

Media Censorship and “Queerness” in China

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Abstract

This paper aims to delve into the concept of “queerness” within the context of gender and its specific manifestations in China. The focus is to explore the ways in which “queerness” is expressed and dealt with in Chinese society, and how it challenges the traditional gender norms and identities. The paper also examines the ways in which the Chinese government exercises censorship over gender and sexuality through social media and mainstream media. It explores the reasons behind relatively stricter enforcements in the case of gay relationships as compared to lesbian ones and how this has changed in recent times. It further explores the role of COVID-19 in accelerating these restrictions and regulations. In order to provide a detailed overview of the subject, the research incorporates a variety of journalistic articles and academic publications by Chinese and Non-Chinese authors.

Keywords: *Queerness, Social Media, Censorship, China, COVID-19*

Introduction

The Chinese government decriminalised homosexuality in 1997 and no longer overtly prosecutes people for being gay. Nonetheless, LGBTQIA+ rights are not recognised or protected in policies and laws, making it illegal to marry a same-sex partner.¹ As China maintains its position as a dominant economic and cultural global power, recognising the complex relationship between social media and the portrayal of LGBTQ+ people becomes crucial. In order to prevent any disruption of its power, the Chinese government has traditionally maintained tight controls over all forms of media. Its strategies frequently include stringent media restrictions employing firewalls and surveillance systems, closure of periodicals or websites, and imprisonment of several vocal activists.²

The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) is the primary regulatory organisation in charge of monitoring and policing the online content. It keeps an eye on social media sites and other online resources to make sure that content adheres to the tight standards set by the Chinese government for what is deemed politically sensitive or destructive to society. The CAC monitors and filters information in real-time using a combination of automated censoring techniques and human moderators. Additionally, they ensure that filtering systems are put in place by social media firms operating in China and that they are held liable for the information uploaded on their platforms by the users.³ This restriction has permeated sexuality and gender-related content as well, creating a highly conservative climate for LGBTQIA+ expression. All media, including television, films, books, and websites are under the authorities' supervision. Strict censorship applies to material that is regarded to be politically charged, morally questionable, or incompatible with the basic values of Confucianism. Despite the fact that the published regulations do not specifically address LGBTQIA+ content, its generic nature allows the Party to enforce its interpretation and repression of queer identities online.

“Queerness” and Social Media

The objective meaning of “queerness”⁴, refers to “deviating from what is expected or normal; strange”. Thus, “queerness” within the context of fourth-wave feminism aptly represents an expansive and inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality. Lynne Joyrich, Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, in an interview with the Brown Daily

Herald stated, “While queerness is often used to refer to all individuals who are sexual or gender minorities, it can also be understood as a framework of “non-normativity” which challenges social categories”.⁵ It includes a wide range of identities differing from heteronormative and cisnormative norms, challenging the conventional ideas of gender roles and relationships.

Integrating intersectionality and inclusion in its foundation, the fourth wave of feminism evolved in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, building on the successes and setbacks of the preceding waves. An important facet of fourth-wave feminism is its emphasis on the social construction of gender. Social construction of gender is the process through which society defines and assigns meaning to the notion of masculinity and femininity. Gender is seen as a product of cultural, historical, and social influences rather than being dictated by biology.⁶

This theory is primarily built on the idea “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one”⁷ expressed by Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneer of the second-wave feminist movement. According to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, the social construction of gender can be regarded as a continual process of executing and enacting gender norms. Gender, in Butler’s view, is a performance that people continuously put on through their actions, visible traits and social relationships. Due to the performative nature of gender, it is possible to challenge and disrupt conventional gender norms and expectations. The social construction of gender recognises that the notions of masculinity and femininity are not set in stone, but are influenced by the standards and ideals of a specific society or culture. It draws attention to the flexibility and diversity of gender across various historical eras and cultural circumstances. This viewpoint contests the idea that gender is entirely based on biological sex or chromosomes and highlights the important role that socialization plays in the development of gender identity.⁸

The acceptance of “queerness” is seen as a means of defying conventional standards and binary conceptions of gender and sexuality. It honours individuality, fluidity, and the freedom to express oneself without regard to predefined categories. The advent of social media has given feminist activists a potent tool for communicating and spreading awareness regarding gender equality and social justice. Moreover, the fourth-wave feminist movement primarily emphasises the use of social media as a tool to generate conversations and counter prevailing narratives on the issues of intersectionality, sexuality, and consent. In this manner, social

media has provided a space for bringing about a gender revolution by giving a platform to individuals claiming an identity beyond the gender binary. Online campaigns and petitions have garnered a lot of traction, increasing pressure on institutions such as governments, businesses, and organisations to address gender inequality and implement legislative changes. Collective internet activism has thus proven to be powerful in bringing about change in the physical/ offline world.⁹

