

LGBT: Chinese and Online

by Tao Hong and Lucas Monteil

After surfacing in the 1990s, the LGBT movement has continued to take hold in China, despite the new Chinese leadership's increasing hostility towards independent non-governmental organisations.

This relative success is partly due to an innovative use of the Internet by the movement's actors.

Emerging in the 1990s, Chinese lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) activism developed within a general context in which political control over the public sphere and individual behaviour had relaxed since Mao's death. In 1997, the new Penal Code eliminated the penal category of hooliganism (*liumang zui* 流氓罪) on which the governmental repression of homosexuality was based, and in 2001 early anti-AIDS gay activists successfully convinced the Chinese Psychiatry Association that homosexuality was not a pathology¹.

Since its commercialisation in 1997, the Internet has grown considerably in China², quickly establishing itself as a key component of the public sphere³ and a vital medium for mobilisations⁴. While it is subject to massive censorship and is used as an instrument of propaganda and political control, it nevertheless enables unprecedented freedom of

¹ Kang Wenqing, "The Decriminalization and Depathologization of Homosexuality in China", in Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen (ed.), *China in and Beyond the Headlines*, Plymouth, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012.

² Although access to the Internet is unequal in China, largely concentrated in towns and the east coast, it has still advanced rapidly since 1998. Source: China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) website, URL: www.cnnic.net (consulted on 22 September 2016).

³ Digital media usage in China is especially high, for example in comparison with France. See, for example, the study by IPG Mediabrands: <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Digital-Overtakes-Traditional-Media-China-TV-Consumption-Holds-Strong/1013881>; <http://www.cbnews.fr/etudes/le-marche-publicitaire-francais-en-hausse-de-29-en-2016-a1028912>.

⁴ Hu Yong, *Zhongsheng xuanhua: wangluo shidai de geren biaoda yu gongong taolun* (The cacophony of people's voices: personal expression and public debate in the network age), Guilin, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008; Johan Lagerkvist, "The Rise of Online Public Opinion in the People's Republic of China", *China: An International Journal*, vol. 3, n°1, 2005.

communication, often utilised for collective action⁵. Online LGBT activism in China is hindered by censorship and control, sometimes falling foul of arbitrary decisions made by individual agents, institutional regulations or public policies. However, in comparison with other social movements, the surveillance and repression to which it is subjected are limited, with homosexuality no longer considered a sensitive political issue by the Chinese government. This situation is partly due to the depoliticisation strategy first adopted by LGBT activists, which avoids taking a direct stand against the government⁶ on sensitive issues such as democracy and human rights. It is also linked to the recognition of LGBT organisations as state partners in the prevention of AIDS in the early 2000s. It was in this context that the emergence of international support also boosted the rapid growth of LGBT organisations in the 2000s.

This article analyses the extent to which, in this climate, the digital communication infrastructure has provided new resources for the Chinese LGBT movement, and how it has affected its development. We illustrate the importance of Internet use in activists' efforts to establish the LGBT question and its public, in the structuring of the movement and in the renewal of their repertoire of contention. We describe the recent assertion of an activist rhetoric promoting rights and combating discrimination, which makes increasing use of legal institutions and its online platform. Finally, we focus on the role of the Internet and the booming digital economy in the growing interconnection between certain groups within LGBT activism and private economic actors, based on the active promotion of a Chinese "pink market".

Digital Spaces and Politics of Visibility

Since the commercialisation of the Internet in 1997, websites and other digital spaces dedicated to homosexuality have developed rapidly within a context of heavy censorship of the Chinese public sphere. Same-sex oriented platforms for socializing, news media, journaling platforms and even social networks have quickly established themselves as privileged spaces for the representation and discussion of homosexuality⁷.

Some influential gay and lesbian organisations, such as *Aibai Culture and Education Center* and *Danlan*, originated partly in online "coming out" practices and the publication of personal experiences during a period—the early 2000s—in which (auto-)biographical

⁵ Rogier Creemers, "The Pivot in Chinese Cybergovernance", *China Perspectives*, 2015/4 | 2015, 5-13.

