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## **Experiences of contemporary Chinese queer individuals: images of physical and online lives**

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Experiences of contemporary Chinese queer  
individuals: images of physical and online lives

Masters Dissertation

By

Siya Zhou

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**Executive Summary:**

This research aims to study the current situation of Chinese queer groups in the new media environment. As the popularity of the internet and the promotion of global queer politics grows, China's queer research is still in its infancy. Due to China's unique political and cultural atmosphere, discussions on the identity of sexual minorities have always been marginalized. This study aims to obtain real life status of the Chinese contemporary queer group through close-range online observation and in-depth interviews with the queer group. This study selected Weibo, China's largest social platform, as a virtual observation site to study how the queer group can express and socialize on such a virtual platform. The interview part of the research focuses on the differences and commonalities of queer individuals, through their own narratives, to study the current queer group's dilemma and their real-life experiences. In the past, there has been little empirical research on Chinese queer groups, and there was a dominant phenomenon of Western queer theory in Chinese queer studies. This study will combine Chinese and Western queer theory to provide empirical research for Chinese queer research as an archive of Chinese contemporary queer group images.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background and Context**

Throughout the history of mainland China (henceforth 'China'), issues concerning queerness and sexuality have been marginalised for a long time. After Chinese economic reform in the 1970s, rapid economic development and social change have seen more openness towards sexual and gender diversity, which have attracted more and more attention to minority issues (Engebretsen and Schroeder, 2015). The academic discussions of queerness have grown and activities like Pride Festival and queer film festival have turned up in big cities, the audience of which has become not exclusively limited to queer people only but includes more and more people beyond the marginalised group. At the same time, more and more gay and lesbian bars have been opened up for queer people to socialise and interact within their own communities.

This openness, however, seems to be limited. The mainstream media in China, which stands as the official voice, remains silent towards the topic of queer (Engebretsen and Schroeder, 2015). Entertainment content such as films and TV dramas concerning homosexuality are still banned on mainstream media platforms, and the queer film festival can only be held in independent cinemas to escape the control of the government (Fan, P, 2015). A survey that United Nations Development Programme did in 2016 shows that only 5% of China's LGBTQ citizens have disclosed their identity publicly. Besides, Deklerck and Wei write that in China there is no education on sexuality and LGBTQ people are often represented negatively, such as "mentally unstable and second-class citizens" (2015, p19). Apart from that, the latest related issue is that the topic page of all lesbian groups on the biggest Chinese social media platform, SinaWeibo (henceforth Weibo), was completely deleted in April, which means any content related to lesbian groups can't be shown in public topic page. The same situation happened one year before in relation to a gay topic. In May, a junior student posted his intention to attempt suicide on Weibo because he felt despair that his

homosexual identity was laughed at by his schoolmates and his father was violent towards him to force him to change his identity. Although the topic pages of lesbian and gay groups on Weibo have been recovered and the boy who attempted suicide was saved, the problem lying behind these issues reflects that sexual minority people in China are still struggling with social inequality and an oppressive political environment in contemporary China.

## **1.2 Research focus**

There have been several studies which focus on different aspects of queer groups in China, like studies on queer activism (Schroeder, 2015; Engebretsen, E., 2008; Engebretsen, E., 2015), queer film and film festivals (Fan, P., 2015; Eng, 2010), the mainstream media representation of queer (Fan, R., 2014), and so on. However, few researchers have focused on the role of new media in Chinese queer community. In the context of China, the last twenty years has witnessed rapid developments in Chinese new media. As Pullen (2012) suggests, online new media have provided more opportunities for queer youth to set up their own storytelling space, thus the first focus of this research will be on the relationship between social media and queer people in China, setting Weibo as a research site. The data shows that the monthly active users of Weibo has increased to more than 460 million by the end of 2018, taking up one third of the total population (Data Bureau, 2019). Weibo has become an important public site for both queer people and non-queer people to interact with others in virtual spaces. This research selects Weibo as the representation of the internet environment and will focus on the characteristics of queer people's self-expression and interaction with others to investigate the monolithic influence of new media and the internet environment on queer people.

This research will secondly focus on the situation of queer youth (20-30 year olds) who can be more easily identified as queer than those who are older and dare not

reveal any identity information to others. Queer youth also have generated more concepts and feelings about which to confide than younger or older queer people, which can improve the practicability of this research. Queer youth are important and major constituent part of the whole queer community, which can make the results of research more representative and valuable. Besides, instead of simply viewing queer people as a group in other studies, the focus of this research will be mainly on the experiences of queer individuals, including their dilemmas and their personal feelings of their surrounding environments in terms of social concepts and political policies.

### **1.3 Research aim and Objectives**

This research will use an ethnographic approach to take a close look at queer people's virtual lives on the social media platform, Weibo, aiming to see how they represent themselves on such a public virtual platform where queer people and non-queer people co-exist. It will also investigate if digital media have contributed to their self-identity and self-expression processes, and to what extent that the internet environment has influenced their daily lives. It will also use the method of interview to explore queer people's real experiences in contemporary China through their own narrations rather than depiction on different media, including to what extent their lives are influenced or oppressed by social environments and their genuine sentiments as a queer Chinese person.

### **1.4 Value (and impact) of Research**

Chinese queer people have stayed invisible in both Chinese society and global society for a long time. There have been several quantitative studies which investigate social attitudes towards gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as qualitative studies that investigate different media culture around queer people, like how queer films, videos and web literature represent the image of them. This research takes the qualitative methods to critically analyse the experiences of queer individuals in Chinese virtual and physical spaces through

their own narrations. It will combine western queer theory and Chinese studies to critically look into Chinese queer communities and to investigate what really matters to queer people in China's specific socio-political context, which may be quite different from western society. It is hoped that this research may add empirical evidence to contribute to Chinese queer studies and may help to develop more culture-based queer theory in the specific context of China. It is also hoped that the impact of this research can broaden public awareness and recognition of queer people in China and function as a literal record of contemporary Chinese queer youth.

