Queer Media Production as Soft Activism: insights from a Chinese community project

Abstract

The LGBT+ movements in China are increasingly in a precarious situation. Queer media spaces are being eroded as numerous digital media platforms run by LGBT+ rights advocacy groups and individuals have been blocked over the past few years. Given this context, a liberal model of a gay rights movement, resembling those seen in the West, is unlikely to occur in China. Consequently, softer activism approaches are often employed by Chinese LGBT+ organisations. This article leverages ethnographic insights from one of China's leading LGBT+ community media projects to offer a critical examination of queer media production and the broader LGBT+ movements within the country. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of 'resistance' and the political significance of 'voice', the analysis presented herein underscores the intricate relationship between queer media production and its socio-political milieu. It showcases the adaptive strategies of 'soft' activism adopted by Chinese LGBT+ organisations, characterised by non-confrontational tactics and a steadfast commitment to amplifying diverse queer voices.

Keywords: queer media production, LGBT+ movements, community media in China

Introduction

As one of China's longest-surviving LGBT+ magazines – DZZ (pseudonym[1]) was launched in the early 2000s as part of an HIV/AIDS prevention project. It later became an independently run community media project. Initially, the magazine primarily addressed a gay male readership, with its content focusing on LGBT+ news, health, culture, and lifestyle. More recently DZZ has gained recognition for its feature articles and extensive reports that document the significant events for the Chinese queer community. It also has a mission of promoting tongzhi[2] literature and non-fiction writing.

In the latter half of 2021, DZZ's WeChat[3] public account was shut down after it detailed how an LGBT+ friendly hostel was forced to close after enduring homophobic harassment from neighbouring residents. This event marked another victim of the crackdown on LGBT+ related social media content. Earlier, dozens of WeChat public accounts run by campus LGBT groups of China's top universities had been blocked with all past content wiped clean in July (Davis, 2021). Major Anglo-American media outlets had all reported this accident and regarded it as tightening control on LGBT+ issues in China. For example, the Guardian wrote: 'The shutdowns have added to concern over China's worsening intolerance of sexual and gender minorities and activism, which has also targeted feminist groups and individuals who have sought to push back against discrimination' (Ni and Davidson, 2021: n.p.).

Indeed, in the media sector, Chinese authorities have banned depictions of gay

people on television as part of a crackdown on 'vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content' (Ellis-Petersen, 2016). The writing and publishing of homoerotic novels can result in years of imprisonment (Wang, 2018). Social media giants, such as WeChat and Weibo[4], often censor LGBT+ related content as routine operations of control politically or culturally sensitive expressions (Davis, 2021).

In the public domain, queer organisations often face raids and harassment by the police (Qian, 2021). Crackdowns on LGBT+ student groups have intensified since 2018 (Wei, 2022). In 2020, the country's longest-running and largest LGBT+ annual festival announced its shutdown, citing safety concerns (Jiang, 2020). The activities of an influential LGBT+ advocacy group were shut down in early November 2021 (Wu, 2021). This group had spearheaded many legal cases pushing for greater LGBT rights in China (ibid.). Most recently, the well-known Beijing LGBT Center closed its doors in May 2023 (Wu, 2023). Initium Media observed that the spaces for the LGBT+ movements in China are shrinking, reaching a critical point for the survival of many queer organisations (Erliang, 2021). Some of these organisations have tried to adapt by changing their names, promotional strategies, and operational models to align more closely with mainstream values; some have even transformed into commercial enterprises (Erliang, 2021). These all suggest that the LGBT+ movements in China are increasingly, if not always, in a precarious situation. It is important to note that this repression is not only directed at LGBT+ groups and organisations, but is part of a broader crackdown on rights-advocacy NGOs under Xi's administration (Zhu and Jun, 2021).

Given such a general context, it is unlikely that a liberal model of a gay rights movement, similar to those seen in the West, will occur in China (Rofel, 2013). Instead, Chinese LGBT organisations often employ more subtle approaches. In this case, DZZ, as one of the country's leading LGBT+ media platforms, provides invaluable accounts of queer media production and precious insights into the LGBT+ movements in China. In this article, I use DZZ as a case study to unpack the complexity of queer media production in China. Through interviews with DZZ's key editorial members and contributors, I detail the constraints those individuals and organisations have faced in queer media production. Meanwhile, and more importantly, I showcase the resistance of the queer community in such an unfriendly environment.

