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**The Making of the Chinese “Gay Wives”: Technology,
Authenticity, and Identity in the Digital Age**

By

Yiyi Wu

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Faculty Advisor: Julie Y. Chu
Preceptor: Mary Elena Wilhoit

Introduction

Since February 2021, a group of women has held live public events every Sunday at 9 pm on Douyin, one of the most popular live-streaming social media platforms in China, where they discuss topics that are relevant to their lives and offer support for audiences who share the same identity as them. Their shared identity is called *tongqi* (同妻). *Tong* (同), meaning ‘same’ in Chinese, refers to the word *tongxinglian* that is stemmed from the English word, homosexuality. *Qi* (妻) means wife. They identify themselves as a population of straight women who unknowingly entered the marriage with gay men. These *tongqi* live streamers are affiliated with an online *tongqi*-support group named Weifeng founded by a forty-year-old *tongqi*, Qiangmei, a middle school teacher of Chinese literature. This support group offers a variety of services for *tongqi*, from free legal consultation to mental health counseling. Each event is well attended by at least three hundred people, and at almost every event, there is one self-identifying *tongqi* requesting support by calling into the live video. Despite the entirely public nature of Douyin, which makes access to services seem easy, these newcomers are always required to pass a series of tests designed to authenticate their identity as *tongqi* before they can attain any support. “Do you have evidence?” During one public event, one newcomer was interrupted by this abrupt question asked by the *tongqi* live streamer before this newcomer could articulate her needs. “What evidence do you have that proves your husband is gay?” As the newcomer struggled to give out a satisfying answer, the live streamer referred the newcomer to a *tongqi* volunteer who can offer her guidance in obtaining evidence. The livestreamer soon clarified the reason why she needed the “evidence” to the audiences: “Evidence is the best indication that proves you are *tongqi*. That is how things work here in our organization. Everyone needs to be transparent. You

need to have evidence. Having evidence will also help us better support you. Evidence is important! Ladies, please get evidence when you can.”

Evidence is the most mentioned word throughout my three-month fieldwork with six tongqi and three *tongfu* (同夫), the husbands of Chinese lesbians. Such evidence refers to digital documentation of the graphic and erotic moments of their spouses' same-sex affairs. It ranges from a flirtatious text message exchanged between their spouses and their same-sex partners to discovering their spouses' active profiles on same-sex networking applications. As shown in the opening vignette, evidence particularly plays a critical role in proving tongqi's authenticity to their peers who can admit them to a broader network of resources.

Although the terminology of tongqi centralizes a gay identity in tongqi's identity formation, this research hopes to decenter husbands' apparent homosexuality by highlighting tongqi's heavy reliance on digital technology to capture evidence and authenticate their experiences. Tongqi's relationship with digital technology is a critical aspect of tongqi's life that has been long overlooked by existing scholars. While the majority of tongqi describe themselves as the victims of “marriage fraud” committed by “closeted” gay men whose homosexuality has discounted the “realness” of their marriage, this thesis problematizes such a generalized accusation by showing how tongqi's authenticating process has rearranged the meaning of realness and objectivity through their techno-interactivity. Specifically, this thesis contends that tongqi have become both the producers and consumers of particular rhetorics of authenticity and a particular ‘authenticated’ and rigid understanding of homosexuality. Moreover, while their goal behind such an authenticating process is to earn social recognition as a unique group of the marginalized in China, this thesis argues that tongqi's insistence that they are not others reinforces traditional gender scripts against women and fuels social discrimination.

How did Tongqi Come About: Patriarchy, Marriage Fraud, and Narratives of Contradictions

As many existing scholars of tongqi have pointed out, the highly patriarchal Chinese society that values marriage between a man and a woman as a way of protecting family lineage is one of the critical factors driving Chinese queers into heteronormative marriage (Zheng 2017; Kam 2013). Filial piety is one of China's most long-standing and important moral virtues that defines a moral person. It reinforces a hierarchical parenting-children relationship and rigid expectations to enter marriage with a person of the opposite sex, rear offspring, and carry on the "ancestral blood" (Sun 2017).

Marriage also offers the opportunity for a better life in China. Individuals who are married are considered more stable and accomplished, particularly men, who subsequently have higher chances of promotion. Marital status is one of the most significant factors in determining access to desirable jobs, particularly those related to governmental affairs (Uretsky 2016). Men who are married are also less likely to be fired since having a job is deemed essential to married men with family responsibilities. Despite the lasting high female employment rate since the establishment of the new China, women's status and their occupational insecurity in the labor market have deteriorated over time (Qian and Qian 2014). In return, marriage also becomes a crucial means for many women to achieve higher standards of living and attain financial security.

Situated in a socio-economical context of China where marriage is essential in completing one's personhood, many Chinese queers are compelled to comply with heteronormative norms by marrying people of the opposite sex. Some Chinese queers negotiate "nominal marriage" or "cooperative marriage," between a self-identified lesbian woman and a self-identified gay man, with each other's formal consent (Wang 2019). Many others marry straight-identified folks of the opposite sex who might not be aware of their sexual orientation.

Different from “cooperative marriage” that is bonded by informed consent and mutual assistance, the second form of a marital alliance is conceived as “fraud” by queers’ straight-identified partners (Zhu 2017). Tongqi view their identification as a product of a fraudulent marriage, where their gay husbands pretend to be straight men, purposefully hide their real sexual orientation, and eventually trick them into marriage to fulfill heteronormative societal expectations. Reportedly, tongqi suffer from low marital satisfaction stemmed from their husbands’ lack of interest in initiating and reciprocating romantic and sexual acts, especially after the successful birth of their children (Tang and Zhang 2013; Tang and Yu 2014). Their husbands’ failure to meet their expectations of what a hetero-romantic companionate marriage should look like has convinced many that their husbands are deceptive and are “biologically” incapable of loving and caring for women in the way that straight men do (Zhu 2017). To further support their marriage fraud rhetoric, tongqi often describe their experience as “being tongqi-ed.” In other words, they view their identity as exclusively defined by their husbands’ gayness and position themselves as passive agents who have no control over their identity formation.

As this thesis will explore, most tongqi have witnessed their husbands’ extra-marital same-sex affairs. Therefore, it is particularly understandable and expected for tongqi to suffer from a strong sense of betrayal, anger, and desperation. However, their marriage fraud rhetoric is still predicated on three apparent troubling assumptions that often contradict their narrated experiences. The first assumption is that their spouses are gays and have always been gay since birth, which negates any possibility that they could have been genuinely attracted to tongqi at any point. The second assumption is that a non-fraudulent marriage between a straight woman and a straight man is purely driven by love, where both parties can provide each other with sexual satisfaction at any time. The third assumption is that homosexuality is the exclusively

driving force that mobilizes tongqi's identity development and the only cause of their struggles. In other words, once a tongqi is married to a gay man, she automatically becomes tongqi.

The first assumption reflects troublesome perspectives on homosexuality that ascribe to a rigid understanding of sexuality as fixed, unchangeable, and binaristic. Much existing academic literature published on tongqi and tongfu uncritically refers them as the heterosexual wives of Chinese gay men and heterosexual husbands of Chinese lesbian women without further contextualization (Wang et al. 2020, Tang et al. 2020, Chow et al. 2013, etc.). As a few research has pointed out, many of tongqi's husbands do not associate themselves with a gay, homosexual, or bi identity (Zhu 2019; Zheng 2015). The tongqi's narratives I collected also reflect a similar inconsistency between their husbands' behaviors and desires and identification. Even after some tongqi confront their husbands with digital documentation that vividly displays their husbands' same-sex engagement, most of their husbands have denied a gay identity. Some claim that they did not realize their same-sex attraction until years after their marriage. Others assert that they enjoy having sex with both men and women without identifying themselves as bisexual. Their husbands' heterogeneous self-testimonies indicate a high degree of sexual fluidity.

