I want to come forward: Voices from Chinese tongqi

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Abstract: This study discusses the challenges of tongqi (wives of gay men) in mainland China, and rethinks homosexual–heterosexual marriage. Over 13.6 million tongqi are victimised in mainland China as a result of the traditional ancestral-oriented family system that coerces homosexual–heterosexual marriage for lineage inheritance. Having suffered from not only being cheated on and emotionally abused, but also having their dignity jeopardised, they are unfortunately publicly neglected. Much worse, they are unwittingly at high risk for HIV/AIDS infection, which stigmatises them and results in health inequity. An existing peer support hub provides them with psychological support through virtual platforms, and strives to increase public awareness of this socially disadvantaged population. However, social, financial and cultural factors impede its development. Apart from an exploration of potential resolutions in this discussion, a debate over homosexual–heterosexual marriage has also been raised.

Subjects: Chinese Culture & Society; Gay & Lesbian Studies; Gender Studies – Soc Sci; Sexuality; Women's Studies

Keywords: gay’s wife; gender inequality; health equity; homosexual–heterosexual marriage; social justice; social movement; socially disadvantaged population

1. Tongqi in mainland China
This study discusses the challenges of tongqi (wives of gay men) in mainland China, and rethinks homosexual–heterosexual marriage. It firstly analyses the cultural factors and social background which yield the tongqi population and tongqi’s afflictions. It then reviewed the objectives and limited resources of the China Wives of Gay Men Mutual Aid Studio, a tongqi’s peer support hub, from which it evaluated the role of the government dealing with this social problem. Through investigating these
issues, it looked into homosexual–heterosexual marriage, and emphasised the significance of consent in marriage and sincerity in conjugation.

Two films, spanning 22 years—The Wedding Banquet (Lee, 1993) and Baby Steps (Cheng, 2015)—explicitly spell out the gay men’s predicament inherent in Chinese culture, presenting an ingrained family concept in conjunction with the idea of clan. Although the Taiwanese mother in the more recent film accepts her gay son to a limited extent, whereas in the former she was reluctant, their desire to have grandchildren remains the same. Such a “Brokeback Mountain” problem (Lee, 2005), as associated with homosexual–heterosexual marriage, is even worse yet in current mainland China, where there is a growing socially disadvantaged population, namely tongqi.

Recent research (Liu et al., 2015) estimates that this challenge involves over 33 million homosexuals in China (Zhang et al., 2003), including gays, lesbians and bisexual people, to which are added 13.6 million gay men's wives and 10 million lesbians' husbands. The tragedies faced by tongqi (同妻) and tongfu (同夫) remained veiled until the mid-2000s. “Tong” refers to homosexual, “qi” to wife, and “fu” to husband. Despite the fact that both are victims of the traditional notion of marriage (Chang & Lu, 2013), tongqi have a much more inferior experience compared to tongfu, as incurred by physiological, social, economic, family and legal constraints (Tang & Yu, 2014; Tang & Zhang, 2013; Xing, 2012).

Parental pressure coerces Chinese gay men to marry in order to continue their family line (The Economist, 2012); particularly since the one-child policy was enforced, but the policy has been ended in 2016 (Lan, 2015). When those who have not yet come out usually pretend to be straight, and therefore marry women. Thus, varied strategies are used to accommodate their intention (Chang & Lu, 2013). A few gay men deliberately marry lesbians, forming a merely formal marriage (形式婚姻) (Kam, 2012), or mutually assisted marriage (互助婚姻) (Chen, 2009) that benefits the gay–lesbian couple. This belied relationship superficially complies with social desirability in the form of heterosexual marriage, and simultaneously fulfils their need to have separate external love affairs. These couples largely do not purport to rear children. However, such a transactional union, having no love-based foundation, presents an atypical mode, either in homosexual–heterosexual or heterosexual marriages, as it contravenes marriage and family values.