## **2. Literature review**

Due to various factors such as political and academic censorship (Engebretsen and Schroeder, 2015), China's researchers on sexual and gender minorities are limited and less diverse compared to Western queer research. According to Li Yinhe, a Chinese sociologist and a well-known queer group researcher, China's homosexual population accounts for 3%-4% of the total population, which is approximately 50 million. In terms of quantity, the Chinese queer group is therefore very important in the global queer studies. However, China's queer research still remains at an early stage, lacking a full range of research. Therefore, this review of the literature will be based on the combination of Western queer studies and Asian queer studies to conduct an overview of previous queer researches to find the gap in Chinese queer studies. The literature review is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on previous important studies exploring the relationships between queer community and new media to see what aspects of queer and new media culture have been focused on. The second part will illustrate the problem of the dominance of Western queer theories (originating in European and North American academy) in Chinese queer research that existing studies have identified. The third part is a general review of what kinds of research Chinese and non-Chinese scholars have done on queer cultures of China and what has been found in previous studies to provide a

clear direction for this research.

## **2.1 New media and queer community**

In the book, *Queer youth and media cultures* (Pullen, 2014), the relationships between queer people and media cultures have been discussed roundly from different perspectives and contextualized in different countries. It chooses queer youth as research objects and discusses many issues of queer youth, including coming out, identity construction, bullying, education, homophobia, self-representation and so on. Different media platforms have been associated with queer youth in this book, including social media, video platforms, TV programmes and films. Different methods like interviews, textual analysis and content analysis are used to examine three parts of queer youth culture: the advantages and limitations of media platforms in promoting the performative potentials of queer youth, the representation and commodity of their desires, and transnational media usage of queer youth within different political environments. It argues that the identity politics still remains heteronormative around the world and queer youth need to be focused on more because they tend to suffer more risks of isolation due to the absence of support models from family who can teach them to behave as a queer. *'A safe and Supportive Environment': LGBTQ Youth and Social Media* (Tropiano, 2014) focuses on the relationships between queer youth and social media, and specifically on the problems of suicide and bullying which happen frequently to queer youth. Through observations on different social media, the research suggests that through more and more coming out videos queer youth can find and help each other. It argues that social media can be a significant way, and simultaneously a significant platform, for queer youth to interact with other queer youth and to be understood and accepted by each other to gain a sense of belonging. It also identifies that social media platforms have their limitations, like they are still heteronormative and tied to economic privilege. But overall it concludes, serving as an online community and an information source for queer youth, the Internet plays an important role as a 'safe

and supportive environment' and in providing queer youth with the support and acceptance they need. The comprehensive discussions around media culture and queer youth provide a clear overview of important themes relating to the relationships between new media and queer youth.

Dasgupta (2017) in his book, *digital queer cultures in India*, engages in new media with queer communities in India, which provides a significant foundation for queer studies in Asia. The book studies how the new virtual world has expanded the cross-class and cross-regional social networks and changed gay relationships within the Indian gay community. It's necessary to note that this book locates Indian queer studies in the context of India's social change and unique post-colonial society, which is the core of this book. It argues that queer culture in India lies within both online and offline space but is excluded from the mainstream narrative as an anti-national identity. Through an overview of media culture in India and its relationships with the queer community, it suggests that the emergence of the Internet and new media has provided queer men in India the new ways of imagining themselves and prompted them to reconsider their national identity within a transnational context. This book uses an ethnographic approach to focus on the class, effeminophobia, intimacies and activism of queer men in India, critically analysing queer experiences within online and offline spaces in the context of socio-economic and political changes of India, which provides valuable theoretical framework for this research to do queer studies on the similar but still different background of Asia societies.

## **2.2 The dominance of Western queer theories**

Many scholars have proposed that there exists a dominance of Western queer theories in the global queer studies (Boellstorff, 2007; Engebretsen, 2008; Engebretsen, 2015; Kong, 2016). This dominance has led to an understanding of the over-conformity of queer groups in different countries. *The Sexual in Chinese Sociology: Homosexuality Studies in Contemporary China* (Kong, 2016) outlines

the development of Chinese sociology of homosexuality and analyses how it has been shaped by Western queer theories since the reform era through a critical evaluation of the literature. It analyses how Chinese sociology of homosexuality has changed from quantitative research and etiology of homosexuality in the early stage to a constructivist approach and more qualitative research focusing on the rise of homosexual identity in China since the 2000s. During this period Chinese queer studies have been shaped by western knowledge systems including bio-medical model or coming out model. It suggests a 'queer hybridization model' for future studies to critically apply both Western theory and Chinese specific political and cultural contexts to explore the complicated process of queer identities, experiences and sexual cultures. Kong's study completes a clear review of how Chinese queer theories develop and provides a fundamental model for this research to avoid global homogenization or local essentialism.

In addition, Engebretsen (2008) in her research, *Queer ethnography in theory and practice: Reflections on studying sexual globalization and women's queer activism in Beijing*, also challenges the dominance of transnational sexuality theories. She uses an ethnographic approach to focus on the activism of a lesbian community in Beijing and reconsider the applicability of Western queer theories in China's context, finding a paradox that the fundamental theories including coming out, queer life, desire for tolerance and activism, which are central to Western queer ideology, are totally not desirable in the discourses of Chinese lesbian community. She suggests that the method of ethnography with reflexivity can help to bridge the gap between the Western queer theoretical framework and socio-cultural contexts of Chinese queer studies, which provides a good viewpoint and suggestion for the method for this research.

