"Love Does Not Discriminate": The Interaction of State Policy, Social Views, and LGBT Music in China

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Introduction

In August 2006, Beijing-based artist Qiaoqiao 乔乔 released the music video to her song《爱不分》(Love Does Not Discriminate). Qiaoqiao's lyrics in the song were both direct and unabashed in their discussion of homosexuality, pronouncing "我的爱没有不同，我的心也不难懂 … 爱不分谁对谁错" (my love is not different, my heart is not difficult to understand…love does not discriminate who is right and who is wrong).[1] While the song was heralded on blogs and on "Gay News Asia" as the first explicit gay representation in Mandarin popular music, the release of the accompanying video took this theme even further.[2] Taped on a foggy film reminiscent of a VHS recording, the music video depicts the relationship of two lesbian dancers. The two share drinks, lean into each other, and wander the streets while holding hands. In a style evocative of a TV drama, one of the women is involved in an off-screen accident. This builds to the distraught emotional climax of the song, filled with flashbacks of the women together. When a music box is delivered to one of the women at the

[1] 乔乔,《爱不分》. 2006.

[2] Dinah Gardner, "China Singer Releases First Lesbian Song," China Singer Releases First Lesbian Song | Gay News Asia, September 2006, https://www.fridae.asia/gay-news/2006/09/05/1697.china-singer-releases-first-lesbian-song.

end of the music video, it is unclear if her partner has survived the accident.

The aftermath of the video's release is unclear. Absent official music charts, view counters, or user comments on the video's distribution through YouKu (China's most popular video-sharing website), the song's reception, let alone its degree of consumption, are all difficult to measure. Perhaps most perplexingly, despite the song's online presence and significance for LGBT individuals, Qiaoqiao stopped producing music afterwards. Ninth months later, she appeared on the short-lived 《同性相连 (Gay Connections), China's first LGBT-based television show, where she discussed her relationship and her bar in Beijing but without mentioning future music plans. For reasons unknown, Qiaoqiao quit the music industry. Fifteen years later, though "Love Does Not Discriminate" remains online, mentions of the song and its video are difficult to find.

Was government censorship to blame for the song's lack of longevity? Or was "Love Does Not Discriminate" simply unimpressive to listeners? Was the perception of Qiaoqiao's homosexuality an obstacle in her career? Though more information about the reception of the first openly lesbian artist in China may be ultimately inaccessible, Qiaoqiao's fate functions as a critical juncture for the modern LGBT narrative within The People's Republic of China (PRC). This paper seeks to explain the lack of LGBT representation in Chinese music since 2000.

I define LGBT music as that which is produced by queer musicians and/or contains themes pertaining to the LGBT experience. Opinion surveys, newspaper reports, lyrical analysis, and previous scholarship are used. To offer additional data in conceptualizing the personal LGBT experience and gain insight into music consumption, quotes and themes from five anonymous interviews conducted in November 2020 are additionally included to give context and aid analysis. All five interviewees are PRC citizens who are between the ages of 20 and 35. Details of each interviewee are available in Table 1 under the 'additional notes' section.

Given the available resources, the paper attempts to understand the interplay between public policy, state censorship, traditional values, and social stigma in restricting Chinese LGBT musicians. Although the paper briefly mentions the actions of some artists in Taiwan, the discussion centers around Mandarin Pop music in Mainland China. I argue that there is a dramatic lack of LGBT voices in Mainland Chinese music, one that is not solely the result of stigma. Rather, politicized censorship of subversive gay media and a lack of exposure to LGBT music silences all LGBT artists. This environment, along with conservative values and discrimination, act as mutually reinforcing factors that make successful gay representation in Chinese music difficult.

Homosexuality in China, 2000 – Present

Disciplines such as sociology and political science perceive the People's Republic of China as a distinct challenger of entrenched norms.[3] The state's resilient authoritarianism, sudden economic expansion since 1980, and policy of ethnic governance perplex many academics while forcing the reassessment of previously established theories. Homosexuality in modern China is similarly unique, challenging conventions that social scientists are accustomed to from extensive studies of discrimination and homosexuality in Europe and the Americas. As Li Yinhe writes, "sex in the West has become a crucial topic of discussion in political studies, whereas in China it remains obscured in shadows and is not regarded as a topic suitable for civilized public discussion."[4]

This section will offer an overview of homosexuality and discrimination in China since 2000. The social environment that homosexual citizens are confronted with — including public discourses and media regulation — is crucial to understanding how

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[3] David L. Shambaugh, *China's Future* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), xv.
[4] Yinhe Li, "Sex, Love, and Chinese Women," *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology 31*, no. 1 (1998): 25-31.

LGBT musicians operate in China and can offer insight into the forces behind self-censorship. A thorough background of policy regarding homosexuality and the Chinese social context will thus be provided. These policies are proven to be direct causes of the low consumption of LGBT music in China. I argue that such policies and norms play directly into the cycle that results in a blanket silencing effect for queer musicians. Firstly, I will analyze official laws and regulations. Next, I will examine public opinion and surveys on discrimination, including those related to Confucian or other traditional views. Additionally, interviewee opinions and experiences will be used intermittently in order to give context to these lines of inquiry.