While the so-called gay husbands and other Chinese queer folks are certainly subject to pervasive heteronormative cultural pressure to get married, the second assumption overlooks the fact that straight-identified men and women are not exempted from such pressures that may as well prompt them to prioritize their societal obligations over their real love interests and sexual desires. Much existing research categorizes tongqi as the victims of "marriage fraud" (Cheng 2016), and some explicitly pathologize tongqi's marriage as a "dysfunctional union" (Tsang 2021). Nevertheless, instead of offering a site for romantic and sexual engagement, the primary function of marriage in China has been about protecting family lineage through reproduction and

serving as a contract between two families to exchange capital goods (Davis 2014; Uretsky 2016). As Jingshu Zhu (2017) points out, romantic love has indeed become an increasingly important factor that informs spouse selection since the 1990s. However, blaming tongqi's husbands as the perpetrator of tongqi's sexless and loveless marriage "obscure[s] the fact that marriage for many, whether straight or gay, used to be, and to a large extent still is, a vehicle for calculation and acquisition of economic interest and social decency (Ibid: 4)." As revealed by my ethnographic data, many tongqi meet their husbands through matchmaking, a common practice in China that matches couples based on their practical needs rather than mutual affection.

The third assumption essentializes a gay identity in tongqi, making them the by-product, in essence, of their husbands. The ubiquitous usage of the number "14 million" in almost every existing study of tongqi (Chow et al. 2013; Pan 2019; Wang et al. 2020, etc.) to quantify them is troublesome. Such an unfounded number is merely a subtraction of a presumed percentage of the population attracted to their own gender and an estimated number of married men. This number centers men as the central enforcer of a tongqi identity and cause of their struggles. However, suggested by the opening vignette, tongqi show great agency in determining a tongqi identity for themselves and others. In addition, their struggles range from an experience of social stigmas associated with divorced women and single mothers, legal challenges that disadvantage women in divorce lawsuits, to living in a bureaucratic system that does not recognize their social challenges (Zhu 2017). These struggles are all unrelated to homosexuality. More importantly, despite the long-standing cultural norms that value the marriage between a man and a woman, recorded male same-sex practice could be traced back to the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE) (Hinsch 1990). Compared to thousands of years of same-sex practices, the emergence of tongqi came much later in the 2000s in correlation to the rise of digital technology, which indicates that such

an identity is a temporary product of the contemporary socio-political and technological milieu needing to be contextualized.

As shown, tongqi's narratives do not entail a coherent narrative about marriage, gay and tongqi identity, and the notion of truth. Although ethnographic studies on tongqi have flourished in the past decade, most of the research centers a discussion of tongqi's victimhood caused by "gay fraud." Without challenging the terminology of tongqi and the marriage fraud rhetoric, existing research inevitably reinforces a binarist understanding of sexuality.

Instead of taking the words "tongqi," "gay," and "fraud" as given, this thesis confronts contradictions, controversies, and inconsistencies that characterize tongqi's narratives by asking what does truthfulness to tongqi even look like in the first place? How are the concepts of authenticity, clarity, and transparency constructed? What are the factors that call the so-called "the Chinese gay's wives" into being if it is not homosexuality? How do these tongqi transform the heterogeneous queer desires presented by their husbands' narratives to one type of gay liar?

Methodology

In this study, I conducted ethnographic interviews with six tongqi and three *tongfu*, heterosexual men who reportedly have married so-called "Chinese lesbians." Due to Covid-19 travel restrictions, this research took place entirely online. Digital ethnography is, however, particularly appropriate to this research considering most of my interlocutors' social activities take place online. Digital technologies also play a critical role in helping them navigate and make sense of their identities. Formal interviews were kept open-ended enough to let my interlocutors tell me about their stories freely. I also incorporated informal interviews and unstructured daily conversations.

I also conducted participant observation in tongqi-led online public events as introduced in the opening vignette. The weekly virtual observation allowed me to see how tongqi interact and interpret each others' experiences. Participant observation also took place in online WeChat group chats and on online public forums, where tongqi and tongfu across China come to share their experiences. Some online group chats contain more than three hundred members. Considering the difficulty to acquire individual consent in groups containing a massive amount of members, I confined my observation within the public forums and relatively small chat rooms with less than twenty members, where I obtained their consent and only documented the general trend of their conversation without recording their information in detail to protect their privacy.

Admittedly, although online observation has allowed me to document a general trend of behaviors and opinions of a relatively broad range of tongqi population, because of my deep bond with a tongqi leader named Qiangmei, who is the founder of one tongqi self-help support group named Weifeng, my detailed ethnographic interviews are all with tongqi and tongfu who are affiliated with Weifeng. There are many other influential tongqi groups that may share missions and ideas about tongqi/tongfu identity that are different from the ones of Weifeng. Unfortunately, I did not get to speak with members of these groups directly, which is one acknowledged limitation to my research.

Authenticating Tongqi: Redpilling, Evidence, and A Constructed Tongqi Reality

You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember, all I am offering is the truth, nothing more.

In the famous scene of the 1999 film, *The Matrix*, the rebel leader Morpheus presented the main character, Neo, with the choice between taking the blue pill to continue living a life of delusion and taking a red pill to wake up to the painful truth of life, that the world he lived in was a computer-generated simulation and everything he was once led to believe in were fabricated

lies. However, as Morpheus emphasizes, once Neo learns the truth, “internalize[s], and start[s] living a new life, it gets better.” Shown by Morpheus’s words, the movie is predicated on the belief that confronting humanity’s hidden truth is essential to achieve personal freedom (Valkenburgh 2021). Although in *The Matrix*, the red pill appeals to a liberating ethos, contemporary scholars have called red pill rhetoric and its metaphorical possibilities into question in response to the rise of North American far-right online groups who use such rhetoric to justify their ideologies (Shullenberger 2021). A misogynistic online community directly named themselves after “the Red Pill.” While the truth in *The Matrix* alludes to humanity's enslavement by humanity’s own capitalistic and environmental exploitation, the truth to the Red Pill members is that men are the real oppressed group in a “reality” dominated by feminists (Ibid.). The troublesome nature of the Red Pill members’ obsession with reclaiming a “real” male-dominated reality indicates that the red pill metaphor is in itself paradoxical.

Although tongqi do not directly use the red pill metaphor in describing and understanding their identity, this section shows that the identification of tongqi is in itself a red-pilled experience full of contradictions and inconsistencies. By exploring their most mentioned word, “evidence,” and how it operates, this section shows how tongqi’s reality is procedurally produced, that they have become both the producers and consumers of their collective experience of so-called fraudulent marriage and gay identity.

Becoming Tongqi: Stay True to Yourself

Like Neo, who has consistently experienced glitches in his world, tongqi, before they become tongqi, suffer from a “glitched” marriage. Out of a desire to find a real cause to their broken marriage, tongqi begin a journey to investigate, where they eventually take the red pill to become tongqi. Shanghuang is a fifty-four-year-old tongqi volunteer from Weifeng. More than

twenty years ago, she met her ex-husband through college. She had a wonderful dating relationship with him for three years, when he was so caring and madly in love with her. However, he became sexually and emotionally indifferent after she was four months pregnant with their son, which made her suspect him of cheating. After a preliminary investigation, she found a phone number that he often called. It was 1997 when she was waiting outside the checkroom for her prenatal visit, and she decided to call back the number. Never would she have thought, the one who picked up on the other side was a man. She confronted her husband. At the time, he explained that he had no romantic attraction to that man, begged her not to divorce him, and promised her that he would never contact the person again.