While everyday queer identity and community practices have been fruitfully detailed in ethnographic studies, our understanding of the queer use of media is just beginning to emerge (Bao, 2021b). This study is situated in the broader field of production studies, which 'takes the lived realities of people involved in media production as the subjects for theorizing production as culture' (Mayer et al., 2009: 4). It aims to extend queer production studies beyond U.S. or European-based contexts (Ng, 2021).

Current (Western) queer media culture has largely developed from the modern gay rights movement, which began with the 1969 Stonewall riots when gay men and lesbians started to proclaim themselves as 'out and proud'. This marked the formation of a form of (Euro-American) identity politics (Martin Jr, 2018). Although the influence of global trends is evident in the development of the LGBT+ movements in China, I

argue that the actions of Chinese LGBT+ individuals and activists are largely constrained by a distinct cultural, social, and political context. Therefore, China provides an insightful site for investigating how cultural production can function as a form of 'soft' activism.

In the following sections, I will first review the development of the LGBT+ movements in China. Situated within this context, I then appraise some fabrications of LGBT+ culture under the concept of queer media production.

LGBT+ Movements in China

One of the great forces that shape LGBT+ activism in China is undoubtedly the political ideology of the Chinese party-state (Kong et al., 2021). Longarino (2020) aptly describes the progress of LGBT+ movements in China over the past several decades as 'precarious'. Over the years, Chinese LGBT+ individuals have made significant strides in terms of visibility, community building, and the creation of safe spaces, among other achievements. However, these achievements are precarious; if the government decides to gradually roll back this progress, these advances can easily disappear. Their survival depends on how far the government wants to go (Longarino, 2020).

The development of queer identity, and community, along with the LGBT+ activism in China began in the 1990s. This period was marked by China's Reform and Opening-Up policy and its preparations to join the World Trade Organisation in 2001 (Bao, 2024). The 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing

introduced global gender discourses and the concept of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to China, sparking a wave of feminist and queer activism (ibid.). Under the name of 'AIDS prevention', with funding from international foundations and the Centre for Disease Control of China, many gay organisations and groups (though not lesbians) were founded throughout the country in the early 2000s (Cao and Lu, 2014). These organisations have been able to carry out a wide range of gay-affirmative activities apart from HIV testing and outreach such as interest groups, clubs, and local gay zines, which provide social spaces for potential queer community building (Bao, 2011; Zhang and Kaufman, 2005; Rofel, 2013). It is noticeable that 'China's LGBT movement is increasingly reaching up and out to make society more inclusive through advocacy' (Longarino, 2020: 3).

However, this development of the LGBT+ movements in China is not easy and there is no guarantee for a promising future either. Chinese LGBT+ organisations 'face the same legal registration constraints common to other NGOs in China; however, these are heightened by the stigma and ignorance surrounding LGBT issues' (UNDP, 2014: 49). Many of them have not been able to obtain civil registration, and thus, 'the majority continue to operate in a legal grey area' (ibid.). The consequence of this is that these community organisations are impossible to receive domestic funding, they can only seek financial support from international stakeholders, including foreign foundations, embassies, NGOs and some UN Agencies (UNDP, 2014: 52). However, with the implement of the Foreign NGO Management Law in 2017, 'LGBT NGOs scrambled to supplement the imminent loss of substantial funding' (Longarino, 2020: 45; also see

Zhu and Jun, 2021). Furthermore, for LGBT+ NGOs and advocates, 'the threat of getting harassed, shut down, or detained by authorities is always present' (Longarino, 2020: 7). As I have stated in the introduction, this crackdown against LGBT NGOs and rights groups have recently reached another level, which threats the survive of such organisations. All of these factors suggest that 'political activism can unfortunately carry serious consequences for Chinese citizens' (Zhang and Kaufman, 2005: 127).

