Living with Censorship: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Chinese Gay Dating Apps
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Summary:
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This study examines booming gay dating app-based economies and diverse dating app-mediated same-sex sexual/intimate practices in China. Unlike their Western counterparts, such as Grindr and Jack’d, whose functionalities revolve around location-based browsing, Chinese gay dating apps Blued, Aloha, and ZANK frequently integrate new features into their basic dating structures. Examples of this include live streaming, gaming, shopping, and overseas surrogacy consultation. This makes Chinese gay dating apps function more like a multipurpose digital platform than a simple dating app. Focusing on the two prime functionalities of browsing and live streaming, this study chooses Blued as its primary case study because, with a user base of forty million, Blued is now the world’s largest gay dating platform. ZANK and Aloha are valuable points of comparison. Having failed to censor itself, ZANK was shut down by the Chinese government in 2018. For its part, Aloha has developed into a gay platform for middle class gay men, with the majority of its users living in China’s major cities. The two apps help illustrate the complex political economic context in which Chinese gay dating apps operate. This study draws on data gathered during two years of internet ethnographic research (January 2016 to January 2018), interviews with the founders and users of dating apps, and published webpages/reports. It combines political economic analyses of gay dating platforms’ development with cultural analyses of users’ dating activities and online erotic/intimate practices on live streaming. The main research questions are: how do businesses based on gay dating apps develop amid close state surveillance and how do users’ sexual and intimate desires shape and transform China’s digital gay economies and gay cultural politics?

I start with a paradox: why have China’s digital gay economies grown at an accelerating rate in a context of wide-reaching censorship? First, I contextualize governance on homosexuality in China from the establishment of People’s Republic of China in 1949 to the market reform of 1978. Having initially been treated as criminal misconduct and mental illness, today male homosexuality is more associated with pornography and obscenity in censorship. Contrary to the idea that censorship constrains China’s gay cultures, I argue that it actually presents Chinese gay dating apps with opportunities to create a space for development. In its actual implementation, censorship is open to a variety of interpretations, which allows for political/economic maneuverings. It has been argued that the dynamics of China’s
censorship regime have been “productive” for music productions (de Kloet, 2010),
“selective” in online criticism on the government (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013), and
“porous” when it comes to political information (Roberts, 2018). This study
contributes to this strand of scholarship by illustrating how censorship can be a
fertile ground on which gay economies and same-sex intimate practices in China
proliferate.

Based on the development of the censorship of homosexuality since the onset
of market reform, I divide censorship into two different yet interconnected parts:
that imposed on gay dating platforms and that to which users are subjected. To
develop, gay dating platforms must attain the status of legitimacy, as framed by
censorship. As the implementation of censorship is always changing according to
the political economic climate of the time, the negotiation of legitimacy must be
similarly dynamic. The permissible boundaries of Chinese gay dating platforms’
economic activity, therefore, are always shifting. I use this shifting background of
China’s political economies to illustrate why Blued and ZANK’s development
reached divergent outcomes in face of the same censorship regime. Business models
are another concern for censorship on gay dating platforms. Because censors tend to
conflate explicit sexual content with pornography and obscenity, I argue that the
monetization of sexually affective data, which is produced by users’ online
activities and intimate interactions facilitated by live streaming, has become
Chinese gay dating platforms’ major business model.

With regard to users, I foreground the ways in which their lived, felt, and
embodied experience of using gay dating apps give rise to a cultural world. More
specifically, I focus on how the same-sex sociality informed by users’ dating
activities, affective encounters among live streamers and viewers, and how gay live
streamers’ pursuit online fame by fostering an erotic reputation all transform
Chinese gay male subjectivities. Taking users’ sexual/intimate practices as the
primary object of analysis, this study does not attain to power relations articulated
through identities and discourses. Bodily practices and sensual qualities of sexuality
help examine “how sexuality was embedded in social relations and meanings, and,
therefore, how sexuality was related to processes of social transformation.” (Spronk,
2014, p.7). In this spirit, I show, first, how users’ physical traits, personalities, and
looks become datafied and how these data articulate users’ sexual desires and dating
activities. Second, I emphasize how the consumption of virtual gifts sustains and
amplifies the intimacy felt by viewers and how money becomes an essential
element of intimacy as mediated by live streaming. And third, I argue that the
negative feelings induced by the widespread shaming of live streamers’ erotic
reputation become a transformative force that reconfigures gay male subjectivities
in China. Through these three emphases, this study shifts the focus of China’s gay
cultural politics from identity formation, community organization, and media (mis)representation to the everyday sexual/emotional desires and personal/bodily performance afforded by gay digital platforms.