Making my life's biggest mistake, I believed him. During the years after that incident, he had been a good husband and father. Although we still did not have many intimate contacts, I was so blind that I genuinely believed him that he was not gay. Until six years ago, I found an old train ticket that he purchased to City B through the joint transportation app we shared. There were two passengers: one was him, and the other one was Mr. A. Since then, I started suspecting again. Later, I placed a mini-recorder in his backpack when he went on a "business trip." From that recorder, I heard him having sex with a man in a hotel room with my own ears.

In the case of Shanghuang, her initial feeling that something was off in her marriage prompted her to investigate her husband's public life, leading to an ambiguous phone call that implicitly hinted at his same-sex attraction. The phone call acted as Morpheus, which put her in the position of Neo, who faced the choice between a blue pill and a red pill. She regarded her decision of taking the blue pill 20 years ago as a mistake since it left her in a delusion of a happy marriage that was, in her words, carefully crafted and manipulated by her husband's lies that disguised him as a straight man. From her perspective, the recorded audio is the red pill that finally woke her up to the painful truth about her husband that he had not only always been "gay" but also had never loved her despite him being a good husband and father. Without explicitly describing their experiences as a red-pillled one, some tongqi used the phrase "tongqi-ed" (被同

妻) that describes the moment of their discovery, which shares a similar implication. In other words, in their eyes, they do not have much power over their identification, that they are left with either choice of acceptance or self-denial.

After her divorce, she became an active volunteer for various tongqi organizations to, in her words, save women from self-denial and let more women accept their tongqi identity by assisting them in uncovering more evidence of their husbands' sexual orientation:

You know some women refuse to be tongqi and keep lying to themselves: did I wrong him? Did I misunderstand the situation? Can his sexual orientation be altered? Back in my generation, some women were so naive that they thought their husbands' attraction to men was just temporary and refused to get divorced. Some women even thought about sending their husbands to mental hospitals and would not even divorce them! However, evidence is powerful. It helps you understand that he does not and has never cared about you and loved you. Evidence helps you to finally give up your husband along the way. As this later section will elaborate, "evidence" refers to digital documentation that indicates their husbands' same-sex attraction, an essential element to authenticate a tongqi identity. In this case, she acts as "Morphine's assistant" to encourage more tongqi to take the red pill and make the red pill more "digestible." By differentiating herself from other "naive" women who took the blue pill, Shanghuang glorifies the moment of becoming a tongqi that eventually frees her and many others from a loveless and sexless marriage. By identifying as tongqi, she highlights the heroic embracement of her authentic self and the moral virtue of honesty, contrasting her and many other tongqi with their fraudulent and immoral husbands.

Meanwhile, as also indicated in her narratives, her moral quality of being truthful to herself was not purely cultivated by her own will but is influenced by evidence and her constant exchange with other tongqi. Her identification journey, spanning 20 years, directly correlates to the growing technological capacity to visualize information and network. She went from only having an unrecoverable phone call that offers a little clue about her ex-husband's public life to a smartphone application that tracks his whereabouts. She went from having no support system to

becoming a key member in a massive online support group. As this section will explore later, Shanghuang's life experience, representing many other tongqi's, highlights the socio-technological milieu that cannot be defined by her tie with gayness, which also calls their understanding of truth and fraud into question.

A Red-Pilled Experience: Hunting for "Legitimate" Evidence

As shown by Shanghuang's self-statement, the most frequently mentioned word by tongqi, is evidence. "Evidence," under the context of tongqi, refers to digitally-recorded materials that display their husbands' "true" sexual orientation. Therefore, interrogating how evidence operates and mobilizes tongqi's identity is critical in understanding how tongqi establish their identity.

This word evidence has a strong judicial and scientific undertone. Evidence is written as "zheng ju (证据)" in Chinese, where "zheng/证" suggests the action of 'using facts to show or determine' and 'ju/据' suggests "things that could be used as proof." Sharing a similar meaning with the word "evidence" in English, "zheng ju" is defined as the basis to determine facts and materials used to prove¹. Different from the word "zheng ming (证明)," defined as the basis of truth, a word that is used interchangeably with "zheng ju" in people's everyday conversation, "zheng ju" is specifically applied during judicial proceedings. It refers to the material items collected by the investigators that ascertain the truth of any alleged matter. Tongqi's adherence to the word choice of "zheng ju" instead of "zheng ming" already indicated their belief that their "evidence" articulates the best truth of gayness and tongqi that cannot be challenged.

Weifeng has a semi-formalized procedure to admit the new members to its group and only admits those who "pass" verification tests into private chat rooms, which produces rich

¹ Definition provided by Contemporary Chinese dictionary

narratives of how the identity of tongqi and tongfu are formed and authenticated. Qiangmei, the founder of Weifeng, explained that such a test aims to filter out those who fake a tongqi or tongfu identity to enter the group chats to obtain free legal resources. This chat room usually contains three tongqi leaders who would conduct an initial screening with new members, where they will be asked a series of questions about their marriage, specifically how they discover their husband's sexual orientation and whether they have evidence.

Evidence comes in various forms. Yet, not all "evidence" is recognized as "legitimate" and able to authenticate a tongqi identity fully. The most legitimate evidence is the one that graphically displays their partners' romantic and erotic same-sex engagement, such as self-pornographic videos, exchanged pictures of male genitals, and text messages that are blatantly romantic and sexual. Not many new members are prepared with legitimate evidence. They are still in the phase of suspicion and have not had their red pill moment yet. While those who can provide a somewhat legitimate form of evidence will be automatically admitted to the group, those who do not have any evidence will be evaluated by their willingness to look for more evidence and the amount of mental distress displayed on their face. Therefore, such a screening will have to be conducted through FaceTime, where they can see the face or hear the voice of the person to ensure their "truthfulness." Qiangmei explains the cruciality of FaceTime is not only to verify applicants' gender identity but present emotions. To Qiangmei and many others, a "real" tongqi and tongfu, especially those who recently just discovered their husbands' extramarital affairs, experience extraordinary mental distress. The visible mental breakdown also serves as one of the first pieces of evidence that contributes to the authenticity of tongqi identity.

After the verification room, tongqi leaders will allocate different individuals to different chat rooms that offer appropriate services based on their needs, where the notion of evidence is a

consistent theme. No matter whether new members possess legitimate evidence at the time, they will be told by tongqi leaders to keep looking for more evidence. There are many online tongqi-led workshops that instruct new members to find authentic evidence. A standard procedure to obtain authentic evidence often includes an investigation of husbands' smartphones, including messages, emails, photo albums, mobile applications, and browsing history, through which they might be able to find their secondary social media accounts.

If the new members and their husbands belong to a younger generation, the tongqi leaders will also instruct them to look for their spouses' active profiles on BlueD, the most prominent Chinese same-sex social media platform. Similar to Grindr, BlueD is a geosocial dating networking application where many users explicitly seek erotic encounters. Most of the users' profiles are entirely public, containing nudity and caption indicating their intention of looking for hookups. When browsing BlueD, other users' profiles are often marked by a distance in kilometers that shows how far the users are to one's own profile. The GPS mapping function helps filter potential matches by proximity, with the aim of expediting localized physical encounters through online introductions (Bitterman and Hess 2021). There is no barrier to create an account on BlueD. Even tongqi themselves can create one if they want to "investigate" their husbands. Because the networking application is location-based, it is normal for these women to find their husbands' accounts right away after registering. The application itself will automatically "suggest" profiles that are closest to their geographic location.

