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***Tongzhi* visibility and representation in China: New media and online spaces as allies to change**

Visibilidade e representação *Tongzhi* na China:
Novos media e espaços online como aliados da mudança

Frederico Duarte Vidal *

* Católica – Faculdade de Ciências Humanas, Portugal; Email: vidalfrederico@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

One of the LGBTQ people's greatest hurdles in China can be traced back to their lack of visibility in Chinese media, alongside negatively biased portrayals. This brief article explores these concepts in a succinct manner, through the analysis of extant literature, as to explain what this lack of visibility and bias actually entail. It is also unavoidable to delve into how revolutionary the widespread use of the internet has been on the reconfiguration of these matters, as it allowed for unprecedented agency in content creation. LGBTQ people have been experiencing a period of empowerment thanks to social media, and this is yet another tool through which visibility and representation are being built.

Keywords: Queer Studies; Chinese LGBTQ; tongzhi; media; Queer Studies in Asia; Visibility; Representation

RESUMO

A maioria dos obstáculos que as pessoas LGBTQ enfrentam na China remete para a ausência de visibilidade destes grupos nos media chineses, aliada a uma representação negativamente enviesada. Este breve artigo explora estes conceitos de maneira sucinta, através da análise de literatura sobre estes temas, de forma a clarificar o

que esta ausência de visibilidade e visão parcial implicam. É inevitável aprofundar o quão revolucionário o uso generalizado da Internet mostrou ser na reconfiguração destas questões, na medida em que permitiu uma agência sem precedentes na criação de conteúdos. As pessoas LGBTQ têm vivido um período de emancipação graças à ascensão das redes sociais, sendo esta mais uma ferramenta para a construção da visibilidade e representação.

Palavras-chave: Estudos Queer, China LGBTQ; Estudos Queer na Ásia, Visibilidade; tongzhi; Representação; media

1. Introduction

Even though the official Chinese narrative regarding homosexuality has taken massive steps around the turn of the century — having it been decriminalized in 1997 and removed from a list classifying it as a mental pathology in 2001 (Bao, 2020) — these people, which often refer to themselves as *tongzhi*同志¹ (meaning, in general terms, comrade, in itself a politically charged designation) (Wong, 2011), still faces many hurdles. These issues are, in some sense, related to their lack of social visibility. Homosexuals opt for closeted lives as there is not enough visibility to show society as a whole how discrimination against one's sexual preference is curtailed notion and because they do not come out, they never attain this direly needed visibility, making for a vicious circle. This is, naturally, a quick summary of the structural issue, whereas one can determine many other factors — family pressure regarding marriage (Choi and Luo, 2016) and procreation — deeply rooted in Confucianism's core value of *xiao*孝 (Lu, 2007; Santos, 2006, Rosemont and Ames, 2009) —, workplace discrimination, social and political attitudes which do not convey messages of acceptance and integration, etc. — which also contribute to these scenarios. One can say that representation in this regard comes hand-in-hand with visibility, as the former is a social phenomenon through which subjective realities are forged and permeate society and the latter is related to effectively how much exposure they have.

1. Meaning those who share the same ideals. The term dates back to a speech by Sun Yixian, the first president of the Republic of China, in which he states that “The Revolution is not yet won, comrades [tongzhi], we must fight together” (Damm, 2000, p.63). This term — comrades, *tongzhi*同志 — was used as a politically correct way of addressing all Chinese people, regardless of their gender, social standing or any other indicator that might have been relevant otherwise — an all-encompassing universal term. As the years went by, it was progressively adopted and used by the gay community, as it too identified itself with the notion that their struggles were still very much alive and their rights being fought for. Other terms orbit this reality — namely *tongxinglian*同性恋, the clinical term for homosexual, which has been repudiated for its overly clinical and perceived derogatory nature (dating back to the Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Diseases) - and *ku'er*酷儿, the phonetic equivalent to the western “queer”.

