Occidentalizing Queerness: Understanding the Internalization of Queer-Phobic Discourses on the Chinese Internet

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Introduction

In February 2024, a debate started in a group chat on the Chinese communication platform QQ. When one person criticized the use of the derogatory term “tranny” (*ren yao*) and expressed acceptance of non-binary gender identities, the other members immediately labeled this acceptance as “foreign” or “Western” and decried the perceived “threat” posed by the LGBT movement to China, saying, “We are not in the United States. No political correctness, bro,” and “Don’t bring this chaos to China.”

In these responses, a clear sense of Occidentalism emerges. In contrast to Orientalism, which Edward Said defines as the Western construction of the “Orient” as exotic, backward, and fundamentally different to justify domination (2023), Occidentalism refers to the negative stereotyping of the Western world by ‘non-Westerners’, which often manifests as an expression of resentment toward Western culture and values or as a means of critiquing Western dominance and imperialism (Buruma & Margalit, 2005). By *occidentalizing queerness*—framing non-heteronormative sexuality and gender identities as “Western” and “non-Chinese”—the participants justified sexual conservatism as a defense of national identity (Zhang, 2017). This Occidentalist reaction is unsurprising within the contemporary Chinese digital sphere, where the discourse of “foreign threats” has become increasingly prominent. Propagated by the state through warnings about “foreign adversaries” who allegedly “mislead” public opinion and destabilize society (People's Daily Online, 2021), this rhetoric has deeply permeated online spaces, where dissenters are frequently labeled “spies” or “foreign agents”. Within this ideological framework, the participants in the QQ debate were not merely expressing personal discomfort with non-heteronormativity but were also reproducing a nationalist narrative in which “the LGBT movement” is positioned as a foreign intrusion threatening Chinese cultural and moral stability.

Existing studies on discourses of queerness, both queerphilic and queerphobic, predominantly attend to *what the discourses are* and *how the discourses are justified.* In particular, queerness is often considered a crucial instrument of otherization fundamental to the construction of national identity. On one hand, the embrace of LGBTQ+ rights is often framed as evidence of Western liberal modernity, justifying the marginalization and intervention of racialized others in the name of sexual progress (Dhawan, 2016). This geopolitical discourse was termed as “homonationalism” by Puar to describe how nation-states leverage LGBTQ+ inclusion to reinforce West supremacy (2007). On the other hand, queerness is frequently rejected as a “Western imposition,” framed as alien and threatening to cultural authenticity and sovereignty, and thereby excluded in the pursuit of a secure national identity (for example, Bacchetta, 1999, 2013; Bilgic, 2024; Conrad, 2001; Kulpa, 2020; Slootmaeckers, 2019). Such constructions of queerness as a threat and a source of erosion are also evident in the Chinese context (Zhang, 2017; Fu, 2024; Liu, 2024).

However, few studies have investigated the question of how and why such discourses are internalized. This project addresses this gap by investigating why Chinese internet users accept discourses that otherize non-heteronormative identities as “Western”. Rather than focusing solely on the rationale provided by internet users to justify their queerphobia, this study argues that internalization is not merely a rational process but is profoundly mediated by affect — understood as impersonal, pre-conscious intensities and bodily responses that precede cognitive processing and labeling (Massumi, 1995). Specifically, this project adopts a three-level framework:

Rationale: Firstly, I summarize the explicit rationales provided by users. This involves examining how they understand and frame ‘queerness’, the specific aspects of ‘queerness’ that they consider ‘western’, and the justifications they provide.

Affects: Secondly, I probe the affective dimensions mediating these discourses. Through close reading of their comments, this study examines their word choice, tone, metaphor, and direct expressions of emotion to identify the underlying affects, such as disgust and fear.

Contextualizing Affect: Finally, I situate these affects in the political context, arguing that state-led discourses have fostered an ingrained suspicion of identity-based grassroots movements. This environment predisposes individuals to affective responses that otherize decentralized political actions as ‘Western’.