⁶ Wei Wei, "De-Politicization vs. Pro-Radical Sexual Values: Organizational Strategies in the Contemporary Chinese Gay Movement", text presented at the annual meeting of the *American Sociological Association*, Philadelphia, 12 August 2005, consulted on 17 June 2009 (http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/3/5/1/5/p35152_index.html).

⁷ The number rose from around 10 in 1998 to between 300 and 500 in 2004-2005. See the documentary by Cui Zi'en, *Queer China, Comrade China (Zhi tongzhi)*.

accounts were proliferating online. Confronted with hegemonic social pressure towards marriage along with significant political restrictions on freedom of expression and association, Chinese LGBT activists turned to the sphere of norms and public awareness. Their rhetoric was based on a set of legitimate social values and norms, such as family or free union: until recently, the publication of accounts and images of homosexual couples or of families who had accepted their gay or lesbian children was the most common form of homosexual visibility on the Chinese Internet, and a recurring theme exploited by LGBT online activists.

As well as offering new opportunities to make homosexual life stories and demands heard and understood, digital spaces have also helped to develop new tactics to boost the resonance and influence of awareness campaigns. The organisation of flash demonstrations in urban spaces (happenings, flash mobs, wanderings, distribution of leaflets), combined with online actions aimed at maximising their scope, is a good example⁸. The distribution of photos and videos increases their range and audience and regularly allows them to be picked up by other media, including abroad.

The new forms of public existence, expression and communication enabled by the Internet have thus allowed the movement's actors to assert their claims on traditional media, beyond an online audience. In a regime with no meaningful elections, the mass media have increasingly played the role of mediators between actors of social movements and the authorities, and their participation is decisive for the outcome of the claims being made⁹. Thanks to the use of micro-blogs, new forms of cooperation between activists and journalists were established or enhanced in the late 2000s, thereby facilitating the media coverage of some social movements¹⁰.

At the same time, with the democratisation of audiovisual creation, initiatives are taken to develop activists' capacities to produce and create audiovisual representations. Since 2012, a training programme called the "Queer University" (*ku'er daxue*) has been offered by the Beijing Gender Health Education Institute in an effort to document the alternative experiences of LGBT lives. The organisation has a video site, "Queer Comrades" (*tongzhi yi fanren*), whose videos are uploaded to other video websites alongside short films and web series featuring gay characters, often produced by LGBT start-ups. LGBT audiovisual production, which is still excluded from cinemas and television, is thereby freely available online.

⁸On the use of these modes of action in Chinese social movements in general, see for example Teng Biao, "Rights Defence (*weiquan*), Microblogs (*weibo*), and Popular Surveillance (*weiguan*)", *China Perspectives*, 2012/3, 2012, 29-39.

⁹Zeng Fanxu, *Meiti zuowei tiaotingren* (Media as Mediators. Citizen Activism and Public Deliberation), Shanghai, Joint Publishing, 2015; Hugo Winckler, "Le Pouvoir judiciaire chinois et l'espace public événementiel", *Droit et société*, n° 86, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 175-197; Teng B. "Rights Defence", art. cited, p. 34.

¹⁰See Marina Svensson, "Media and Civil Society in China", *China Perspectives*, 2012/3, 2012, 19-28.

Network Organisations

As a social space and a tool for media exposure and coordination, the Internet has provided significant support for the development and structuring of Chinese LGBT organisations. The PFLAG China case is a perfect example of this. This association, now established in 20 cities and provinces, and leading activities in more than 50, has managed to build a network of more than 2000 volunteers, including 500 parents, and coordinate all of its activities—all of this through the use of digital tools. Its staff manages numerous discussion groups and accounts on QQ, WeChat and Weibo, and offer live shows on dating applications such as Blued and Rela. Those sites serve as spaces for expression, information sharing, coordination, sociability and mutual help between volunteers and the public who together ensure a day-to-day collective presence online. This presence often allows a quick intervention to be arranged for helping LGBT people and their families, for example when an attempt at coming out has gone badly: volunteers establish contact with the family, provide emotional support, invite parents to join online discussion groups and eventually become volunteers themselves; much of this process is accomplished online.