I intend to take a glimpse at studies related to the quantity of information that is allocated to homosexuality in Chinese media — i.e. visibility — as well as studies that examine the quality of information that is disseminated — i.e. representation. As an extension of my research, this article’s main focus will be male homosexuality and an analysis of extant literature pertaining to its visibility and representation. It is important to assess the manner in which these portrayals showcase underlying agendas — be them positive or negative — and understand to what extent these have helped shape Chinese people’s opinions regarding this segment of LGBTQ people.

2. A Different New Year’s Eve Dinner

In order to better understand why visibility and representation are important, I believe some context needs to be given. Narratives of Otherization, which thrive on dichotomic views of *Us vs Them*, have tormented social minorities throughout the ages and China has not been immune to this type of social affliction. Notwithstanding, changes are being felt throughout the globe in order to counteract these. You can either be a part of the system — or *renmin* 人民, the people, those for which social structures are built — or live outside of it, what one would call *diren* 敌人^[2]. This is an outdated category whose meaning has shifted over time but has grown to include those who do not abide by the already established social norms. *Tongzhi* are very much an embodiment of *diren*: they lack rights (Chang and Ren, 2017), they lack visibility, and their lives lack secure footing — as they struggle to be inserted and accepted into and by the system — becoming *renmin* in the process (Bao, 2018).

The idea for this brief exploration came about around the Chinese New Year period (2020), when Tmall, a shopping website affiliated to Alibaba, released a New Year TV advert, which showcased a gay man introducing his lover to his family on New Year’s dinner^[3]. The man is welcomed by a surprised-looking household, but by the end of the advert, it is clear that he has already made himself comfortable — even thanking his boyfriend’s father with a very familiar “*xiexie ba* 谢谢爸”^[4].

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2. Meaning enemy. Historically, this term was used to refer to those who opposed China but has went on to attain this more nuanced meaning, where it encompasses many forms of social dis-sidence (Bao, 2018).
 3. South China Morning Post (2020, Jan 10) *Chinese ad featuring LGBT couple wins widespread praise-ACCESSO*. Last accessed on 28 November, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c5HHz382k>
 4. Meaning “thank you, dad”, mimicking the way in which people who marry into a family address their in-laws.

Even though the ad was praised for giving visibility and positive representation to this sexual minority, some^[5] were quick to criticize it, claiming it was a manifestation of companies' desires to present a more LGBTQ-friendly façade in order to lure in a different type of demographic – to cash in on the “*pink yuan*”^[6], as it were. The fact that this was a single event in time and not an ad inserted in a string of consistent efforts to support minorities also led to the ad's condemnation.

The ad was broadcast during a tense period for the *tongzhi*. Families are still seen as one of the major oppressive forces (UNDP, 2016) in *tongzhi* people's coming out process and overall well-being. The New Year period witnesses unparalleled mobility to and within China, as families come together to celebrate the date. This means that many LGBTQ individuals dread these days, as they feel even more unable to express themselves and are faced with many questions regarding their lives and their choices – namely, inquiries about marriage and children. Therefore, bearing in mind the circumstances, one can see how an ad such as this, where these issues are present - albeit not explicitly addressed –, during a period which is closely associated with family reunion can be seen as a bold move, which was bound to stir up a reaction from its audience.

That being said, the ad incident led me to consider in what manner are LGBTQ people – especially homosexuals – portrayed in Chinese media: how much space they are given, what scenarios are associated with them, what language is used, etc.

3. Traditional and New Media – a Clash of Social Perspectives

This isolated ad has indeed showcased male homosexuality in a neutral – if not positive – light; but this has not always been the case regarding LGBTQ visibility and representation. Hu and Li (2019) very aptly studied the manner in which Chinese media represents homosexual individuals. The authors divide Chinese media into two different categories: *traditional* media (state sponsored media, such as TV, newspapers, radio, books, movies, etc.) and *new* media (all things Internet related: social networks, websites, etc.); the former has its content more closely monitored, whereas the latter is where *tongzhi* take advantage of the Internet's volatile vastness to dodge censorship to form

