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Pop-cultural representation of non-conforming genders and sexualities on Chinese social media

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CHAPTER 1

COMMODIFIED “QUEERNESS” AS POP-CULTURAL PRODUCT

Social media platforms today shape cultural narratives, societal norms, and individual identities. With their pervasive influence, these platforms have framed how individuals interact, consume information, and construct their sense of self.¹ With its vast online population and unique internet ecosystem, China presents a particularly fascinating case study for examining the complex interactions between social media, popular culture, and the construction of gender and sexual representations.

The national “isolation” created by China’s Great Firewall appears to have fostered a distinct cultural, political, and economic online sphere that diverges significantly from the neoliberal-driven landscape dominated by American social media giants. However, despite appearing to function in vastly different contexts, these systems remain deeply interconnected, with Chinese platforms and their global counterparts engaging in sustained mutual influence.² China’s intensive buildup of online networks constitutes a model of “state-led digital capitalism” that both collaborates with and contests the US-dominated digital capitalism system—specifically its top corporations and their networks—in areas where their spheres of influence overlap.³

This research examines how “queer” symbols are consumed as pop-cultural products on Chinese social media platforms, using case studies of Sina Weibo, Bilibili, and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). It examines how a significant portion of these consumption

1. Deana A. Rohlinger and Sarah Sobieraj, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022). See Rohlinger and Sobieraj, “When the Extraordinary Becomes Mundane: Digital Media and the Sociological Lens,” 1-2; Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, “Media and the Social Construction of Reality,” 28-39; Brady Robards, Paul Byron, and Sab D’Souza, “LGBTQ+ Communities and Digital Media,” 339-361; and Sophie Bishop and Brooke Erin Duffy, “The Feminization of Social Media Labor,” 469-489.

2. Franceschini, Ivan, and Nicholas Loubere. *Global China as Method*. Elements in Global China. Cambridge; New York; Melbourne; Delhi; Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

3. Hong Yu, *Networking China: The Digital Transformation of the Chinese Economy* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield, [Illinois]: University of Illinois Press, 2017). 11-2.

patterns often reinforces, rather than challenges, conventional views of gender and sexuality. The term “queer” is employed here in its broadest sense, encompassing a wide range of non-normative gender and sexual representations, expressions, and practices. By focusing on the circulation and consumption of queer symbols within the digital sphere, this dissertation aims to illuminate the complex negotiations between subversion and conformity, resistance and co-optation that characterise engagement with non-normative gender and sexual representations in contemporary China. This tension arises from the juxtaposition of censorship on the one hand and the burgeoning popularity and commercial profitability of queer motifs and sentiments on the other. Amidst these competing tensions, the lived experiences of queer communities are at risk of becoming the most irrelevant factor. Moreover, this study can reveal the politics encoded in seemingly neutral digital programming by interrogating how social media platforms’ sociotechnical systems privilege conformity over marginalised empowerment.

My research questions are: How are non-conforming gender and sexuality representations presented on Chinese social media platforms, why is this so, and how do these representations relate to actual queer identities and lived experiences?

This question is motivated by the observation that social media platforms have become sites of vibrant experimentation and expression concerning gender and sexuality.⁴ From the pop-cultural consumption of homoerotic male celebrity pairings among Weibo *fan*

4. Bao Hongwei, *Queer Media in China*, Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2021). 45, 52-6.

See Tan Jia, *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China* (New York University Press, 2023).

Han Ling and Liu Yue, ‘When Digital Feminisms Collide with Nationalism: Theorizing “Pink Feminism” on Chinese Social Media’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 105 (July 2024).

Chang Jiang, Ren Hailong, and Yang Qiguang, ‘A Virtual Gender Asylum? The Social Media Profile Picture, Young Chinese Women’s Self-Empowerment, and the Emergence of a Chinese Digital Feminism’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (May 2018), 325–40.

