the time (Figure 5). Also interviewed in the film, Cai Yiping, Feng Yuan and Lü Pin confess that they became self-identified feminist activists after the conference. It was no exaggeration to say that the Fourth UNWCW triggered a wave of feminist and queer movements in the PRC. Chinese activists have not only learned that NGOs can be used as a way of self-organising and grassroots mobilisation; they have also started to appreciate the importance of international solidarity in fighting for gender and sexual equality.

### **Feminist and queer activism before 1995**

If the film *We Are Here* conveys a sense that the Fourth UNWCW, and other transnational feminist and queer activist engagements more broadly, marked the beginning of feminist and queer movements in the PRC, such an understanding is incomplete without taking into consideration the social dynamics in China before 1995. As Cecilia Milwertz's research demonstrates, starting in the 1980s, various 'popular women's organisations' — including the Women's Research Institute (which later became the Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre), the Jinglun Family Centre and the Migrant Women's Club — were set up in Beijing and other Chinese cities by women themselves 'to support venerable social groups, to create social change and to challenge gender-based inequalities in society' (2002, 1). These women and organisations started a wave of women's movement in the post-Mao era. Although these organisations did not target LGBTQ people specifically, they played a crucial role in raising consciousness about issues of gender and sexuality.

One of the challenges for Chinese feminist historiography is to assess the role of ACWF, otherwise known as *Fulian*.<sup>6</sup> Founded in 1949 and claiming to ‘represent and maintain the interest of women, and to promote the equality between men and women’ (Liu 2001: 147), ACWF has acted as the official leader of the women’s movement in China. It is responsible for promoting government policies on women and protecting women’s rights within the government. Before 1994, the organisation had over 68,000 branches (including 30 at provincial level, 370 at city level and 2,810 at county level) and somewhere between 80,000 and 90,000 cadres (Howell 1996, 130). Despite being part of the state bureaucracy, ACWF supported many grassroots organisations and initiatives as well. Although the Fourth UNWCW accelerated the mushrooming of women’s NGOs across China, many of these NGOs had to affiliate themselves to, or collaborate with, the ACWF to gain political legitimacy and to get things done. The growth of women’s NGOs took off from 1984 onward, reaching a total of over 5,000 in October 1993 (Howell 1996, 136). By the end of the 1990s there were 6,386 women’s associations and recreational clubs under the ACWF umbrella, and 20,000 group members of women staff committees which made up the various levels of trade unions (Liu B. 2001, 149). Together with the ACWF, these NGOs have contributed significantly to advocating women’s rights in China.

The role of the ACWF, together with the state-led socialist and Marxist feminism it represents, for gender equality in China cannot be underestimated. While liberal feminists often see the ACWF as a tool for the Chinese Communist Party to exert its political and ideological control over women, socialist and Marxist feminists

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<sup>6</sup> Despite being part of the state bureaucracy, the ACWF was introduced to the international community as the biggest women’s NGO in China, and probably in the world, at the Fourth UNWCW. This creative interpretation of NGO, or GoNGO (Government NGO), proved to be beneficial for the establishment of other NGOs, because it effectively made NGO a politically safe term and part and parcel of China’s governance of civil society.

recognise the important role that the ACWF plays in fighting for women's rights and in institutionalising women's rights through laws and state policies. Also, due to popular criticism of the Chinese state, the negative impact on the women's movement by capitalism has often been overlooked by Chinese feminists. As Wanning Sun and Yingjie Guo (2013, 1) suggest, China's economic reforms in the post-Mao era have 'transformed China from one of the world's most egalitarian societies into one of the most unequal in Asia and in the world'. Lisa Rofel (2007) posits that differences in gender, sexuality and desire are part of the package that neoliberalism has brought to China. Min Dongchao (2017, 123) cautions that Chinese feminist scholars and activists 'have always been eager to learn about Western feminism, but often they have not questioned or challenged the dominance of Western knowledge' and are reluctant to question 'what role the terms gender, development, and NGO play in the neoliberal development agenda'. In short, as we celebrate the introduction of a particular strand of Western feminism, liberal feminism in particular, to China, it is necessary to reflect critically on what has been lost in the process and whether other strands of feminism (including Marxist and socialist feminism) have been given sufficient attention. It was the ACWF, together with many individuals and organisations who dedicated themselves to gender and sexual equalities that paved the way for the burgeoning feminist and queer activism before and after 1995.

