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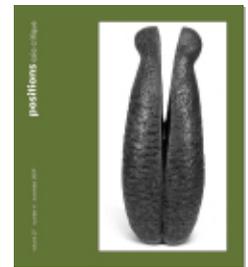
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"Love Your Films and Love Your Life:" An Interview with Fan  
Popo

Fan Popo, Bao Hongwei, Bao Hongwei

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## **“Love Your Films and Love Your Life:”**

### **An Interview with Fan Popo**

Fan Popo and Bao Hongwei, with an introduction by Bao Hongwei

#### **Introduction**

Invited by the Institute for Screen Industries Research, the University of Nottingham, Chinese queer filmmaker and activist Fan Popo visited Nottingham in February 2018 for a series of events titled “Queer Cinema as Art, Activism and Industry,” including research workshops, student seminars, and film screenings.<sup>1</sup> Bao Hongwei, assistant professor in media studies, interviewed Fan about his filmmaking career and his participation in transnational screen industries. This interview focuses on the status quo of queer independent filmmaking in a transnational context, with an emphasis on the opportunities and challenges that creative professionals face in increasingly commercialized and competitive work environments.

Fan Popo is an independent filmmaker and queer activist from Beijing. He studied screenwriting at the Beijing Film Academy. After his graduation



**Figure 1** Fan Popo (right) and Bao Hongwei in conversation. Photo courtesy of Tang Xingjian.

in 2007 he became a leading figure in China's queer filmmaking and activist communities. His documentaries on LGBTQ and gender issues have been screened at film festivals around the world. Fan is the author of *Happy Together: A Complete Record of a Hundred Queer Films*. He is also an organizer of the Beijing Queer Film Festival and the China Queer Film Festival Tour. In 2015, he sued China's censorship authority, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television for banning his film *Mama Rainbow* from online video-streaming platforms, and this became a landmark event for China's queer activism. Fan's films include *New Beijing New Marriage*, *Be a Woman*, *Chinese Closet*, *Mama Rainbow*, *The VaChina Monologues*, and *Papa Rainbow*. Fan is currently based in Berlin, writing scripts and making new films.

### Queer Cinema as Industry

**Bao:** Popo, welcome to the University of Nottingham. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your films and your engagement with screen industries. This series of events at Nottingham is titled "Queer Cinema as Art, Activ-

ism and Industry.” What is your view on queer cinema? Where do you see your films in this context?

**Fan:** Queer cinema has always been associated with art and activism, but whether it constitutes an industry is always a question to me. If we understand the term *industry* in a broad sense, then I see queer cinema as an alternative industry or sometimes even an anti-industry.

**Bao:** People usually associate the term *industry* with commercial productions. However, most queer films in the PRC do not fit into this model. How do you describe queer films in relation to the mainstream screen industry?

**Fan:** Queer films outside China, especially in Europe and North America, are quite big industries: they can produce films with a big budget and use more professional actors; they also go to big film festivals. Chinese queer films are definitely not in the mainstream industry. Because of media censorship in China, we are not able to show films related to queer topics in commercial cinemas. But we have our own ways of screening films and communicating with audiences. These include online screenings and collaborations with local LGBT NGOs and small independent film groups. This can create some social impact, but individual filmmakers do not really benefit much from those screenings financially. It is therefore hard to say whether this kind of alternative screen industry is an industry or not.

**Bao:** It is very difficult for independent filmmakers in China to make money from their films. How do these filmmakers survive? How do you fund your films?

**Fan:** I get some of my funding from nongovernment organizations or different foundations. Some of them are based overseas. I also make some films through crowdfunding. My latest documentary *Papa Rainbow* successfully made use of crowdfunding. I not only got some money to make the film; crowdfunding also helped to publicize the film. The amount we got was small and it could only cover some basic costs though. I barely make any money from making films, so I have to do some part-time jobs to make a living.

**Bao:** Such as?

**Fan:** Recently I have been doing script translation for some foreign filmmakers who want to work in China. Most of them are commercial productions. I am not only a translator; I also give them advice on how to adapt their scripts to the Chinese context. I used to be a fixer for foreign television teams. When they came to China to shoot something, I would help them find the right contacts or the right way to do things. I have also made short videos for some commercials, events, and conferences.