5. Chen, Laurie (2020, Jan 9) *Does China's response to LGBT couple in Tmall advert signal acceptance?*. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3045435/does-chinas-response-lgbt-couples-tmall-advert-signal-acceptance>

6. Williams, Sophie (2020, Jan 25) *Why China's LGBT hide their identities at Lunar New Year*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51199309>

(and find) communities where they can express themselves freely. These authors canvassed the notion that there is a correlation between traditional media usage in China and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes regarding homosexuality – which the article manages to prove, stating that silence on homosexual matters is only broken to report news that show this social group involved in negative social situation (Hu and Li, 2019; Chang and Ren, 2017; Bao, 2018; Tu and Lee, 2014).

Meanwhile, those who rely on new media are more likely to show tolerance and acceptance towards LGBTQ issues, credited by the authors to the different levels of information control and censorship placed on online information – even if the space to discuss these issues is not as broad as in the West (Lu, 2007) – and to the possibility of finding alternative forms or representation of homosexual individuals, which can lead one to question traditional views on gender roles and sexuality. However, these lack the ability to be as reachable as traditional media and one must state that this sort of information is only online for those who (know how to) look for it.

As an example of how current representation of homosexuals in Chinese traditional media is biased and how their visibility is insufficient, we can consider another article by authors Chang and Ren (2017), who have performed extensive research through the analysis of Beijing newspapers over a period of five years – all of which are under CCP ownership – and have dissected the 71 news articles related to homosexuality found within these (the number itself is already revealing). The authors' conclusions state that articles on gay people can be summarized in 4 different categories, in which they are presented as: victims of crimes due to their inherent weakness; as violent individuals; as foes of traditional Chinese values (even though homosexuality was, at several periods throughout Chinese History, a rather normalized and unthreatening behavior – see Jeffreys, 2006; Burger 2012; Wu, 2003; Gulik and Goldin, 2003); and as a source of social instability. It is also worth mentioning that 80% of the surveyed news articles are related to criminal activities and court reports – involving issues of venereal diseases, blackmail, sexual promiscuity, and so on.

This is an example of how traditional media work as tools that perpetuate a narrative of not only vilification but also perversification of homosexuality in China⁷. That being said, the same article also states that lesbians are not as harshly portrayed, as their homosexuality is deemed less serious (in accor-

7. Whereas reports from Western nations – such as the Nielsen Report (2020) show an unprecedented portrayal of LGBTQ individuals, permeated by fairness, respect and integrity, allowing for authentic voices to expose their narratives. It can be said that some segments of LGBTQ peo-

dance to an understanding of them acting closer to the heterosexual person, and therefore, the norm).

Another clear example, which testifies the findings Hu and Li (2019) uncovered in their article, takes shape in a study related to the effects that modernizing factors, such as internet usage and access to higher education, can have on attitudes towards homosexuality, religion and views on tradition culture (Xie and Peng, 2017). This study finds that 78.53% of respondent hold the belief that homosexuality is “wrong”^[8], even though those who did show greater exposure to the aforementioned modernizing factors — namely access to online information and higher education — were noticeably more accepting and tolerant of homosexuality. It is also noteworthy that these authors state China’s socioeconomic progress in the past decades has been able to undermine Chinese traditional culture’s — and, by extension, Confucianism’s — power over these issues. It is the authors’ opinion that to stand for the weight traditional culture might have on homosexual matters is to neglect the power that Chinese socioeconomic progress has had on the modernization of the country.