State Policy

Publicly, the Communist Party of China (CCP) promulgates a policy of "no approval, no disapproval, no promotion" of LGBT issues and content.[5] This policy is a familiar tactic by the CCP, one used when dealing with religious institutions and some NGOs. It officiates indifference while concurrently banning or retaliating against groups that threaten national stability.[6] Indeed, while all five subjects interviewed for this paper acknowledged progress in LGBT status "in the last decade," this information was qualified by each participant with a reminder of state restriction of LGBT content. Subject 1 went as far as to say that the environment for LGBT people had worsening significantly under Xi Jinping, signaling a disconnect between what the party officiates on paper and the lived reality of citizens.[7]

State policy has not always been publicly impartial. Before 2000, the inclusion of hooliganism 流氓罪 in Article 160 of the National

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[5] Mountford, Tom. *China: The Legal Position and Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in the People's Republic of China.* IGLHRC: International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 3.

[6] Eleanor Albert and Lindsay Maizland, "The State of Religion in China," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/religion-china.

[7] Subject 1, interviewed by author, 2 November 2020.

Criminal Code allowed for the prosecution and imprisonment of any LGBT individuals accused of public disruption in China.[8] This law often targeted gay men who dated or engaged sexually in public meeting areas. With little record as to the degree that this dog-whistle was exploited, the legal term was removed in 1997. Homosexuality was thereafter removed from the state register of mental disorders in 2001.[9] After 2001, police could no longer arrest individuals for homosexuality, and the CCP moved to a science-based terminology that divorced homosexuality from mental disorders. However, though the Jiang Zemin administration signaled decriminalization, queer individuals continued to face censorship and discrimination.

Perhaps most significantly, LGBT content has remained nominally blocked through China's so-called "Great Firewall." Under the CCP's 2017 update to the General Rules for Content Review of Online Programs, the policy that officiates the content allowed on state television and radio states that media sources that depict homosexuality 同性爱 are banned on the basis of representing "abnormal sexual behaviors."[10] LGBT activists frequently note that the banning of LGBT-centered websites, including the frequent shutdown of the popular 'boyair.com,' a website for discourses on the gay lifestyle and sex is unjust. In 2015, "Mama Rainbow," a documentary on LGBT voices, was banned online (although director Fan Po Po eventually successfully sued for the film to be re-uploaded, this victory was due to an illegitimate process by the relevant Ministry, not a

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[8] Guojuan Li, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And Transgender Culture In Contemporary China "(M.A. dissertation, University of Mississippi , 2016), 7.
[9] Guojuan Li, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And Transgender Culture In Contemporary China "(M.A. dissertation, University of Mississippi , 2016), 7.
[10] Standing Council of China Network Audiovisual Program Service Association, "《网络视听节目内容审核通则》发布," 《网络视听节目内容审核通则》发布, June 30, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com//zgjx/2017-07/01/c_136409024.htm.

relaxation on gay content).[11] Posts with LGBT references on social media are also sometimes blocked; Sina Weibo's attempted 2018 "clean-up" of illegal content pertaining to homosexuality that resulted in widespread criticism is the most prominent example. On WeChat posts, the rainbow flag emoji, symbolizing gay pride, is often redacted.[12] Additionally, China was banned from streaming the 2018 Eurovision contest after it censored a rainbow flag and musicians from an Irish band during a performance that included two men dancing and holding hands.[13] Clearly, although the party retains a "no disapproval" stance, this posturing rarely comes to fruition. The state continues to codify homosexuality as something abnormal, frequently taking down posts or media that has a net-silencing effect on LGBT voices. As is later seen, this has a direct effect on LGBT musicians and the consumption of their work.

At the same time, as noted by Subject 1, with the growth of the population of Chinese netizens, "the censorship on social media really has changed — and not just in one direction."[14] While bans on LGBT themes have been rigid in official guidelines, the way that they are carried out has become much more lenient, both online and off. Increasingly, general non-political posts about homosexuality do not get censored on social media. Although thousands of posts were removed and some content is still blocked, a 2018 hashtag "#IAmGay" elicited such a response that social media giant Sina Weibo changed its policy to allow for some LGBT content. Most messaging services, such as WeChat, allow for general gay terminology and content. On

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[11] Elaine Jeffreys, "Public Policy and LGBT People and Activism in Mainland China," in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, ed. Willy Wo-Lap Lam (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017) , 12-13.
[12] Subject 2, interviewed by author, 3 November 2020.
[13] Anna Codrea-rado, "China Is Banned From Airing Eurovision After Censoring Performance With Gay Theme," The New York Times (The New York Times, May 11, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/arts/music/eurovision-china-gay-censorship.html.
[14] Subject 1, interviewed by author, 2 November 2020.

the other hand, in the offline environment, due to fewer restrictions, gay bars, clubs, and bathhouses have grown in recent years, which have changed the landscape in Chinese cities.[15] Shanghai held its first Pride parade in 2009. Although such gatherings are sometimes shut down under the guise of unlawful assembly, these have continued to occur.[16] Subject 1 states that "I have been able to look for and find communities … for the past ten years, people are talking more and more about LGBT stuff."