Many believe that a gay rights movement that resembles those seen in the West is unlikely to take place in China (Rofel, 2013). Deklerck (2019: 152) critically reminds us that 'the term "LGBT+ activism" in itself also tends to evoke immediate associations with Euro-American inspired LGBT+ politics that tend to ignore the particularities of the Chinese situation'. Engebretsen (2013: 126) suggests that we should 'depart from a perspective based on a Western-originating politics of public visibility' in understanding LGBT+ activism in China. Instead, she advises that Chinese LGBT+ activism 'is best understood as a practice-oriented politics of community, where the primary strategy is to establish a collective consciousness within queer communities, raise general awareness, and ultimately consolidate popular support and mainstream acceptance' (ibid.). This perspective focuses on (inward) LGBT+ community-forming and articulating similitude. A major activist strategy of this is 'to appeal to a commonly shared humanity, de-emphasizing difference and highlighting commonality and similarity, often by invoking the normativity ideal (for example, as daughters, friends, colleagues, and student peers)' (ibid.). Adapting the idea of 'a practice-oriented politics of community', my analysis of DZZ further illuminates the nuances of 'LGBT+

activism’ in China.

Queer media in China

The Western model of a libertarian press system does not exist in China (Winfield and Peng, 2005). The Chinese media is well recognised for being caught between the Party's political line and the commercial bottom line, as well as between political censorship and commercialisation (Zhao, 2008). Because of social taboos and political sensitivity, the (mainstream) media space for LGBT+ issues is relatively limited. Since the late 1990s, media regulations have explicitly included ‘homosexuality’ among a long list of prohibited content, with other topics that threaten mainstream sexual norms (Longarino, 2020).

Despite enduring media censorship in China, its imperfections can foster social interaction and innovative expressions for LGBT+ voices, especially as these individuals are not usually seen as major political disruptors (Bao, 2021b). Meanwhile, with the development of the internet, Chinese queer popular cultures have emerged owing to the booming of online video streaming sites’ private ownership, economic imperative, participatory culture, and the temporary absence of government interference from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s (Wang and Bao, 2023). These emerging media forms facilitated a diverse range of borderline sexual content, simultaneously leading to the development of a queer media industry with significant economic and cultural impact (Wang and Bao, 2023).

As a form of ‘affective economy’, boys’ love (BL) is a prominent media genre within the development of Chinese queer popular cultures (Wong, 2020). While the rise of the BL web series in China appeared to offer potential for challenging the prevailing heteronormative structure, their swift assimilation into mainstream commercial culture indicates the contrary (Zou, 2022). Moreover, as a media genre created primarily by women and for women, BL may have far-reaching implications for Chinese women and the general public rather than for the LGBT+ community per se (see Chang & Tian, 2021; Luo, 2023).

In addition to these profit oriented queer media, there are also alternative media forms that ‘have been used by queer people to communicate messages to community members’ (Bao, 2021b: 36). Bao (2021b: 36) argues that ‘these community-based media should not be seen merely as providing representations for LGBTQ identities and communities; they also function as active and ongoing social processes in which identities are constructed, communities are forged, and activism is conducted’. These community media practices can be seen as a ‘soft’ type of activism that interrogates the cultural specificity of LGBT+ activism in China (Bao, 2021a).

Jin (2009) regards Friends Exchange (FE) as a typical case of alternative media, which constructs a public sphere for the gay community in Mainland China. FE was the most influential queer print publication in the 2000s with 10,000 copies at peak of each issue distributed around China (Jin, 2009; Zhang and Kaufman, 2005). It was a bimonthly journal published since 1998 by the Friends Project ‘to improve scientific knowledge about homosexuality, promote health and love, and build a civilized

environment for gay people'. (Zhang and Kaufman, 2005: 128). Although FE had a clear focus on HIV/AIDS prevention, it also included global LGBT news, literary works, advice columns, and letters from the readers (Jin, 2009); and more than 60% of its content being produced by community volunteers and ordinary readers.

Funded by two young lesbian women and their respective partners, Les+ was published between 2005 and 2013 (Han, 2021). It was perhaps the longest-running lesbian community zine in China (Bao, 2021b). The founders felt at the time, when most lesbian stories online were depressing, inspired them to start their own magazine. Therefore, the objective of Les+ was to express 'bright, honest, and optimistic voice' of lesbians (Zhao, 2008: 111 cited in Han, 2021). Through content analysis Han (2021:1) finds that the editors of Les+ foster a lesbian and queer feminist discursive space by using three strategies: 'network-building, mutual empowerment, and politicization, which roughly represent three periods of the magazine's development'. Han (2021:1) suggests 'while these strategies help build momentum for activism, they unintentionally narrow the scope of the magazine that has contributed to the disbandment'.