I humbly disagree with this statement. The findings on the report “*Being LGBTI in China — A National Survey on Social Attitudes towards Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression*” (UNDP, 2016) — which predates Xie and Peng’s article by one year — reveals a country which is still struggling with cultural biases and heteronormative expectations (Bao, 2018; Liu 2010 and 2015, Burger, 2012). Social phenomena such *xinghun* 形婚 — i.e. a coping mechanism comprising of an arranged marriage between a lesbian and a gay man, celebrated in order to appease family pressure regarding society’s heteronormative expectations and Confucian notions of ideal families (Huang and Brower, 2018; Santos and Harrel, 2017) — *pianhun* 骗婚 — i.e., marriage between a closeted gay man and an unknowing heterosexual woman (commonly known as *tongqi* 同妻) (Zhu, 2017), an affair at the intersection between the planes of marriage expectations and homosexual advocacy; or the manner in which unmarried, single men and women past a certain age are labeled as *guanggun* 光棍 and *shengnu* 剩女 respectively are clear evidence of the manner in which Confucian values and expectations regarding gender roles and filial piety are still very much present in Chinese society.

ple are still fighting for visibility, others have already attained and are invested in the quality of this visibility, by focusing on representation and authenticity.

8. The study mentions how this result differs from extant literature and theorizes that this issue may be related to the target audience of the survey. Most studies in China target students, which have a tendency for being more accepting and liberal. This study however targeted a holistic and diversified audience.

Several authors throughout the past decade, who have dedicated themselves to Queer Studies in China, have also mentioned how these values are a wall that needs to be breached (or even torn down) in order for those who identify themselves as being LGBTQ to conquer a new place in society (Kong, 2011; Leng, 2012; Tu and Lee, 2014; Zheng, 2015; Chang and Ren, 2017; Miles-Johnson & Wang, 2017; Bao, 2018 and 2020; Hu and Li, 2019, Qian, 2017).

4. Bargaining — an ally to Visibility and Leverage

It is, then, understandable that new media are the ground upon which new action can take place; it is an unprecedented tool through which society has attained a novel capacity to mobilize and present new issues to the government — a sense of *power*. With around 688 million Chinese netizens (Yang, 2018), there is no doubt regarding the wide and varied audience that can be reached through the Internet and social media. Not only is there a public, but there is, as Yang describes, a collective and individual empowerment of the *tongzhi*, and this manifest itself in different manners. At first, it means Freedom, something which LGBTQ people feel they do not have; even if the online world is subject to censorship and restraints, there are still ways in which this can be avoided and the effect can be liberating; secondly, this empowerment can further materialize itself in the production, collection and dissemination of content regarding LGBTQ issues — websites, documentaries, books, movies, conferences, etc. — which are essential for self-awareness and for the shaping of a collective identity; and lastly, these are undoubtedly tools used in the promotion of equality and the pursuit for rights and advocacy. The aforementioned author goes on to condense all of these realities in one composite term: *bargaining power*.

Bargaining power reflects how the Internet has proved itself to be an outlet for *diren* voices — which can spread like wildfire and dodge any type of censorship through the use of coded languages, the use of humor, or any other such artifice — which mobilize others and make hitherto invisible issues not only visible but also impossible to ignore. It gives LGBTQ people leverage, the ability to present the power in charge with their issues — even if a solution is not achieved.

To better illustrate this bargaining power, one can explore the 2014 case of Qiu Bai's⁹ suing of the Chinese Ministry of Education as to recall books at her university's library, which still deemed homosexuality a disease (even though it had officially not been considered one since 2001). The young college stu-

9. Fictional name attributed to the Sun Yat-Sen University student (Yang, 2018), located in the Guangdong Province.

dent stated that she did not expect the government to actually recall the books or acknowledge any sort of wrongdoing: what she truly wanted was to bring this issue to the forefront and to open public spaces where this debate could take place. Summarily said, when the system tried to stifle her complaints, Qiu turned to social media — namely, a self-registered WeChat — where she posted information regarding her lawsuits and garnered material (and immaterial) support for her cause through crowdfunding. Eventually, the situation grew to the extent of it not being able to be further ignored by the government — garnering national and international media coverage. Even though she lost the lawsuit and the appeal, she was indeed able to disrupt the waters and focus social attention on this specific topic. Qiu Ba has gone on to continue with her endeavor, by dealing with these issues directly with publishers and discussing with them the matter of homosexuality being represented as an illness, despite official statements saying otherwise.

