Audrey Tse  
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Chinese Comrades Through the Lens and Camera of Cui Zi’En

The first vernacular use of the word *tongzhi*, meaning comrade, to describe Chinese queer, gay, LGBT and non-heterosexual individuals was in 1989. It was wittingly appropriated from the Communist Party’s rhetoric for use at the first Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Hong Kong. *Tongzhi* has since been used in all regions of China as a word separate from Anglo-Saxon constructions of homosexuality, and the word’s origins in the Communist and Nationalist Party struggles in the latter half of the twentieth century results in a word that embodies positive cultural references, gender neutrality and desexualization within the stigma of homosexuality. *Tongzhi* thus becomes an indigenous cultural identity that has been embraced from the 1990s onward, particularly after China decriminalized homosexuality in 1997 and removed it as a mental illness in 2002.

In the past two decades, *tongzhi* culture, activism and identity has increased its presence in mainstream China despite institutional discrimination. But how are queers in China “coming out” into mainstream Chinese culture using cinema? Individuals, groups and activists are using film and the subsequent formed communities to create and create/recreate/rectify preconceived conceptions of homosexuality or “deviants” from sexual norms. Mt thesis work focuses on the films of director, activist and writer Cui Zi’En. His nine queer films and active discourses
beginning from the early 1990s serve as a dynamic repertoire in which queer Chinese culture can be deconstructed to compose a more cohesive representation of Chinese sexuality. Questions such as how queer culture was formed through social film screenings during festivals and academic gatherings in universities, through Internet forums and Chinese terminology, vocabulary and linguistics, will also be addressed.