The politicization of homosexual content is perhaps most critical for understanding the impact of this uneven policy with respect to LGBT music. In a notable 2013 study on Chinese censorship, Gary King and his collaborators show that sensitive content (posts related to lawsuits, arrests, bombings, etc.) was only systematically censored when the content intended to "represent, reinforce, or spur collective action."[17] This appears to be the case for most LGBT content. For the most part, political or especially controversial posts are removed, whereas general comments or mentions are allowed. Some decisions remain seemingly arbitrary, however, given website removal or censorship of certain terminology or emoticons. The specific patterns of LGBT censorship are hard to delineate without access to private documents or wide-scale studies.

It is difficult, then, to precisely measure the degree to which state policy has censored homosexuality in recent years. Despite policies that restrict LGBT content and limit LGBT organizations and social media posts, the picture is not entirely black and white. Since reform

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[15] Elaine Jeffreys, "Public Policy and LGBT People and Activism in Mainland China," Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party, 2017, 283-296, 4.
[16] Hunter Gray, "Negotiating Invisibility: Addressing LGBT Prejudice in ...," 2014, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=cie_capstones, 14.
[17] Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326-343.

in the early 2000s, the Chinese government has focused less on blatant laws and the criminalization of homosexuality. Rather, government policy is more focused on subtle forms of silencing LGBT voices in ways that include using the pretense of unlawful gathering, abnormal sexual content, or political censorship to regulate LGBT media, including music. This methodology has pushed LGBT citizens into a unique bind. On the one hand, gay apps and social media posts are more and more common. On the other hand, the threat of government action remains steadily over any media or posts. As we will see, this binary — particularly with relation to the government's censorship of specifically political material — has great implications for musicians in China, with ramifications for self-censorship and social exposure to normalized LGBT content.

Public Opinion

Given the restrictions on public opinion surveys under China's authoritarian state, a precise measure of attitudes toward homosexuality is difficult to gather. Whereas databases have procured detailed reports of opinion in the United States, this type of information remains rather ambiguous, especially with respect to different geographic locations in China. Based on the few surveys available and in accordance with the content of the interviews conducted for this paper, the majority of China's public appears to remain privately unreceptive to homosexuality. Unlike in religious societies where this prejudice stems from theological interpretation, in China this is largely a function of family-based intolerance and social pressures rather than blatant or legally sanctioned discrimination (despite a lack of constitutionally-mandated anti-discrimination laws). These familial and social pressures have great implications for citizens' willingness to consume LGBT music.

In one of the most comprehensive surveys (involving 29,000 participants) of discrimination in China (2019), Wang found that while broad discrimination against LGBT individuals from a general population was moderate, rejection rates from heterosexual

participants when asked if they would accept an LGBT child (46.4) were relatively high.[18] Gay men's perceptions of discrimination were also high (51.4).[19] Subject 2's emphasis on intolerance within the family above all else confirmed this narrative: "If you are LGBT … It will be a very shameful thing to parents. For example, other parents' children all get married and have a family — have a normal family. If the children say that 'I'm a gay' or 'I'm a lesbian' in front of the public or in front of the relatives or neighbors, it will be a very shameful thing to the parents, and the parents can't accept this."[20]

Very few Chinese LGBT citizens openly disclose their sexuality. Approximately 48.4% of gay men surveyed in Wang's study were "out" to family members, while only 21.3% disclosed their sexuality in the workplace. This number is likely to be even lower, given the study has no way of accounting for individuals who are LGBT but unwilling to disclose so in the survey. For comparison, estimates demonstrate that 50% of LGBT Americans disclose their sexuality at work.[21]

Reasons for this low rate of acceptance in the context of the family unit and the high rates of perceived discrimination are debated among scholars. One theory suggests that a long history of collective, Confucian values canalize these perspectives toward intolerance. During my interviews, all five of the subjects strongly believed that traditional values, in particular those associated with Confucianism (which include a less individualistic emphasis on filial piety, one's lineage, sexual morality, and family connectedness) had a significant impact on social views about homosexuality in China. Adamczyk and Cheng also observed relatively high rates of intolerance toward

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[18] Yuanyuan Wang et al., "Mapping out a Spectrum of the Chinese Public's Discrimination toward the LGBT Community: Results from a National Survey," *BMC Public Health* 20 (2020): 4.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Subject 2, interviewed by author, 3 November 2020.
[21] Kari Paul, "Nearly 50% of LGBTQ Americans Are in the Closet at Work," MarketWatch (MarketWatch, October 11, 2019), https://www.marketwatch.com/story/half-of-lgbtq-americans-are-not-out-to-co-workers-2018-06-27.

homosexuals in Confucian countries.[22] Interestingly, the survey found the intolerance of homosexuality to be strongly correlated with few values related to Confucianism — notably rejection of divorce and prostitution — while others, like an emphasis on distinct gender roles or filial piety, were weaker predictors of bias.[23]

In a more recent peer-reviewed study associating Confucianism to LGBT tolerance, Lazarra found that most non-heterosexual Chinese interviewees feared disappointing their parents by coming out to them.[24] Adhering to Yeh and Bedford's term, 'authoritarian filial piety,' homosexuality was seen as a challenge to the parental respect, which "seems to threaten the whole society" under Confucian norms.[25] The study, along with Wang's survey, suggests that Confucian and traditional views increase intolerance toward homosexuality, in an effort to protect the family unit. These views certainly have a wide-ranging silencing effect for many closeted LGBT citizens in China, including musicians.