Though there are multiple terminologies for divergent sexual or gender identities, such as ‘sexual minorities’ or ‘LGBTQ+’, this study uses the term "queerness" to encompass non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities deemed “deviant” from mainstream norms. While terms like “LGBTQ+” or “sexual minorities” are more commonly used by participants, “queerness” is intentionally selected because it reflects the varied and often contradictory ways participants themselves define the term. As detailed in the findings, what constituted “queerness” varies significantly among individuals, making this fluid term more analytically appropriate for capturing their diverse perceptions than a rigid categorical label.

This research contributes to the study of othering and queer-phobic discourses by shifting the analytical lens from the production and justification of these discourses to their reception and internalization among Chinese internet users. While existing scholarship has extensively mapped the narratives that frame non-heteronormative identities as “Western” and has highlighted the state’s role in producing and disseminating these discourses, there remains a lack of understanding regarding how these narratives are taken up, negotiated, or resisted by individuals. By focusing on the processes of internalization mediated by affect, this study adds depth to the literature on othering, revealing how structural forces and individual agency interact in shaping attitudes toward queerness.

Literature Review

Otherizing Queerness:
Politicians and ordinary people alike have used both the inclusion and exclusion of queerness to construct national identity by distancing themselves from a morally adverse ‘other’. On one hand, the embrace of queerness has been framed as evidence of the superiority of ‘Western’ liberal democracies over “homophobic”, “backward” non-Western societies. This Orientalism is articulated in Puar’s concept of homonationalism, in which the state has incorporated ‘proper’ queerness — white Euro-American, and middle-class — into its construction of a liberal, progressive national image, justifying the exclusion of the alleged “homophobic”, hypersexualized Islamic immigrant characterized by “toxic masculinity” (2007). This dichotomy between the ‘progressive’ West and the ‘backward’ ‘non-West’ is not merely a manifestation of individual prejudice, but rather a politically powerful discourse that legitimizes imperial interventions to the purportedly ‘backward’ countries (Dhawan, 2016).

On the other hand, the purportedly ‘backward’ countries have resisted such interventions through the rejection of queerness. The strategy of framing queerness as a ‘Western imposition’ — alien and hostile to the nation — allows marginalized ‘non-Western’ states to reject non-heteronormativity. In doing so, they uphold a national identity defined by traditional, heteronormative practices, known as ‘heteronationalism’ (Slootmaeckers, 2019). For instance, since the early twentieth century, homosexuality has been portrayed as antithetical to Irishness, particularly during periods of perceived national vulnerability (Conrad, 2001). Similar dynamics appear in post-communist Poland (Kulpa, 2020), where traditional values — namely Catholicism and heternomativity — were invoked in reconfigure Polishness in its struggle against the imagined communist hegemony that endorsed homosexuality. Additionally, in Turkey, emotions such as fear and disgust are politicized to dehumanize the homosexual “others”, reinforcing the desired heteronormative self. This dehumanization has led political elites, such as President Erdoğan, to legitimize violence against queer communities to maintain a “pure” national identity (Bilgic, 2024). Similarly, queerness is weaponized as a symbol of foreign decay to consolidate heteronormative ideals of Hindu nationalism (Bacchetta, 1999, 2013).

The rejection of queerness is also prominent on the Chinese internet, shaped by localized narratives of tradition, nationalism, and foreign threat. Specifically, the following discourses are commonly articulated to rationalize this rejection:

Antithetical to ‘Chinese Values’: Studies have found that queerphobic discourses on the Chinese internet frame homosexuality as abnormal, immoral, and corrosive to “traditional” Chinese gender norms and family structures (Zhang & Zhuang, 2023). These discourses link queerness with moral deviance, equating it with behaviors such as pedophilia or depicting it as a corruption of filial piety and gender hierarchies, thus positioning LGBTQ+ visibility as a contaminant undermining cultural authenticity (Fu, 2024). Macho nationalist discourses, characterized by patriarchal moral codes and the valorization of heterosexual masculinity, portray LGBTQ+ individuals as failures to conform to “normal” gender expectations (Fu, 2024), thus marking them as non-citizens (Liu, 2021). Similarly, Zhang and Zhuang (2023) demonstrate how delegitimization strategies employ moral evaluations and rationalizations to frame queerness as “unhealthy” and “infertile” (p. 1), reinforcing the perception of LGBTQ+ identities as pollutants that must be contained to safeguard public morality.