Yang Wei, Guo Jingxuan, and Inge Arteel, ‘What Is “Rural Feminism”? A Computer-Assisted Analysis of Popular Antifeminist Discourses in Chinese Social Media’, *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 2 (April 2023).

circles [饭圈] to romantic depictions between women extending beyond the spheres of ACGN (Anime, Comic, Game, Novel) into derivative products of reality shows on Bilibili and to Douyin's cross-dressing videos becoming "*passwords to high-traffic*" [流量密码], Chinese social media platforms appear to embrace diversity while pushing traditional gender and sexual boundaries. Crucially, however, the question remains as to whether these representations constitute genuine challenges to the dominant order or are merely superficial appropriations of queer symbols, aesthetics, and narratives to capture audience attention and capitalise on high digital traffic.

This research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing upon insights from political economy, affordance and actor-network theory, and gender theories. By situating the analysis within the broader contexts of China's socio-political landscape, the technological affordances of social media platforms, and the power structures of Chinese gender politics, this dissertation aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the forces shaping the production, circulation, and consumption of non-conforming pop-cultural products in contemporary China.

Central to this dissertation is the argument that a significant portion of queer symbol consumption on Chinese social media platforms, while ostensibly subversive and transgressive, holds a limited connection to the diverse lived experiences and struggles of queer populations in China—or, to employ Jürgen Habermas' terminology, queer "lifeworlds"⁵. Instead, it operates within a framework constrained by mainstream cultural norms, government regulations and policies, and the imperatives of a political economy driven by attention, engagement, and profit. In many instances, we see a strategic appropriation of queer aesthetics and narratives. Indeed, the cultural products that exhibit

5. Jürgen Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, The Theory of Communicative Action / Jürgen Habermas 1 (Boston, Mass: Beacon Pr, 1984). 126.

seemingly non-conforming gender and sexual representations with the most significant monetisation potential and ability to attract attention have little to no relevance to queer identity in a political sense and do not aspire to such relevance. In other words, these are often depoliticised, with limited subversive political potential.

In the following section, I will introduce the themes that provide the framework for this research: political economy, social media platforms as networked actors, and gender.

1.1 Political Economy

This research examines how Chinese corporate platforms, operating within a framework of government policies, market forces, and the imperatives of “communicative capitalism”⁶, have forged an ecosystem that shapes the production and circulation of cultural content, including representations of gender and sexuality. Understanding the political economy of Chinese social media platforms requires tracing the historical development of the internet in China and the specific regulatory framework within which these platforms operate.

Since the introduction of the internet in China in the mid-1990s, the Chinese government has sought to balance the economic potential of digital technologies with the need to maintain political control and social stability. This has led to the development of a unique model of internet governance, characterised by a combination of technical controls, legal regulations, and self-censorship by internet companies, collectively known as the “Great Firewall of China”; this “GFW” aims to create a domestic “intra-net”⁷ that keeps Chinese users hermetically sealed off from foreign digital services. Here, it is worth noting that the Chinese state’s approach to digital governance is not static but rather involves “a complex

6. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

7. See Florian Schneider, ‘China’s “Info-Web”: How Beijing Governs Online Political Communication about Japan’, *New Media & Society* 18, no. 11 (2016): 2664–84.

Susan Leong, ‘Sinophone, Chinese, and PRC Internet: Chinese Overseas in Australia and the PRC Internet’, *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 3, no. 3 (2016): 117–37.

ecosystem of institutional actors, with their own objectives, incentives, and concerns”,⁸ leading to ongoing negotiations and adjustments in policy. Within this context, Chinese social media platforms have emerged as key players in the digital economy, offering a range of services, including instant messaging, microblogging, video sharing, and e-commerce, and achieving tremendous success.