A lack of exposure to LGBT content outside of media in the context of HIV/AIDS also shapes homosexuality's negative connotation, especially for parents and older generations. "[The reason] a lot of people aren't supportive of this [LGBT] or open about this is because they haven't been exposed to…either the content around it or people…they are not surrounded by this information when

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[22] Amy Adamczyk and Yen-Hsin Alice Cheng, "Explaining Attitudes about Homosexuality in Confucian and Non-Confucian Nations: Is There a 'Cultural' Influence?," *Social Science Research 51* (2015): 276-289, 277.
[23] Amy Adamczyk and Yen-Hsin Alice Cheng, "Explaining Attitudes about Homosexuality in Confucian and Non-Confucian Nations: Is There a 'Cultural' Influence?," *Social Science Research 51* (2015): 276-289, 277.
[24] Sarah-Jane Page, Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip, and Emmanuele Lazzara, "Our Lives from a Different Perspective': How Chinese and Taiwanese Gay and Lesbian Individuals and Their Parents Navigate Confucian Beliefs," in Intersecting Religion and Sexuality: Sociological Perspectives (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 190-212, 193.
[25] Ibid, 192.

they grow up."[26] In a survey of archives of "The People's Daily," one of China's most prominent state-run newspapers, only 78 articles since 1985 have mentioned the formal term for homosexuality, 同性恋者.[27] Of these, 44 articles — about 56% — mentioned homosexuality in the context of HIV or AIDS. Of the remaining 34, 6 were mentioned in reference to criminality, curses, or pornography. This leaves a total of 28 reports mentioning homosexuality without association to crime or disease. Coupled with a state policy that restricts online content and media, a lack of exposure to normalized, non-threatening LGBT content further reinforces a reductive and negative perception of LGBT people. This view is difficult to discard unless placed in an urban environment that serves a familiarity with queer citizens or advocacy organizations.

China's authoritarian policy and social views that are dominantly shaped by tradition or Confucianism make the environment for LGBT persons both unique and difficult to traverse for citizens. During interviews, subjects stressed a multifaceted narrative, and stressed that the younger generation, especially young people who live in the city, is accepting of homosexuality. The three LGBT participants that I interviewed were open about their sexuality with friends and felt that they could post about the subject online, even if the content was occasionally taken down. At the same time, they stressed the fact that circumstances that remain adverse, despite the "definite" change in the past ten years. State policy still formally restricts LGBT-based media, even if regulation sometimes goes unenforced. Online posts, such as those in the 2018 #IAmGay movement, are often censored. Social views, shaped by a lack of exposure to the LGBT population and by traditional views concerning the protection of the family, remain hostile among many citizens. Importantly, family remains the greatest

[26] Subject 3, interviewed by author, 19 November 2020.

[27] "人民日报图文数据库（1946-2021）," 人民日报图文数据库 （1946-2021） (People's Daily Online Technology (Beijing), 2021), http://data.people.com.cn/rmrb/20210403/1?code=2.

barrier for openness, as citizens receive enormous pressure to marry and fear of disappointing their parents. This intolerance is likely exacerbated for homosexual men under China's one-child policy, since Chinese men are expected to find a wife who will care for their parents in their old age.

In short, while younger citizens living in urban areas feel comfortable about being their authentic selves, they acknowledge the influence of censorship and the stigma of homosexuality on their lives. As I will later argue, these factors remain salient when it comes to LGBT musicians in China.

LGBT Music in China

Music in any society functions as an important form of expression that can normalize, or isolate, social groups and ideas. Unlike other forms of media, musicians are unique in their ability to conceal, or reveal, their sexuality in nuanced ways. Given a state policy that unevenly censors and politicizes LGBT content, and a citizenry that harbors prejudiced, traditional views about the family unit and their own children, what does LGBT music look like in China? How do artists navigate this uncertain terrain? This section will give an overview of several noteworthy homosexual musicians in China and ultimately contend that two major strategies are used by LGBT musicians: a less-successful strategy of upfront disclosure, and one of straight performance or sexual ambiguity. I will also mention four artists (three of whom are Taiwanese) whose widespread popularity in China allowed them to successfully release LGBT-related content later in their career. The major strategies of LGBT musicians, with the above factors of Chinese policy and social environment, all act in a mutually reinforcing and cyclical manner that results in low consumption of LGBT music in China.