DZZ shares characteristics with the aforementioned community media projects as it also started as a community zine, which was 'distributed free of charge all over the country through grassroots organisations' (Bao, 2021b:44). These LGBT+ publications operate within policy grey zones and are a component of China's loosely controlled yet extremely vibrant informal cultural economies (Bao, 2021b). However, DZZ also differs from the other two, not only because it is the only surviving queer print media

to date, but also due to its active engagement with new media platforms. In 2008, DZZ launched its own blog, followed by the publication of e-zines in 2009, and the establishment of a WeChat public account in 2013. This WeChat account has since become their primary outreach channel. Thus, DZZ offers a unique lens into the evolution and resilience of LGBT+ media in China.

Methodology

Informed by an ethnographic approach, this study examines 'queer cultural production in relation to the politics of marginality in both media and society more broadly' (Ng, 2021: 3). Ethnographic tools have long been successfully employed in media production studies to understand complexities involved in institutional (both official and grassroots) media practices as these methods 'take into account a wide range of social, material, and temporal factors that are entailed in production' (Szczepanik, 2013: 100). An ethnographic approach to media studies can help us understand the complexities of media production by examining 'producers' sentiments and subjectivities in conjunction with questions of political economy' (Ganti, 2014: 16).

I have had an in-depth engagement with DZZ since 2018 when I volunteered to translate the annual report for the funding body. My researcher status was apparent to all key staff of DZZ. I have also participated in various events and production activities organized by DZZ. Besides participant observation, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with four key members of the editorial team who worked or continuing to

work at DZZ. The interview topics included DZZ's origins, challenges and opportunities, role in the gay community, role in the LGBT+ movements, relationships with readers, and outlook. These interviews lasted for 60-90 minutes. To gauge the participation nature of alternative/community media, I also interviewed six regular contributors discussing their motivation in participating in queer-themed writing and reporting, their views towards DZZ, and gay community media in general. These interviews were normally around one hour.

Analytical Approach

Two theoretical concepts informed my analysis of DZZ and queer media production in China. The first is the Foucauldian notion of 'resistance'. For Foucault, the employment of the term is related to his political commitment to those who are 'lesser forms of power, not because they are power-less' (Heller, 1996: 99). As I shall argue later that recognising these lesser forms of power from subordinate groups is critical in understanding both the role of alternative media and the LGBT+ movements in China. Resistance, in this sense, becomes a diagnostic of power (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

The second concept is the idea of 'voice as value'. Couldry (2015) suggests that the 'political use of the word "voice" continues to be useful, especially in contexts where long-entrenched inequalities of representation need to be addressed' (p.44). He writes:

> voice as a value distinguishes between large-scale ways of organising societies, resources and the world which take account of people's capacities for voice (that is, to participate in voice as a process) from those which do not. Voice, then, is the overarching value which makes sense of why people get involved in, and fight for the possibility of, alternative media: voice as value grounds the possibility of imagining alternative media at all (Couldry, 2015: 45).

This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the role of alternative media in China. As I have previously demonstrated, the state maintains a tight grip on LGBT+ related content in mainstream media. This makes alternative forms of media a vital, albeit limited, platform for Chinese LGBT+ individuals to express their voices as a form of resistance. The following sections provide an in-depth analysis of DZZ's production and explore the implications of alternative media for community building.

Findings and discussion

Non-confrontational operation

> On the one hand, I have fully understood the grassroots nature and the vulnerability of gay activism in China. After Xiaogang left, Beijing Gender and Health Institute (BGHI) ceased to exist except in name. Their projects were given

> to other individuals and organisations. This time DZZ came to Guangzhou to shoot [the Rainbow Narrator] was also because Gao and Li came here to make their documentary on conversion therapy. Meanwhile, they [Gao and Li] could have some time to work for DZZ. I was also shocked to know that no one is currently working full-time for DZZ. Sam started a new life with his boyfriend in a small town near Shanghai; Zhuang took a manager position in a printing factory back in his hometown; even Jack has already worked as an HR officer in an insurance company since I finished my PhD fieldwork in 2018. However, being together with the filming team for days, I can certainly sense the solidarity from members of [the gay] community. They all committed to presenting good work and wanted to show the diversity within the community. 25th October 2021

The above words were extracted from my field notes which summarizes my feeling after attending a three-day filming event of DZZ. It is clear that many gay (and/or LGBT in general) activist individuals and groups are struggling under current circumstances, their primary organisational objective is survival (Erliang, 2021). Despite the challenges, they are persisting in their efforts to effect positive societal changes. Their action is the best example demonstrating the concept of resistance. However, this is not to romanticize resistance, but rather to understand resistance as a way of strategically using the 'signs of human freedom […] to tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in them' (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 42).