### **2.3 Queer culture of China**

*Queer/ Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism and Media culture*, (Engebretsen and Schroeder, 2015) is a significant book in Chinese queer

studies. It brings together more than ten researchers on queer culture in China and provides a comprehensive overview of queer China, focusing on various aspects of queer culture including queer activism, queer media culture and queer individual lives. Tongzhi, is a term that queer people in China use to call themselves, which was originally used to describe people with rebelliousness and is now used to designate queer people in China specifically. This book's introduction argues that queer and tongzhi are not strictly separate in meaning and are actually interwoven with each other, and suggests that Chinese queer studies needs to be associated with Western queer theories and at the same time be analysed in a Chinese-specific socio-political context.

In this book there are several chapters setting queer media contents as their objects of study. Some focus on the expression and representation of queer films and film festivals, which are different from Western works, to discuss how media practices are associated with queer activism in China (Fan, 2015). Some focus on web literature concerning queer texts, including boy love and its gendered imagination, analysing that the phenomenon that lies behind is a rejection of a monolithic interpretation of gendered identity under patriarchy (Yang and Xu, 2015). Some examine the image of queer people in Chinese pop culture, including in the music industry, queer pop stars, and TV programmes (Wang, 2015). This work suggests a twofold logic of governmental control that limits active media contents that may transcend the political boundary over queer issues, while simultaneously allowing the commercialisation of queer performance where queerness is ambivalent but can contribute to cultural economy (Wang, 2015).

There is one chapter in this book that provides insightful analysis into queer activism in the context of China's society, which is *Research, Activism, and Activist Research in Tongzhi China* (Schroeder, 2015). Schroeder in this research conducts ethnographic research on queer recreational groups in Beijing and

examines the meaning of queer activism in China. In this research, Schroeder finds that in these queer groups people who act as activists may be marginalised or expelled from these groups because most queer people in these groups don't want too much attention from mainstream society to trigger any political control. Instead they want these queer recreational activities to remain secret to keep them away from daily life for one day per week. It suggests that it's necessary to break down the fixed notion of activism as overt queer resistance, including fighting for legal rights in the context of China. It argues that there is a politics of having fun in China, which means that having fun can also function as providing an affective space to make potential change. It concedes the limitation of such utilitarianism lies in the possibility of neglecting the importance of activism, but it also stresses the need to follow the ethics of "culturally rooted justifiability".

Besides, there are several studies focusing on the relationships between new media and queer media culture in China. Shaw and Zhang (2017) choose SinaWeibo as a research site and use content analysis to explore the promotion and consumption of queer documentary films and its relationships with social media. It also explores how the contemporary representations of queer documentary films function in the digital social rights movement. It finds that the representation of Chinese queer film reflects a continuing tension between political control and queer artistic expression. It concludes that social media provides a stable platform for the dissemination of queer films for more exposure and visibility to public and less risk of being monitored or having to shut down compared to queer websites which were often closed by the authorities. It argues that although Internet surveillance exists in China, new media platforms still enable queer films to have more opportunities to obtain access to the public and provide more space for queer expression. This study focuses on the role of Chinese new media on increasing the visibility and social acceptance of queer-related media content, providing a general direction for this research.

*Homosexual identity in the online community* (She, 2013) also focuses on queer media culture in China. Different from examining how queer media contents are promoted and consumed on new media platforms, this study selects a Chinese gay community website (iboysky) as a case to discuss the self-identification processes of gay groups in the online community. It uses textual analysis and observation methods to examine how gay community members identify themselves and update such identities in gay online communities, what kind of cultural identity is constructed through the online community. It also explores whether the identity of the gay community in the online community will change the prejudice and discrimination of members of mainstream social groups. It finds that gay group members establish their group identity through discovering and maintaining common emotions and values in online communities, and that the construction of this kind of identity can, to a certain extent, alleviate their identity anxiety in real life. It argues that the cultural identity of the homosexual community is a social construction dominated by heterosexual culture and the narration of identity within gay community reproduces such heterosexual norms. The limitation is that this study uses the gay community as an observation point and can only discuss the identification of identity within the gay community. The analysis of the connection between mainstream social groups and homosexual groups is subjective and lacks sufficient arguments. But it establishes a study of the relationships between virtual community and homosexual groups and provides a good viewpoint for this research to do similar observation on behaviours of queer people on online platforms.

From the literature review, it can be concluded that many Chinese queer studies have focused on the relationships between queer culture and media culture in China. However, most studies have taken the queer community as a whole to explore its relationships with media culture, and there exists a lack of empirical studies of queer individuals. Thus, this research will combine Western queer theories and emerging Chinese queer studies as a theoretical framework to

conduct an ethnographic research to try to establish the connection between Chinese queer individuals and new media, contributing empirical studies of queer culture in China.

### **3. Research Methods**

#### **3.1 Research strategy**

##### **3.1.1 Research methods**

This research focuses on the relationship between social media and queer youth in China. This research not only aims at finding more information about queer culture and its relationship with the specific media ecology in China, but also focuses on the experiences of different queer individuals in China, considering them as a whole and at the same time as different independent individuals. In terms of the aims of this research, an ethnographic approach will be taken to use the method of participant observation and interview, the combination of which helps to produce data that can be cross-checked (Dexter, 2012) and contributes to a thick description of a culture from different details of their life experience (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

The first method is virtual participant observation, a method to enter a community to take a close look at people's daily behaviour (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Weibo is a public virtual space where the behaviour of users may be influenced by many factors, like the comments from others and public discussions on related issues. Compared to physical spaces, it may be a place that is relatively free for queer people to receive information and engage in self-expression in daily life. As Engebretsen (2008) suggests in her queer ethnography research, an ethnographic approach is suitable for breaking the cultural world down into components to seek commonalities and varieties and finding more details about queer people's daily lives based on observation of their everyday life. It emphasises the use of participant observation to set up daily interactions and collect data (documentary evidence) during this process. In this

research, the researcher will take the role of participant observer and also a follower of informants' Weibo accounts to take part in their daily virtual life including commenting on or liking their posts. Observation will last for two months to observe and record their daily behaviour and to take a close look at informants' social lives on Weibo.