As well as significantly speeding up their development and enhancing their coordination capacities, the use of the Internet has fostered greater interconnection between LGBT groups and organisations both at national and transnational levels. First of all, it has enabled them to become part of a transnational militant and institutional network, giving them access to new resources and allowing them to import knowledge and repertoires of contention established abroad. This is evidenced by the regular translation and publication by the major LGBT website Aibai of activist, journalistic and scientific information on homosexuality published in the United States, or the establishment in 2007 of the Chinese Lala Alliance network¹¹, which organises the transfer of experiences between lesbian activists from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and North America, particularly during annual camps. Furthermore, the immediacy of digital exchanges has made it possible to multiply the links and circulations between groups and activists in different cities, resulting in new cooperation at national level, as well as the organisation of coordinated campaigns, meetings and national activist events, including the establishment of local satellite organisations. 2009 marked the introduction of Weibo, the largest Chinese micro-blogging platform, whose accessibility and popularity have enabled many young LGBT associations to establish a public presence and join a growing network of activists, bringing together a rising number of sympathisers. In promoting horizontal links and transversal and immediate interaction between LGBT groups and organisations, the arrival of Weibo has also contributed to the structuring of the movement at national level.

This new national integration has enabled a public space to emerge within the Chinese LGBT movement. By enabling direct confrontation between divergent points of view with regard to the legitimate foundations and orientations of the movement, this space has led to a form of polarisation of the Chinese homosexual cause. After the first debates in 2007 between well-known gay bloggers over the strategies of coming out, a fierce controversy

¹¹ See Holly Hou Lixian, “LGBTQ Activism in Mainland China”, *Solidarity*, December 2014. URL: <https://solidarity-us.org/lgbtqchina/>

broke out on Weibo in late 2011, over the movement's legitimate theoretical references—the biology of homosexuality, or queer theory—and the role of lesbian, bisexual and trans minorities within the movement. The controversy continued during the years that followed in debates on what position should be taken with regard to gays and lesbians entering heterosexual marriage. The manifestation of this dissension helped to make previously marginal voices heard, and partly redressed the imbalance of power within the movement. It led to the relative autonomy of lesbian activists within the gay movement, and to the creation of the online magazine “Queer Lala Times”. In June 2012, the China LGBT Community Leader Conference was held, subsequently becoming the China LGBT Forum, which marked a desire, beyond all dissension, to organise the debate and achieve convergence between activist groups at national level.

By turning each account holder into an agent who can be mobilised as well as mobilise, Weibo also had a major impact on activists' capacity to influence public debates. A new mode of action thus emerged, consisting of monitoring, challenging and condemning public figures who are responsible for discriminatory speeches or acts. The Lü Liping case illustrated the capacity of LGBT actors to take advantage of this new attention economy. In June 2011, following the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the State of New York, a Chinese-American Baptist pastor used Weibo to condemn the growing tolerance of “homosexual sin”. The actress Lü Liping retweeted his comments, calling on her “brothers and sisters” to spread the word. Thanks to the multi-layered networks and activists' consensus supporting the fight against discrimination, reactions against Lü Liping quickly spread across the Internet and beyond. In the end, the actress was denied the privilege of awarding the prize for Best Actress at the largest film festival in Taiwan, and was publicly disowned by the state television channel CCTV-13 in a report entitled, “Say No to Discrimination, Respect the Choices of Each Group”.