As previously seen, cited articles have delved into the benefits of social media and Internet usage on the reeducation of Chinese people regarding *tongzhi* matters and visibility, stating that those who do so show more tolerance, empathy and acceptance when compared to those who rely solely on traditional media outlets. It also becomes increasingly clear that LGBTQ online communities are striving to change the social backdrop of their existence and improve their standing in China, especially when “*Chinese media, regardless of their highest level of availability to the audience in China, are the least ideal information source to learn about homosexuals because of the absence of fairness and balance in their portrayals of lesbians and gay men*” (Tu, 2014, p. 996).

5. Conclusion

From the collected literature, one can extrapolate two conclusions. On one hand, the *tongzhi* and newer generations resource to new media to commune with others^[10] about issues the traditional media have no space for. On the other hand, online information plays an important role not only in *tongzhi* visibility but also *tongzhi* representation. These, to me, create a ballast upon which change can take shape. In a country where the open pursuit for one’s rights is still repressed, cultural manifestations of the *tongzhi* can be perceived as ersatz political activism.

These dynamic cultural manifestations are of profound interest, as they help shape the identities of this minority — not only due to their agency in

10. These interactions are not restricted to *tongzhi*. Tu and Lee (2014) have stated that they have found these interactions to be in-group and out-group; Leng (2012) has also shown that many of those who seek *tongzhi* literature identify themselves as heterosexual.

this process, but also because in doing so, they can shape the way in which Chinese society perceive them: they attain visibility which is, as mentioned previously, one of the key issues. It is, therefore, a double process.

Even though the Citizenship Rights^[11] for LGBTQ people are precarious and by no means a guarantee — although some small victories are taking place^[12], alongside significant steps, ones whose earnestness have been devoid of incredulity on behalf of the court of public opinion — one cannot say that the metaphorical waters are still. As the public manifestations of this community often struggle to remain interference-free — namely, Queer film festivals, Pride festivals, Academic debates on these issues, and so on — *tongzhi* have found other outlets (which are frequently surreptitious in nature, as to not be easily detected or shut down by the ruling power) through which they have been producing movies, writing novels, organizing events, etc.

As an example of the relevance of these aforementioned manifestations, one needs only to look at Ray Yeung's critically acclaimed^[13] motion picture *Suk.. Suk 叔. 叔* (2019) — a poignant drama whose plot revolves around a love affair between two older, closeted, homosexual men — as to understand to scope of issues are being tackled: not only matters of *tongzhi* identity and the social hurdles these face in their daily lives — which are intrinsically linked to Sinophone spaces — but also ageism^[14] amongst homosexual men - the topicality of the latter being transversal to the majority of homosexual men (an issue Kong (2012) delves into, in his article, stating that a rise in homonormativity has resulted in the marginalization of other social groups as a by-product, namely older gay men; the author goes on the stress the necessity of allocating space for their narratives to be heard and explored).

Spearheading this plight for visibility is Fan Popo, activist and internationally celebrated LGBTQ Chinese filmmaker, who states^[15] that he feels Chinese people do not have enough information on this community - no image of them

11. I feel the need to make it clear that due to uniqueness of the Chinese context, Human and Fundamental Rights are fought for under the banner of Citizenship Rights, a designation which is deemed to be less contentious, seeing that it still acknowledges the sovereignty of the Chinese State, whereas the other categories would endanger it and would most likely be met with a different sort of repercussion (Bao, 2018).

12. Feng, Jiayun (2019, Aug 9). *Beijing approves first guardianship case for same-sex couple*. SupChina. <https://supchina.com/2019/08/09/beijing-approves-first-guardianship-case-for-same-sex-couple/>

13. The movie was nominated for several Hong Kong and Taiwan based film awards, and garnered international recognition, including the Berlin International Film Festival.