Most gay men marry straight women while maintaining bonds with their boyfriends (Wei & Cai, 2012), but cease conjugal life after their children are born. Although maintaining a legitimate marriage status, tongqi are psychologically tortured, often without knowing the reason, by means of indifference and cold violence (that is, emotional abuse), and even domestic violence. Prior to marriage, some gay men plan to divorce after the baby is delivered. All of these scenarios demonstrate unilateral, dishonest, self-interested and irresponsible decisions, reflecting that for some married gay men, women are considered to be solely a reproduction tool. This instrumental decision objectifies these females and reinforces de-humanisation towards women, not only insulting feminine dignity and ravaging their happiness, but also magnifying gender inequality (Liu & Tang, 2014a).

Shocked by discovering their husbands' homosexual orientation, tongqi are resentful, due to a strong feeling of being cheated and betrayed (Kort, 2014). Their self-esteem drops heavily when they know that the attraction their husbands have for them is null, and that their competitors are men, which pours salt in their wound. Such hurt is fundamentally engendered from the imbalance of power between the sexes, partly in which women attach to men for survival in conventional sex stratification, reinforcing the threat to tongqi’s dependency on their husbands.

Much worse, tongqi have been categorised as a highly HIV/AIDS-infected community in China (Tang & Liu, 2015; Zhang, Li, 李秀芳, et al., 2015), since over one-third (3 million) of gay men who actively have sex with men (9.2 million) show HIV/AIDS symptoms (Liu et al., 2015). Many tongqi are also affected by depressive symptoms (90%), have suicidal ideations (40%) or attempt suicide (10%)
(Liu et al., 2015). These facts threaten individual and public health equity (both physically and mentally), and obstruct their chances for re-marriage, all of which worsen the stigmatisation of tongqi.

2. China Wives of Gay Men Mutual Aid Studio: Peer support service

Ridiculously, these victimised tongqi are stigmatised (Tang & Zhang, 2013), increasing marginalisation of this group, thereby doubling victimisation. Furthermore, there are no official organisations to prop them up, while only tenuous support comes from specific internet forums (Lin, 2013; Liu & Tang, 2014b) chiefly provided by volunteering tongqi and ex-tongqi. Among them, the China Wives of Gay Men Mutual Aid Studio (同妻互援工作室) is the only service provider in which a full-time volunteer carries out advocacy activities, as Xiao Delan (小德蘭 Little Teresa) claims when being interviewed by the author.

Xiao Delan, the founder of the studio, is an ex-tongqi. She was completely unaware of homosexuality and was not aware of her ex-husband’s sexual orientation. Her ex-husband finally confessed his sexual orientation to her two months after their marriage, which suddenly changed her life. Her marriage lasted only half a year, as initiated by her ex-husband, which annoys her parents because they do not know the reason of her divorce. This sorrowful experience has led her to serve other tongqi since late 2012, and to create a peer support hub in March 2013.

The primary objectives of the studio are designated as reducing the number of tongqi, and protecting tongqi’s rights. In spite of an anticipated decrease in the number of tongqi, as a benefit of the crawling improvements in societal openness and gender equality (Zhang, Li, Li, et al., 2015), Xiao Delan affirms that a substantial number of tongqi will remain in the near future, encouraging her to unmask this unprivileged group to the public. Moreover, due to her experience in divorcing without compensation, as with 36.4% of surveyed ex-tongqi (Zhang, Li, Li, et al., 2015), she is on a quest to re-examine the legal rights of tongqi in terms of not only financial indemnity, but also of averting the risks of being subjected to potential HIV/AIDS transmission (Li, Zhang, Chen, Wang, & Li, 2010; Liu et al., 2015).

In fulfilling these objectives, the studio makes an effort to increase public awareness of homosexuality. It assists in activities related to the anti-discrimination of homosexuality, in order to cultivate inclusiveness and equality towards homosexuals. It then proposes licit same-sex marriage as a way to avoid homosexual-heterosexual marriage. Despite its contribution to education regarding homosexuality, the studio is unlikely to be able to tackle the ancestral-centred marriage tradition that is deeply engrained into Chinese family structure. These efforts will be unable to uproot the social problems facing tongqi.