First, as Schroeder (2015: 64) suggests 'the category of "activism" itself needs to be expanded to give us a fuller picture of the political in queer China', DZZ's case complexes our understating of 'activism' and the way of doing 'activism' in China. In dominant Euro-American worldviews, the term 'activism' tends to be associated with 'protest' and 'militant reformers' (Deklerck, 2019). This notion of 'activism' is certainly contested by the principal staff of DZZ, which is illustrated in its relationship with the LGBT+ movements. Jack, the current director of DZZ, believes that DZZ has definitely grown up in the LGBT movement and is subject to various transnational forces：

> First of all, one of the reasons for me to work in AZX[5] after my university was because of the influence of my schoolmate who was involved in local HIV prevention projects. Secondly, when I started my job at AZX in the early 2000s, I was surrounded by and in touch with the organisations such as the Beijing LGBT center and Common Language which are all the backbone of the whole Tongzhi movement in China to this day. These organisations have certainly influenced me in many ways including thoughts, versions, and methodology. During this process, I learned a very important ability, which is to write project proposals and apply for funds. That is to say, if I didn't learn this, and didn't have the capability, then it would not have today's DZZ. This was the most fundamental basis for the development of DZZ. So, yes, DZZ, first of all, came from the [LGBT+] movement. Furthermore, we do agree with the central value

> of [LGBT+] movement which is to speak out for LGBT+, and this is actually what we do later on, although we are not speaking out for any sharp issues, especially those advocacy voices. For example, no matter whether non-fiction or literary works we write are stories; we provide less opinion, [in particular] critical opinions.

As stated earlier, DZZ originated as a part of the HIV prevention project which received financial support came from international institutions and organisations at that time. Arguably, the development of DZZ alongside other LGBT+ organisations and groups in China have more or less been influenced or inspired by ideas of Western LGBT+ activism (Engebretsen, 2015). DZZ currently receives funding from a foreign embassy in China, and the title of their grant project is “Promoting the Freedom of Expression and Rights Advocacy”.

On the surface, this indicates a clear alignment with global flows of ideologies and discourses of queer activism. However, this is not exactly the case. As Jack noted, DZZ actually tries to avoid advocacy voices and tends not to provide critical opinions. This approach underscores DZZ's adaptive capacities in a heavily constrained environment, which can be viewed as a form of 'soft' activism (Bao, 2021a). Because of the political constraint, DZZ tends to adopt a non-confrontational strategy which involves carefully learning how to ‘read’ the government. This strategy reflects Rofel's critical observation (2013:157):

> [L]esbian and gay activists have become quite savvy in learning how to 'read' the government. They know that within the Chinese state gaps in governance always exist and they must learn how to take advantage of those gaps. These activists are creative, thoughtful, flexible and nimble in relation to where the government draws the line between what is permissible and what is not. That line, activists say, is always shifting and they have to shift with it but also push that line further back. Activists explained to me that they constantly 'experiment'. They try to avoid government obstacles rather than confront them.

Even though DZZ had years of experience in 'reading' the government and dealing with censorship across various digital platforms, they still made a blunder that resulted in a significant loss (as mentioned in the introduction, DZZ's public WeChat account was blocked due to an article reporting a homophobic event). On the night of the incident, the key editorial team organized an emergency meeting to prevent the situation from worsening. The team did not post any explanation on their personal social media; instead, they urgently sought to understand the reasons for the ban. With the help of a DZZ reader, they discovered that the blocking of their WeChat account was solely due to that particular article, not because of their activities as an organisation. They also learned that appealing to the WeChat company was typically futile, as such appeals rarely succeeded. Therefore, they did not bother to appeal, instead, they registered a new WeChat account[6] and promoted it immediately. This swift response, all within a day, exemplifies a critical aspect of DZZ's non-confrontational approach: taking

suitable actions. Hannan and Freeman (1984) suggest the primary goal of organisations is to stay alive, therefore, organisations strive to adapt strategically in order to counteract external threats in the environment. For many LGBT+ organisaitions, like DZZ, they must constantly take actions to survive. Thus, 'taking action' is situational, which needs careful negotiation with the current social and political forces of China.