Invasion and Subversion: Queerness is not only portrayed as a corrosion of morality, but also as a political weapon wielded by external actors to weaken China from within. By constructing queerness as a geopolitical and existential threat, nationalist discourses target not only non-heteronormative individuals but also their sympathizers, positioning them as dangers that must be resisted to preserve national sovereignty and social stability. For instance, by conducting critical discourse analysis on comments from a mainland anti-gay community online, Liu (2021) illustrates that mainland internet users framed the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan as promoting Westernization and separatism, fostering fear that LGBTQ+ rights would fracture national unity and erode sovereignty. Similarly, online nationalist discourses depict queer activism as an insidious foreign agenda that “manipulates the LGBT” community. Fu’s study of *Weibo* [1]comments also demonstrate how LGBTQ+ rights are framed as Trojan horses of Western infiltration, with queer visibility depicted as part of a broader strategy of “peaceful evolution” (2024, p. 378). The framing of queerness as “garbage from the West” or “sexual chaos” is not merely rhetorical but serves to dehumanize queer subjects, rendering them hostile to the pursuit of a “pure” Chinese identity (Fu, 2024, p. 374).

Affects

The two aforementioned discourses, portraying queerness as either a contaminating individual action or a sinister political project, reflect two major affects—disgust and fear—that are mobilized in the occidentalization of queerness (Massumi, 1995).

Fear

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that fear does not reside within an object itself but circulates between individuals and becomes attached to objects through social and discursive practices (2014). Fear works by constituting the very objects that are deemed fearsome: emotions stick to certain figures such as the “foreign infiltrator” or “queer activists”, creating a shared sense of threat that binds a community together against a perceived common danger.

This fear-based logic is central to the occidentalization of queerness. As shown in prior sections, LGBTQ+ identities become symbols of foreign invasion that pose an existential threat to the nation-state. This incorporation into the nationalist rhetoric transforms the rejection of queerness from individual prejudice into a patriotic imperative—the defense of national boundaries against perceived foreign infiltration and subversion. Fear, in this sense, is mobilized to justify the exclusion of occidentalized queerness.

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[1] [1] Weibo (微博), literally “microblog,” is a dominant Chinese social media platform often described as a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook. Like Twitter, it is organized around public accounts and short posts. A key feature is its extensive and visible commenting system, where user replies to a post are displayed in a public thread, creating a primary space for mass communication and public debate.

Disgust

Additionally, Ahmed explores disgust, which defines the boundaries of the acceptable by marking what is considered repulsive. Drawing on Kristeva, Ahmed argues that disgust is linked to abjection—the expulsion of what threatens the boundaries of the self. By designating certain things or bodies as "out of place", disgust maintains social and bodily boundaries (2014). Paradoxically, the feeling of disgust involves a double movement that seems contradictory: On one hand, this feeling is built upon proximity: the disgusted object must be close enough to be sicken. On the other hand, once the object is close enough to be sensed, it is then repelled through recoil. This process is performative: the repetitive action of naming something as 'disgusting' generates the disgusting object it names.