Having started virtual platforms on Chinese social media in 2012, such as on a Sina blog, a QQ forum, Weibo and WeChat, the studio has engaged a certain number of tongqi. This rarely involves offline contact or social gatherings with the virtual participants, but offers an anonymous method for them to share their stories and vent their emotional discontent, indicating their fear of being discriminated against, which forces them to hide in the closet with their homosexual husbands.

In addition, Xiao Delan began a marriage-seeking campaign series on the streets of Quan Zhou, Fujian, in the evening of the Double-Seventh Festival, in early August 2014. This Chinese festival, set for every 7 July (on the Chinese lunar calendar), is in memory of a fairy story, and symbolises unchanging true love. She wore a wedding gown, and carried a cardboard advertising that she was seeking marriage, representing tongqi’s rights to pursue happiness, and exposing this disregarded community to the pedestrians along the street. This movement has drawn significant media attention, for which she is always invited for interviews, thus delineating the afflictions of tongqi. However, it has inevitably been censured by conservative seniors who blame her for the assault against social harmony.

Xiao Delan also participated in the Pride Parade in Hong Kong in November 2014 (refer to Figure 1), in which sexual minorities came from different countries to fight for their human rights. Her
participation has enriched her vision of social movement by exchanging her experience with those of overseas social activists. The rainbow umbrellas she used denote the ambivalent link between gay men and tongqi: a pair made up of antagonists and suffering consorts within the Chinese connubial culture.

Xiao Delan is concurrently active in gay communities, and frequently goes to gay bars to distribute condoms and HIV/AIDS educational pamphlets. Being an ex-tonqi, she can build a favourable relationship with gay men, talking with them about how tongqi are harmed physically and psychologically, and persuading them not to get involved in homosexual–heterosexual marriages. She asserts that a reduction in gay men’s expectations of marriage will effectively lessen the number of tongqi.

The studio has attempted to hold creative events in order to serve tongqi and alleviate their adversities; nevertheless, these efforts have likely been confined by limited resources. First, irregular funds hinder its expansion into activities, as provided by one lone worker, who relies on part-time jobs to support her living. Insufficient pecuniary assistance probably withholds wider exposure for its community services. Second, a lack of professional advice impedes the development of its tongqi-directed services and propaganda campaigns. This weakens the achievements of Chinese pressure groups. Since social movement is too green in mainland China, most domestic non-government organisations are unfamiliar with strategies and tactics for organised community services and civic movements. Equally as prominent, the obscure governmental attitudes and policies towards social movement hold an unpredictable hazard for the growth of the studio. Tighter controls and censorship have been imposed on civic movements through legislation, in order to restrict financial and non-financial aegis from local and non-local non-profit organisations, which beats down the endurance and attainment of social activists.

3. Rethinking homosexual–heterosexual marriage
The interactive relationships between gay men and tongqi are synchronously both antithetical and coexistent. The tongqi community is derived from gay men’s self-concerned decision to get involved in homosexual–heterosexual marriage without prior notification to their wives. This dynamic, on the one hand, causes mutual resistance. Most tongqi complain their homosexual husbands, and married gay men hurt their wives’ happiness to conceal their sexual orientation which conflicts with social

Figure 1. Ex-wife of gay man coming out.
Acknowledgement: Permission has been granted by the owner of this photograph for use in this manuscript.
Source: http://www.weibo.com/p/1001603788190682096306?f rom=page_100505_profile&wvr=6&mod=wenzhangmod.
acceptance (Liu & Tang, 2014a), as explained earlier. However, the married gay men are unwillingly to change their sexual orientation. On the other hand, these vulnerable groups (gay men and tongqi) (Tang & Liu, 2015) are both victims under Chinese culture, which is the root cause of this calamity.