These platforms—including the three to be discussed in this study, namely Weibo, Bilibili, and Douyin—have amassed hundreds of millions of users and have become integral to the daily lives of Chinese citizens. Their growth and operation are profoundly shaped by the political and economic imperatives of the Chinese state, which seeks to leverage the potential of digital technologies for economic development and social control while also managing the risks and challenges posed by the rapid spread of information and the formation of online communities.⁹ Chinese social media platforms have developed sophisticated content moderation and user management systems to navigate this complex regulatory landscape, combining algorithmic filtering, human censorship, and user reporting to identify and remove politically sensitive or socially inappropriate content. At the same time, these platforms have also cultivated close relationships with government agencies and state-owned enterprises, aligning their business strategies with national policy objectives and constructing a “harmonious” online environment projected from the government’s

8. Creemers, Rogier. ‘Uneven Coverage and Blank Spaces: Bringing the State Back In’. *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 10, no. 1–2 (7 June 2023), 140.

9. See Hong Yu, *Networking China: The Digital Transformation of the Chinese Economy* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield, [Illinois]: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

Yik Chan Chin, Ahran Park, and Li Ke, ‘A Comparative Study on False Information Governance in Chinese and American Social Media Platforms’, *Policy & Internet* 14, no. 2 (June 2022), 263–83.

Jeroen De Kloet et al., ‘The Platformization of Chinese Society: Infrastructure, Governance, and Practice’, *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12, no. 3 (3 July 2019), 249–56.

Rogier Creemers, ‘The Pivot in Chinese Cybergovernance: Integrating Internet Control in Xi Jinping’s China’, *China Perspectives* 2015, no. 4 (2015), 5–13.

viewpoint.¹⁰

However, the political economy of Chinese social media platforms cannot be reduced to a simple story of state control and corporate compliance. These platforms are also deeply embedded in the global digital economy, subject to the forces of market competition, technological innovation, and user demand. As such, they constantly negotiate between attracting and retaining users, generating revenue, and maintaining their competitiveness while managing the uncertainties of functioning in a highly regulated and politically sensitive environment.

One of the critical features of this political economy is the centrality of data and attention as resources and commodities. Chinese social media platforms, like their global counterparts, rely on collecting, analysing, and monetising user data to generate revenue through targeted advertising, e-commerce, and other value-added services.¹¹ At the same time, they also compete for user attention, using a range of techniques, from algorithmic recommendation and personalised content feeds to gamification and social incentives, to keep users engaged and active on their platforms.¹² This attention economy has significant

10. See Zhu Yanling, *Media Power and Its Control in Contemporary China: The Digital Regulatory Regime, National Identity, and Global Communication* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2022).

Jiang Yue and Kuang Xianwen, 'Selective Censorship on Rightists and Leftists? An Observation and Analysis of Censored Social Media Posts in China', *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 3 (4 May 2023), 266–76.

Luo Zhifan and Li Muyang, 'Participatory Censorship: How Online Fandom Community Facilitates Authoritarian Rule', *New Media & Society* 26, no. 7 (July 2024), 4236–54.

11. Liang Meng, 'The End of Social Media? How Data Attraction Model in the Algorithmic Media Reshapes the Attention Economy', *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 6 (September 2022), 1110–31.

12. See Wu Dajuan, '数字时代注意力经济的运演逻辑与人的形式化存在之痛 [The Operational Logic of Attention Economy in the Digital Age and the Pain of Formal Existence of Human Beings]', *经济学家 [Economist]*, no. 6 (2024), 35–44.

Xie Xuefang and Geng Nishuai, '注意力经济时代网红营销模式的发展 [The Development of Influencer Marketing Models in the Attention Economy Era]', *青年记者 [Youth Journalist]*, no. 5 (2020), 104–5.

Ma Junfeng and Wang Bin, '数字时代注意力经济的逻辑运演及其批判 [The Logic

implications for the production and circulation of cultural content on Chinese social media platforms, including representations of gender and sexuality.

