

# **Hashtag IAmGay Campaign on Sina Weibo: A Case Study of the Online Activism and Discourse of LGBT Community in China**

**by**

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# Approval

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the characteristics of the online activism and discourse of the Chinese LGBT community in hashtag IAmGay campaign through content and discourse analysis. The case of this essay, hashtag IAmGay campaign, is a representation of the digital contention of Chinese society. Online activism has changed the passive position of Chinese netizens and built multiple connections with Chinese government. Chinese LGBT online activism is cultural and social, through which Chinese LGBT community challenged the government in an indirect way. By using appealing and challenging online discourse, Chinese LGBT community is trying to forge a nascent social movement and put forward demands for policy and official attitude change. Based on the content and discourse analysis, this study concludes with the discussion that there is possibility for China to constitute an emergent subaltern public sphere for LGBT community in cyberspace under the premise of not challenging the stability of the regime.

**Keywords:** LGBT community; Sina Weibo; online activism; public sphere; hashtag IAmGay campaign

*To people who made the Chinese LGBT community heard.*

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# Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures.....	viii
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review.....</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Online activism and its presentation in China.....	7
2.2 Chinese LGBT community, identity, discourse and activism.....	10
2.3 Sina Weibo, democratic discourse and public sphere.....	13
<b>Chapter 3 Analysis on #IAmGay Campaign.....</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 Methodology.....	18
3.2 Content analysis design.....	19
3.3 Content analysis and findings.....	21
3.4 Discourse analysis.....	27
<b>Chapter 4 Discussions on #IAmGay: Meaning and Future for LGBT Community.....</b>	<b>33</b>
4.1 From cultural regulation to online activism.....	33
4.2 Special interaction between LGBT community and Chinese government.....	35
4.3 A possible subaltern public sphere for LGBT community.....	37
<b>Chapter 5 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>40</b>
References.....	42

## List of Tables

Table 1: #IAmGay campaign content coding table .....	21
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## List of Figures

Figure 1: The number of verified users in Top20 and Top100 Weibo.....	22
Figure 2: The ratio of different themes in Top100 Weibo.....	24
Figure 3: The ratio of major forms for Top100 Weibo.....	26



# Chapter 1 Introduction

China's 'microblogging revolution' broke out in 2009, the year the Chinese government blocked Twitter and shuttered its domestic media. With the government's approval, Sina Weibo, 'a mashup of Twitter and Facebook', rose to become the most popular microblog in China.<sup>1</sup> Amongst all social media used by Chinese online users, Sina Weibo, often called Weibo, is one of the most frequently used and presents interesting qualities. On August 3, 2017, China Internet Network Information Center reported the number of China's netizens has grown to 731 million, and the Internet penetration rate has increased to 50.3% by the end of 2016. The usage rate of Weibo has risen to 38.7%, making it the third most used social media app in China.<sup>2</sup> "Like all other media outlets in China, Sina Weibo is also censored, but is considered one of the freest online platforms in China."<sup>3</sup>

With millions of users active on the platform, Sina Weibo has become the largest public opinion field where Chinese people facilitate discussions, form opinions and find people with similar interests. Meanwhile, with the power of social media, Chinese people can interact with mainstream media, leading to an online interaction with Chinese government often characterized by a fight for more democratic discourse and practical policy change. As Internet researchers state:

"heavy self-censorship enforced by Sina Weibo, this mainstream platform has developed into a kind of tabloid press, raising scandals, mobilizing capricious online public opinion and in some cases effecting

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Su, "A virtual public sphere and its limitations – microblog, online civic engagement in China and its interplay with the state," *The Journal of International Communication*, (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2015.1076734>

<sup>2</sup> "The 40<sup>th</sup> Internet Development Survey Report of China," China Internet Network Information Center, accessed August 3rd, 2017, [http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwjtjbg/201708/t20170803\\_69444.htm](http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwjtjbg/201708/t20170803_69444.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Su, "A virtual public sphere and its limitations – microblog, online civic engagement in China and its interplay with the state," *The Journal of International Communication*, (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2015.1076734>

'virtual mob justice'. Their enormous numbers, the unusually social and active personality of Chinese netizens, and the mistrust of official information sources have helped Sina Weibo become a contested force in Chinese politics."<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, there have been cases of media phenomenon on Sina Weibo which not only bring public issues to a national level but also involve massive societal discussion, debate and activism. There arises prominent media phenomenon, which has gone to the lengths of successfully influencing the government's decision-making and policy announcement. In contemporary China, Chinese people are facing a great number of social struggles which leads to the frequent appearance of social issues, public emergency events and trust crises. Social media users are no longer traditional mainstream media audiences but rather are active, influential and communicative online actors, making their opinions louder than ever before. As Yochai Benkler states, "The easy possibility of communicating effectively into the public sphere allows individuals to reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in a conversation" and "citizens no longer need be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes."<sup>5</sup> During the structural transformation of society and the discursive realm, Chinese netizens have more power and freedom to participate in the discussion of social issues and even challenge the authoritativeness of the Chinese government. More importantly, the Internet and social media platforms such as Sina Weibo play a critical role in promoting public opinion and its interaction with the government. Thus, the study for Sina Weibo and its function in the development of democratic discourse and practice becomes significant through the enlargement of the market economy, the rise of the middle class and the intensification of globalization within the nation.