If new members fail to find any clue via social media and smartphone applications, usually those who are older, that both their husbands and them are not active media users, tongqi volunteers will instruct them to place hidden voice recorders or placing hidden surveillance cameras at home to capture the potential homoerotic moments of their partners.

Less legitimate evidence includes images and text messages that fail to yield a “clear” and “unambiguous” message that graphically reveals their husbands’ romantic and erotic same-sex engagement. For instance, during one online public event, one woman called in the livestream. She was uncertain about her identity since all she had was a selfie of her husband with another man. The tongqi who was hosting the online event decided that the picture was too ambiguous since it was taken in a public restaurant, and they did not sit “physically close enough.”

Shown by Shanghuang’s narratives, the authentic red-pilled experience of tongqi also includes liberation from a “fraudulent” marriage, where evidence plays a critical role in assisting tongqi in their divorce. There are chat rooms that specifically assist members in filing a divorce. They often include a volunteer attorney who helps answer general legal questions and some tongqi leaders who offer additional support. Due to the traditional gender script that confines women’s roles to the domestic sphere (Davis 2014) and the gender inequality in the labor market, women are generally financially disadvantaged in divorce cases and have a lower chance of obtaining full custody (Ibid.). Adultery is considered as a fault-based ground for divorce in China. Nevertheless, because same-sex acts are not legally recognized by Chinese laws (Hinderbrant 2011), it is especially challenging for tongqi to argue for a fault divorce and receive fair compensation despite that many of them possess a handful of evidence of their spouses’ extramarital affairs. Additionally, unilateral divorce is extremely time-consuming, and marriage could take years to dissolve even if they stem from active domestic violence (Michelson 2019). As complained by many tongqi, the obstacles associated with getting a timely divorce significantly hinder their ability to enter new relationships and marriage.

Because of the challenging divorce procedure, the volunteer attorney often ends their consultation by advising tongqi to privately negotiate a deal with their husbands and file for an uncontested divorce through the Civil Affairs Bureau rather than courts. Afterward, a tongqi leader would take charge of the conversation, instructing new members to use “evidence” strategically to reach a favorable divorce deal, which is essentially blackmailing their husbands using the digital-recorded evidence. To use evidence as a strategy to divorce also explains why tongqi prefer more graphic evidence. Liangliang’s ex-husband initially refused to divorce till she presented him with all the images she found through his secondary social media account, which blatantly display his long love relationship with one of his male classmates. Since he is a registered member of the Chinese Communist Party, she threatened him that if he refused to divorce, she would expose these images to the local Party Committee. Many other tongqi use similar strategies to negotiate divisions of property and custody arrangements that work in their favor. Such an act of blackmailing is ethically challenging and could be extremely detrimental to their husbands’ livelihood considering the cultural and political stigmas associated with same-sex practice in contemporary China. As this thesis will discuss later, tongqi’s authenticity appeals to a politics of recognition that oftentimes perpetuates social discrimination.

Even after tongqi successfully divorced, there are chat rooms for divorced tongqi who want to stay in the organization to maintain the precious connections they have made throughout their red-pilled experience. Many of these chat room members become tongqi volunteers. While all these women are no longer wives of their so-called gay husbands, by helping new members collect evidence, interacting with other tongqi, and sometimes, even revisiting the digitally-recorded evidence they captured, these divorced tongqi members preserve their identity through their constant re-engagement with evidence and other members. As the next portion of this

section will explore, the continuation of their identity after divorce suggests that a gay identity is not the defining element in constituting their identity and calls tongqi's perception towards an authentic gay identity into question.

An "Authentic" Gay Identity: A Constructed Tongqi Reality

During a conversation among a group of tongqi, the tongqi identity of one woman, Xiaoxiao, was questioned by others. Xiaoxiao, who self-identifies as a tongqi and is still married, indicated she had little sexual intercourse with her husband for two years after their daughter was born. She even confronted her husband about his sexuality and her husband did not deny her assumption. Her husband "goes out to work in the morning and comes back on time after work. If the daughter misses him, he will come back even earlier. He will take her and her daughter to any social event he is invited to." She acknowledged that according to her husband's routine, she did not think her husband had any affairs, which made it pointless for her to obtain evidence. Her self-identification as tongqi is based on her lack of sex life and his acknowledgment of his gay identity. However, the rest of tongqi, overlooking her husband's self-identification, discounted her legitimacy as a tongqi by telling her that her husband most likely had sexual dysfunction. They even jokingly questioned her why she was in the group with them.

Tongqi's insistence on obtaining legitimate evidence suggests that, in their eyes, an authentic tongqi identity stems from an authentic gay identity. At first glance, such a quest for legitimate evidence may make sense: how can their husbands not be gay, or at least, be gay at some level if there is graphic documentation that displays their active engagement in homoerotic activities? However, a case like Xiaoxiao's calls tongqi's definition of an authentic gay identity into question. Tongqi's search for authentic gay identity embodies neither tongqi's rigorous comprehension of sexuality nor their attempt to cultivate an understanding of sexual and gender

diversity. Shown by their evidence obtainment process, the authentication of a gay identity is inherently processual dynamically shaped by tongqi's interactivity of interpretation. Therefore, as Sarah Banet-Wiser (2012) emphasizes, it is critical to interrogate how authenticity operates rather than the exact definition of authenticity. That is, "how, and in what ways, the concept of authenticity remains central to how individuals organize their everyday activities and craft their very selves (2012: 10)."

To begin with, it is important to recognize the paradoxical nature of the term "authenticity." The term authenticity gained its traction and came to replace the word "sincerity" in the late eighteenth century due to a shifting philosophical ideal that was gradually characterized by a valorization of individualism and selfhood (Trilling 1972). While sincerity marks one's ability to act genuinely to others, advocates for authenticity interpret "sincerity" as performative and artificial, contending that truthfulness comes from the shrinking distance between the inner self and the public image one presents (Laceulle 2018). Sincerity is also associated with conformity. On the contrary, authenticity breaks conventionality and highlights one's uniqueness (Taylor 1992). Authenticity highlights one's authorship over one's desire and fate. This has led to a new understanding of the self that conceptualizes one's identity as a result of a natural and undisrupted self-discovery that is not determined by others (Ibid.). Authenticity also has become a moral virtue: One cannot be true to others without being true to oneself. Embedded in the liberation of one's decisions and acts from manipulation and deliberation that are often thought to be the cause of dishonesty and fraud, such a moral principle is used to evaluate the legitimacy of one's claims (Varga and Guignon 2020).

While it is easy to say "be true to yourself," such a taken-for-granted inspirational quote becomes obscure when a question arises as to what should be fathomed as humanity's "true" self?

Geoff Shullenberger (2021) points out that, on the one hand, taking the red pill alludes to an act committed by the socially marginalized to challenge one's fabricated surroundings and open up oneself to the counterintuitive "truths." On the other hand, anyone can claim the status of the red-pilled. Because of the absence of the third party that possesses the absolute objective power to decide what is correct, the position of "the fabricated fraud" and "the authentic truth" are interchangeable. One cannot acquire an authentic status, or in other words, be authenticated, without others' recognition (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2021). Charles Taylor argues that identity cannot be created in isolation but is constructed through "dialogue, partly overt, partial internal with others." Moreover, tongqi are situated in the twenty-first century, a highly digitalized world, where the creation of artificial products is only one click away. Present-day searches for an authentic self are exemplified by the rise of online vlog culture. Such a culture generates million-dollar revenue by selling YouTubers' so-called mundane real-life daily routines that are heavily modified by body shape editor apps and deliberately performed (Morris and Anderson 2015). How to explain such a seemingly counterintuitive quest for authenticity in an increasingly technologized society that is characterized by artificiality?