The second method is interviews, an important method to examine and comprehend the interrelationships of research subjects and their implications (Boellstorff et al., 2012). By giving informants oral stimuli (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), interviewers can access informants' direct interpretation of their life and motivation of their behaviour, which provides a completely different perspectives of a specific culture from observation (Boellstorff et al., 2012). The data drawn from interviews, which is direct information from informants who belong to Chinese queer community, will be an important support for the findings in this research. The interview is designed to be semi-structured, which is more flexible for getting more information that varies with each individual. The interview will also be adapted according to informants' different behaviour on Weibo.

### **3.1.2 The criteria of selecting informants**

Considering the potential risk of exposing one's sexual identity and limited available support resources, this research uses a snowball strategy to obtain informants, which is often used to find hidden and hard-to-reach populations (TenHouten, 2017). With the help of the socially interconnected system of the identified informants, this strategy can expand access to potential respondents (Thomson, 1997) and can obtain "a degree of trust" in advance before the interview to avoid unnecessary violation (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). A snowball strategy can also ensure that the informants have actively made their identity visible to others, avoiding the risk of casting any undue burden on informants. There are several criteria that this research uses for selection during snowball

strategy:

### **Informants from different regions in China**

This criterion is used for getting access to people in different background which may be quite different in different regions of China to make sure the results can be more generalisable to the Chinese queer community. Besides, it also helps to investigate if the social concepts towards sexual identity differs in different cities with different economic conditions.

### **Young people**

Young people here refers to a specific age group ranging from 20 to 30 years old. On the one hand, queer youth is the most important component of the Chinese queer community being more socially active than other age groups. On the other hand, most of them have been going through or have finished a self-identification process and have entered university or the job market, which may help them have better understanding and more awareness of their surroundings. Compared to other groups, young queer people belong to a “more-willing-to-reveal informants” category (Dean et al. 1967: 285), which is better and easier for data collection.

### **Different gender**

During the selection process, this research also tries to find informants of different gender or sexual orientation to capture different stories and concepts within a queer group. It includes informants who are self-identified as gay, lesbian and bisexual.

By snowball strategy, the researcher has gained access to eight informants, two females and six males. Three of the eight informants self-identify themselves as bisexual, and the others are self-identified as homosexual. The participants are between the ages of 21 and 26, and include undergraduate students, graduate students and employees in different industries. They come from seven different provinces or cities in China and have left their hometown for different cities for further study or a job.

### **3.2 Data collection**

After the selection of participants, next comes to data collection. Data collection in this research is divided into two parts: data from participant observation and data from interviews. During participant observation, informants' daily behaviour was recorded by screenshots including their daily post, repost, comment and other behaviour and the researcher also wrote fieldnotes during observation from time to time. The screenshots and fieldnotes are one important part of data for further analysis. Then all participants were contacted by phone after they gave consent to be interviewed. The interviews varied from 30 minutes to 40 minutes and all interviews were recorded by audio and have been turned into transcripts as the other important part of the data.

### **3.3 Framework for data analysis**

This research uses an ethnographic-analytical framework to deal with data. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p 212) suggest, there is no normative rule for data analysis but what's most important is moving "back and forth" between ideas and data to test them repeatedly and then develop ideas to fit with further data. All the data documented in this research has been sorted and analysed manually. Each interview transcript and each fieldnote has been labelled and coded. During the coding process relevant parts of data have been put together through different codes. Codes have been adjusted over time as the research progressed to remove overlapping codes and update more valuable codes. These codes were listed and organized to develop some themes that were drawn from the interpretation of codes and the phenomena behind them. To avoid self-evident coding and to critically analyse collected data, this research drew on previous studies and researcher's ideas to deal with data and to do reflection on codes during data analysis from time to time (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). After the process of documenting, coding, managing coding and developing themes, the research findings were identified and will be discussed below in relation to

previous studies to obtain conclusions that can respond to Chinese queer community and may help further studies.

### 3.4 Ethical issues

It is necessary to note that this research kept all informant’s information anonymous to protect them. The informed consent forms that include the information and intention of this research have been sent to informants and interviews were not conducted until gaining their consent. It has been stressed that they have the right to refuse to answer or stop the interview if they felt uncomfortable with any of the interview questions. The design of this research is also based on full consideration of, and to avoid any risks to, informants. All consent information is recorded in the form of screenshots. To avoid any risk of revealing informants’ information, fake names are used in this dissertation to replace real names.

## 4 Results / Findings

### 4.1 Presentation of results

Codes	Themes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-identifying process and sense of belonging</li> <li>2. Environments around queer people</li> <li>3. A gap between different age groups</li> </ol>	Experiences of queer people
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Coming out to family</li> <li>2. Social acceptance</li> <li>3. Finding a stable partner</li> </ol>	Dilemmas of queer people
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-expression and interaction behaviour on Weibo</li> <li>2. Receiving queer information on Weibo</li> </ol>	Behaviour on social media platform

Table 1 Framework of analysis

The table above shows the process of coding and obtaining themes during the manual analysis of collected data. Eight codes have been used and three themes are drawn from these codes, including experiences of queer people, dilemmas of queer people and behaviour on social media platform. The following section will provide specific meanings of these codes and different phenomena which lie behind them.