Social Media and “Queerness” in China

In the context of China, social media has helped queer individuals in the country claim the once-popular term *tóngzhì* 同志 to identify homosexual relations. Literally “comrade”, *tóngzhì* is one of the most popular terms to refer to sexual minorities in China today. Despite the numerous other terms that circulate in China, including *tóngxìngliàn* (homosexual) and *ku’er* (queer), *tóngzhì* is the most widely accepted term for self-identification by queer people in early 21st century China”.¹⁰ The phrase has been adopted by the LGBTQIA+ community in China as a means to transcend the censorship that surrounds queer identity. In this manner, “comrade” served as a veiled reference to being queer without explicitly using terms that may attract censorship or backlash on social media platforms. The influence of social media on real-world events in China was demonstrated when a comprehensive draft of the civil code was released online in December 2019 by the top legislative body in China for input from the public.¹¹ In just a month, approximately 200,000 people sent their comments, with 190,000 of them making the same suggestion, - asking the judiciary to legalise same-sex marriages. This outpouring online support further forced the authorities to officially acknowledge the recurrence of this recommendation.¹²

Along with being used as a tool to fight for gender equality, social media has also been used by governments and other religious organisations to censor and suppress gender differences and their expression. The coining and widespread use of terms like “leftover women”¹³, “girly guns”¹⁴ and “sissy men”¹⁵, introduced by the Chinese government has been since then popularised on several social media platforms. This displays how social media has repeatedly been used by the authorities to target people who are “strange” or do not conform to the traditional and binary construct of the society.

Despite government crackdowns, a strange dichotomy has emerged among Chinese social media users. There are individuals on social media who are not as visible as LGBTQIA+

organisations, activists, and media producers, but share as well as document their own experiences as members of the queer community in China from time to time. This group includes various self-media producers like celebrities, online influencers, couple vloggers, and ordinary people who are either queer or their allies. Despite the stricter censorship enforced in 2021, there has been a flourishing presence of these kinds of influencers, whose efforts have played a significant role in lending a voice to the community. This in part, may be due to the commercialisation of queer content across platforms like *Bilibili*, *Weibo*, *iQiyi* and so on. The popularisation of the BL (Boy's Love) industry at a global level has commercialised gay relationships all over the world with popular series and books being churned out at burgeoning rates. Even the gay content creators in China are motivated by the desire to attract viewers, gain popularity and earn money. They are inclined to fulfil the demands of their audience- portraying a so-called "ideal" relationship in order to do so.¹⁶

Governmentality in China- Justifying the Anti-LGBTQIA+ Rhetoric

The Chinese government's actions towards the queer community reflect a broader trait of totalitarian regimes¹⁷, i.e. using anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric and policies to suppress dissent. These actions could be linked to the concept of 'governmentality' put forth by Michel Foucault. The term outlines various methods and justifications used by the State in order to exert authority and control over its citizens.¹⁸ It involves the creation of so-called governable identities by the State for easier governance. This includes the attempts made by the State to mould the attitudes and behaviours of its people using variety of tools such as censorship, propaganda, and surveillance. Governmentality serves as a mechanism for the Chinese government to maintain its political hegemony over the country. China's long history of centralised rule and Confucian values places a strong emphasis on social stability and cohesion. By exercising control over public discourse, media, and cultural practices, the government aims to shape and regulate social behaviour, ideologies, and beliefs to align with its vision of a "harmonious society".¹⁹ The Chinese government attempts to police queer identities, among others. Local officials still prohibit gatherings with queer themes and use police force on LGBTQIA+ groups, resulting in a lack of visibility for these communities in mainstream media.²⁰

The Chinese government's perception of sexual minorities as a threat is influenced by its political ideology and desire to maintain a tightly controlled moral order. The Communist

Party's emphasis on conformity, stability, and social harmony leaves little room for the recognition and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. In this manner, the government views sexual minorities as a vulnerable group that may be exploited by western actors to destabilise the CPC's authority and destroy the country's traditional social fabric. "In Mr. Xi's China, the marginalised represent a security threat, not an object for compassion".²¹

The efforts for common prosperity²² and the intent to abolish "sissy men" fan culture²³ highlight a growing trend in domestic politics and society in China i.e., the desire to stifle diversity.²⁴ In 2021, President Xi declared that China's economy would hereon strive to deliver "common prosperity." The first step to accomplish this involved justifying the dismantling of so-called corrupt, large monopolies and simultaneously creating smaller corporations that would be easier to regulate politically.²⁵ This includes private entertainment companies which the Chinese government views as a threat to its governmentality. The survival of these companies is closely linked to the so-called "sissy men" who have amassed a massive fan following helping them generate a considerable chunk of their revenue.²⁶ The drive to impose conformity on gender standards, race, and political beliefs under the guise of new initiatives like "common prosperity" is increasingly in tandem with a desire to eradicate any difference by narrowing the gap between economic classes.²⁷