As platforms seek to maximise user engagement, they tend to privilege sensational, emotional, and visually arresting forms of expression,¹³ which can reinforce cultural stereotypes and power relations.¹⁴ This is particularly evident in the case of queer symbol consumption. On Chinese social media platforms, non-normative gender and sexual identities often work as attention-grabbing spectacles, revealing profound disconnections between platform-mediated representations and the diverse narratives emerging from queer communities.

The political economy of Chinese social media platforms also shapes labour conditions and value creation in the digital sphere. The production and circulation of cultural content on these platforms rely heavily on the unpaid or underpaid labour of users, who create, curate, and share content for free while generating data and attention for the platforms. This has led to new forms of digital labour, such as “fan labour”,¹⁵ where users invest time and energy in creating and promoting content related to their favourite celebrities or fictional characters, often without any financial compensation.

The interactions of state directives, corporate strategies, and user agency within China’s digital political economy thus underscore a paradox: platforms simultaneously act as conduits for state-sanctioned narratives and as market-driven engines of cultural innovation, with the commercial imperatives of communicative capitalism incentivising platforms to

Operation and Criticism of the Attention Economy in the Digital Age’, *社会科学 [Social Sciences]*, no. 11 (2020), 111–20.

13. For the role of emotional content in driving engagement behaviours, see Hamidreza Shahbaznezhad, Rebecca Dolan, and Mona Rashidirad, ‘The Role of Social Media Content Format and Platform in Users’ Engagement Behavior’, *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 53, no. 1 (February 2021).

14. Ysabel Gerrard and Helen Thornham, ‘Content Moderation: Social Media’s Sexist Assemblages’, *New Media & Society* 22, no. 7 (July 2020), 1266–86.

15. Zhai Haoyang and Wilfred Yang Wang, ‘Fans’ Practice of Reporting: A Study of the Structure of Data Fan Labor on Chinese Social Media’, *New Media & Society* 17 (2023), 1913–34.

commodify user engagement through algorithmic amplification of provocative or emotive themes—including non-normative gender and sexual expressions. This tension between steering and commodification lays the groundwork for analysing platforms as contested networks of human and non-human actors, where power is negotiated through code, content, and capital.

1.2 Social Media Platforms as Networks of Actors

This research draws upon actor-network¹⁶ and affordance¹⁷ theories to conceptualise digital platforms as fluid and complex spaces of meaning production shaped by interactions between human and non-human actors. This approach recognises that social media platforms are not neutral or passive conduits for transmitting information but rather active participants in constructing, curating, and interpreting cultural symbols and meanings. From an actor-network perspective, Chinese social media platforms are heterogeneous assemblages of technological infrastructures, algorithms, interfaces, users, content, cultural norms, political and economic circumstances, and more, which together shape the conditions for the production and consumption of queer symbols. These platforms are not simply digital spaces for expressing pre-existing identities and desires but sites where new forms of subjectivity and sociality are constructed and negotiated through interactions among multiple actors.

For instance, scholars argue that Weibo is a heterogeneous assemblage of technological features, user practices, censorship mechanisms, and government interventions that mutually influence each other. This perspective reveals that Weibo is not merely a neutral conduit for information but an active participant in constructing and reconfiguring meanings during contentious episodes. By tracing these dynamic interactions between human

16. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

17. Ian Hutchby, 'Technologies, Texts and Affordances', *Sociology (Oxford)* 35, no. 2 (2001), 441–56.

and non-human actors, researchers provide insights into how social media platforms like Weibo contribute to new forms of political expression and social organisation in the Chinese digital landscape.¹⁸

Actor-network theory helps show that non-human actors, such as algorithms and interfaces, play a crucial role in shaping the contours of social and cultural life on digital platforms.¹⁹ The algorithms underpinning social media platforms are not neutral or objective tools but embody specific values, assumptions, and biases that shape the visibility and circulation of certain types of content over others. By privileging content that generates high levels of engagement and interaction, such as sensational or emotionally charged posts, and readily recognisable content that aligns with social norms, these algorithms can reinforce dominant cultural norms and power relations while marginalising alternative or subversive voices.