## **4.2 Experiences of queer people**

### **4.2.1 Self-identified process and sense of belonging**

“I never doubted it when I found myself having crush on a same-sex friend. I think it’s normal. And I didn’t feel I have any desire to find a group in order to obtain a sense of belonging.”

(Fu, 23 years old, self-identified as gay)

Most of interviewees said they had the awareness of their identity since they were in the primary school or junior high school. When asked if they felt confused or stressed when they first realised that they were sexual minorities and might not be understood by others, most interviewees said they didn’t doubt themselves at the beginning. “When I realized I fell in love with one boy, I felt calm and thought it was normal,” Fu recalled. But he mentioned that he didn’t immediately talk to any friends about it when he realised it. Some interviewees mentioned that they had seen some homosexual couples around them before they realised their identity. They have also been exposed to relevant content like movies and novels. Miro, 24 years old and self-identified as bisexual, said in his high school class, there were many Funüs (a title used to describe the group of girls who like reading boylove novels) in his class and they would often imagine two boys as a couple, which made him feel quite normal when he found himself having affection for a boy.

But Chow, 21 years old and self-identified as gay, said he felt the sky had fallen

when he realised he liked boys, though he had been exposed to many gay-related contents online. “Even when you had an understanding of homosexuality, you would still feel panic when it happens to you,” Chow recalled. Lin (23 years old, self-identified as lesbian) stated that when she found she might like girls, she tried to find a boyfriend to ‘make herself straight’, but she failed. After that she accepted herself as a lesbian with pleasure. The self-identification process varied among queer people, some struggling in the beginning while some accepted it quickly. The extent of desire for sense of belonging also varies among them. Chow said after his panic of self-identification as a gay, he went to the internet to seek a lot of gay groups online and to obtain a sense of belonging and to get rid of sense of isolation. While for others, they answered that they didn’t have much desire for sense of belonging, although most of them still chose to watch some queer media contents on the internet, such as Baidu Tieba (an online community allowing people who have the same interests to interact with each other and was popular in China before the emergence of Weibo), to get new knowledge about this group out of curiosity.

The observation on Weibo found that their self-expression behaviours are also different from individual to individual. Among them, some informants’ self-expression behaviours are based on an individual within society rather than an individual with a queer identity. They don’t seek identification of their identity by other queers on Weibo but would rather stay individually on such a virtual platform. Some would often repost queer-related contents as the behaviour of strengthening their identity according to their own interpretations. It can be found that there is no unified rule that defines that queer people all suffer from the pressure of the self-identification process and all of them desire for sense of belonging in the context of China. The absence of uniformity is not to deny that they didn’t suffer from the identity of sexual minorities at all, but to suggest the importance of noticing different colours from a beautiful kaleidoscope, which means viewing them as lively individuals rather than just a rigid component of

oppressed minorities.

#### **4.2.2 Environment around queer people**

“Even when I feel being discriminated by someone, I will keep away from him/her. I won’t spend my time explaining what homosexuality is or why I am homosexual. There is no need to convince them and it’s not important for me to let others admit my identity.”

(Fu)

When asked if the social or political environments had any negative influence on them, Fu replied like this. He explained that when the queer topic page on Weibo was prohibited, they can still use other dating applications designed for queer people to communicate with each other. He didn’t feel angry with these issues because he thought it didn’t affect his daily life. Most of interviewees expressed similar attitudes: for them, as long as they can live their daily lives normally (without political intervention on their daily lives), public opinions do not have much impact on them. It is necessary to note that when asked if any issue of homophobia happened to them, all of them replied they didn’t meet with unkind treatment and neither did their queer friends. Although from their narrations it can be found that they had the worry for the unequal social environment, whether their surroundings were safe for them. It can be seen that for most Chinese queer people, once they have completed the process of self-identification, they would have the ability to protect themselves from the social environment and can stay safe and happy within their social circle with the help of the internet, although such protection still reflects their passive status against social environment which is still intolerant to sexual minorities.

#### **4.2.3 A gap between different age groups**

During the study, the researcher found that the acceptance of queer groups in the

non- queer community was highly differentiated in the various age groups. When the researcher asked in the interviews whether the respondents felt different queer culture acceptances in different regions, the prevailing view was that the differences between regions were not obvious, but there were large differences among people of different ages. “Our generations, most of whom are in their twenties or thirties, have received a great deal of information on the internet. Their abilities to accept new and odd things are better than other generations who are in their fifties or sixties, who may be undereducated and can only receive little information on the internet,” said Li (26 years old and self-identified as gay), who expressed his opinion on the differences between age groups. Cui, 21 years old and self-identifying as bisexual, told of his experiences about such gaps in different age groups: “I often go to one specific restaurant to have dinner with my boyfriend. Peers can realize we are a couple because we show up together almost everywhere. But the waiter in this restaurant, who is in her forties, said we were such intimate friends who stayed together every day. She didn’t even know the existence of homosexuality. This phenomenon has been common in their generation.”

### **4.3 Dilemma of Chinese queer people**

#### **4.3.1 Coming out to family**

“Even in the future I won’t come out to my parents. They are conservative and traditional. It will make them sad. My mom possibly can’t fall asleep all night.”

(Lin)

“For me, I won’t come out to my parents ever because it’s a shock and would impact them rather than an issue of trying to make them understand my identity. If I come out to them, it will only force them to accept it and cause them to bear more pain. I’d rather disguise it than come out.”