Voice Matters

Fuchs (2010:173) argues that alternative media should be understood as critical media whose 'product content shows the suppressed possibilities of existence, antagonisms of reality, and potentials for change'. However, as I have already illustrated that under the current political environment of China, alternative media, like DZZ, are less willing to produce critical content as such media practices would threaten their own existence. Therefore, if the extent of making critical voices is largely restricted, then what value motivates the making of 'alternative media'? The answer lies in the idea of 'voice as value' (Couldry, 2010; Couldry, 2015). Couldry (2015: 45) proposes we should understand 'voice as our capacity to make, and be recognized as making, narratives about our lives and the world within which we act'. He (2010: 2) further points out that there is a crisis of voice under neoliberalism in which 'a particular discourse operates with a view of economic life that does not value voice and imposes that view of economic life onto politics and society'. Although the extent to which China practices neoliberalism is a point of contention, scholars tend to agree that despite its unique

characteristics, contemporary Chinese culture, media culture in particular, adheres to certain neoliberal tenets (Rofel, 2007; Wallis and Shen, 2018).

Influenced by neoliberalism, many gay-orientated media platforms prioritise their market functionality. However, DZZ sets itself apart from other gay digital media outlets with its commitment to valuing voice as a form of reflexive agency, rather than merely commodifying it. Many DZZ authors I interviewed noted that, compared to other gay WeChat accounts, DZZ tends to publish more serious content. For instance, reflecting on his observations of the ecology of China's LGBT+ media, Eros stated, 'I believe there are several prominent categories [of writing and media forms]. Some focus on documenting personal feelings and affairs; others post semi-erotic pictures and articles. Then there are very few that are as serious as DZZ in doing long-form reporting or focusing on tongzhi literature'. Little Tiger has also noted that most gay WeChat accounts are entertainment-oriented supplying readers with rather superficial content. In contrast, Sam, DZZ's current editor in chief, proudly told me, 'we are a community-oriented media and there is no other [LGBT+] community-oriented media other than us, the only community-oriented media in China is DZZ'. While it is not my aim to verify his claim, I want to underscore the condition under which DZZ is articulating its own voices.

He also shared, 'we hope that under our job duty, we can do something that when members from the LGBT Community see it, it could make them feel that they are alive, and let them recognize their existence'. Indeed, an older version of the DZZ public WeChat account's one-line synopsis was 'focus on the existence and subsistence

of the LGBT community'. Although this line has become 'stories that add colour' now, the core motivation of DZZ remains the same.

To do so, DZZ has amplified the voices of those marginalised individuals within the Chinese LGBT+ community, such as those living in rural China, gay migrant workers, working-class transgender individuals, and others. Sam further explains how and why DZZ represents multiple perspectives of the lived experience within these communities:

> For example, we wrote about a transgender fruit seller in northeastern China, who has not been in contact with any LGBT community. But you can see the tremendous effort he, as an individual, must exert to survive while embracing such an identity. It's not just about the effort, but also how he negotiates with his surrounding environment to live as he prefers. So, I think when you read something like this, especially if you're a gay man, you won't find that life is that hard.

For Sam, these individual narratives hold more importance than abstract concepts associated with the so-called 'LGBT+ activism'. He explains:

> I believe the only way to understand reality is through the lens of individual experiences. And I always uphold the idea of what's queer? **Queer is the individual, the individual is queer**. Right? If you want to have some kind of

LGBT movement, what's your ultimate goal? Isn't that you want everyone to live the life that s/he wants?

Hall (1997:16) posits that identities are constituted within representation in which they are 'the production of meaning through language'. Thus, the works of DZZ facilitate the narrative construction of gay (or LGBT+) identities, which is very valuable for gay individuals in China. For instance, consider the experience of Poyuan, a civil servant. Working and living in a heavily heteronormative environment, Poyuan was very stressed and struggling with his sexuality. He started to search tongzhi content on WeChat, and discovered several relevant accounts, including DZZ. Poyuan recalls: 'I was very impressed by the idea of non-fiction writing. I really liked their [DZZ] articles because they were not just focused carnality and desires. More importantly, they presented a variety of lived realities. [……] As I was really confused at that time, I wanted to see how other people made their choices'. Arguably, the articles on DZZ have provided its readers, like Poyuan, with valuable 'narrative engagement' (see Hammack and Cohler, 2009), offering them a window into diverse accounts of gay identity in China.