Thus, the interface design and user experience of Chinese social media platforms frame how users interact with and interpret cultural symbols and meanings. Memes can serve to reinforce gender stereotypes and normative expressions of sexuality, whilst the emphasis on short, bite-sized content can constrain the possibilities for more nuanced or critical forms of expression. At the same time, the affordances of these platforms—the meaning-making sphere framed by creating and sharing user-generated content—can provide opportunities for experimentation and transgression as users appropriate and subvert dominant cultural codes to express alternative identities and desires. However, although existing social conventions can be negotiated and contested through the agentive use of these platforms, experimentation and transgression remain marginal compared to the overarching preservation of normative

18. See Thomas Poell, Jeroen De Kloet, and Zeng Guohua. 'Will the Real Weibo Please Stand up? Chinese Online Contention and Actor-Network Theory'. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 7, no. 1 (2 January 2014), 1–18.

19. Ibid.

cultural codes.

Crucially, however, the actor network's dynamism hinges on the agency of users as co-constitutive actors, even within structurally constrained environments. While platforms engineer affordances to steer behaviour, users actively interpret, appropriate, and repurpose these features in ways that exceed corporate or state intentions, circulating subversive narratives. Although mediated by non-human actors, such as data filters, users remain generative in shaping cultural meaning and retaining grassroots creativity as communities rework platform logic to carve out spaces for non-normative expression. Consequently, users are neither fully autonomous nor wholly subjugated but enmeshed in a contested terrain where their emotional, creative, and discursive labour sustains the platform's political economy even as it contests its boundaries.

1.3 Gender and Sexuality

A crucial challenge in studying gender and sexuality on Chinese social media platforms is the complex and often contradictory ways these identities are constructed and negotiated within China's specific cultural, political, and economic contexts. To fully understand this ecology, it is necessary to examine the dominant concepts of masculinity and femininity that shape Chinese society and how they intersect with and are influenced by Western notions of gender that have become globalised.

One of the key insights of gender studies and queer theory is the recognition that gender and sexual identities are not fixed or essential categories but socially constructed and performative, shaped by complex interactions between individual agency, cultural norms, and structural power relations.²⁰ This perspective challenges the binary and hierarchical logic of

20. Examples of prominent studies include Sally Haslanger, 'Ontology and Social Construction', in *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, n.d., 83–112.

Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 1. paperback ed., 5. [print.] (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr, 1991).

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

heteronormativity, which assumes a natural and immutable distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual. It emphasises the fluidity, diversity, and contingency of gender and sexual identities, as well as how they intersect with other forms of social difference, such as race, class, and ability.

The dominant Chinese conceptions of gender and sexuality, shaped by various philosophical and cultural traditions, including Confucianism and Daoism, have long emphasised the complementary but hierarchical roles of men and women (yin and yang) in society.²¹ In pre-modern China, gender was conceived in terms of yin/yang power relations rather than biological sex. Yin was generally associated with femininity, submission, and lower social status, while yang denoted masculinity, dominance, and authority, mutually reinforcing and generating each other. These gender norms have been further strengthened by the modern Chinese state's promotion of a heteronormative and pro-natalist social order, which sees the nuclear family as the foundation of social stability and economic development.²² Despite Mao-era revolutionary expressions such as “*Iron Girls*” [铁姑娘] and “*Women Hold up Half the Sky*” [妇女能顶半边天] ostensibly encouraging women to challenge gender norms, these images present ideals rather than realities: while women are

Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, Second edition. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

21. Li Xiaojiang, ‘With What Discourse Do We Reflect on Chinese Women? Thoughts on Transnational Feminism in China’, in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, trans. Zhang Yajie (Minneapolis ; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ‘Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities’, in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

Tani E Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Song Geng, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).