We should also contextualise the prospering queer activism after 1995 in the history of LGBTQ activism in the PRC in the 1990s. The study of non-normative sexualities did not emerge in post-Mao China until the early 1990s. In 1991, HIV/AIDS activist Wan Yanhai, then working at China's National Health Education Institute, started a research project titled 'Research into Gay Men and Knowledge, Faith, Attitude and Behaviour Relating to AIDS, and AIDS Education Studies'. He also launched the

first HIV/AIDS hotline and chaired the first cultural salon for gay people, ‘Men’s World’, in 1992 (Guo 2015). After the short-lived salon was banned by the Ministry of Health, Wan established the Aizhixing Action Institute, which subsequently became the largest NGO for HIV/AIDS prevention in China. Wan’s pioneering work coincided with a number of publications including Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo’s sociological research into homosexuality, *Their World (Tamen de shijie)* published in 1992; Zhang Beichuan’s medical research into homosexuality *Same-Sex Love (Tongxing’ai)* published in 1994; and Fang Gang’s journalistic writing *Homosexuality in China (Tongxinglian zai Zhongguo)* published in 1995. Most of these researchers were heterosexual-identified; and their concern for sexual minorities was primarily motivated by humanitarian reasons. They often worked with or for the governmental institutions as consultants or experts to make policy recommendations. These mostly heterosexually identified researchers became bridges between the Chinese government and queer communities, and sometimes acted as spokespeople for the queer communities. The positive roles played by these researchers in China’s queer activism should also be given due recognition.

It is easy to see the mushrooming of feminist and queer NGOs around the Fourth UNWCW and to celebrate ordinary people’s political agency in self-organising. But people tend to forget that it is the pioneering work of state institutions such as the ACWF and Chinese intellectuals such as Li Yinhe that paved the way for the feminist and queer activism in the 1990s. Being part of the state bureaucracy does not make their activism less effective or significant. A sole emphasis on the ‘non-governmental’ actors not only neglects the complex relationship between the ‘governmental’ and ‘non-governmental’ actors in China, but risks erasure of complex social histories and multiple feminist genealogies, often along generational lines (Min 2017; Wang 2018).

Apart from these governmental and non-governmental organisations, commercial and entertainment venues such as bars and clubs, together with numerous reading groups, sports clubs and home parties, also facilitated China's queer activism. Queer activist He Xiaopei (2002) recalls a 'birthday party' held in the On-and-Off bar in Beijing's Sanlitun district in 1996 to celebrate the anniversary of Stonewall as an early form of queer activism. In her seminal study of *lala*/lesbian activism in the PRC, Elisabeth Engebretsen insightfully suggests that queer feminist activism should be best understood as 'a practice-oriented *politics of community*, where the primary strategy is to establish a collective consciousness within queer communities, raise general awareness, and ultimately consolidate popular support and mainstream acceptance' (2014, 126, original emphasis). Engebretsen (2014, 126, original emphasis) argues that this approach departs from a 'Western-originating *politics of public visibility*' often characterising activist work carried out by government organisations and NGOs. In short, these non-institutional efforts of community-building constituted early forms of activism, although they are not often recognised as such.

In summary, while this film focuses on the international influence on China's feminist and queer activism during and since the Fourth UNWCW, it neglects the internal dynamism in Chinese society at the time, in which state institutions such as the ACWF, Chinese intellectuals, and even commercial venues played important roles in shaping feminist and queer activism in China. By marginalising and erasing these memories, queer feminist history in China would look as if it had a Western origin. I would caution against such a simplistic reading by reflecting upon how such a discourse has emerged in the postsocialist context.

### **Feminist and queer liberalism**



Here I would stress that in order to understand how certain narratives around gender and the UNWCW have developed, we need to understand the kinds of transformations China was undergoing in the 1990s. The Fourth UNWCW took place after Deng Xiaoping's 'southern tour' in 1992 and before China's formal entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, two historical events that symbolised China's commitment to neoliberal principles and its full participation in the global neoliberal economy. Through this conference, the Chinese government hoped to showcase China's openness to the world by emphasising how much importance the government had attached to women's issues. The new concept of 'gender' therefore became part of the Chinese government's public relations strategy to conduct cultural diplomacy with the rest of the world.

Chinese feminist scholar Song Shaopeng (2015) astutely points out the political and ideological underpinnings of the Fourth UNWCW:

Interestingly, the rise of neoliberalism coincided with the process in which the theory of gender (*shehui xingbie*) was introduced to China. After 1989, the Chinese government was eager to get rid of its negative international publicity. The Beijing municipal government proposed to host the 2000 Olympics, but the proposal was vetoed by the US government. The UN World Conference on Women in 1995 was the first handshake between China and the Western world after 1989.