(Fu)

Coming out has always been an important issue to queer people. The research finds that the closet is not so difficult for interviewees to open, but it still depends on the people they are coming out to. All interviewees have come out to their friends - some to intimate friends and some to all their friends. When talking about whether it's difficult to come out to peers, their attitudes were quite consistent: it's easy. However, when asked if they have come out to their family, all of them were cautious about it. "In the future I will definitely come out to my parents. Maybe when I become financially independent, I will tell them because I don't want to deceive them," Chow said. He called coming out as a "revolutionary act", which every gay should accomplish. He explained that most people can't accept sexual minorities because of ignorance, while if more and more sexual minorities can come out to prove the actual existence of queer groups, the majority won't view it as marginalised. "I pretend to be a straight man in front of my parents, but I will take it easy to come out because it's still too early for me. I haven't become a free man," he added. Li also expressed his plan to come out to his parents after he became independent economically. Besides, he mentioned having a stable partner was the other important factor for him to persuade his parents into accepting it. "Only when I have a stable partner would I have the courage to come out to them to demonstrate that it's not an issue of impetuosity or immature thoughts, but a serious thing in my life," Li added.

While for others, coming out to parents is not so simple. As quoted above, Lin said that she would never come out to her parents. She mentioned discussions between herself and her father when he asked in a doubtful voice whether she is homosexual or not when she disclosed her unwillingness to get marry. "I become speechless suddenly and dared not talk about it anymore. After that I would obey everything they ask me to do," Lin said.

Miro mentioned one of his friend who came out to his parents when he was a

sophomore, and the result was that his friend's mother burst into tears and his father flew into a rage, and after that he dared not to talk about issues of homosexuality in front of his parents any more. Miro commented that there was no need for his friend to come out to his family when he was still so young. "So don't come out to your parents when you are still young and dependent on them, the result of which both you and your parents can't take on," he added. He said that he wouldn't come out to people whom he can't trust except his intimate friends, to make sure his disclosure won't cause any unwanted trouble, like being outed accidentally to his parents.

The informants described their parents as traditional and conservative, which makes them believe their parents can't accept their identity. The huge gap between queer people and their families has become one of their biggest dilemmas. On the one hand, low-level internet information reception among the older age non-queer groups causes the unconsciousness feeling or perception to homosexuality. Some of them still see homosexuality as a mental illness. On the other hand, the lack of official recognition of queer groups and correct reporting by mainstream media has led to the stagnation of these dilemmas, leaving no space for solutions or for queer people to deal with it themselves. It led to the three interconnected pressures or dilemmas for the identity of queer people: pressure to hide their identity in front of their families; the burden of the emotional isolation from their parents and pressure to reveal their identity; the burden of possible sadness and disappointment from their parents.

#### **4.3.2 Social acceptance**

"Although my friends accept my identity, I still feel there exists a kind of benign discrimination," said Li. He used the word "benign discrimination" to describe the phenomenon among his friends on the attitudes of homosexuality and explained that although his friends wouldn't discriminate him or view him as abnormal, they still believed heterosexual marriage would be better for him in the

future. Cui also talked about his experiences after he came out to his friends. One of his friends said for certain that he would get married in the future. It can be seen here that the concept of heteronormativity still prevails in society. Although non-queer people especially young people accept the existence of sexual minorities, they still view this group as a vulnerable or non-mainstream group, which will be assimilated by mainstream heterosexual society in the future.

Additionally, Fu (self-identified as gay) expressed his thoughts that he would persuade his friends who self-identified as bisexual and had possibilities to fall in love with heterosexual partners into heterosexual marriage . He explained that although can himself live an easy life and ignore those negative factors, he still felt it was quite difficult for queer people to lead a life of happiness due to the dominant heteronormativity culture and intolerant governmental attitudes. “It’s still a difficult road,” Fu said.

#### **4.3.3 The difficulty of finding a stable partner**

During the interviews, the researcher found that several interviewees mentioned their difficulty in finding a stable partner. “It is usual that homosexual people not only spend less time on the process from knowing each other to establishing relationship than heterosexual people, but also spend less time in maintaining relationships,” Ming (23 years old and self-identified as gay) said. He described that this phenomenon had been common in Chinese gay group that most gays seemed to have irresponsible attitudes towards relationships, and often changed their partners very quickly once they felt unsatisfied with the relationship. “They think that their relationship won’t have any result in the future because of the absence of marriage laws for queer people, so they tend to have fun before they have to confront with the pressure from their parents to set up a heterosexual relationship or marriage,” Ming explained.

Li also expressed his disappointments on gay relationships. “My thought is that if

I can find a stable partner, I will have the courage to come out to my parents. But the problem is that it's really difficult to find a person who is suitable for me and is willing to step into a long relationship.” His opinion was similar to Ming's, holding that gays tend to refuse long relationships for the reason that they think they can date with different people when they are young, and that they also worry that their relationships will be opposed to by each other's families. “I think I have become a little bit disappointed in terms of finding a homosexual partner. If in the future I still can't find a stable partner, I may try to be straight and find a girl whom I love,” Here Li expressed the possibility of stepping into a heterosexual marriage. This phenomenon often happens in the gay community in China. As the amount of dating apps within the gay community increases, gay people have more chances and freedom to interact with each other socially and have less risk of being isolated. This also leads to a problem: without long-term regulation and moral restraints on relationships like in the heterosexual community, the relationships within the gay community often remain unstable. Cui mentioned that such a phenomenon had led to negative impressions of gay people in public, where they were viewed as irresponsible and disloyal. It has been a vicious circle where without official acknowledgement and public acceptance, people within gay community are prone to treat relationships casually in fear of the vulnerability of long-period relationships, and such unstable relationships conversely increase public misunderstanding of this group. This has been a significant dilemma for queer people especially for gay groups.