14. I.e., discrimination and prejudice towards certain groups of individuals based on their age.

15. Wiliam Brougham (2015, Oct 18) *LGBTQI Rights and Censorship in China - Popo Fan* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jROBnt4C3zU>

- and thus they are seen as “*monsters*”. Therefore, the director — deemed as one of the most resounding in LGBTQ Chinese activism — was drawn into the filmmaking process in an attempt to build bridges between these two parts of Chinese society, in a bid to establish dialogue, create imagery and raise awareness and understanding, which he feels are currently lacking, due to censorship enforced upon the media coverage regarding these topics. Fan Popo is an example of how powerful the creation of humanizing portraits can be — and he has done multifaceted work: not only has he made films and documentaries, he has also created a website — www.queercomrades.com, 同志亦凡人 — a platform in which people can discuss LGBTQ issues openly¹⁶.

If China were to allow visibility and positive representation to increase — and, with it, debate, tolerance and acceptance — progress would be swifter, and the changes could be very positive (Hu and Li, 2019). One can look at the waves of reaction caused by the Tmall ad — an advert whose running time fell short of 1 minute — to assess the power the media have in bringing forth issues into the public eye; therefore it is urgent to deconstruct the manner in which *tongzhi* are represented and strive for traditional media’s inclusion of LGBTQ matters, seeing as these channels are widely more accessible — albeit this has proven itself to be no easy feat. Some authors, however, are more optimistic in their approach — such as Kong (2016). The author’s description of the sociological view regarding the evolution of (male) homosexuals, which “has shifted from a mental patient or social deviant in the 1980s to a different person in the 1990s to a cosmopolitan and *suzhi* (‘quality’) citizen in the 2000s” (Kong, 2016, p. 14) is evidence that the image Fan Popo feels is lacking is undergoing mutations; Kong goes on to claim that the more the field of Asian Queer Studies progresses, the more these dichotomic notions can be diluted, making way for a profoundly more *nuanced* understanding of homosexual identity — not only in China, but worldwide, as it can ultimately lead to a rethinking of Western queer studies.

It is clear now that China’s younger generations are, as made evident by the aforementioned literature, more tolerant in regard to LGBTQ matters and this exceptionally educated and cosmopolitan generation will undoubtedly bring about future agents for change, as they have experienced what the standard for LGBTQ living in other countries is. Some have deemed that perhaps it is time for the Chinese LGBTQ community to stage their own version of Stonewall Riots in a bid to force visibility and disturb the proverbial waters. I cannot

16. And one should bear in mind that the Internet is the most frequently used tool to access information on homosexuality) (Tu, 2014). Through clever use of wordplay or keywords, content creators are able to dodge censorship on certain platforms and netizens are able to locate platforms catering to their LGBTQ identities.

agree with such a stance when it comes to China, a country which has shown how swift repercussion can be upon public rioters and other demonstrators of disgruntlement who raise their dissident voices in such a unique context; I do however believe that the *status quo* needs to be disrupted, but by following initiatives such as Qiu Ba's and Fan Popo's. China is a case study upon itself and change cannot come as an import of phenomena that made sense in other countries, other cultures and other societies at a specific moment in time: it has to be organic.

I believe it is crucial to understand that political activism amongst LGBTQ people has effectively taken up the occasional guise of cultural manifestations instead of just being a poor replacement for it, even though LGBTQ people in China still struggle to find a place in a repressive, heteronormative society where censorship and discrimination are still experienced. As Bao (2020) puts it, “for many, LGBTQ political rights and gay prides are desirable but not indispensable”, as there are other steps deemed more necessary to attend to first.

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Sobre o autor

FREDERICO DUARTE VIDAL é Licenciado em Tradução (DE e FR) pela Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. Mestrando em Estudos Asiáticos pela Faculdade de Ciências Humanas da Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Bolseiro da Fundação Jorge Álvares.

[ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5236-0380>]

About the author

FREDERICO DUARTE VIDAL holds a BA in Translation (DE and FR) from the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, NOVA University of Lisbon. Master's student in Asian Studies at the Faculty of Human Sciences, Catholic University of Portugal. Scholarship holder from the Jorge Álvares Foundation.

[ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5236-0380>]