Consequently, in 2021, the propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party introduced new rules for media masculinity in an attempt to regulate morality and ideas of traditional masculinity through censorship, making it a part of the broader crackdown on civil society and dissent. President Xi Jinping claimed to restore China's former glory through strict control of all aspects of society including business, education, culture, and religion. To achieve this goal, the National Radio and TV Administration issued guidelines calling for the elimination of "sissy men" and other non-traditional forms of masculinity. The new rules require broadcasters to uphold a "correct beauty standard", reject internet celebrities and vulgar displays of wealth, and promote and maintain traditional Chinese principles. The guidelines also prohibit all "idol audition shows" and recommend blacklisting anyone who has broken the law or violated public morality.²⁸

While peace and victimhood are linked to an idealised and socially constructed view of femininity, war's aggression and brutality are frequently associated with an idealised image of masculinities.²⁹ This explains the reasoning behind China's preoccupation with masculine

traits. China aspires to establish itself as the world's leading geopolitical force, and in order to accomplish this, it seeks to forcefully project a 'strong' and 'aggressive' masculine persona onto its people.

Joshua Eisenman in an email interview with NBC News stated that China's masculinity crisis and fixation on masculine traits stem from insecurity about their national security during the period known as the Century of Humiliation wherein the nation had been colonised by several foreign forces.³⁰

Changing Perceptions on Lesbianism

Same-sex relationships between men have mainly been viewed as a threat to Chinese society and government, which is in huge contrast to the way lesbian relationships have been traditionally and are currently perceived in Chinese society and culture. "That same-sex conduct between two women was never officially criminalised is less a testament to leniency for lesbians than society's contempt for such relations".³¹ Lesbian relationships have not been seen as a threat to society the same way same-sex relationships between men have been. Additionally, there is a common belief that lesbian relationships are less stable and women will eventually return to the traditional family structures. This belief is reinforced by the idea that women are dependent on men for financial and social support through marriage and childbearing. Any relationship between two women is frequently misinterpreted as a response to male abuse or neglect or as the product of an alleged lack of physical attractiveness.³² In classic literature books called *bǐ jì*³³, female-female sex was not categorised as "authentic".³⁴

"When women's same-sex attraction did surface in men's writings, it was figured as the insignificant, the laughable, the naughty, and, on rare occasions, the anomalous. Basically, female-female eroticism was dismissed to a grey zone of amorality rather than demonised as a vice".³⁵ Emotional and physical intimacy between women was not categorised as immoral. The female-male congress was the only facet of the Confucian doctrine focusing on the topic of chastity of women where a woman's immorality by default implicated the presence of a man. Parallel to how contemporary legal codes do not explicitly identify and expand on lesbian desire, the traditional moral code of conduct did not outwardly criminalise female-female sexual behaviour, thereby rendering it trivial and insignificant.³⁶

There has, however, been a significant clash between China's traditional mindset towards lesbian relationships and signs of modernity. In light of China's demographic crisis and the growing trend of women opting not to marry, driven by factors such as increased financial independence and prioritisation of education and career, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has recently begun perceiving women and their sexual choices as a genuine threat to the society. The recognition of this phenomenon by the CPC highlights a significant shift in their perspective, acknowledging the impact of changing social dynamics and women's aspirations on traditional societal norms and demographic stability. In response to the demographic crisis, the Chinese government has implemented various measures, like the three-child policy, to encourage women to have more children. However, alongside the demographic concerns, other societal factors have further complicated the situation for women in China. These include issues like high housing costs, increasing domestic violence, and the exacerbation of existing gender discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷

To address the declining birth rate and its potential impact on the regime, the Chinese government focused its efforts on enacting policy measures inordinately affecting women as a means to increase the birth rate. "China's continued repression of online literature that portrays bromance³⁸ reflects a distorted rationale that forbidding such themes will 'correct' women's sexual orientation and save them from the 'toxic' Japanese cultural invasion so that they will be more willing to have children".³⁹ Increasing censorship of the BL subgenre as well as "queer" content and relationships in media, which is seen as one of the causes of a decrease in China's population growth, reflects the government's approach of completely overlooking an ever-increasing gender disparity in China. An example of this censorship is manifested in the deletion of several scenes and references to a recurring lesbian character in the sitcom "Friends" which aired on popular streaming platforms like *iQiyi*, *Bilibili* and *Youku* in 2022.⁴⁰

COVID-19 and Post-COVID Era

COVID-19 served as a pretext to censor anything that the CPC found problematic or immoral on the grounds of public welfare. The process of censoring queer media and expression started in 2015 but accelerated with the onset of COVID-19 and Zero-Covid policies. The government's stance on "sissy men" had always been unclear before the pandemic. Just three years before "sissy men were officially banned from the Television, the Chinese government

encouraged children to watch a patriotic show starring the Taiwanese boy band F4 who displayed all the effeminate traits that the government later condemned.⁴¹