Disgust functions as an affective mechanism for otherization, which transforms queer bodies into moral contaminants that must be expelled to secure national boundaries. This mechanism is widely used by non-state authorities, such as parents, teachers, and religious leaders, who regulate sexuality in everyday encounters, erecting "particular regimes of violence and domination" against sexual minorities (Ashworth, 2017). These narratives align with what Zhang (2017) describes as queer Occidentalism in China, where the "West" is framed as a source of moral decay, with LGBTQ+ visibility serving as a marker of foreign contamination that must be repelled to protect the integrity of the nation. By framing queerness as antithetical to "Chinese values" and as evidence of moral decline instigated by foreign interference (Fu, 2024), this discourse demarcates the boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable. It reinforces a heteronormative and patriarchal moral order by positioning foreign queer culture as a pollutant. Disgust thus becomes central to the everyday reproduction of national identity, transforming LGBTQ+ individuals into "matter out of place" that signifies disorder and decay, thereby legitimizing exclusionary practices (Bilgic, 2024).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the affective impacts—rather than the rationales—of engaging in online debates about sexual minorities among young adults in mainland China. To capture personal experiences and affects, the methodology centered on in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Importantly, two critical assumptions informed the research design:

First, this research consciously decoupled users' justifications from the sociological explanations for their beliefs. This was because (a) affective attitudes often precede and shape rationalization instead of the other way around (Wetherell, 2013), and (b) the rationales themselves are frequently contradictory and serve to justify established conceptions.

Second, this research did not assume a direct correlation between a user's identity and their political attitude. As is evidenced in the following sections, even individuals from within the queer community can exhibit homophobic attitudes. Therefore, a close, individual-leveled analysis was needed to investigate the interaction between individual experiences and the discourses they were exposed to.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through selective sampling from a specific online debate forum on the QQ platform, where the initial debate on sexual minorities had taken place. To meet ethical requirements, all participants were required to be above 18 years old. Eventually, I interviewed eight individuals (aged 18-22) whom I had established strong prior relationships, a factor intended to enable open discussions given the sensitivity of the topic.

The participants included two cis-gender males (both self-identifying as heterosexual) and six cis-gender females. Notably, five female participants identified as either homosexual or bisexual, with one participant's sexuality remaining unknown. This distribution was unexpected, considering the participants' previous engagement in debates that had demonstrated queerphobic inclinations.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual, audio-only online interviews conducted on QQ, each lasting approximately one hour. The choice of platform was intentional, as it provided a familiar and comfortable environment for the participants, thereby granting them a greater sense of autonomy and security.

The interviews were semi-structured, beginning with initiating questions such as "How did you first hear about the term 'sexual minority'?" and "How did you feel when you encountered these topics?". Subsequently, the participants were encouraged to guide the discussion toward the experiences and affects they considered most significant.

Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical protocols were followed to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. No real names, addresses, or personal images were collected. Each participant was assigned a random letter (A through H) to anonymize their data in all records. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained. Following data collection, interview transcripts were sent to each participant, allowing them to verify, clarify, or amend their statements to ensure the transcripts accurately represented their views and feelings.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, facilitated by NVivo. The analytical process involved a hybrid inductive-deductive approach to coding. An initial round of inductive coding was conducted to identify emergent themes and capture unexpected findings directly from the data. A subsequent round of deductive coding was applied to draw upon pre-existing concepts relevant to the research. Using NVivo's hierarchical charting tools, these codes were grouped into potential themes, reviewed for consistency, and finally synthesized into a coherent narrative presented in the following sections:

Conceptualizing Queerness

The narratives collected in this research highlight profound individual variation in what is considered 'queer'. Consequently, to understand *how* and *why* queerness has been occidentalized, I start with *what* queerness is conceived to be.

Results show that queerness is not understood as a monolithic entity. When asked about 'sexual minority', most participants began by naming specific categories—such as homosexuality and transgender identities—rather than discussing a homogeneous 'LGBTQ+ community'. This categorization is critical, as it underpins different degrees of, and rationales for, the occidentalization process. For instance, when asked about terms like 'LGBTQ+' and 'sexual minority', participant A argued that "LGBTQ+" is more "problematic" than "sexual minority". This is because "sexual minority"—which includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and asexual identities—is grounded in a binary gender framework and "kept between males and females". In contrast, the "Q+" (queer and beyond), which encompasses gender fluidity, was seen as enabling gender to be "created from air" and viewed as largely "unstable". Consequently, as 'Q+' introduces more ambiguity and further disrupts the gender binary, "LGBTQ+" was considered more "Western" than "sexual minority".