All of the interviewees struggled to name more than one LGBT artist in China. When questioned, both homosexual and heterosexual respondents had a similar answer: "A few actors and artists. I don't

know that many people."[28] In addition to Qiaoqiao, musician Chenli 陈粒, mentioned by Subjects 1, 2, and 3; and "T-Style" pop singers such as Li Yuchun 李宇春 offer insights into LGBT music in China.

"Love Does Not Discriminate" appears to stand alone among other methods in Chinese music. For one, Qiaoqiao is the only artist mentioned to have produced both an explicitly LGBT song and video to accompany it. Her artistry functions as an example of one method of creating queer music in China: an "outright disclosure" of sexuality. Qiaoqiao's sudden disappearance, and a dearth of successful compatriots who have attempted this method of disclosure, suggest that this type of production is publicly unappealing, economically fruitless, unsafe, or some amalgamation of the three. None of the subjects interviewed were familiar with Qiaoqiao's music.

The artist Chenli approaches LGBT music in an opposite, more veiled manner. Three subjects (1, 2, 3) mentioned Chenli during their interview. First acknowledged after her band won the 2012 the Shanghai Zippo Hot Rock Contest, Chenli is openly a lesbian. To date, she has released five albums, and has over 3 million fans on Weibo.[29] In 2014, Chenli revealed in a post on Sina Weibo, the popular Chinese blogging site, that she was in a relationship with a woman. Beyond this, she has expressed little about her sexuality. According to Subject 1, 《祝星》*Zhuxing* — named after Chenli's girlfriend — and 《光》(Light) are the only two songs from which one could pick up "subtle clues" to interpret her sexuality.[30] Chenli's non-specific lyricism ("当事者闭上眼不看了/美丽的给我温暖沉默，" the person involved closed their eyes and ignored / beautifully gave me warmth and silence)[31] coupled with non-gendered pronouns and nouns in spoken Mandarin make Chenli's homosexuality nearly invisible in her music.

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[28] Subject 3, interviewed by author, 19 November 2020.

[29] "陈粒_的微博_微博," Sina Visitor System, accessed April 3, 2021, https://weibo.com/chen1ee?refer_flag=1005050010_&is_all=1.

[30] Subject 1, interviewed by author, 2 November 2020.

[31] 陈粒，《光》. 北京有此山中化博媒有限公司，2015.

This functions as a second method in creating queer music in China: straight performing, with near indiscernibility of content related to sexuality.

Additionally, several of what Kam terms "T-Style Pop Singers" contribute to the genre of ambiguity. These are pop artists who embrace a masculine style that rejects the traditional femininity of Chinese artists.[32] These musicians, best represented by Li Yuchun and Denise Ho, are viewed as constructive to the lesbian identity and visibility in China.[33] The aforementioned Li Yuchun has been consistently ambiguous about her sexuality, while Ho came out in 2012, many years after her initial popularity. These singers, who create an "alternative" gender dynamic in music, facilitate a style of artistry that many gay women (survey by Kam) viewed as queer signaling to the lesbian community, but which is also ambiguous.[34] Even with this gender performance, this style can still be consumed by general audiences due to the straight or otherwise undisclosed sexuality of its performers. Unlike Qiaiqiao's explicitness, these artists adhere to methodology like that of Chenli. Though not straight-performing, Li Yuchun (and Denise Ho until 2012) tread an uncertain middle ground that allows for varying interpretations of their music and videography.

These artists paint a clearer picture of LGBT music in China in the last decade. On one hand, artists such as Qiaoqiao use music as vessels for articulation of sexuality or political statements, including references to homosexuality in song lyrics and videography. Although not officially blocked in Qiaoqiao's case, this approach is not only uncommon, but conflicts directly with the 2017 media guidelines published by the CCP. In opposite fashion, artists such as Chenli, the only openly gay Mainland artist mentioned during interviews, craft genderless lovers in their lyrics to veil their sexuality in music and

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[32] Lucetta Y. L. Kam, "Desiring T, Desiring Self: 'T-Style' Pop Singers and Lesbian Culture in China," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 18, no. 3 (June 2014).
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

videos. Although open to interpretation or decipherable with context, Li allows for her music to co-exist within circles that reject homosexuality and circles that embrace it, while circumventing state censorship.

In Taiwan and Hong Kong, four additional artists with explicit LGBT themes were found. Three of these — Jolin Tsai 蔡依林, Christine Fan 范玮琪, and Elva Hsiao 萧亚轩 — are straight Taiwanese artists with music that sometimes advocates for LGBT acceptance. A fourth, Hong-Kong based musician Anthony Wong Yiu-Ming 黄耀明, came out as gay in 2012. All four of these artists were high-profile celebrities before they engaged in discourse about LGBT issues. While these artists are outside of the scope of this paper due to their existence in the periphery of the PRC, their release of LGBT music *after* their initial commercial popularity is significant to note, as this may indicate a path for future LGBT representation in music by Mainland artists. Even Anthony Wong Yiu-Ming's 禁色, recently considered a gay anthem, was released in 1988, three years after his band's initial popularity. As Subject 3 noted when speculating about homosexuality in the music industry and potential backlash, "It depends on how well-known the artist is."[35]

Despite a small sample size of openly gay artists in Mainland China, this section acknowledges several patterns. First, it is most common for artists to either, on occasion, reveal their sexuality but craft their image as straight-performing, or not reveal their sexuality at all. Surveys show that China has the largest gay population in the world.[36] Those surveyed, however, could only name one openly gay artist from Mainland China (Chenli) and three Taiwanese artists that were straight but had subtle LGBT themes in their music (Jolin Tsai, Christine Fan, and Elva Tsiao). This gap is drastic. There is a clear

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[35] Subject 3, interviewed by author, 19 November 2020.