Although, after the first years of struggle, the majority of LGBT activists adopted a strategy of depoliticising their public speeches and demands, thereby carefully avoiding a confrontation with the government, the Internet has, by boosting their capacity for coordination and mobilisation, welcomed them into a shared space of deliberation and action. In this sense, it has undoubtedly fostered the emergence of a new form of politicisation of the LGBT movement, geared towards defending LGBT rights.

Rights Advocacy

As the Internet and digital media continue to sustain the Chinese LGBT movement's commitment to changing the social norms and representations that permeate Chinese society, this trend is also being reinforced by legal actions taken against those responsible for discriminatory acts, speeches and decisions. Recently, it has become increasingly common for

activists to take legal action against private actors and public institutions, actions which are coordinated and relayed over the Internet. In May 2014, at the Haidian District People's Court in Beijing, homosexual rights advocacy was at the centre of a court case for the first time in China. Condemning the "conversion therapy" offered by some Chinese clinics and hospitals to "treat" homosexuality, activists targeted a private clinic as well as Baidu¹², China's biggest Internet search engine, which was promoting the clinic above the search results for the term "homosexuality" (*tongxinglian*). In December 2014, the court ruled in favour of the plaintiff by acknowledging the false nature of the advertisement for the therapy, affirming, in reference to its depathologisation in 2001, that "homosexuality is not a disease". The ruling received broad media coverage and was hailed as an important victory by activists. It also reinforced the use of legal action as a legitimate and effective mode of action. Since 2014, "LGBT trials" have multiplied, and seven of the cases brought have been deemed admissible by the courts.

The most remarkable feature of this development is no doubt the fact that some of these cases have been heard even though they target state institutions. This has been made possible in particular by the Chinese government's adoption of new regulations designed to improve administrative transparency and streamline legal procedures relating to access to administrative documents and the filing of lawsuits. This rationalisation of the legal framework¹³ is a reflection of the party-State's desire to direct certain protest movements towards institutional political channels. Nevertheless, it has given rise to a new space for expression that LGBT activists are using, in the absence of anti-discrimination legislation, to try to influence legal decisions, the government and public policy.

The strengthening of LGBT activist groups and their links with other activist networks has been a decisive part of their capacity to establish and publicise the cases among a broader audience, i.e. to increase the number of people who support their cause. The shrewd exploitation of legal instruments by some LGBT activists, such as their capacity to produce the technical legal arguments required to bring a trial to court, was the result of closer links they had established via the Internet with other activist networks, most notably the rights defence community. Legal action against conversion therapy was supported by an organisation specialised in the defence of LGBT rights, created in 2013, and by an informal network of lawyers formed on WeChat for another trial, which provided it with crucial expertise. The mobilisations surrounding the legal cases and the modes of action that they entail also fed on experiences of denunciation, questioning, deliberation and cooperation gained from the numerous online debates and mobilisations over more than a decade. Moreover, they are a continuation of digital practices aimed at raising public awareness: the

¹² One of the three digital giants in China, *Baidu* (with *Alibaba* and *Tencent*, collectively dubbed BAT), is known in particular for its search engine, which was more popular than Google even before its censorship at the end of 2012, and for its forum service, *Tieba*, a breeding ground for Chinese Internet phenomena. Since 2007, its commercial practices have regularly been the subject of much-publicised criticism.

¹³ Stéphanie Balme, "Chine : la règle de droit aux marges d'un empire bureaucratique et absolutiste (1978-2014)", *Revue française d'administration publique*, n° 150, vol. 2, 2014, pp. 393-413.

visibility and media repercussions of the lawsuits and the related causes, are at once a condition of possibility (the holding of trials), of effectiveness (legal advances) and an issue in themselves (public awareness). The trial can be a key element within a campaign comprised of a series of actions, carried out entirely or partly by the same actors, with a view to publicising and problematising a common theme.