Lineage forms the core attribute of the traditional Chinese family system, stemming from an agricultural culture. As men dominated the manual farming labour, they legitimate the passing down of ancestral properties, excluding women’s rights and strengthening gender inequality. The term “ancestors” refers to familial males, in respect to life and death, as realised by filial piety (Xie, 2013). They are respected and financially supported by their succeeding generations when they get old, and are also offered to and worshipped through religious rituals after death. Although China is shifting to modernised production, this traditional value remains immersed in the ideology of Chinese gay men (Zhang, 2012), urging them to marry for the purpose of having children in order to secure their bloodline.

The government plays a key role in transforming such a procreation-driven family system through education and social policy, resulting in a review of the agents of socialisation that adapt the contemporary context. In the short term, it is proposed that professional services to be offered to tongqi to meet their immediate economic, medical and psychological needs through official organisations in collaboration with non-profit organisations and trained practitioners and volunteers. The establishment of laws and legal provisions protecting tongqi rights of marriage and compensations for divorce is also suggested (Zhang & Wang, 2013) in the mid-term. This could also disallow and criminalise mendacious marriages. More significantly in the long run, however, gender equality must necessarily be brought forward to the public view. This requires scholarly effort to put the research outcomes into practice.

Homosexual–heterosexual marriage becomes the target of criticism pertaining to the agony of tongqi. However, is it a problem per se? When heterosexual and same-sex marriages are acceptable, why not homosexual–heterosexual? Wei-Wei, the leading actress in The Wedding Banquet, woos Wai-Tung, the protagonist, even though she knows that he is a homosexual, simply because she loves him. She not only willingly gets married to him to deceive his parents, but also gives birth to a baby for him. Comparable life stories happen though there are not many (Juan, 2012). This exemplifies that informed consent with mutual agreement is the most critical issue. A recent study reports that 29.9% of tongqi hold onto the marital relationship since they still love their husbands (Zhang et al., 2014). If a woman accepts the marriage knowing beforehand that her husband is gay, like Wei-Wei, this marriage also should be blessed. If not, it is fraudulent. This also applies to heterosexual and same-sex marriages, and is connected to the concept of being unfaithful, rather than to sexual orientation. Many tongqi suffer from emotional abuse (Tang & Liu, 2014); similarly many heterosexual couples show indifference perhaps because of their spouses’ external affairs. Rather than due to negligence, tongfu (lesbians’ husbands), while also being hurt psychologically, tend to mask their shame for the sake of dignity of men, and thus do not dare to voice their situation. Therefore, they may experience more distress than do tongqi. All of these facts signify matrimonial ethics, which calls for serious discussion.

The China Wives of Gay Men Mutual Aid Studio exhibits an intrinsic contradiction in not aligning with its rudimentary values. While it advocates same-sex marriage, it negates homosexual–heterosexual marriage due to its hypothesis that the latter violates morality. It promotes equality towards homosexuality, but unconsciously combats equality towards individuals who love homosexual people and tries to inhibit their wedlock. It overlooks the cardinal dichotomies of honesty and deception, loyalty and treachery, respect and affront, humanisation and de-humanisation, functionality-governed and love-realised matrimony, which determine the integrity of marriage, resulting in depriving self-determination through freedom of informed choice. If the studio can contribute to the defeat of deceptive marriages regardless of whether they are heterosexual, same-sex or homosexual–heterosexual, it will spearhead the defence of social justice in the domain of connubiality.
On the whole, the social problem facing tongqi is connected to homosexual-heterosexual marriage; albeit the primal cause is rooted in the Chinese family value of ancestry, according to which gay men involuntarily but duly fulfil their filial marital and reproductive duties. Various measures in the short-, mid-, and long-term periods are recommended in order to cope with the macro- and micro-limitations of this challenge. This discussion also argues that the idea of homosexual-heterosexual marriage may not necessarily be problematic if it contains conjugal verity. It therefore considers the diversification of marriage to respect individual preferences and informed choices, manifesting social justice.

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**Cover image**

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