In response to these questions, many contemporary scholars have argued that authenticity is inherently performative and manufactured by interactivity between humans and digital materials. As Patrick Jagoda (2020) critiques, the twenty-first-century digital media is not what Guy Debord (1967) once called *spectacle* that theorizes media as a mere mediation of social relationships and highlights a separation between people and material presentation. Instead, twenty-first-century digital technology is characterized by hyper-interactivity that supplement daily meaning-making with a variety of materialized forms of interactive practices such as "modding, remixing, content creation, and networked relations with other users (2020, 15)." As

digital technology invites people into a milieu of constant engagement, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2021) conceptualizes “authenticity” as a set of rules that mold participants who can continue framing their life around a rhetoric of authenticity. As Chun elaborates, in the case of recommendation systems in social media, the function of algorithms seemingly is to capture users’ behavioral patterns by analyzing their unconscious day-to-day actions, and then suggest individuals content that matches their genuine interest. However, such an algorithm, in fact, intentionally restricts users’ choices by only offering them limited options based on the past activities and activities of people who live nearby. Such a confined recommendation list simultaneously impacts users’ “preference” and shapes users’ future behaviors (Chun, in press 2021 MIT Press). In other words, algorithmic authenticity is co-constituted, mandated by the relations between humans and humans and between humans and machines.

Moreover, one cannot authenticate, or in other words, be organized by a set of rules without being visible to others. Twenty-first-century quest for authenticity values “behavioral transparency” (Ibid., 241). Yet, such transparency, as shown by the example of the recommendation system, is not a natural attribute. Instead, it refers to a series of deliberate actions that make things appear to be obvious and transparent through dramatic performances (Ibid.) while maintaining a visceral sense of realness. Chun places twenty-first-century authenticity in a dialect with the plurality of self-identity in a technologically networked world. The emergence of the so-called true self is collaborative manufacture by a mediated recognition of others that simultaneously and dynamically inform our actions, visions, modes of thinking, and feelings of realness. The “ultimate reality” that seems to be “organically” found by the red-pilled is a usually “authoritative account” constructed by the red-pilled themselves. Such a constructed account “replaces the orthodox one and offers a manner of suturing reality back

together - a process often reinforced by a newfound sense of being a member of enlightened few who have walked the same path (Ibid, 7).” While fraud refers to deliberative actions that hide the truth through fabrication in order to lead others to believe certain values or commit certain acts, such a meaning behind fraud is essentially the very definition of authenticity.

Since authenticity is a self-contrasting word, tongqi’s perspectives on authentic gay and tongqi identity are characterized by inconsistencies and contradictions. On the one hand, as elaborated in the introduction, since tongqi consider their marriage as a fraud committed by their husbands who trick them into marriage and make them into tongqi, their marriage fraud rhetoric assumes that a gay identity is the only cause of their struggles. Based on their logic centralizing their husband’s sexual orientation, once a woman is married to a gay man, she automatically becomes tongqi. Nevertheless, their rejection of self-identified tongqi like Xiaoxiao also reveals that their husbands’ self-identification is not the critical component that constitutes their identity and experience. Moreover, while tongqi are deeply bothered by their husbands’ real “hidden” sexual identity, indicated by their narratives, many of tongqi’s husbands are not secretive about their same-sex desires at all as they are living a dual-life on BlueD, an entire public media app that not only renders tremendous visibility to their same-sex engagement but functions as a map that actively leads tongqi to witness. Yet, tongqi’s continuous dissatisfaction with “visibility” rendered by these apps indicates that “transparency” is not about their ability to see but their capacity to interpret and interact. Tongqi’s experience expands from initial suspicion to a preliminary investigation, from an initial connection with the online tongqi community to a journey traveling from chat rooms to chat rooms, from a married new member to a divorced tongqi volunteer. Such a process is procedural, interactive, and increasingly networked. Missing one critical step could lead to the failure of becoming a real tongqi regardless of their husband’s

sexual orientation, suggesting that they themselves are the central participants in their red-pilled experience to become tongqi.

The reason why Xiaoxiao fails to attain an authentic tongqi status is not that her husband is not gay enough. Instead, it is because her lack of evidence and interest in looking for evidence prevents her from participating in certain patterns of techno-engagement, resulting in her different understanding of gay and tongqi from others. While Xiaoxiao shows her deep trust in her husband's self-testimony and his love for her and her daughter despite the lack of marital sex, authentic tongqi, through their way of interacting with evidence, would totally deny the possibility that their husbands could have ever loved and cared about them. They view gay identity as biologically determined and unchangeable. In the case of an authentic tongqi, Liangliang, even after she confronted her husband with evidence, he denied a gay and bisexual identity. Instead, he insisted that he was genuinely attracted to her and wanted a second chance for their marriage. In her perspective, his testimonies are complete lies that he has always been gay, thus, incapable of love. To prove her point, she showed me an album of screenshots of her ex-husbands' intimate pictures with his same-sex partner that she collected on his secondary social media. During the interview, she zoomed in on every picture and dragged her phone screen slowly to display every single detail from her husband's facial expressions to gestures: "How would anyone believe his lie? How dare he say that he had loved me before while taking these kinds of pictures with his boyfriend? Disgusting *jilao*² deceiving women like me into marriage!" The saved screenshots allow Liangliang to review the pictures again and again. The dramatic visuals that forever freezes romantic moments of his two-day romantic excursion have consumed all her attention and gradually become the only component that defines her experience with him regardless of their two years of relationship. As also indicated

² A slur in Chinese to describe gay men

by Shanghuang's self-statement, although her husband had always been a good father and a good husband, the short audio she obtained that documented her husband same-sex engagement completely repudiates their twenty years of face-to-face interactions. It crystalizes all their ups and downs in their twenty-year marriage into one explanation: the marriage is fraudulent.

Consequently, through the relentless engagement of material content conveying indexical signs of same-sex desires, they developed an understanding of gay identity that sees it as permanent and binary. Such an understanding further supports their marriage fraud rhetoric against their husbands. It is worth mentioning that by the time my interviews with Liangliang and Shanghuang took place, they both had already divorced their "gay" husbands for a long time. However, like many other women in the divorced tongqi's chat room, they still identify themselves as tongqi and stay in the organization as volunteers. The continuation of their identification serves as another example of the significant role that their constant interactions with digitally-documented information and other tongqi plays in sustaining their gaze and preserving their identity rather than their husbands' queerness. The captured evidence conveys a notion of "apparent transparency" and "immediate recognizability" through pronounced eroticness. It creates a visceral feeling of realness, contrasting their husbands' "deliberative" and "performative" in-person speech and actions. However, as both Edouard Glissant (1997) and Marilyn Srathern (2000) contend, visibility animates a process of concealment. While digital technology visibilizes same-sex desires more than ever, their evidence is also confined by temporality. It keeps gender and sexual fluidity from tongqi's sight and eventually outputs a convenient singular reality that could be explained by straight/gay dichotomy.