The capacity of LGBT activists to influence the political authorities and, in turn, legal rulings, regulations and public policy, is nevertheless a key issue in trial-based activist campaigns. These are particularly influential given that the Chinese authorities today consider the “digital public sphere” to be a yardstick for measuring public opinion¹⁴. Based on data surveillance and in-depth analysis¹⁵, the new digital governance designed to win back public opinion on the Internet and gain better control over open grievances paradoxically contributes to the effectiveness of the mobilisations that have accompanied the trials in recent years. When it comes to violence, negligence or abuses committed by the public authorities, online mobilisations have led the political powers to sway judicial decisions in their favour, or even to change legislation (particularly in the case of the abolition of the detention and repatriation system)¹⁶.

However, this mode of action¹⁷, which experienced a “golden age” when Weibo was launched in 2009, seems to have declined in recent years following a campaign waged by the new leadership in August 2013 to repress and control the social networks¹⁸. The recent successes experienced by LGBT activists are part of a somewhat different publicity dynamic, but are still based on the use of Internet technologies.

Mobilisations against homophobic content in university textbooks, on which the lawsuit brought by a university student was based, provide a good illustration of this. In order to run their campaign, activists first sought to voice their demands through the media by organising a picket in front of the government agency involved. Initial reports by journalists triggered a first wave of reactions on the Internet, but were quickly censored. From then on, it was primarily thanks to WeChat that the activists were able to stay visible in the public eye. Activists also sought to get the public involved through these platforms: the campaign was entirely financed by donations from Internet users, who were often invited to share information, choose between different courses of action, send in photos and videos, and were encouraged to make complaints and pursue dialogues with the authorities themselves. More than just a resource for activism, the Internet here becomes consubstantial with it: as an

¹⁴ Séverine Arsène, *Internet et politique en Chine*, Paris, Karthala, 2011.

¹⁵ R. Creemers, “The Pivot in Chinese Cybergovernance”, art. cited, pp.13-14.

¹⁶ H. Winckler, “Le Pouvoir judiciaire chinois”, art. cited, p. 189; Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan, “De l'épreuve publique à la reconnaissance d'un public : le scandale Sun Zhigang”, *Politix*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2005, pp. 137-164.

¹⁷ Wang Shaoguang, in his analysis of models for policy agenda setting in China, uses the term “popular pressure” to describe the capacity of public opinion to influence political decisions, and he notes that the rise of this model constitutes the most significant change in the shaping of the political agenda in China. Cf. Wang Shaoguang, “Changing Models of Policy Agenda Setting”, *Modern China*, 34/56, pp. 70-81.

¹⁸ Teng Biao, “Rights Defense”, art. cited; R. Creemers, “The Pivot in Chinese Cybergovernance”, art. cited.

alternative and participatory media¹⁹, it is also a privileged tool and space for forming and mobilising its public.

Campaigning Through the Pink Market?

The new opportunities offered by the analysis of digital interactions and data are also linked to another major development in Chinese LGBT activism: its growing interconnection with private-sector actors through the establishment of a Chinese “pink market”. For a number of years, the “pink economy” has been promoted by different actors as both generating significant economic resources and benefiting the homosexual cause by bringing greater visibility and a better recognition of the specific needs and expectations of gay and lesbian consumers. Several dimensions of this movement can be observed, all of which have a particular link with the development of the Internet.

In August 2014, the “First Annual China Pink Market Conference” was held in the conference room of a luxury Shanghai hotel, following the publication of the results of an online survey on Chinese gays and lesbians’ consumption behaviour. With the aim of helping companies to tailor their marketing to the Chinese pink market, the event brought together actors from a variety of cities and backgrounds: LGBT organisations and start-ups developing LGBT dating apps who had launched the survey, the American social marketing firm that designed it, Chinese e-commerce companies wishing to target the pink market, etc.