22. Susan L. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). 191.

encouraged to enter traditionally masculine domains and embody traditionally masculine virtues, men show no reciprocal movement toward qualities or responsibilities considered feminine. This one-sided flexibility, while propagating an illusion that gender inequality has been resolved, is particularly evident in the pervasive societal backlash against perceived male effeminacy, as evinced by the mainstream moral panic concerning men exhibiting “sissy-like” or “emasculated” behaviours.²³

However, the modernisation and globalisation of Chinese society in recent decades have created new spaces for the expression and exploration of non-normative gender and sexual identities, particularly among younger generations who have grown up with greater access to diverse cultural products and perspectives. The visibility of feminist discourse, as well as LGBTQ+ issues on mainstream media platforms, commercial dating apps for gays and lesbians, the acceptance of same-sex relationships among urban youth, and the queer activist networks and advocacy groups on social media platforms, are all growing.²⁴

At the same time, the influence of Western concepts of gender and sexuality, which remain dominant in global popular culture and academic discourse, has also impacted how Chinese individuals and communities understand and express their identities. The binary and essentialist notions of gender and sexuality that underpin Western heteronormativity, which see masculinity and femininity as fixed and oppositional categories determined by biological sex, have been exported to China through media, education, and consumer culture. This has created tensions and contradictions with traditional Chinese gender norms, as well as with the

23. Gai Qi. ‘性别气质与审美代沟——从“娘炮羞辱”看当前媒介文化中的“男性焦虑”’[Gender Representation and the Aesthetic Generation Gap: An Examination of “Male Anxiety” in Current Media Culture Illustrated by “Effeminate Shaming”]. *学术研究* [Academic Research], no. 7 (2019), 151–55.

24. See Tan Jia, *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China* (New York University Press, 2023).

lived experiences of individuals who do not conform to these binary categories²⁵—starkly evident in dominant narratives framing individuals of non-conforming genders as “deceivers” or “make-believers”,²⁶ rooted in the essentialist equation of gender with genital “essence”.

As a result, dominant cultural norms and power relations in China, as elsewhere, remain heteronormative and patriarchal, with robust expectations surrounding gender roles, sexual morality, and family values. The emphasis on social harmony and stability in Chinese political discourse²⁷ further serves to marginalise and stigmatise non-normative identities and practices by framing them as threats to the moral and social order.

The Chinese state regulates gender and sexual expression through cultural governance rather than explicit criminalisation. Consider homosexuality: while same-sex relations were never formally outlawed post-1949, legal ambiguity persisted until the 1997 Criminal Law revision abolished the “hooliganism” clause used to target queer communities.²⁸ This systemic ambivalence extends to medical practice: despite the 2001 depathologisation of homosexuality in the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (CCMD-3)²⁹ and the 2014 China’s first judicial case against conversion therapy explicitly affirming that homosexuality is “not a mental illness”,³⁰ media reports continue to document the persistence of conversion

25. Gai Qi, 151–55.

26. Talia Mae Bettcher, ‘Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion’, *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007), 43–65.

27. Regarding the political discourse of how the state links social harmony and stability to conformity with traditional moral values and social hierarchies, see Li Xing, ‘Conceptualizing “Meritocracy” as Ruling Legitimacy in the Course of China’s History, Transformation, and Global Rise’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Studies*, ed. Chris Shei and Wei Weixiao, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021), 127–43.

For the stability discourse in China, see R Veena, ‘Critical Examination of the Stability Discourse in China’, *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 77, no. 1 (2016), 85–92.

28. See Guo Xiaofei. ‘中国有过同性恋的非罪化吗? [Did China Ever Decriminalize Homosexual?].’ *法制与社会发展* [Law and Social Development] 76, no. 4 (2007), 51–65.