Individual member's perceptions towards authentic gay and tongqi identity are also significantly influenced by others. Liangliang reports that in the evidence-obtainment chat room,

some new members would attempt to exonerate their husbands and want to give them a second chance by reminiscing the good times they had and speculating a possibility for their husbands to be bisexual. To help these new members to accept their tongqi identity, or in other words, to accept binary gay identity as “normative” knowledge, she would guide these women to review their evidence together repeatedly and encourage them to look for more. As Shanghuang confidently states: “Evidence helps you to finally give up your husband along the way looking for evidence!” Through countless online workshops that facilitate conversations among tongqi and interactivity between tongqi and evidence, many new members are eventually convinced that bisexuality does not exist: their husbands were born to be gay, deceiving them into marriage.

To reiterate, many tongqi were like Xiaoxiao who entered the organization as a new member with no evidence. Since the decision to admit a new member or not is often evaluated by individual tongqi leaders’ subjective judgements, whether those newcomers pass or fail the verification test also depends on interactive factors. Sometimes, tongqi leaders would admit those with no evidence but present stories that are personally relatable to theirs. Some new members were admitted because they presented extraordinary distress during the initial FaceTime screening, including an uncontrollable breakdown of tears and a loss of voice. Anger, sadness, outrage, and fear, emotions generally perceived as irrational and undesirable, are now conceived as desirable reactions rendering visibility and immediate recognizability to individual tongqi. The initial FaceTime screening that hunts for new members’ aggressive reactions is another example that highlights the irrationality of tongqi’s perceived rational world.

There are also cases where tongqi could not find any legitimate evidence but were allowed to remain in the group because of their expressed willingness in searching for evidence. Ironically, Xiaoxiao’s husband is among the very few tongqi’s husbands who actually identify

themselves as gay. While Xiaoxiao's membership is denied, there are also women who neither have found evidence nor received a verbal confirmation from their husbands becoming one of the key tongqi leaders. This is because they have shown a great dedication in looking for evidence, spent a great time interacting with other tongqi and their evidence, and transgressing from chat rooms to chat rooms. The admission of those tongqi highlights the superiority of what the idea of evidence, transparency, and recognizability mobilizes over what their husbands have done in authenticating a tongqi's identity.

In contrast to tongqi's own understanding, the authentic gay identity is not the priori condition that calls tongqi into being. It is produced by tongqi's operational practices that are informed by the visual and networking effects of digital technology. An authentic binary gay identity is constituted and consumed by tongqi to sustain their identity development. While tongqi consider themselves as the moral being who stay true to themselves and demonize their husbands as the immoral ones who fabricated a heteronormative marriage to fulfill their manhood, tongqi fail to realize that their "objective" truth that strictly links same-sex desires to biological incapability to love and care about women is also a manufactured product. In other words, tongqi's self-identification rooted in their accusation of "gay fraud" is equally fraudulent, as it is deliberately scripted and performed.

As Adrain Mackenzie (2002) emphasizes, even what is perceived as the last episode of a series of transformations is not inert but subject to contingency and continuous transformation. Thus, it is important to recognize that tongqi's manufacturing process is always in the making as different tongqi contribute their own interactivity of interpretation that continuously informs understanding of who authentic tongqi and gay are. As I am writing this thesis, a new chat room got invented containing self-identified gay volunteers who claim that they have accurate "gaydar"

that could detect gayness by only looking at pictures of tongqi's husbands'. These gay men volunteers are brought by some tongqi who claimed that it were their gay friends who helped recognize their husbands' gayness. These chat rooms are designed to help new members who struggle to find legitimate evidence. These gay men volunteers help evaluate how gay their husbands are in terms of how trimmed their eyebrows are, the way they smile and even their hand gestures. The creation of these rooms once again reveals that tongqi have simultaneously become the subject, the object and the spectator of the ongoing construction of authenticity. Moreover, this new perspective on gayness grounded in physiognomy once again tells a story of visibility in crisis. Tongqi's ongoing problematic practices that reinforce bio-essentialism and binarism is the result of their politics of recognition, as the later section will elaborate.

Politics of Recognition: The Red Pill Will Not Set Us Free

We are definitely different from other straight women whose husbands cheat on women. We were never loved by our husbands, so we experience more pain. A straight man would have at least treated you well at some point, but a gay man would not. We are in so much pain. We experience a different kind of pain that is worse.

This was Qiangmei's response to the question asked by an anonymous audience about the difference between tongqi and other women whose husbands have cheated with women during one of their weekly events on Douyin. Her reply was applauded by many tongqi audiences who sent thumbs-up emojis, virtual tokens and affirming comments³ to the broadcaster. Tongqi viewers also sent supportive comments such as, "Yes, big sister, you are so right!" "Yes, we are different. We have it so much worse!"

Shown by this scene, tongqi's online activism demands public acceptance, protection, and recognition of their identity and emphasizes their distinctness from other women. Their movement embodies what Charles Taylor (1992) theorizes as "the politics of recognition." The

³ On Douyin, audiences who join the live stream can engage with the broadcaster in real time in various ways, which include sending emojis, comments, and virtual tokens that are often purchased with real money.

rationale of a politics of recognition is to empower those historically underprivileged identities by influencing the public perception towards them. As Taylor and many other contemporary theorists also point out, the politics of recognition risks essentializing a binary understanding of identity and reinforcing the existing hierarchical relations (Brown 1995; Snyder 2012).

Recognition is relational (Chun, in press 2021 MIT Press). To recognize is not a pure act of seeing but is doing the work of differentiating one from the other and, thus, solidifying boundaries between two subjects. It is also influenced by one's preexisting beliefs about what an authentic identity ought to look like. As a result, the politics of recognition inevitably commits the act of exclusion and discrimination by constantly filtering out those who do not fit the hegemonic description and reinforce stereotypes that are products of existing social inequity (Snyder 2012; Butler 1999).

In addition, as discussed in the previous section, authenticity serves as the basis for recognition (Chun, in press 2021 MIT Press). However, authenticity is neither objective nor morally infallible. Correspondingly, recognition does not invent a new reality that displaces existing systems but leads to a scenario "that mimics.... the totalitarian world view, in which the visible world is dismissed as fictitious, in favor of a 'hidden' authentic university natural and historic laws (Ibid., 76)." In other words, to recognize embodies an attempt to separate one from the dominant ideology. Yet, without creating a new ideology that challenges the existing mainstream, recognition enables "misreading" and "misidentification." It establishes a delusional effect making one believe that current reality is challenged while, in fact, perpetrated.

An example of the harmful result of the new politics of recognition and the red pill metaphor is the surge of the far-right online subculture, *incels* (Valkenburgh 2021; Brzuszkiewicz 2020). Incels, the portmanteau of "involuntary celibates," is an online population

that believes the world is dominated by women and attractive men. They identify themselves as a group of men who are never able to engage in romantic and sexual relations with women because of what they perceived as “permanent conditions” that make them undesirable (Chun, in press 2021 MIT Press; Brzuszkiewicz 2020). These perceived conditions include short body height, feminine vertical forehead, and lack of body muscles, which are in contrast to dominant masculine traits possessed by those “alpha” men whom women are attracted to (Ibid.). On the one hand, incels take the red pill by isolating themselves from mainstream masculinity and consider themselves as both the victims and the enemies of widely-celebrated masculine traits. On the other hand, they simultaneously defend and reinforce these masculine types by situating themselves in opposition to the hegemonic masculine men so that they can become incels (O’Malley and Holt 2020).