Chapter 1 conducts a comparative analysis of Blued and ZANK. It illustrates how censorship has shaped and transformed the political economic landscape of homosexuality over the past two decades, and how gay businesses and gay politics have become increasingly conflated in the process. I show that Blued and ZANK operate their businesses in different ways, particularly in how they relate to the government. Whereas Blued constantly adapted itself to government policies, ZANK distanced itself from the government. In the case of Blued, I show how China’s digital gay politics has been constructed on the basis of political equality, a rejection of discrimination against sufferers of HIV/AIDS, and the economic visibility of gay consumer culture. In the case of Blued, political resources accumulated from government-funded HIV/AIDS projects intertwined with economic development. ZANK, in contrast, became simultaneously detached and involved in politics. On the one hand, ZANK distanced itself from government engagement in the areas of HIV/AIDS and internet security. On the other hand, it aimed to stimulate consumption via gay identity politics. ZANK’s fall reveals that adherence to censorship alone cannot shield gay dating apps from political interference. As Blued demonstrates, gay dating apps have to be flexible, adapting to authoritarian rules in exchange for additional security. Overall, this Chapter provides a critical perspective on Chinese gay politics beyond activism.

Chapter 2 turns to the analysis of Blued users. It investigates how users cope with censorship of homosexuality in their online dating lives. Early homosexual internet users quantified themselves into sequences of numbers. This chapter sheds light on how Blued extends this tendency by boiling down same-sex sexual/emotional desires into data points represented by numbers, tags, and labels. For Blued browsing, gay men are datafied with numbers and tags for users to sort and filter. For Blued live, gay men are evaluated by the yanzi (颜值) algorithm to help users narrow down their dating goals. Literally, yanzi means “value of a person’s face”. By gaming the data and shaping algorithmic outcomes, Blued produces an algorithmic sociality. Algorithms such as filter browsing and the yanzi metric become ritual tools for users. This chapter ends with a critique on the justifications adduced to defend the social biases lurking in this algorithmic sociality.

Chapter 3 foregrounds how gay live streamers’ self-censorship practices shape their affective encounters with viewers on Blued live streaming. Live streaming
invites users to either perform themselves or watch gay men perform. Through paid virtual gifts that circulate as affective signs, live streaming fosters and intensifies viewers’ intimate attachments to gay streamers. As such, the virtual intimacy produced by gay live streaming has a significant economic component and is therefore associated with stigma. Consequently, gay streamers do not position streaming as a type of sex-related work and paying viewers do not portray gifts as consumption. The chapter argues that in understating the economic and sexual underpinnings of affective encounters mediated by live streaming, gay live streamers and viewers not only reinforce heteronormativity, but produce homonormativity.

Chapter 4 analyzes the political economy of sexually affective data on Blued. It investigates how Blued’s tightening censorship on displays of same-sex eroticism gives rise to a form of intimate and emotional data production. This chapter argues that sexually affective data flows (e.g., virtual gifting, following, liking, commenting, and sharing) produced by gay streamers represent key corporate assets through which Blued attracts venture capital. These data are sexually affective in that they are produced within the parameters of same-sex desires such as infatuation, sexual arousal, and online intimacy (as opposed to rating a service and expressing an attitude). Unlike Western gay dating apps, which monetize users’ hooking up encounters, Blued live streaming’s business model focuses on sexually attuned affective data in order to navigate around censorship.

Chapter 5 discusses how Chinese gay live streamers pursue online fame and are therefore labelled as wanghong (网红, internet celebrity) and mingyuan (名媛, socialite). In media portrayals, the two terms are often gendered female and linked to heterosexual cultures. When appropriated by gay men, however, the two labels are increasingly sexualized and associated with the stigmas of promiscuity, femininity, and transactional relationships. Gay streamers’ celebrity status is paradoxical, then, in that they are simultaneously desired and stigmatized. Based on interview data with gay live streamers, it seems that fame and infamy still matter in how gay streamers negotiate their celebrity status. Nonetheless, my argument in this chapter emphasizes how the negative feelings induced by censorship’s shaming of pornography and obscenity have been transformed into a productive force for reconstructing gay male subjectivities in China. In pursuit online fame, gay streamers became happy about their work and thus created and represented more desirable forms of self. In turn, their fame produces a collective gay culture articulated through wanghong and mingyuan.