

## Summer Fieldwork with Beijing LGBT Communities: Opportunities and Limitations.

Yidong Wang

School of Journalism and Mass Communication

The research fund offered by the Institute for Regional and International Studies supported my fieldwork in Beijing, China, as part of my dissertation project on queer media ecology. I visited Beijing for six weeks and conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation with the local LGBT communities. The findings from the fieldwork helped me to develop queer media ecology as an analytical framework and laid an empirical foundation for the multi-site case study in both China and the United States.

### **Community Partnership**

This project demanded a close relationship with the studies community, and the initial step was to develop the network of community informants and build trust with them. For this summer fieldwork, I reached out to multiple LGBT organizations and media outlets. I managed to collaborate with seven of them—Beijing LGBT Center, Common Language, Beijing Lala Salon, GaySpot Magazine, Beijing Queer Chorus, Gayglers Beijing, and Destination Cultural Center. These organizations represented many areas of urban LGBT life including activism, leisure, professional development, education, and culture. Many of them had been active for more than ten years and serving a large number of community members.

The primary hindrance to maintaining collaboration with community partners was the limitation of resources the researcher had to provide concrete benefits for the community partners. Some of the LGBT organizations expressed frustration working with academics because they rarely received anything useful back from them. And due to the unfavorable environment for LGBT activism in China, the organizations themselves had very limited material resources and labor to do the “additional work” for academics. The organizations were interested in working on large-scale research funded by high-profile NGOs or entities like the United Nations Development Programme, as such collaboration could help the organizations to build transnational networks and expanded funding sources. Research projects like mine would benefit the community partners little materially. I planned to produce more public-facing outcomes like reports and commentaries to share with them as a way to maintain a reciprocal collaboration.

### **Participant Observation**

I participated in several community events during the fieldwork. One organization with which I built a closer tie was Beijing Queer Chorus, a chorus whose members self-identified as LGBT or ally. I visited them during rehearsals and watched their concert. The first time I visited one of the venues they rented for weekly rehearsals ended up with a minor mishap. It was very near to their public performance, and the chorus needed to discuss detailed logistics about the performance. They had a strictly-enforced rule forbidding all performance-related information from being disclosed to non-members. My informant apologized for not being able to allow me into the rehearsal room. Later I found that keeping the time and location for events confidential

was a routine for many LGBT organizations because unwanted publicity could lead to police harassment and cancelation of events.

Another memorable experience I had was with an art project called “Lovers.” This project was inspired by the film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* and aimed at raising awareness of inhumane conversion therapy. The artist team toured among major cities in China and had three red trucks with slogans questioning the therapy pass by local landmarks. The team happened to be planning for a Beijing stop during my fieldwork period. I conducted the team and followed the shooting of the trucks for a day. Interestingly, the trucks’ carts were left blank red this time. The team was worried about police intervention as it happened before. They decided to add the slogans to the photos afterwards. One location of the shooting was 798 Art Zone, where a high-profile anti-LGBT incident took place a year ago.

### **In-Depth Interview**

I also interviewed the staff of community partners and general community members. The interviewees were more representative of the populations of cisgender gay men and lesbian women, with limited representation of transgender men, queer-identified bisexuals, and straight allies. Such representation also indicated the visibility of different LGBT communities. Bisexual individuals had a very low level of visibility, while trans individuals were often marginalized even within the LGBT communities. The interviews also revealed a certain extent of segregation by age, physical appearance, and socio-economic status. For gay men and lesbian women with an urban elite background, it was relatively easy to build their LGBT social networks in a big city like Beijing. The advancement of digital media technologies also disproportionately benefited these groups to fulfill social and informational needs. Despite the active presence of several networks of organizations and individuals, the media ecology of LGBT communities was still rife with disconnections, and digital communication did not eliminate the material constraints of city life for LGBT individuals.

### **Future Plan**

I will conduct follow-up fieldwork in Beijing this coming winter, and I have plans to expand the Chinese part of the project to other cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu. Another part of the project is based in Madison, Wisconsin. I have been in contact with local LGBT organizations to prepare for future collaboration. The next stage of the project is focused on producing outcomes that formalize the framework of queer media ecology within the academic community and finding alternative ways to meet the needs of community partners.