[36] Hunter Gray, "Negotiating Invisibility: Addressing LGBT Prejudice in ...," 2014, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=cie_capstones, 1.

scarcity of LGBT music, particularly in comparison to the United States. Second, songs that are political in nature or contain explicit LGBT themes, such as Qiaoqiao's "Love Does Not Discriminate," are difficult to find and generally unpopular. Finally, there are some uncommon instances where artists' songs Tsai's 《迷幻》,《我呸》, and Fan's 《类似爱情》) with LGBT themes gained traction. These examples came strictly from well-established artists. Those who reject this trajectory, such as Qiaoqiao, face an exceptionally difficult barrier to widespread popularity by refusing straight-performance in initial releases.

The final section of the paper will further examine these three trends in Chinese LGBT music.

The Interaction of Censorship, Social Views, and Consumption

For individuals seeking success, China's music scene is a tricky industry to thrive in. Given the pressures of contemporary stardom and maintaining an appropriate social presence online, musicians must also engage in gameplay with state censorship, authoritarianism, and the diverse perspectives of over one billion potential listeners in China. Missteps can mean economic or social failure. This is especially the case for minorities and those with styles averse to party regulations (punk rock and rap, for example, two genres that have been hushed by the CCP in the past), given that these individuals can become targets of the state or public retaliation.[37] As public figures under an autocratic regime, musicians are faced constantly with trade-offs concerning their career, self-expression, and safety.

Openly LGBT musicians and LGBT themes are rare in Chinese music. Unlike the constraints the above genre atypical artists face — which are largely censorship — rather than stigma-based, given the genre's immense popularity (so much so, in the instance of rap, that the CCP chose eventually to begin co-opting instead of blocking the

[37] Nathanel Amar, "Navigating and Circumventing (Self)Censorship in the Chinese Music Scene," *China Perspectives* 2 (2020): 25-33.

genre) — those that LGBT artists face are not so simple.[38] Limiters to success and free-spoken sexuality come from several directions.

What emerges is a complicated web of causes that feed into the low production of and low consumption of LGBT music in China. Figure 1 (also available in the additional notes section) places these causes and their effects into a single diagram, each of which will be explained below. In many places, these processes are cyclical, reinforcing restrictions on these musicians and their ability to express themselves, creating a pattern that is difficult to break without radical changes to state policy or social norms.

State censorship comes first and plays an undeniable role in the creation and consumption of LGBT music. Censorship, codified in the General Rules for Content Review of Online Programs, faces artists at several points in the music-making process. Firstly, uncertain social views that often skew discriminatory in older generations make collaborations with others for the production of music difficult,

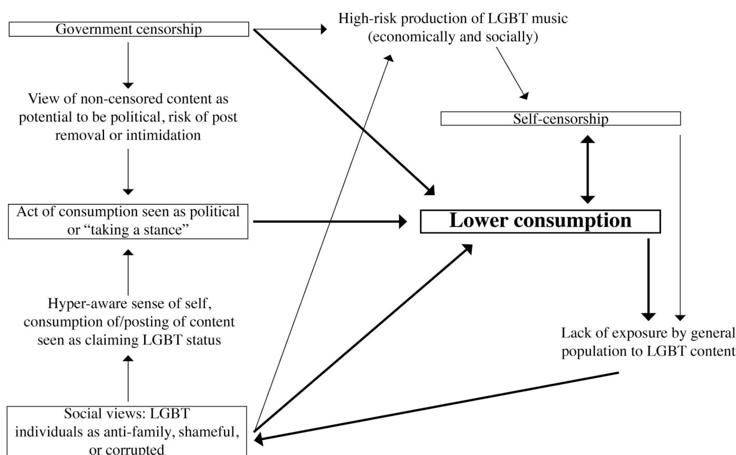

FIGURE 1: The cycle of censorship, conservatism, and consumption

especially if artists have not previously been open about their sexuality.[39] Artists must choose carefully to whom they disclose their sexuality, and with whom they work, ensuring these citizens will be

[38] Ibid, 30.
[39] Subject 4, interviewed by author, 19 November 2020.