29. See Qian Mingyi, ed. *变态心理学* [Abnormal Psychology]. Beijing: 北京大学出版社 [Beijing University Press], 2006. 207–8.

30. 北京市海淀区人民法院 [Beijing Haidian District People’s Court], ‘北京市海淀区人民法院民事判决书 [(2014) 海民初字第16680号] [Beijing Haidian District People’s Court Civil Judgment Document (Case No. 16680, 2014)]’, no. Case No. 16680 (2014).

therapies,³¹ revealing a stark gap between legal recognition and societal realities.

Nevertheless, within this complex and often contradictory landscape, the representation and consumption of queer symbols—which have considerable monetisable potential—on Chinese social media platforms are also shaped by the commercial imperatives and attention economy of these platforms.

The emphasis on visual spectacle, emotional intensity, and sensational content on these platforms can lead to the reduction of queer identities to mere tropes or stereotypes, detached from the lived experiences and struggles of actual individuals and communities. Moreover, the algorithmically driven nature of these platforms can reinforce dominant cultural norms by privileging certain types of content and users over others, creating filter bubbles and echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences.

As a result, studying gender and sexuality on Chinese social media platforms necessitates an in-depth and intersectional approach that considers the interactions between traditional Chinese cultural norms, the influence of Western concepts of gender and sexuality, and the specific workings of the digital attention economy.

1.4 Chapters Outline

The dissertation includes five chapters after this introductory chapter.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review that outlines the theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and contextual background informing the analysis. It situates the research within the field of digital media studies, highlighting the debates and perspectives that have shaped the understanding of social media platforms as sites of cultural production, identity formation, and political contestation. The chapter expands on the issues outlined in

31. See 颜星悦 [Yan Xingyue], ‘15岁女生在“戒网瘾学校”遭教官性侵 | 深度报道 [15-Year-Old Girl Sexually Assaulted by Instructor at “Internet Addiction Rehab School” | In-Depth Report]’, *新浪财经* [*Sina Finance*] (北京青年报 [Beijing Youth Daily], 21 September 2023), <https://finance.sina.cn/2023-09-21/detail-imznncti3654177.d.html>.

this introduction by drawing on political economy, theories of digital labour predicated on user participation, the notion of communicative capitalism as a challenge to the internet's role as a democratic public sphere, actor-network theory, digital affordance theories, and gender studies approaches. It explains how these approaches integrate to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. It also traces the historical development of the internet and social media in China, identifying key players and platforms that shape the contemporary Chinese digital ecosystem. It examines how China's internet platforms are embedded within and responsive to the capitalist logic of production.

Chapter 3, the first of three case studies, explores the *danmei* [耽美, literally meaning “indulging in beauty”] culture of pairing male figures, analysing the 2020 “227 Incident” on Weibo. Examining fan communities around Xiao Zhan [肖战] and his commodified masculinity reveals how the idol industry exploits Weibo's affordances, incentivising organised fan networks to compete by generating maximal traffic to strategically elevate their idol's rankings. Xiao Zhan, an archetypal exemplar of the idol industry, becomes a product himself in the fetishisation of the commodity—where the perceptible world yields to a world of selected images³²—and a site of exchange: fans actively trade digital labour and economic investment for access to crafted sexual fantasies that offer intimacy illusions, enabling female fans to project desires onto the commodified form within imagined relationships actively. What might appear as a female gaze deconstructing masculinity involves complex co-creation. Xiao Zhan's persona deliberately shares subjectivity with fans, who appropriate his image. Moreover, the sexualised fantasy and non-conforming gender presentation function as aestheticised selling points. While largely consumed within heteronormative frameworks and divorced from lived gay politics, fans reinterpret and reconstruct these artefacts.

32. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, Rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014). 14.