Incels recognize their members as a unique group of the marginalized. Yet, they establish their uniqueness around a made-up list of characteristics that they deem as irrefutable and scientific truth. Through an internalization of lookism, inceldom reflects a radical form of nihilism. Since they perceive all the undesirable traits as genetically determined, they believe it is beyond their control to change their fate of being a loner (Brzuszkiewicz 2020). As a result, mobilized by such a worldview, they generalize women as those who “only look at the look, money, and status” (Ibid., 6), spread offensive and verbally violent comments against women online, and some of them are even radicalized to commit extreme violence, such as the mass shooting that took place in Isla Vista. The incel shooter considered himself a victim of women and sought revenge against them since women are responsible for his own “inadequacies” (Scaptura and Boyle 2020).

Recognizing Tongqi: Separation, Discrimination and Legitimizing Traditional Gender Script

Tongqi, as women, are indeed socially marginalized, subject to systemic gender inequity. Their online movement that offers women legal and emotional resources indeed addresses women's struggles and needs. Nevertheless, because of their obsession with categorization and differences, the pitfall of their movement is the production of an essentialized understanding of tongqi and gay identity, which fuels separation and discrimination. Like the one of incels, the social recognition of tongqi did not set them free. Instead, it fosters and mobilizes hate against others and themselves.

The identity recognition of tongqi is based on a misrecognition of same-sex sexuality. Tongqi's movement that continuously markets such a mis-conceptualized same-sex identity to the public exacerbates the discrimination against the LGBTQ folks in China. The stabilization of a tongqi identity comes from a conceptualized binary gay identity enabled by digital technologies that create a visceral sense of fixation. As discussed, digital preservation of evidence makes gayness appear visually permanent, so that tongqi begin adopting a bio-essentialist understanding of gay identity, believing one's sexual orientation is determined at birth and unchangeable throughout one's life. Such an understanding negates any possibility that their husbands could have ever been attracted to them and further supports marriage fraud claims, worsening tongqi's hatred towards the gay community in China. Bio-essentialist understanding also fosters conspiracy theories among tongqi groups about how dishonesty and same-sex attraction is genetically connected to homosexuality and could be passed on to their offsprings. The recognition of tongqi then is rooted in an acknowledgment of the gays' moral wrongdoing and the erasure of gender and sexual diversity. While such a conceptualized gayness is an exclusive product of tongqi's techno-interactivity, it is now marketed outside the tongqi community as normative knowledge through their online public events. It even is internalized by

the Chinese LGBTQ community. For instance, PFLAG China⁴ have consistently published short films that aim to persuade its gay members not ever to get married. These videos also go hand in hand with some women group's petition letters written in a strong eugenical tone that ask the government to legally ban gay men from marrying, which further perpetuates the idea that gays are the problem.

Privileging a particular interpretation of tongqi identity problematically imposes a hierarchy of legitimacy, producing a divide between tongqi and other women. The standard to grade the legitimacy of evidence and a series of mechanisms to test new members' authenticity constantly filter many out of the tongqi community. Many of these excluded women are as helpless as tongqi who have long suffered from the unfair distribution of financial and social resources in China, hoping to acquire resources in a woman-led organization. Since recognition is relational, tongqi's desire to be recognized as a unique group solidifies a hard boundary between tongqi and other women, which leads to an erasure of certain narratives of struggles. It is interesting when asked if they would give their husbands a second chance if they were to find out that their husbands were cheating with women, all the tongqi I interviewed gave me a positive answer by explaining that at least, in that case, their husbands could love them sincerely. Their responses show their over-romanticization of straight men assuming that all heteronormative marriages are united by the ideal pack of marriage-love-sex while marriage in China is widely celebrated as a social institution that protects familial bloodline and capitals (Zhu 2017). Shown in the opening scene, by constantly emphasizing that they "have it much worse," tongqi's identity thrives on romanticizing the husbands and marriage of other women. Tongqi's authenticating process creates a feeling of realness that makes their struggles seem to

⁴ PFLAG China is one of the largest and most influential LGBT organizations in China that serves and supports LGBT individuals, their parents, and supporters.

be objectively proven to be worse than others'. This further enables a misrecognition of their enemies: instead of challenging patriarchy, tongqi view other women as the competitors for social attention and public resources. What such a divide sacrifices is the possibility to unite all women in China to enact broader and more systemic changes.

Moreover, tongqi's politics of recognition continue positioning themselves as the objects of male representation. Swallowing the red pill to accept their identity as tongqi, making the hard decision to end the marriage with their "gay" husbands, and overcoming the stigmas associated with divorced women and single mothers, many tongqi describe themselves as the advocates of women's independence and freedom. While tongqi's efforts to gain public resources for underprivileged women through social recognition cannot be undermined, as mentioned in the last section, divorce does not terminate their identity. The preservation of evidence continues their life as gays' wives, leaving them as a by-product of their ex-husbands' perceived identity. The defining time for many tongqi to forfeit their identity is when they enter the next marriage, where they could then become the wives of someone else.

Other men might not want me because they would think that it was me doing something wrong in my previous marriage that led to a divorce. Yet, I was such a great wife: I made him (ex-husband) dinner, washed his clothes and prepared his bed. I did nothing wrong!...I need evidence to prove to my next boyfriend that I would still be a good wife. Displayed by her testimony, as Liangliang continues finding digital evidence powerful that ends her tongqi identity and leads her to a brand new life, she fails to realize that such a termination is only temporary and partial. In this case, her visual evidence, the so-called "powerful" tool that materializes her identity and seemingly grants her control over her husband, simultaneously rearranges her role from what she perceives as the privileged subjects to the viewed objects of men. Tongqi's seemingly liberating advocacy to divorce does not help them become an independent woman but simply stabilizes their identification as "wives" if it is not gay's wives.

Tongfu in a Direct Dialect with Incels: Online Misogyny, Hate Speech, and Violent Incitement

It is a good moment to reflect on tongfu, who are understood as the husbands of the Chinese lesbians. Compared to tongqi, the tongfu community is much smaller in size and way less active in social media activism. Tongqi often ascribe such a lack of tongfu online population to their privileged gender status as men, which makes them less in need of public assistance. Yet, knowing that tongfu do not bear the same financial, social, and legal struggles, tongqi leaders still actively recruit tongfu to, in their words, show their solidarity with their supposedly corresponding group. After two years, Weifeng finally gathered about 15 tongfu-identified members. They have their own online chat room separated from tongqi's. Although tongqi's identity acquisition and recognition process already exhibited a somewhat similar pattern as the ones of incels, the ones of tongfu share an even more dangerous similarity in terms of their violent rhetoric against women. The radicalized milieu fed by tongfu's misogynistic speech and violent incitement is also a result of tongqi's politics of recognition.

Weifeng's online recruitment of tongfu contradicts the one of tongqi, which further shows that the notion of homosexuality is strategically produced and consumed by tongqi to establish their social status. Unlike tongqi whose membership is evaluated by the relatively strict standards, tongfu join the group with low barriers. No tongfu possesses legitimate evidence or shows interest in looking for evidence. They identify as tongfu mainly because of their wives' active refusal to have sex with them. Through an online keyword search of a sexless marriage, they found the tongqi community and became convinced that their wives are lesbians. Qiangmei explains her decision of still acknowledging these tongfu's identity by highlighting tongfu's challenges to find evidence: "When a man holds hand with another man, he is gay. But when a

woman holds hands with another woman or sleeps on the same bed with another woman, you do not know.” While tongqi centralizes the role of digital materialization of same-sex desires in authenticating a gay and tongqi identity, they contradict themselves in their acceptance of these tongfu. Such a decision ironically implies their acknowledgment that one’s same-sex identity is not consequently determined by one’s documented actions. In this case, tongqi’s understanding of homosexuality is inconsistent and transforms situationally. Their urge to look for tongfu members is rooted in their desire to solidify their identity and social legitimacy since if gays and lesbians both exist, how will it make sense if there are only tongqi but not tongfu? Tongfu, tongqi’s corresponding group, has to exist in order to complete an authentic tongqi reality.