Two key elements stood out in particular from the speech delivered by the event organisers, reconciling interests seen up to then as independent. From an activist standpoint, the first gave priority to the alliance with private-sector actors as an opportunity to strengthen the LGBT cause by providing it with considerable financial resources (direct financing, corporate sponsorship, research and consultancy services for businesses and the development of lucrative services for gay and lesbian consumers) and symbolic resources (visibility and respectability). The second was a key part of efforts to promote the pink market among companies, characterising the gay and lesbian population as being financially better off and more consumer-minded than average: child-free and therefore with more free time and less financial burden, but also better educated and therefore better paid.

This event, like similar subsequent events, is an effective illustration of the growing interconnectedness of some parts of LGBT activism with actors from the private sector, supported by the opportunities that the Internet offers to gauge and develop the Chinese “gay market”. This interconnection is first based on a financial and economic alliance: developing forms of sponsorship for certain activities and organisations represents an important source of

¹⁹ Dominique Cardon and Fabien Granjon, “Des médias alternatifs aux médias participatifs”, in *Médiactivistes*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2013.

financing for the LGBT movement, while businesses find opportunities to advertise in their target markets. Lastly, it appears to mark a shift or even a blurring of boundaries between LGBT organisations and the market sector. This is made visible by the porosity between activist and professional careers: quite a significant number of company executives, managers and employees marketing gay and lesbian applications were activists in the past and have a relatedly activist conception of their activities, and share the observation that the Internet has acquired a decidedly strategic dimension for the LGBT community.

The particular interweaving between the economic sphere and the LGBT militant scene is supported by the high regard in which economic and business activities is held in China today, in sharp contrast with the suspicion and restrictions that burden any activism that is independent of the party-State. This asymmetry manifests itself in particular through the legal status of civil organisations, with the majority opting to register as private companies (or not to legally register) on account of the strict administrative controls imposed on NGOs. The priority given to economic development in government and nationalist discourse in China and the swift rise in consumption largely explain why some activists have such confidence in the emancipatory potential of the market, “entrepreneurial activism” and gay marketing. Of entrepreneurial activities, the digital sector seems to enjoy even greater legitimacy; it is the only national strategic sector dominated by private actors today, and its influence in the Chinese economy is still growing²⁰. Internet companies have acquired a status of national champions and models of China’s growing capacity to innovate, which has brought about a rapprochement between some gay business leaders and the country’s senior leaders, along with timely media coverage. In this context, some groups, when organising public events, have had to put on a commercial veneer in order to protect themselves from censorship.

The growing interconnectedness between LGBT activism and private business has a strategic dimension in modern-day China, owing to the resources it provides in a context of strong constraints and weak political and institutional support. However, although concomitant with new initiatives to prevent discrimination in the workplace, it implies a partial and non-consensual alignment of LGBT activism with pro-market rhetoric, albeit pink. The movement is thus being led to redefine its project, based on a representation of the Chinese LGBT population limited to members of the middle and upper classes.

The system of political constraints and interactions specific to the Chinese context explains the decisive role played by the Internet in LGBT mobilisations as well as the evolution of these mobilisations. It would be difficult to understand why some activists have turned towards the market without taking into account the respective autonomy of the political and economic spheres in post-Maoist China. Similarly, the success of activist campaigns capitalising on both public mobilisation and the judicial institution is closely linked

²⁰R. Creemers, “The Pivot in Chinese Cybergovernance”, art. cited, p. 14.

to a mode of governance that seeks to channel civil society's discontent in order to better control it.

With that in mind, this paper highlights the limitations of an approach that would seek to evaluate the effect of the Internet on political mobilisations by measuring the respective increase in freedom and in control. The importance of Internet use for Chinese LGBT mobilisations is part of a unique configuration and reconfiguration of power relations, with multi-directional and complex effects²¹. The uncertainty that hangs over the future of the Chinese LGBT movement, expressed by its actors themselves, is commensurate with this unprecedented situation.

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²¹ Émilie Frenkiel and Jean-Louis Rocca, *La Chine en mouvements*, Paris, PUF, 2013.