As Song points out, one of the biggest achievements of the Fourth UNWCW was the introduction of the term 'gender' into the Chinese context. Before the conference and in order to 'connect track' (*jiegui*) with Western feminism, the term 'gender' was translated into *shehui xingbie* (literally 'social sexual difference') by Chinese feminists and introduced to the Chinese public (Min 2017, 59). Concomitantly, 'gender equality' (*shehui xingbie pingdeng*) was proposed to replace the Maoist slogan 'equality between men and women' (*nannü pingdeng*), which was seen as old-fashioned and out of date at

the time. As Song (2015) acknowledges, ‘gender’ (*shehui xingbie*) as a concept had played a positive role in the 1980s China, insofar as it brought sexual differences and gendered subjectivity into existence. However, by naturalising these differences, the concept also ‘sexualised and commodified women in the 1990s consumer culture’ (Song 2015).

Whether, and how, terms such as ‘gender’ and ‘feminism’ should be translated into Chinese was subject to intense debates among feminist scholars and activists in China in the 1980s and early 90s (Wang and Zhang 2010; Min 2017). After 1995, these discussions seem to have vanished: as China entered the world of global capitalism, a large part of Chinese feminism has embraced liberalism and even neoliberalism at large. Dai Jinhua posits that ‘the emergence of gender (or women’s) culture was still instantly appropriated as a screen to conceal the new class structure and class differentiation’ (2002, 12). Moreover, as China dives deeper into neoliberalism, liberal feminism even mutates into a highly egoistic, utilitarian and consumption-driven brand of feminism, ‘Chinese country feminism’ (*Zhonghua tianyuan nüquan zhuyi*) (Wu and Dong 2019, 2), which further marginalises and victimises women in a ruthlessly competitive and egocentric market economy. Meanwhile, Marxist and socialist theories of feminism, together with their concomitant discourse of ‘equality between men and women’, were violently rejected, partly because of their association with China’s socialist past. Liberal feminism, equipped with its trademark of ‘gender’, seems to have become the hallmark of feminism in the PRC. But the theory of gender did not have much to say about how China’s increasing inequalities and social injustices under state-led capitalism have impacted on women’s and men’s lives. Meanwhile, China’s LGBTQ communities are witnessing a booming ‘pink economy’ and the rise of a homonormative identity politics, characterised by an uncritical celebration of visibility, pride and conspicuous

consumption. At such a historical conjuncture, it is high time to reflect on the politics of remembrance and forgetting in feminist and queer historiography, so as to envision a more egalitarian feminist and queer politics.

## **Conclusion**

Through linking Chinese queer activism to a major international conference for women, *We Are Here* demonstrates that it is impossible to separate sexuality from gender, queer rights from women's rights, and China from the rest of the world. It is difficult to disentangle feminist and queer histories in the film, but perhaps it is the convergence of feminist and queer issues that makes this film particularly fascinating. As Ditsie states in her speech at the Beijing conference, 'lesbian rights are women's rights', and 'women's rights are universal, inalienable, and indivisible human rights' (2007 [1995], 409). The lesbian activists who attended the Beijing conference and were interviewed in the film had resorted to a universalist rhetoric and the human rights discourse to fight for their visibility and rights. If such a universalism had successfully brought together women from different parts of the world at the Fourth UNWCW in 1995, what was missing in the film, together with other documented memories of the event, was unequal power relations between the West and non-West, between Chinese feminism and Western feminism, as well as between different strands of feminist ideas and practices, each with their own ideological baggage and political imaginary. Min Dongchao (2017, 7) observes that some feminist ideas (e.g. liberal feminism) travel easier and faster than others across national borders. Various commemorations of the Fourth UNWCW, *We Are Here* included, also demonstrate that some memories (e.g. how liberal feminism has travelled to China) are more deserving of remembrance than others (e.g. how Marxist and socialist feminism has worked in China). While it is important to remember the

transnational feminist solidarity at the Fourth UNWCW and the concomitant introduction of innovative ideas and practices such as gender and NGO work, it should also be recognised that with the celebration of China's re-entry into the global capitalist world after 1989, gender has played an ideologically ambivalent role in facilitating a state-led neoliberalisation in China, and this has led to further marginalisation and subordination of women. In this process, while liberal feminism is celebrated, Marxist and socialist feminism is forgotten or erased from both historiography and public memories. If the film title *We Are Here* conveys an unrelenting commitment to the feminist cause, perhaps it is also necessary to see beyond the 'here and now', look at what was 'then and there' before 1995, and reflect critically on what narratives and memories have been erased through the narration and remembrance of the Fourth UNWCW. After all, it was the fact of 'we were there' that paved the way for 'we are here' and beyond.