Tongqi’s intention of creating tongfu’s online chat room was to create a space for these men who have experienced sexual frustration in their marriage to support each other emotionally. However, this group chat soon is filled with narratives of victimhood, misogyny, and homophobia. Implied by tongfu’s self narration, most of their wives have given these tongfu clear reasons why they do not want to have sex, which include their own sexual frustration, diagnosed health conditions, and a change in religious belief. However, since tongfu are supposed to be the corresponding group of tongqi, they simply take the narratives established by tongqi for granted. Similar to tongqi, after joining the group, tongfu undergo a red-pilled experience, “realizing” that their wives’ explanations are all lies and they are tricked by lesbians who disguise themselves as straight women, even though none of their wives identify as lesbians. The belief that they are frauded by lesbians instigates their hatred towards their wives. They often describe their wives as disgusting, perverted, and useless because of their inability to provide them with satisfactory sex. Beyond the private group chat, tongfu’s online public forum on Baidu Tieba is fed with even more violent language and sentiments. An anonymous user

posted a complaint about his sexless marriage while expressing uncertainty about his tongfu identity. Some other users soon confirmed his identity as a tongfu and imposed a false belief that a woman would only refuse sex if she were a lesbian. Some users even commented “kill her” and “rape her and her girlfriend.” Justifying their extremely violent language, they claimed that tongfu are the real victims since men are treated as cash cows by women and, unlike tongqi, they are more constrained in voicing their struggles because of a masculine culture that stigmatizes weak men. Moreover, tongfu’s posts collectively imply a sense of relief that their physical ability is finally “proven” not accountable for their wives’ disinterest in sex. Granting their wives a lesbian title helps rejuvenate their masculinity.

To reiterate, tongfu’s acquisition of their identity and social recognition stems from their active exchange with tongqi’s established online network. Some are inspired by the tongqi’s stories while others are directly recruited by tongqi. Although Weifeng’s tongqi members also find the tongfu's chat disturbing, they are still actively recruiting, or in other words, manufacturing tongfu members to strengthen tongqi’s social recognition. Despite the small size of the existing tongfu public forum that contains around only ten thousand followers, the gradually growing size of this forum filled with misogynistic incitements and female objectification is still concerning considering the high rate of domestic violence against women in China and the lack of effective provision to restrain abuse (Qi et al. 2020). Tongqi’s activism once again reinforces gender hierarchy, ringing an alarming bell of the trajectory of their movement.

Conclusion: From the Right to Know to the Right to Opacity in the Digital World

At the end of my fieldwork, Qiangmei excitedly announced to me that she and other

tongqi leaders have created a new WeChat public account for Weifeng and invited me to follow. This account serves as the public digital archive of tongqi's stories and is a part of Weifeng's marketing efforts to recruit more members. As I clicked into the main page, the slogan at the very top of the page caught my eyes: "Prevent gay men from committing marriage fraud! Protect women's right to know!" The right to know, written as 知情权, is not explicitly mentioned in the Chinese Constitution or granted right to citizens. Although the meaning of "right to know" has a variety of complicated legal implications, tongqi's understanding of the right to know is more generalized that highlights the demand for universal access to information.

As shown by tongqi's narratives throughout the thesis, tongqi's authenticity stems from their desire to see and be seen, to know and be known. They crave the discovery of "hidden" information in a digital world that is defined by mass surveillance and information overflow, where the individuating process of tongqi bodies has become the very information they consume. Their tongqi identification is rooted in their avid pursuit of an authentic status, while such authenticity is neither objective nor coherent but a manufactured product of interactivity between their bodies and a changing socio-technical milieu. They yearn for unionization and social recognition while their authenticating process is empowered by a constant erasure of others and solidification of boundaries. Their obsession with authenticity and transparency, two self-contrasting concepts, drive their attention away from addressing a more pressing issue of systemic gender inequality to a mere frustration of not being able to know.

Therefore, instead of asserting their right to know, tongqi should adopt an alternative strategy by claiming their right to opacity (Glissant 1997), hence, to resist the attempt to know, categorize, and schematize. In Edouard Glissant's sense, the right to opacity is the "right to remain illegible to other groups (1997: 191)." Opacity can be conceptualized as the unconfined

in-between space between two materializing objects. In contrast to transparency and authenticity that mobilize movements of reduction, opacity is undefined, so it “cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence (191).” In other words, opacity animated by relationality and reciprocity is not singular but embraces multiplicity, relentlessly refuting totality and convenience. A group’s right to opacity prevents itself from being perceptible and subjugated to “the processes of commensuration” (194) that solidify boundaries among groups, excluding one from the others. Ultimately, Glissant contends that privileging opacity and treating poetic expression as the primary mode of communication allows more prosperity and new possibilities of resistance.

The embracement of opacity is not to quickly dismiss tongqi’s politics of recognition or encourage tongqi to forfeit their movement that indeed mobilizes countless women in China struggling with unhappy marriage and divorce. Embracing opacity, tongqi can acknowledge the duplicity of tongqi-ness by not only privileging one hegemonic narrative about what tongqi and gay should be but allow different versions to co-exist. In other words, opacity allows tongqi’s identification to stay vague. Vague-ness enables their services to be more inclusive. It breaks down the boundaries they once established with other women.

Opacity encourages a reconceptualization of tongqi identity. This thesis does not have a definite answer about what a transformation of tongqi’s perception to their identity should exactly be like but proposes several suggestions that tongqi civil society can follow while leaving these suggestions contested. The first suggestion is to circumvent the danger of identity politics by reclaiming the meaning of tongqi. One example that the tongqi civil society movement can possibly learn from is the contemporary Western feminist movement - not the feminist knowledge framework, but the way it is transforming. The early feminist movement was

grounded in a core value of gender, but that was extremely limiting and inefficient. Owing to black feminist thought, this movement is now transforming to a more intersectional one that encompasses issues with class, race, and power. As hooks well illustrates, “subject construction itself does not occur in discrete units.” As emphasized in this thesis, tongqi itself is not a discrete unit that is made solely through the bond of a gay identity but their constant interactions with others. They can still call themselves a tongqi without tying it to any specific definition of sexual identification, marriage, authenticity, and pattern of recognition.

Tongqi’s stories also show how twenty-first-century digital technology participates in the separation, subordination, and isolation of the marginalized group through relentless visualization and materialization (Chun 2009; Benjamin 2019). Tongqi’s stories are not in isolation with the U.S. law enforcement’s utilization of facial recognition that disproportionately misidentifies black criminals (McIlwain 2019) or white nationalists’ usage of genetic ancestry testing to “restore” a pure white identity, predicated on a genetic essentialist understanding of race (Panofsky 2019). All these human encounters with technology raise the question of how to claim the right to opacity in a digitalized world, where information has become more blatantly visible and yet temporary and discriminatory than ever. Echoing Ruha Benjamin’s argument in her famous piece *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, it is a pressing time to reimagine the “default settings” (2019, 195) of science and technology and appropriate them for liberatory ends. In other words, technology should not be conceptualized as the hegemonic tool that brings the view of the hidden but serves the supplemental materials that go along with human experiences. In the case of tongqi, instead of stressing the cruciality of evidence and taking the temporary symbols socialized by digital documentation for granted, they should begin questioning what they see and learn to look away. In other words, they should

privilege the thick descriptions of people's narratives and centralize the knowledge brought by their lived experiences.

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