okay with producing LGBT music. Secondly, the CCP has indirect control of all media publication. Many major labels are owned by the CCP and all at least have party members involved in decision-making processes. For private, independent companies, this means that albums must be screened and approved for publication.[40] As with the punk band "UnderBaby," examined by Amar (2020) in a case study of music censorship, sounds and lyrics can be modified or rejected by these government organizations.[41] Finally, once published, this music still runs the risk of facing soft-censorship (minimizing the content's page views) or full removal, as stipulated by party rules and as seen with other LGBT content.[42] Collectively, this makes the production of blatant homosexual content, such as that produced under Qiaoqiao's "outright disclosure" method, both socially and economically risky. As pointed out by Subject 2, "They don't take this risk, because making music is a very time and money consuming thing. If we can make money in other ways, why make the LGBT music, as we need to take such a huge risk?"[43] Censorship makes the production of openly LGBT music precarious and thus encourages musicians to take shelter behind self-censorship, which in turn allows for less consumption of LGBT content. This incentivizes artists such as Chenli to engage with routines that rarely disclose their sexuality in music.

This state censorship of LGBT content also functions in uniquely subtle ways. In line with the research by Roberts, which suggests that the government principally censors content that is seen as threateningly political (i.e. suggesting collective action or protests), LGBT content is often quietly politicized. When a portion of LGBT

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[40] Nathanel Amar, "Navigating and Circumventing (Self)Censorship in the Chinese Music Scene," *China Perspectives* 2 (2020): 28.
[41] Nathanel Amar, "Navigating and Circumventing (Self)Censorship in the Chinese Music Scene," *China Perspectives* 2 (2020): 28.
[42] Elaine Jeffreys, "Public Policy and LGBT People and Activism in Mainland China," *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, 2017, 283-296.
[43] Subject 2, interviewed by author, 3 November 2020.

content (here, music) is knowingly removed or blocked due to its political nature, a blanket effect befalls even the content that is left up or approved for publication. Aware that this material is sometimes targeted by the government, and with the knowledge that activists view LGBT content as movement towards political change, ordinary citizens become hesitant to consume this music, fearful that it will be viewed as a political endorsement or statement. In the case of "T-Style Girls," Kam suggests these musicians were often politicized and avoided due to their rejection of social norms.[44]

Moving down Figure 1, traditional social views also interact with this politicization. Conservative perspectives, and the above politicization from censorship, make it difficult to divorce activism or regular consumption of LGBT music from one's own identity. Particularly, outside of urban areas, and especially in fear of parental disappointment or a loss of "face" 面子, citizens may be hesitant to post or consume LGBT music or other content given that it can be interpreted as professing one's own identity as LGBT. In the case of the 2018 #IAmGay movement, many posts were careful to clearly mark themselves as distant from homosexuality despite support for the community.[45] Similarly, the act of consumption and sharing of music which contains LGBT content is implicitly viewed as "taking a stance" or self-identification with the community. This further reduces the consumption of LGBT music by citizens.

Social views — perceiving homosexuality as anti-family, as corrupted, or as shameful, often associated with Confucian values — lower consumption in obvious ways. External views cause artists to self-censor and mean that fewer citizens are listening to explicitly LGBT music given that they reject their themes.

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[44] Lucetta Y. L. Kam, "Desiring T, Desiring Self: 'T-Style' Pop Singers and Lesbian Culture in China," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 18, no. 3 (June 2014).
[45] Sara Liao, "'#IAmGay# What About You?': Storytelling, Discursive Politics, and the Affective Dimension of Social Media Activism against Censorship in China*," International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019), 2323.

Depicted by the linking force in the fourth quadrant of Figure 1, these components that lower the production of and consumption of LGBT music act in a self-reinforcing nature. Exposure to homosexuality and LGBT citizens in a normal context in China is already rare. Most news sources report on homosexuality in a context of HIV/AIDS or criminality. Censorship and social views construct an environment with less LGBT content online and prompt drastically low rates of sexuality disclosure in workplace and family settings.[46] A lack of openly-LGBT artists or themes in the music industry reinforce this gap in exposure to normalized content. In turn, conservative or discriminatory social views are unchanged and thus regenerate the cycle of self-censorship and low engagement.

Conclusion

In recent years, a sufficient portion of scholarship has been dedicated to understanding the queer population in China.[47] With the slow emergence of opinion polling and an LGBT presence online, scholars are beginning to reckon with the novel environment — authoritarian, middle-income, Confucian, largely censored — in which homosexual citizens must function.

Queerness in Chinese music offers insight into how these citizens navigate this terrain culturally. Globally, popular culture has the potential to make or break social movements and efforts toward de-stigmatization. It has the potential to coordinate communities under oppressive regimes. How celebrities and artists perform publicly, what they wear, and the issues that they speak on guide the dominant social narrative, especially among youth, that researchers seek to understand. Particularly in China, where national stars can theoretically speak to a population of 1.3 billion and as the Chinese internet bubble continues

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[46] Yuanyuan Wang et al., "Mapping out a Spectrum of the Chinese Public's Discrimination toward the LGBT Community: Results from a National Survey," *BMC Public Health 20* (2020): 1-10.

[47] Wang et al.

to expand, this link between LGBT artists and social views is crucial to social research.