Chapter 4 examines the consumption of lesbian-themed cultural products associated with the ACGN³³ concept of *baihe* [百合, literally meaning “lily flower”], on the video-sharing platform Bilibili. The chapter examines the digital affordances framed by the platform’s functionalities that encourage high levels of interactivity, especially bullet comments. It looks at the emergence and circulation of lesbian-themed linguistic memes, including “*citrus-like*” [橘里橘气] and the “*ji*” [姬] series—derived from the Cantonese pronunciation of “gay”. The chapter argues that while *baihe* content on Bilibili incorporated by the mainstream is predominantly consumed by audiences disconnected from queer communities, these users exercise their agency by repurposing such narratives to express aspirational engagements with what Adrienne Rich terms lesbian continuum³⁴—albeit driven more by an aesthetic fascination with the genre’s tropes than political alignment with lesbian identity. This process transforms *baihe* into a hyperreal idealisation of symbols, where platform mechanisms privilege stylised narratives over the socio-political depth of women-identified experiences, rendering such consumption inherently commercialised.

Chapter 5 investigates the popularity of “male” “cross-dressing” performances on the short-video sharing platform Douyin, where this particular framing of gender performance

33. This dissertation employs ACGN over the much more commonly used Chinese term, *two-dimensional world* [二次元], for the ease of English readers. In Chinese online discourse, the dimensional metaphor encompasses three distinct cultural spheres: the *one-dimensional world* [一次元] (textual narratives), the two-dimensional world (visual media with Japanese anime aesthetics), and the *three-dimensional world* [三次元] (physical reality, including visual representations of physical reality).

While ACGN overlaps with the two-dimensional world in this discussion, the latter specifically refers to Japanese anime-influenced pop-cultural products—often excluding Western equivalents like Disney animations and Marvel comics—and associated subcultural identities characterised by intentional distancing from mainstream society (the three-dimensional world). It is fundamentally marked by *otaku* [宅] lifestyles and value systems rejecting *normies* [现充, literally meaning “those fulfilled in reality”], marking a form of voluntary cultural marginalisation. Although these conceptual boundaries remain fluid and contestable, this simplified explanation is here for analytical clarity.

34. Adrienne Cecile Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 3 (2003), 27-9.

emerges through the platform's socio-technical network, although its categorisation as "cross-dressing" is questionable and reflects only one of many possible interpretations of this expression. Through a visual analysis of trending "cross-dressing" videos and a discourse analysis of user comments and reactions, the chapter examines how these performances, despite their transgressive potential, are often co-opted by the platform's attention economy and fail to challenge the underlying gender binary. It argues that these popular performances on Douyin appeal to users primarily for their novelty value, rather than their capacity to subvert or destabilise gender norms, and that users are more likely to consume gender representations that ultimately conform to a binary opposition. When presenting cross-dressing or even genuine trans performances, the platform's digital affordances and algorithmic curation encourage consumption behaviours that seek out a "true gender" represented by genitalia or sex assigned at birth. In contrast, performers' own gender identities are rendered irrelevant. In this process, the interplay of the platform's digital affordance, the user's stances, the social, cultural, and political milieu in which the users are embedded, and the economic ideology of communicative capitalism combine to engender such a consumptive environment.

Chapter 6 synthesises the findings in the case-study chapters 3 to 5 to advance our theoretical understanding of Chinese social media platforms as complex actor networks. In this final chapter, I argue that these platforms emerge as heterogeneous socio-technical assemblages where various human and non-human actants—including users, content creators, technical infrastructure, platform affordances, state regulations, and the economic ideology of communicative capitalism—combine to determine how gender non-conforming representations are produced and consumed. I show how the findings of this dissertation extend the literature in Chinese Studies, platform studies, and gender studies by mapping the intricate translations between these actants, revealing how their interactions produce distinct

forms of cultural consumption that cannot be adequately explained through Western theoretical frameworks alone. The conclusion develops concepts such as “managed utopianism” to theorise how these networked arrangements both enable and constrain the circulation of non-conforming gender representations whilst demonstrating how market forces, platform dynamics, and state regulation operate not as separate forces but as interconnected actors—thus limiting the space for the manifestation and appreciation of queer identities and lived experiences.