#### **4.4 Behaviour on social media platform**

During the two-month observation, the researcher found that self-expression behaviours of informants were mainly around sharing their daily lives and interacting with close friends. There was a low-level of self-expression for most informants, who didn't write original posts very often on Weibo. Rather they tended to receive information from Weibo and “liked” a lot of content on Weibo, which can be seen from their personal homepages. Female respondents tended to

focus more on vlogs of lesbian couples (vlog is an abbreviation of ‘video blog’ which is used to record daily life of the users via video, including the daily interactions between lesbian couples or daily activities they participate in together). Male respondents often follow famous queer celebrities. The informant, Chow, posts contents related to his identity frequently, including his photo with his partner and his opinions on social events concerning queer people. “I think the most significant meaning is not only to enhance my own sense of identity, but also to make this group visible to others [non-queer people], and to make them realise that the phenomenon of homosexuality does exist and is the same, reasonable existence as them,” Chow replied when asked if there was any purpose of his behaviour on Weibo. Lin expressed her thoughts on reposting contents concerning queer people, for example, when she reposted the news of the passing of the Taiwan homosexuality marriage law. “I think that reposting does not to make my identity visible. I only want to show my attitudes towards these events.” While other informants didn’t post any content related to their identity because they viewed it as a private and personal thing and there was no need to let others know.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Non-political phenomenon**

This research argues that there is a non-political phenomenon among Chinese queer people, which means most of them will avoid radical acts and focus more on their daily life. The researcher found that although they are eager for a more equal environment, they have no desire to take actions for legal rights for the queer community. It can be drawn from both observation of the behaviours of queer people on Weibo and the interview questions focusing on the attitudes of respondents towards their subjective initiatives to promote social change, towards queer marriage law, as well as towards the queer movement, that most of their activities are at the level of ensuring the normal conduct of daily life instead of

seeking political demands and radical movement for equal rights. Most informants held pessimistic attitudes towards the queer marriage law, which they don't believe can be realised in short term. The identity of queer people in China has a tendency to exclude political discussions, and instead is turned into more cultural and economic discussions, for example, how queer individuals live a rich and diverse life with the help of various new media platforms, and how queer media content like queer vlogs are consumed on these media platforms. Thus, the portrait of queer individuals in China concluded from this research is termed by the researcher as 'non-political' to give a description of their identity as a social being rather than as an empowered citizen: completing a self-identifying process, adapting into society and conducting a normal social life in safe social circles (including both homosexual and heterosexual groups), getting queer information on the Internet, building a relationship through dating platforms, and keeping away from seeking political demands for sexual minorities.

On the one hand, I argue that this phenomenon is due to the solidification of the long-term political ideology. The government has consciously adopted a policy of supervision of queer media content and removes political discussions from public view, such as on sexual orientation issues or queer marriage law. The reports by mainstream media, most of which can be seen as mouthpiece of government, have also been kept away from discussing any political rights of sexual minorities. On the other hand, as mentioned, informants felt that their efforts would be futile in fighting against the Confucian culture of China, which for more than five thousand years hasn't accepted homosexuality. They felt that it's almost impossible to confront the strict and unshakeable supervision of the government through their own actions and activities. The infiltration of the government's political ideology and the huge gap between the ideal and reality have greatly

weakened the desire of queer individuals to actively seek political appeals, resulting in non-political behaviours and avoidance of any topic that would cause political trouble, instead focusing on their daily life.

Although limited by the constraints of unequal social acceptance and political control, it is necessary to note that most informants held optimistic attitudes towards the situation of sexual minorities in the long term. They hold the opinion that there is more and more tolerance of sexual minorities around the world. With the spread of information via the Internet and more visibility of queer communities, the acceptance by Chinese society would also change over time. Although such an opinion that depends on slow progress of society may lead to the inaction of sexual minorities, it is still a true portrayal of queer individuals in the context of China's specific socio-political environments.

## **5.2 The role of new media**

During the interviews and observation, the researcher found that new media have played a significant role in the queer community of China. Faced with the silence or biased reports by mainstream media on queer issues and events, the development and interactions of the queer community have been greatly prompted by the Internet after the reform and opening up. Most informants mentioned in the interviews that the Internet was the most important way for them to receive queer-related information to complete the process of self-identification, and to establish connection with other people within the queer community when physical spaces like gay or lesbian bars are still scarce. Although the government's surveillance on the Internet continues to exist, leading to ambiguous descriptions of queer relationships in queer-related media content such as movies, network novels and network dramas (for example, the recent popular network

drama, *Chenqingling*, adapted from a novel, has changed character setting of gay couples into intimate friends), a large amount of queer content still exists and new media platforms like gay dating apps are not prohibited, remaining in the grey areas of government surveillance. The emergence of new media has heavily broadened the activity sites for the queer community from limited physical space to more unconstrained virtual space. Although the behaviour of self-expression may vary among queer individuals, free expression is allowed in such virtual spaces and have gained more and more visibility for the queer community. Internet, functioning as a communication tool, is particularly meaningful in the context of China to give citizens (here referring to queer people) more opportunities for unlimited public self-expression and channels for information not subject to censorship (Shirk, 2011) and provides a necessary tool for a diverse queer community in China (Shaw and Zhang, 2017). Furthermore, I argue that the role of new media in China serves as a bottom-up tool for queer people to resist the hegemonic reports by mainstream media, the political control of an authoritarian government on queer issues, as well as the hegemonic social concept which follows the rule of heteronormativity. New media make the voice of queer community visible to public and the public impression of queer people no longer follows in the shape of mainstream media, and instead more vivid images of queer individual lives can be disseminated on the Internet. This realises the queers' resistance to incorrect descriptions of sexual minorities in a non-confrontation way. To conclude, new media not only provide an important virtual platform for queer people to receive information and to express freely, but also function as a significant tool for non-confrontational change for queer people in China (Engebretsen, 2008) to steadily create a visual image of the queer community (Bao, 2015). To some extent, new media provides great possibilities to

alleviate the effect of the inactivity of the non-political phenomenon in China, to help the queer community occupy the Internet space slowly and to promote social change in a steady way, which is essential in China's context but different from Western definition of activism (Schroeder, 2015).