Nevertheless, despite disagreements about what "queerness" entails, nearly all participants emphasized a critical distinction between individual choice and political action. Specifically, "queerness" is considered a personal choice as long as it is confined to the private sphere and does not "disturb others" (as participant A, B, and G mentioned). On the other hand, when non-heteronormative actions leave the private sphere and become publicly visible or politically active—often associated with the term "LGBTQ+"—they are viewed as collective actions and become occidentalized.

In other words, in this research, participants were not occidentalizing queer practices or identities, but the politicization of such identities. Homosexual or bisexual people are not considered foreign to Chinese tradition as long as their actions remain private. Individual behaviors and identities were frequently historicized and legitimized through references to Chinese traditions (e.g., "龙阳之好" [the delight of Longyang], "断袖" [cutting the sleeve]), and thus were not automatically viewed as imported. However, political actions and organized advocacy were overwhelmingly framed as a

‘Western’ phenomenon. The “political actions” can be as collective as Pride Month parades (as participant A, D, F, and G suggested), or as individual as posting or commenting online to advocate for the rights of LGBTQ+ communities. This occidentalization was often tied to a sense of superiority, as illustrated by participant A’s remark:

(In contrast to the ‘West’ where LGBTQ+ communities are “always protesting and demonstrating” and “disrupt[ing] the functioning of the state”) “We’ve been living in the country for years and have never heard of any paranormal activities or disturbances happening anywhere. This basically shows that education in China has been quite effective.”

His response echoes the discourses of homonationalism. First, it posits a fundamental difference between China and “the West”. Second, this difference substantiates a distinction between a superior self from a backward “other”, asserts China’s superiority by claiming that it has successfully managed sexual “issues” that the West has failed to control.

The aforementioned quotation is one of many discourses that occidentalize queerness. In the following section, I present three commonly found discourses that otherize the politicization of queerness—namely, “disruptive”, “coercive”, and “liberal”. Notably, the seemingly contradictory discourses of “coercive” and “liberal” were provided by the same participants. In the end, I will discuss what this contradiction suggests and what it reveals about the political context in which this contradiction is made possible.

Disruptive

Political actions, such as Pride parades and protests, are framed as disruptive to the “normal functioning” of both the economy and the political system. Interestingly, although these discourses explicitly target LGBTQ+ activists, they can be broadly applied to contentious politics in general, including protests and electoral campaigns. For example, when discussing his previous aversion to the “LGBTQ+ community”, participant A remarked:

“Foreign LGBT groups — always protesting and demonstrating — disrupt the functioning of the state. ... When they protest, the whole street shuts down, and businesses on both sides have to stop operating.”

This notion of “disruption” extends beyond economic activities to include perceived interference in elections. As participant A argued:

“If a leader is elected with strong support from the LGBTQ community, their policies will naturally favor LGBTQ interests [...] If someone is elected primarily through LGBTQ backing, and their policies fail in other areas, it essentially means that the

group is influencing the operation of national governance and reducing governmental efficiency."

In this framing, "LGBTQ+ movements" become a microcosm of contentious politics. The perceived "disruptions" are not unique to LGBTQ+ movements but reflect broader anxieties about collective action and interest group politics that are considered "foreign" to Chinese politics.

Liberal

The majority of female participants described friends or acquaintances who had suffered from social exclusion and bullying. Although none believed they had personally experienced such mistreatment, two participants (D and G) explicitly highlighted a lack of parental understanding. While their parents did not overtly reject them, they expressed clear expectations for their daughters to enter heterosexual marriages and viewed their same-sex relationships as mere "friendships". Within this context, participant G distinguished between "China" and "the West", expressing admiration for the latter:

"Given the attitude of most Chinese people, even if someone discovered they were like that [a sexual minority], they probably wouldn't make it public. It's usually only people abroad who come out openly and confidently. Actually, I think... that's something admirable about foreigners—they truly acknowledge and accept their own identities. Coming out is something they can do openly, and they're not overwhelmed by public criticism."