### **Acknowledgement**

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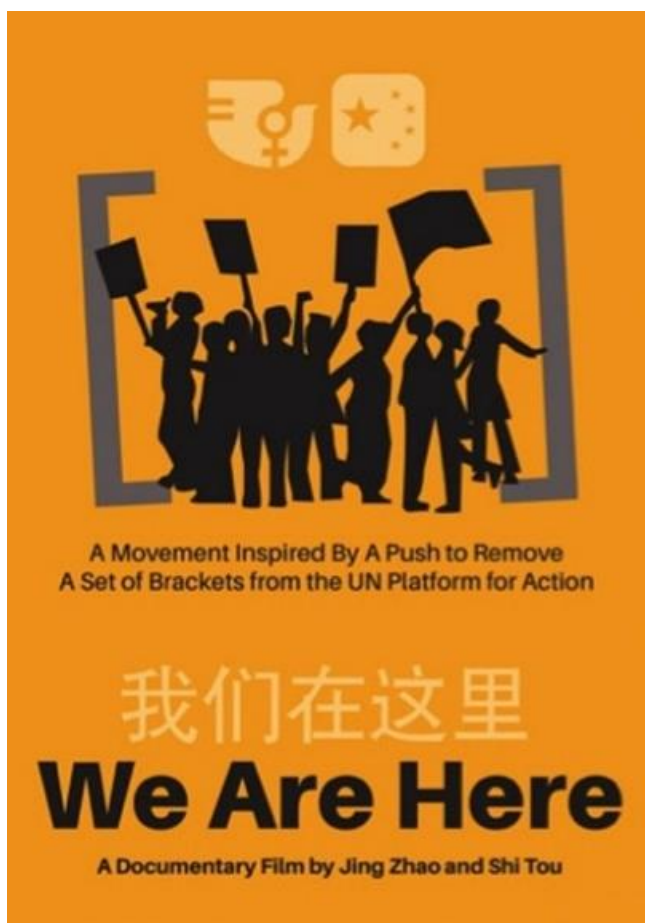


Figure 1. *We Are Here* film DVD cover (Courtesy of Shi Tou)





Figure 2. *We Are Here* film still (Courtesy of Shi Tou)



Figure 3. *We Are Here* film still (Courtesy of Shi Tou)

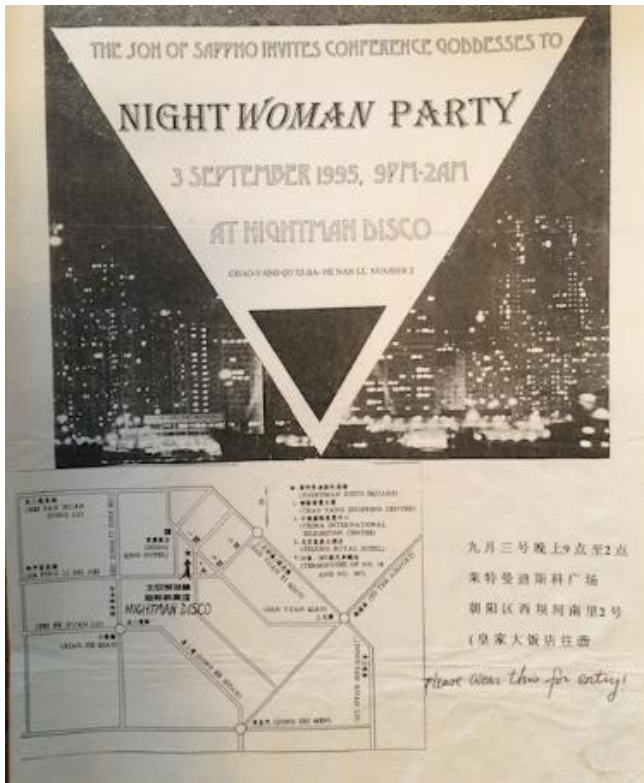


Figure 4. The Night Woman Party flyer (Courtesy of Wu Chunsheng)



Figure 5. Lesbian activists Susie Jolly, Shi Tou and He Xiaopei in Beijing in the 1990s (Courtesy of Shi Tou)