The onset of the pandemic initiated a slew of online censorship and a halt in the activities of several LGBTQIA+ organisations which had provided essential support to several queer individuals on social media. ShanghaiPRIDE, an annual celebration of China's LGBTQIA+ movement that operated for 12 years, ended its operations in 2020 due to political pressure and to ensure the safety of all its members.⁴² "In July 2021, Chinese tech giant Tencent's WeChat social media platform deleted dozens of LGBTQIA+ accounts run by university students, saying some of them had broken the rules pertaining to information dissemination on the internet, sparking fear of a crackdown on gay content online".⁴³

The non-profit organisation, LGBT Rights Advocacy China, which had previously won high-profile cases against conversion therapy and harassment of sexual minorities, declared an end to all of its activities on WeChat in November 2021.⁴⁴ Since it is challenging for LGBTQIA+ organisations to obtain government clearance, they frequently do not formally register. Such unregistered groups also face severe political pressure. An activist close to 'LGBT Rights Advocacy China' claimed that organisations, especially the smaller ones, frequently shut down without any explanation.⁴⁵ Another queer blogger reiterated that operating any kind of LGBTQIA+ group had become extremely difficult due to the complete deletion of any LGBTQIA+ content by social media platforms like WeChat. Consequently, *Xinhua News Agency* reported that the Ministry of Civil Affairs has taken action against 3,300 illicit social organisations. Additionally, around 200 unregistered websites and individual social media accounts were closed down without any explicit reason. However, it remains unclear whether the closure of this particular group was a result of government crackdown.⁴⁶

On 15 May 2023, the Beijing LGBT Centre was forced to close down due to persistent online harassment and external pressure. In addition, several events organised by the centre were abruptly halted in the past two years. Although these organisations were not overtly political, they had the ability to mobilise their followers and were deeply rooted in strong community networks making the authorities uncomfortable. As a consequence, remaining organisations in China either adopted a highly discreet approach or depoliticised their initiatives by substituting explicitly LGBTQIA+ terms with a more neutral language.⁴⁷

Before the onset of the pandemic, the BL industry in China produced several live-action adaptations of popular gay online novels like *The Untamed* in 2019. By 2021, it became a

cultural phenomenon in China and attracted a large and dedicated fanbase which ensured that the series reached 10 billion streams in just two years.⁴⁸ It catapulted its actors into popularity, with *Xiao Zhan* gaining several brand partnerships thanks to his role as *Wei Wuxian* in the hit drama.⁴⁹ The popularity that these dramas acclaimed despite not being overtly sexual or queer due to the censorship of gay content online resulted in trending of several such adaptations. However, post-COVID, the production activities of many such series like *Immortality* which was slated to be released in April 2021 after being submitted to the State Administration of Film Radio and Television, has not yet been released to the public. Similarly, a series called *Justice in the Dark*, adapted from an online gay novel, released eight episodes in 2023 and seems to have halted the broadcast of other such works for a foreseeable future without any explanation.⁵⁰ This indicates a worrying trend of an increasing crackdown on any online content with queer undertones after the pandemic.

Conclusion

This paper studied the intricate relation between media censorship and “queerness” in China. The importance of social media in furthering queer rights cannot be overstated. On the contrary, its regulation by the State effectively cuts off individuals and organisations of a community from each other, which may act as their support systems. It is evident that Chinese government’s strict control over media content has significantly impacted the representation and visibility of queer individuals and their issues within the country. Through a combination of regulatory policies and the propagation of masculine traits, the Chinese government has had a negative impact on the struggles of the LGBTQIA+ community. Social media, which has become an important medium of expression, has been stifled the most. While gay relations have been seen as a threat to masculinity all along, it is only recently that lesbian relations have also started being perceived as a threat to the efforts for ‘National Rejuvenation’.⁵¹ The rapid change in the way lesbian relationships have been perceived is strongly interlinked to the demographic crisis that the country is undergoing. This undue targeting of the entire community has only hastened with the onset of the pandemic, and the crisis provided the Chinese government greater freedom to exert media control over its population at the time of emergency. The management of the COVID-19 crisis facilitated the government’s expansion of its censorship on media, especially social media. While Chinese law ensures that there is a certain level of protection provided to queer individuals against

physical violence and discrimination, the enforcement of strict media censorship ensures that the existence and inclusion of the community in China remains bleak in the near future.

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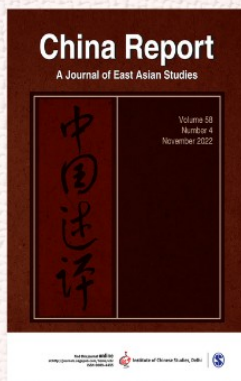


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