Cavarero (2000: 88) astutely asserts that 'an identity which, from beginning to end, is intertwined with other lives and needs the other's tale'. Building on this, Couldry (2015: 46) suggests that 'voice as a social process involves, from the start, both speaking and listening: the building of alternative media is a social application of that principle'. DZZ embodies this power of alternative media by cultivating a platform

where more ‘serious’ voices are facilitated through long-form reporting and non-fictional literature works.

Sustainability as an Issue

Bao (2021b) suggests that the spirit of community media is captured by a media platform run by community members and for the communities it serves. However, despite this commitment to the community engagement, many community media projects struggle to sustain. This is particularly true in China's relatively unfriendly environment where, as previously discussed, numerous queer media projects have faltered due to various factors. Beyond structural constraint, the disengagement of ordinary Chinese LGBT+ individuals is a significant contributor to the decline of queer community media. A co-founder of Les+, explained in an early 2016 letter on their public social media account why she decided to terminate Les+, China's first and longest-running lesbian print magazine (Han, 2021). She explained that, despite the magazine's efforts over the years to expand opportunities for lesbians in China, most lesbians in China prefer to remain in the shadows and limit their interactions to small circles in order to avoid being exposed (Han, 2021). This tendency is also prevalent within the gay community. Therefore, establishing a sustainable model of queer media production is a challenging task. Recognizing the issue of sustainability in managing community media projects early on, DZZ has taken several successful actions, even as they continue to confront new challenges.

DZZ has particularly fruitful results in cultivating authors for their media production. Many gay men, for instance, are willing to take up writing as a form of self-expression. Consider Peter, who began writing in his senior high school as a means of stress relief and pastime. He first submitted his articles to mainstream literary magazines, but they all rejected his work. The reasons were relatively consistent, with the magazines stating his work did not align with their theme and tone. 'Homosexuality' has always among a long list of prohibited content from Chinese mainstream media, and publishing houses have also been 'rejecting any material with homosexual content' (Leng, 2012: 21). Thus, it is unsurprising that mainstream literary magazines would not publish Peter's works. Knowing Peter's situation, his friends recommended DZZ to him. DZZ's editor appreciated Peter's talent and published his articles, leading to a long-standing, positive relationship.

DZZ's readers contribute significantly to its content production. As discussed earlier, DZZ values individual voice and aims to represent the lived experiences of the marginalized. Once these stories were published, many readers reach out to DZZ to share their own narratives pertaining to the same issue. Jack explained: 'sometimes you might feel that a certain topic or issue is more pronounced. That is because once we interviewed a certain person and published their story, many other people actively contact us to provide their own stories too. In other words, there's a magnifying effect'. This phenomenon reiterates that individuals from marginalized communities are eager to share their stories, and community media platforms like DZZ effectively fulfil their needs.

To further develop a sustainable mode of community media production, the DZZ Academy project was established in 2013. This was when DZZ wanted to transition to a literary magazine that tried to tackle bigger issues using long-form and narrative reporting. Jack informed me that DZZ underwent a lengthy period of experimentation in terms of editorial and production practices when it moved away from the HIV prevention project. This experience clarified DZZ's need to cultivate talents and professionals within the community, leading to the launch of the DZZ Academy.

The Academy is a charitable project aimed to cultivate young queer writers to articulate their own voices. Renowned writers, directors, photographers, and media professionals were invited to the coaching camp to provide the LGBT+ community with training in interviewing and writing skills. By 2021, 170 young LGBT+ individuals had participated in this project, and they continue to find ways to speak out for the LGBT+ community in China.

The Academy also provides DZZ with sustainable human resources. Several DZZ Academy attendees I interviewed felt that the Academy has offered them a unique social space where shared community sprite was fostered, thus encouraging their participation in community media projects. It is important to note that DZZ encourages the trainees to undertake individual long-form reporting projects and submit their literary works to DZZ, but it does not mandate them to do so. Furthermore, DZZ allocates a significant portion of its funding towards author remuneration.

Taken together, it is clear that DZZ has made significant efforts to fulfil its role as a community media project. Sam shared with me a mix of pride and frustration in

his statement:

> [Our vision] in running DZZ is very simple. We aim to create a media environment that we believe can be slightly better. We want people to write, to put in great effort into their work, and to earn some income from it. We hope for things to work a bit better and to produce some truly quality staff.