**Bao:** Have your collaborations with commercial and international institutions impacted on your filmmaking?

**Fan:** Definitely. Collaboration with international filmmakers has opened up my eyes. I'm interested in what they think and the way in which they work. Of course, there are challenges, but most of the time I can learn things from them. They give me access to international networks too. Once, after I had done a very good job for a director, he introduced me to other directors, and this helped me a lot. We are living in such a globalized world, and China is playing a more and more important role in the screen industries. It is important to get access to the network of international screen industries.

**Bao:** You mentioned that you helped foreign filmmakers or script writers to adapt their works to the Chinese market. As you see it, what are the major considerations if a foreign filmmaker wants to work in China?

**Fan:** In my experience, first, comedy is a particularly difficult genre, as humor can be difficult to translate across cultures. I had to spend a lot of time translating a comedy script because a lot of American jokes don't suit Chinese culture, or in China people are not familiar with some American cultural references. Secondly, there are also differences in the way how people write scripts. In the US, many writers use computer software such as Final Draft to write their scripts, but in China we use a Word document. Last but unfortunately not the least, there is censorship. In China, scripts have to pass censorship. International filmmakers often ask me if a script will pass censorship. Of course, I don't know, as I haven't been working in the mainstream screen industry. I can only give them advice on how to adapt scripts to the Chinese context, but not on whether a script will pass censorship.

## Film Distribution and the Audience

**Bao:** Making queer films is difficult enough; it is probably more difficult to disseminate them because of China's media censorship. How do you promote and disseminate your films?

**Fan:** I have been traveling quite a lot around festivals and universities. Some distribution companies also got in touch with me. There are DVDs for *Mama Rainbow*, distributed by the Taiwan Ethnographic International Film Festival.<sup>2</sup> You can purchase the DVDs from Taiwan or through their website. I have also got a lot of requests from online platforms such as revry.tv, an American website distributing queer films.<sup>3</sup> They have bought most of my films. You can watch the full-length version of *Mama Rainbow* and *Papa Rainbow* online. There is also a Taiwanese company called the Gaga-Oolala.<sup>4</sup> It mainly targets audiences in East and Southeast Asia. A few US universities have bought my film DVDs. They include Columbia University, Indiana University, and Duke University. In the UK, the University of Manchester's Graduate Centre for Visual Anthropology also has a collection of my films.

**Bao:** Have you received any audience feedback? How do the audiences like your films?

**Fan:** The online feedback on streaming platforms within China are unfortunately not available anymore after the video *Mama Rainbow* was censored, but I have received some emails from the audiences from various screenings. I remember when *Mama Rainbow* was out, I got a lot of touching emails in the first few months. A girl emailed me telling me about her story. She moved to Germany with her mum when she was a child. Her mum never knew about LGBTQ issues even while they were abroad. She felt she could never come out to her. She wished her mum were as accepting to her sexuality like the mums in my films. Then a year or two later, she emailed me to say that she had come out to her mum and the mum was OK with her sexuality. She showed my film to her mum and it was really helpful. I am pleased that I witnessed the process. I don't know how much my films help people with their coming out experiences, but I'm very pleased when they do.

### Queer Cinema as Activism

**Bao:** You have been a very active member in China's LGBTQ movement. You are an organizer and a board member of the Beijing Queer Film Festival, China Queer Film Festival Tour, and the Beijing LGBT Centre. As a filmmaker, how do you see the role of films in China's LGBT movement?

**Fan:** I have always emphasized that a film alone is not something that can change the society. I've never said that people have to follow what happens in my films to live their own lives. Never like that. Films are just reflections of our lives. They are very small parts of the realities we live in. When you see queer people on screen and how they live their lives, you also see a possibility to live in a way that is not so difficult. You can have a similar life, and this is what I try to emphasize through my films.