In the case of China, it is no surprise that the music scene includes a relatively low proportion of LGBT artists. Between five interviews with Chinese citizens and external research in the genre, six Mainland artists were identified as openly gay or to have produced themes suggestive of LGBT narratives in their music. Of these, I suggest two methods in terms of how artists approach the subject of their sexuality. One group, that of "outright disclosure" including artists such as Denise Ho or Qiaoqiao, is publicly upfront about their sexuality. This group rejects self-censorship by including explicit LGBT themes in their music. Unless these artists are well-established with dedicated listeners, this method is one of high-risk. The second group, that of straight-performance, including artists such as Chenli and Li Yuchun, chooses to either veil their songs in ambiguity or omit LGBT content from their songs altogether. I argue that government censorship, by way of politicization and prompting self-censorship, conservative views, a connection between LGBT music use and one's identity, and the high-risk nature of producing LGBT music all lead to lower consumption of and production of such music. The ensuing lack of exposure to and normalization of LGBT content in the Chinese population reinforces this cycle. This pattern incentivizes artists like Chenli to limit queer content in their music.

Given the size and history of the Chinese music industry, it is impossible for this chronicle to be complete. Chinese musicians, heterosexual and homosexual, exist in many corners of the internet and express themselves in remarkably subtle ways. This paper offers only a brief glimpse into some of the most notable artists mentioned in interviews and in previous writing. A continued examination of LGBT content — such as how the visibility of gay or nontraditional artists continues to fare in the face of censorship and conservative ideologies — is critical to explaining how the portrait of queer China is changing. Furthermore, a precise measure of the extent to which homosexual content is censored online in China is necessary to understand the

degree of risk that these artists face. Another area that merits greater examination is the apparent disparity between male and female LGBT artists in China. Here, the already-popularized masculine gender presentation of "T-Style Girls" may have facilitated a space of visible queerness for some women.

Although the expedient entrance and exit of Qiaoqiao from the music scene may never be explained, the way queer music will continue to evolve in China can be carefully anticipated. Government policy is difficult to strong-arm, but as seen with the change to Sina Weibo's policy on gay content in 2018, it is not impossible. Challenges in court offer another avenue for change. Despite a recent increase in censorship and strongman policies under Xi Jinping, changes to LGBT music and the community's perception will likely come from one of two directions: government prescription or the gradual change to social views. The former seems unlikely, given the CCP's hesitance to bend solely to public opinion or protest in the past. The latter seems possible, though given the circular effect of conservatism and a lack of music consumption and exposure, this will probably take a long time.

Another path to consider would be the growth of well-established artists using their platforms to promote LGBT rights or content. As seen with Taiwanese artist Jolin Tsai, and as suggested by Subjects 3 and 4, this method could insulate the already-popular artist from detrimental effects while aiding LGBT representation in music.

Until one of these changes occurs, it appears that LGBT citizens and musicians can only wait. Action requires a great financial and social risk. Without immense incentives or pressure, it seems unlikely that many will follow Qiaoqiao's intrepid path of openness chosen in "Love Does Not Discriminate."

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Table 1: *Subjects interviewed*

Subject	Age	Gender	Province	Identify as LGBT?
Subject 1	18-25	Female	Jiangsu	Yes
Subject 2	18-25	Male	Shanghai Municipaility	Yes
Subject 3	18-25	Female	Jiangsu	Yes
Subject 4	25-35	Female	Jiangsu	No
Subject 5	25-35	Female	Jiangsu	No

Figure 1: *The cycle of censorship, conservatism, and consumption*

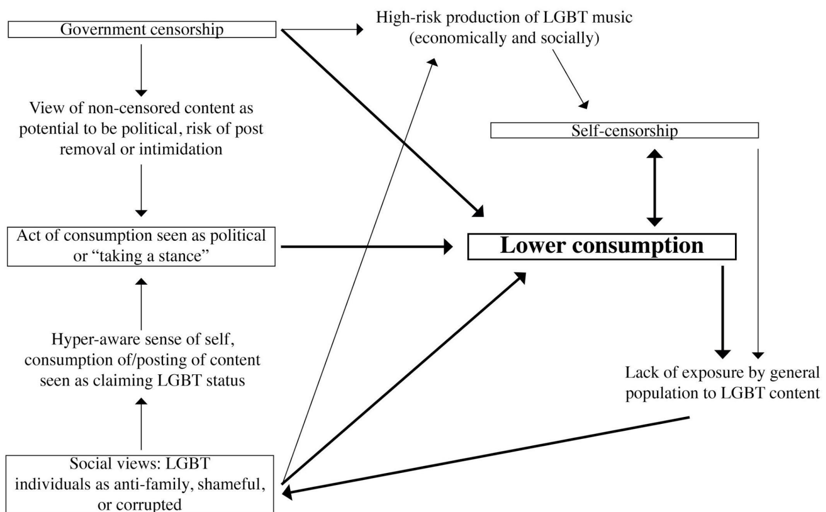

FIGURE 1: The cycle of censorship, conservatism, and consumption

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