Interestingly, G quickly added that she did not personally aspire to such openness:
"They're too enthusiastic. It feels like they'll pull you into that community, into that circle. I worry that this kind of thing might spread certain diseases. So I don't really support it."

In this case, language of contagion is echoed, reflecting anxieties about both social and physical contamination that are often projected onto Western queer communities.

Coercive

Although many lesbian and bisexual participants highlighted social pressures—such as stigmatization and bullying—faced by non-heteronormative individuals in China, they simultaneously criticized what they perceived as "coercive" Western practices that force "normal" people to accept queerness. This sentiment was most evident in the account of participant G, who self-identifies as a lesbian. In her narrative, coercive acceptance operates on both intellectual and physical levels:

Intellectual coercion includes:
"I heard that in the United States, some teachers seem to indoctrinate children with this knowledge when they're very young."

Physical coercion refers to forced medical interventions:
"I saw someone online sharing a true story. He said a boy in his relative's family grew up in the US and attended high school there. Around his senior year, he was tricked by classmates into undergoing sex reassignment surgery."

In these cases, LGBTQ+ movements in the US were conceived as an authoritarian imposition forcing every individual to live in a "queer" way. Interestingly, participant A, who echoed this authoritarianism, contrasted it with the Chinese modesty:

"Chinese people, in general — not counting the very rare exceptions — seem to be quite gentle and easygoing. [...] But in the West, this quality is still lacking. Including in Russia."

All of the discourses above mark a distinction between 'us' (China) and 'them' (the West), whose boundary is marked by the different "treatments" of queerness. In the following section, I examine two critical affects — fear and disgust — that are manifested in the aforementioned discourses, which mediate the internalization of queerphobic discourses.

Disgust:
Participant G's response offers a typical illustration of the double movement of disgust. On one hand, G expresses admiration for qualities associated with 'Western liberalism' — such as self-acceptance and freedom from public criticism — thereby establishing the necessary proximity for disgust to emerge. This acknowledgment draws her affectively close to the object of her attention. On the other hand, she immediately recoils from this proximity, stating, "I don't really aspire to that". Her subsequent justification — that foreigners are "too enthusiastic" and might "spread certain diseases" — echoes classic discourses of contamination. This reflects an underlying anxiety around breached boundaries: between what she perceives as the security and hygiene of the Chinese environment, and the insecurity and contagion of the West. By swiftly rejecting the Western model, G reinforces the symbolic boundary between 'us' and 'them', expelling the very object that had momentarily attracted her in order to reaffirm her own sense of purity and safety.

Fear:
The aforementioned discourses also suggest that the 'fearful object' is constructed through portraying an offensive 'other'. According to Sara Ahmed, fear is a circulating force that constitutes its object. In other words, the queer activist is not inherently fearsome. Instead, they are made into a figure of fear through narratives that attach anxiety about political stability to them. For example, participant A framed protests as a pathogen that causes the "normal functioning of the state" to shut down: Streets are blocked and businesses cease operating. In this process, a 'Western other' is constructed: The idea that a leader "elected primarily through LGBTQ backing"

would cause a failure in governance does not only frame queer activism as a contagious influence that corrupts from within, but also attaches this corruption to the ‘Western’ democratic political system that enables this corruption. In this case, ‘queerness’ became the object to which fear and anxiety about the foreign political system were attached, making queerness both ‘fearful’ and ‘alien’.

Participant A’s self-description of ‘relief’ further substantiates this otherization. Once he realized that the protests were kept out of the national boundary and that the LGBTQ+ issue could be “solved” through effective governance — by informing the community of the scope of activity permitted by the state and by avoiding trouble—he said he felt a sense of “relief”:

“I realized that such groups (sexual minorities) also objectively exist within our country, and they have not historically caused significant negative impacts. Therefore, I believe that this issue is not without solutions and just relieved. It’s none of my business. After all, I’m not that kind of person.”