Showing and watching films is a very good way to get all the people together to discuss things, whether it is offline or online. Because of films, we get together and get to know each other better, become part of the community, or even go outside of the community and let people see us. Through films, we also get to see the mainstream society and learn what they think. It is my hope to bridge the gap between us and the mainstream society. Right now, because of censorship, such bridges are still very limited and very narrow.

Films have been playing quite an important role in China's LGBTQ movement. As we can't hold demonstrations on the streets, we rely on some smaller ways of demonstrations. Making and showing films are some of these ways. I hope that films can play a more important role in China's LGBTQ movement in the future.

### Queer Cinema as Art

**Bao:** In China's queer filmmaking community, there are diverse types and styles of films. Your films are different from those ones made by Cui Zi'en, He Xiaopei, Shitou, and Wei Xiaogang. How do you describe the style of your films?

**Fan:** I have been using a quite mainstream or nonexperimental way of filmmaking, because I want as many people to see and understand my films as

possible. This is my primary concern, although it is not my ideal type of filmmaking. I like a lot of experimental films, and I like dark movies, but when I started making my own films, I already knew that this was not the best way to engage with the society. I decided to make films which can talk to more people. I would like to make more experimental films in the future. In fact, I have started to do so. I have started to put a lot of experimental elements into my fiction films. I am still in the process of exploring.

**Bao:** Speaking of experimentation, in some of your recent documentaries, you have incorporated theater performances in your films. For example, in *Papa Rainbow*, you directed a play for the fathers of gay children. *About My Parents and Their Child*, the documentary theater that you participated in, is also quite interesting. Could you talk more about how this came about?

**Fan:** The film *Papa Rainbow* was inspired by a few things at the time. There was a popular reality TV show on Hunan Satellite Television called *Papa, Where Are We Going*. I liked the show and thought: why don't we have a queer version of the show? Obviously I don't have the budget to make a show in that way. Also, I saw a documentary, which combined theater performances and interviews with real life, and I was very inspired. I thought it would be great to make a film in this way. Of course, there was another reason: in my previous films, I have been criticized for not being objective enough, as, unlike the people in my films, many gay people in China are having difficult times in coming out and being accepted by their families. With the drama workshop, I was also able to represent the people who had difficulty with LGBTQ issues. I had a consultant for the film; she is a friend of mine and we both loved the idea. So, I decided to make the film.

Making the film was a very hard process on the whole. We had a very limited budget. We ran out of budget even before the postproduction stage. Fortunately crowdfunding was successful. It really helped. But the editing progress was a real nightmare, because we had footage from the interviews, from the interviewees' daily lives, and from the drama workshop, including rehearsals, live performances, and stories from behind the scenes. It was a huge job for me. I worked on the editing for about a whole year. In the end we got very positive feedback. People were happy because they could see something very different from *Mama Rainbow*, and there was more creativity in the film as well.

## The Audience and the Filmmaker

**Bao:** In some of your feature films, you have used more experimental styles and techniques. Are you worried about losing your audience? Who are your target audiences?

**Fan:** Why am I making films and for whom am I making films? These are also big questions for me. Certainly, there are audiences from China and audiences from film festivals. But you have to satisfy yourself first. In the last ten years I always felt that something is missing. I think now I need to make more films in my own way. Maybe this is a selfish idea, but I think that there are people who share my thoughts. Also, we should not underestimate the tastes of the audience. I can see that in China more and more young people are interested in experimental films. They want to see more diverse ways of representing the society. LGBTQ people in China also deserve to be represented in more diverse ways. If the audience wants to watch more mainstream films, they can watch my previous films. As a filmmaker I want to explore new ways of filmmaking.

**Bao:** Some of your recent film scripts are getting more and more intimate and autobiographical. Is this a conscious decision?

**Fan:** My fiction films are different from my documentaries. In documentaries, although the stories are familiar to me, such as the coming out experiences, they are still other people's stories. When I write fiction films, the stories are usually closer to my own life. I feel that they can be closer to the realities. This is why I want to make more fiction films. Also, for documentaries, when you interview and film other people, you are never a fly on the wall, and the camera could definitely change the way how people act. But for fiction films, you can present the reality in your eyes, especially when you write a story close to your own life.