### **5.3 The analysis in China's context**

Different from Western researchers that conclude two options for queer people: remaining in closeted safely, or coming out to face possible rejection and discrimination from society (Rhoads, 1995), there is a special phenomenon that remains middle ground in China's queer community: half-out. This has become a strategy for most queer people to maintain a stable life. For queer groups growing up in a traditional Chinese family culture, their relationship with families is very different from that of the West. The family relationship has caused the Chinese queer group to have many concerns about coming out and not coming out. As Engebretsen (2015) suggested in her ethnographic research on Chinese lesbians in Beijing, coming out to parents is considered meaningless by lesbians themselves, and it would be viewed as "morally bad and selfish" to neglect feelings of parents. The biggest reason for not coming out to parents that informants in this research mentioned was that they didn't want to make them sad and disappointed. It is similarly a moral restraint connected to traditional Chinese family culture whereby queer people would view themselves as unfilial if they forced their parents to accept their "abnormal" identity. The traditional beliefs of Chinese parents, where homophobia still exists, has cast a heavy pressure on queer people and remains unresolved in the short term.

Chou (2000) argues that Confucian family values are deeply rooted in Chinese culture and homosexuality is viewed as a Western discourse that is

confrontational and selfish. In this context, homosexuality is seen as a subversion of traditional harmonious qualities and which is morally bad, and, at the same time, heteronormativity is believed to be good and worthy of respected (Kam, 2012). I argue that the core problem leading to the stagnation of social concepts about queer issues lies in the political concern that the subversion of traditional heteronormativity may lead to the subversion of the regime in China. The authoritarian control is the central rule of the political structure in China, while the subversion of traditional culture may shake the dominant political structure. This can't be allowed by the authorities. In China's society, the discussions of sexual issues have also been disguised by the authorities, and any media content containing exposure of sexual behaviour will be removed from public platforms. To open the discussions of issues related to sex or sexual orientation means to open possibilities of losing control over public discussions, especially when the issues of sex are seen by the authorities as the most rebellious topic.

To conclude, the discussions of sexual identity in China must be put within its political and cultural context to better understand how these phenomena emerge in China. In such a strict environment, the internet has greatly empowered the Chinese queer community and enabled them to lead a stable life, to receive queer information, and to interact with others online. Queer individuals have their own strategy of 'half-out' to avoid confrontation with seemingly unshakeable social perceptions and political control.

## **6 Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary of results and discussion**

Through observation and in-depth interviews, this study closely observed the lives of the Chinese queer community and obtained their own narrations of their

lives. Based on a review of previous Chinese and Western queer literature, the study chose to use a framework that combined of Western queer theory and Chinese queer studies to explore the current situation of queer groups based on China's unique political and cultural contexts. This study uses an ethnographic approach to observe the Weibo accounts of eight participants for two months and conducted in-depth interviews with each individual. Through the narration of queer individuals, the research finds that unlike the needs of the Western queer group for group belonging, the needs of Chinese queer individuals for group belonging are not as strong and vary from person to person. The study also found three major dilemmas of the contemporary Chinese queer group: the dual pressure to come out to their families, the social environment that is not tolerant of sexual minorities, and the difficulty of finding long-term partners. For queer individuals, following the completion of the self-identification process, they tend to perform normal social intercourse and realise self-expression with the help of the Internet, and it is no longer difficult for them to come out to their peers. The study argues that there is a non-political phenomenon in the Chinese queer group. It means the discussion within the queer groups only stays at the level of individual life and lacks the drive for political rights. Secondly, this study analyses the important role new media played in promoting the development of Chinese queer groups. Finally, the study analysed the phenomena discovered in the context of China's political and cultural environment. It can be concluded that the situation of queer people in China has improved over recent years with the help of new media. But there still exist a lot of deep-seated problems that are rooted in the specific political and cultural environments of China.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

This study provides the basis for understanding a queer group image for future research. Future researchers need to address more refined queer group experiences, such as emotional experiences in the queer community, intimacy, and research into the difficulty of long-term relationships among queer people especially gay groups. With the development of the Internet, more and more

queer individuals have the opportunity to appear in public, which will also help more empirical research based on queer individual experiences in the future.

### **6.3 Limitations**

The limitations of this study are mainly in the choice of research methods and samples. Due to limited time, this study only carried out two months of observational research on the virtual online life of the queer group and could not reach the more comprehensive and meticulous research requirements of a full ethnography. In this process, the primary identity of the researcher is the observer, lacking long-term participation. Secondly, due to the limited resources and the privacy of the identity, the respondents in this study mainly came from urban areas and the research therefore lacks the perspectives of queer individuals from rural areas. This makes the sample lack a certain representativeness. In the process of analysing the behaviour of the queer group, there is also a subjectivity in the interpretation by the researcher.

### **6.4 Summary**

For the current queer community, there is not an urgent desire for queer people to completely come out of the closet and seek political demands. In the unique political and cultural environment of China, the efforts of individuals and even groups cannot promote social change easily. Queer groups have found a stable lifestyle, where the non-political and half-out strategy seeks the most stable state of getting along with the environment. The road to equal rights for queer people in China is still quite difficult in the short term.

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