In this case, “fear” and “relief” are two sides of the same coin, both suggesting that the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ must be kept, reinforcing a national identity defined against a perceived external threat. Fear operates when the ‘other’ is seen as penetrating or challenging national borders, while relief arises when those boundaries are perceived as secure. In the next section, I will discuss how the repulsion of ‘other’ reflects the political context in which the occidentalization takes place as a preliminary attempt to understand why such affects—fear and disgust—are created in the first place.

Contextualizing Affect

The fear for ‘Western queer activism’ can be used as a diagnosis of the perception of ‘the political’: What is politically acceptable and what is not? What actions can be taken and what cannot? How much power do individuals have?

The perception of queerness is shaped by understandings of what is politically possible. In this research, participants consistently conceptualized politically possible and desirable change as centralized, organized, and top-down—directed by authorities. Although asked initially about what they thought about sexual minorities, participant A quickly redirected the conversation to governmental strategy, recommending the following to Western politicians:

“We should educate them —make the government’s and the nation’s clear stance known to them [...] They should be guided in a positive direction. As long as the boundaries are clearly defined, there shouldn’t be much of a problem. It would also make national governance easier.”

Here, it is notable that solutions are proposed from a governmental perspective, positioning activists themselves as a “problem” to be managed by the state. Similarly, although adopting a more sympathetic stance toward individual rights, participant D also emphasized that state-led action is necessary — and potentially the only viable pathway:

“The change I imagine should come through internal reform, and the organization should be one with state influence [...] it should rise to a level with actual power and authority.”

This preference for state-sanctioned channels is rooted in the perception that other forms of politics — particularly contentious or grassroots politics — are either impossible or ineffective. As D explained:

“Because China’s democratic movements are still stalled. Throughout history, there has never been a period of true democracy — the kind involving broad public participation. In other words, the centralized power structure has not changed in recent years. So realistically speaking, this authoritative organization shouldn’t be a grassroots one.”

Moreover, engaging in grassroots politics was seen not only as ineffective but also as dangerous — potentially harming the very communities it claims to represent. Participant G highlighted this risk when explaining her reluctance toward public visibility:

“Political trends determine the fate of homosexuals. They might gain influence, or they might suffer terribly.”

When asked whether the homosexual community possesses political influence, G responded:

“I don’t think so. Even if they do have influence, it may only have a negative impact. [...] Politicians use support from these groups [LGBTQ+ community] to serve their own ambitions. [...] The ones at the top —after stirring up all this —just disappear quietly. It’s still this group that’s left behind to take the hit. So the backlash can be terrifying.”

In sum, participants’ views of Western queer activism were mediated by their perceptions of what is politically possible and their understanding of their own political power. The characterization of such activism as ‘Western’ and ‘chaotic’ (participant A, D, F, and G) was shaped by a deep-seated distrust of grassroots politics and the belief that meaningful change can only occur through state-directed channels.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the occidentalization of queerness in contemporary Chinese discourse is not a simple rejection of non-normative sexualities, but a targeted process of otherization. Through conducting semi-structured interviews with eight Chinese internet users aged 18 to 22, this research found that participants were not occidentalizing queerness itself, but rather the politicization of such identities—particularly protests—as ‘Western’. Through analyzing three dominant discourses that occidentalize the politicization of queerness—disruptive, liberal, and coercive, this research found that the internalization of queerphobic discourses is mediated by affects such as disgust and fear, which constitute a “fearsome” and “contaminating” Western queer activist as an offensive other. These affects are grounded in the understanding of what is politically possible, beneficial, and the lack of political influence of individuals.

As a strength, this research employed interviews, attending to individual experiences that are largely neglected by existing studies on queer-related discourses. By focusing primarily on the affects instead of their justification, this research illustrates the processes of discourse internalization that few studies have investigated. However, due to the limited time span of this research and the inability of online audio interviews to capture bodily responses, the study of affects is solely based on verbal analysis, which can potentially neglect the nuances. Additionally, while there is a preliminary attempt to contextualize these affects within participants’ understanding of politics, this study does not yet fully account for what initially shaped these affects. Future research could further explore how this state-centric understanding of politics originates.

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