The problem for me is when I write scripts, I often forget whether things really happened or not, or whether some stories are based on reality. Right now, I am in a state of mind where I sometimes forget what the reality of my life is. I sometimes even forget the boundaries between fiction and the reality. I am doing a script residency in Germany. While I write scripts, I

often experiment a lot. I write on topics such as my own life in Europe as Asian and queer, and all the other different identities and labels that cover me. I feel very overwhelmed and I sometimes struggle. But at the same time, there are a lot of excitements and I love all these new discoveries. I look forward to putting myself into the film and sharing my stories with my audience.

### **Creative Labor in Transnational Screen Industries**

**Bao:** Are you making any new films at the moment? What's your filmmaking plan?

**Fan:** I have two short scripts I am planning to shoot this summer. They are fiction films. Hopefully I can get them done this year. By 2020 when I am 35 years old, I would like to have my first feature-length film. I hope it's not too late. At the same time, I have an idea of working on some video installations, so I am trying to be productive.

**Bao:** Now you are based in Berlin and you work with many international filmmakers and creative talents. You don't have to worry too much about censorship. What are your opportunities and challenges?

**Fan:** Berlin is a very exciting place for me. I have got to know a lot of friends who can work with me or who are already working with me. There is a lot of energy and I feel that people here still care about their dreams. Even with a limited budget, people still care very much about artistic standards. They talk to me very patiently about where we should put this sound, or whether you sync this editing correctly, or if you do this with the character, the character could go deeper. I feel very inspired. I look forward to my future films, but there will definitely be more challenges.

The issue for filmmaking in China is the cost: the price has been raised to a crazy level because the industry is doing very well. I remember a few years ago, the industry was much smaller, and that was positive for independent films. There were a lot of filmmakers and creative talents, and they didn't have much industry work to do. You could say, if I give you 500 RMB, could you help me do the sound for this film, or I don't really have a budget, but if

you perform in my film, I can invite you to eat some barbecue lamb kebab, they would always say yes.<sup>5</sup> But those days are gone. Nowadays it is so easy for those who have filmmaking skills to get a job, and the costs of making films are much higher than before.

You said there is no censorship in Europe. This depends on how we define it. There is perhaps no censorship from the political authorities. But there is an invisible censorship from the market. For example, when you write a story about an Asian character in Europe, you have to think about who will watch it. I have met some producers. They emphasize how important it is to have Asian representations in the film industry, and they all agree with me on the lack of Asian representations. But somehow, I feel that they don't really care about this, because most of them only want to make money. When you can't project your film as something that will make a profit, it's really hard to get any funding support. Even if you turn to government funding, how can you persuade people to give you grants and fund your filmmaking? This is a different type of censorship. I'm still trying to find strategies to get money to make my films. I will start making short films to prove to people my abilities in filmmaking and directing, until I can get enough resources to make a feature-length film.

**Bao:** For our film and media students and the young people who wish to enter the screen industries, do you have any advice?

**Fan:** I think the most important thing is to listen to yourself and know what you want to do. Interest is the best teacher and the biggest motivator. When you feel you are passionate about what you are doing, you will automatically go forward and be productive. Love your films and love your life.

**Bao:** Thank you very much, Popo. We look forward to seeing more of your films, and good luck with working in the screen industries.

## Notes

- 1 We thank Tang Xingjian for video recording the interview and Phil Cowley for transcribing the interview.
- 2 Taiwan Ethnographic International Film Festival website: [www.tieff.org/en/](http://www.tieff.org/en/).
- 3 Fan Popo's films on revry.tv: [revry.vhx.tv/the-films-of-fan-popo-fan-po-po-dao-yan-de-dian-ying](http://revry.vhx.tv/the-films-of-fan-popo-fan-po-po-dao-yan-de-dian-ying).
- 4 GagaOOLala website: [www.gagaoolala.com/en/home](http://www.gagaoolala.com/en/home).
- 5 500 RMB (yuan) is roughly equivalent to 79 US dollars or 56 British pounds.