Sam also expressed a sense of 'obligation' to fulfil these goals in the current LGBT+ media culture. He elaborated: ‘our main aim is to ensure that when someone from the tongzhi community seeks content about LGBT+ issues, they can be assured of its “quality”. At least, content that has value, can contribute to their personal growth, address their concerns, or stimulate reflective thinking’.

However, producing ‘quality’ content in a sustainable way is no easy task. Many authors I interviewed likened the DZZ Academy to a utopia event, finding it is challenging to commit to community writing and reporting as a long-term obligation, especially when dealing with other life challenges. While DZZ provides remuneration to its authors, this modest income is insufficient for make a living through writing alone. Another challenge for DZZ arises from is the evolving (digital) media culture. Jack pointed out that feature stories and long-form reporting require a specific readership, and maintaining such a readership has become increasingly challenging. He observed that with the rise of short-video platforms, fewer people are engaging with text-based content, particularly long-form reporting. In response to this trend, DZZ has launched

new media projects via different short-video platforms, including the Rainbow Narrator which attempted to mobilize representatives of the LGBT+ community to tell their stories on camera. This is another adaptive action that DZZ has taken to ensure its survival.

Conclusion

Although DZZ remains committed to publishing paper-copy magazines which has reduced from 4 issues to 1 issue a year due to limited human resources, their focus has shifted to the new media. Today, DZZ's public WeChat almost publish an article every working day. By 31st May 2021, the DZZ WeChat account had reached 74, 710 followers, with an average readership of 8000 per article. However, After the accident I mentioned in the introduction, the DZZ WeChat account was perinatally shut down, and all content was erased. Although a new account was promptly created, it could not compensate for the significant loss of the old account. By late 2022, this new account has accumulated around 10,000 followers with an average readership of 2000 per article. Obviously, DZZ is experiencing an even tougher time.

When I asked Jack about his expectations for the future, he responded: 'we do not have many expectations [for the future], but we are still doing [our work]'. He said the DZZ team would not be that disappointed if DZZ was completely shut down by the government. They believed that throughout the years they have done their best to document a piece of Chinese LGBT+ history. However, as long as they can work for

DZZ, they will continue to do so. Even under such an unfriendly context, they are not giving up as they believe voice carries value. Their actions serve as the most powerful demonstration of the concept of resistance.

My observations suggest that this resistance can be seen as a form of 'soft' activism. It is characterized by non-confrontational actions that involve carefully 'reading' the government's stance and testing its boundaries. These actions are situational requiring careful negotiation with the current social and political forces in China. The idea of 'voice as value' (Couldry, 2015) underpins the meaning of such queer media production. Through long form reporting and non-fiction literature, the community media project attempts to provide a voice for diverse queer individuals, particularly those marginalised LGBT+ individuals from rural areas and lower social classes. This effort contributes to the valuable construction of LGBT+ identities. Therefore, DZZ's work showcases the complexity of queer media production in China is deeply embedded in its social and political context.

Notes

1. To provide more nuanced insights into the characteristics of queer media production in China, and for the benefit of the organisation, pseudonyms are used in this article, even though consent has been obtained from the DZZ team.
2. Tongzhi literally translates to "comrade", a term widely used in China during the Maoist period to denote equality among citizens. However, in the late 20th and early

21st centuries, the term began to be used in a different context, particularly in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan. Activists and scholars in these areas began to use "tongzhi" as a term to refer to people who identify as LGBT+. This new usage was a way to create a unique identity term that was separate from Western concepts of gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc., and that could better reflect the experiences and identities of LGBT+ people within Chinese-speaking communities. For a more detailed explanation of this please see Wong (2011) and Bao (2011).

3. WeChat is a multi-purpose messaging, social media, and mobile payment app developed by Tencent. It was launched in 2011 and had become the world's largest standalone mobile app in 2018. WeChat users can create a public account, granting them the power to distribute content to followers. An official account has many functions and resembles a mini-website.
4. Weibo, a microblogging site originating from China, was introduced by the Sina Corporation in 2009. It is often compared to Twitter due to its format of short, public posts, and it has become one of the most influential social media platforms in China.
5. AZX is the pseudonym for the HIV prevention organisation from which DZZ originated.
6. Despite WeChat's real ID requirement limiting individuals to one account, DZZ, with its multiple operators, can feasibly establish a new account.

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