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sullivan, "A tale of two microblogs in China," *Media Culture & Society*, volume 34, (September 2012): 773-783, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443712448951>

<sup>5</sup> Benkler, Yochai. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* / Yochai Benkler. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 213-72.

The Hashtag IAmGay campaign on Sina Weibo reflects the unusual interaction and dynamic between Chinese communities with the Chinese government, especially due to the specificity of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community in China. On April 13, 2018, Sina Weibo made a surprising announcement, launching a "clean-up campaign", aimed at removing content including images, videos, text and cartoons that were related to pornography, violence, or homosexuality for the next three months.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, a popular Weibo account called the Gay Voice which has more than 345,000 followers and is being seen as the most influential LGBT related account announced that it would cease updating any news or podcasts. According to Global Times, these two announcements aroused anger among Chinese LGBT groups, who led a swift counterstrike by posting photos and comments on Weibo with the hashtag IAmGay. Related content using the hashtag has been viewed over 600 million times. Under such pressure, Weibo reversed its decision on April 16, saying the clean-up campaign does not include homosexual content.<sup>7</sup> Even the WeChat account of People's Daily Commentary has posted an article about this incident, explaining that homosexuality is not a disease and "different fireworks can also blossom."<sup>8</sup>

China is known as a traditional and authoritarian country. Despite its advancement in economy and culture, the attitude towards the LGBT community has always been variable and vague. The beginning of the Chinese government's protection LGBT rights is even earlier than that of United States: "China's landmarks are the 1997 decriminalization of 'hooliganism' -- which was widely assumed to include homosexuality, although the law was never explicit on this point -- and the 2001

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<sup>6</sup> "China's Sina Weibo backtracks from gay content ban after outrage," *BBC News*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43779650>

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Yiqian, "Chinese gay apps stop short of fighting homosexual ban on social media," *Global Times*, April 17, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1098382.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> Yi Nuo, "Different fireworks can also blossom," *People's Daily Commentary*, accessed June 19, 2018, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/DvQGVmHrgn\\_yfVCg-2xYAA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/DvQGVmHrgn_yfVCg-2xYAA)

decision to remove homosexuality from the list of mental diseases.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the amendment that presumably acts to reduce stigma toward LGBT groups, the Chinese government has never made a public statement about the rights of LGBT people. Instead, the mainstream media which is controlled by the Party featured several coverages about the situation of Chinese LGBT communities during these years. The fact that the hashtag IAmGay campaign received such a quick response from the mainstream media (People’s Daily) itself is a “success” for the campaign. In fact, Gay Voice, the influential Sina Weibo activist, made an announcement after surviving the clean-up campaign: “Thank you for everyone who anticipated in this campaign. Because of every single one of you, the viewing number of #IAmGay campaign has surpassed 500 million within 48 hours, making it the most viewed LGBT Weibo topic in Chinese internet history.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the hashtag IAmGay campaign made an important impact on LGBT history in China, and this is one of the reasons I chose this case to study the online activism and discourse of the LGBT community in China.

Another reason for my selection of this case is that the interaction between the government and the LGBT community in China is rare and interesting. Especially for myself as someone who grew up in the north east region of China, an area considered to be very traditional. Compared with my hometown, Beijing is much more international and diverse than I thought. During undergraduate study, I was lucky enough to know some friends who were openly gay or lesbian to their good friends which gave me opportunities to know and interact with the community in a different way. From my perspective, the activities and impact of LGBT groups in Beijing is typically reserved for the private realm, which not only brings concern for the living situation of LGBT

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<sup>9</sup> Tabitha Speelman, “Tiptoeing out of the closet: The history and future LGBT rights in China,” *The Atlantic*, August 21, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/08/ptiptoeing-out-of-the-closet-the-history-and-future-of-lgbt-rights-in-china/278869/>

<sup>10</sup> 同志之声 (@同志之声), “感谢每一位参与发声的你。没有阿声的 48 小时所发生的一切, 足以证明: 发声才有可能改变,” Weibo, April 15, 2018, [https://m.weibo.cn/status/4229438965228604?wm=3333\\_2001&from=1086193010&sourcecitype=weixin&featurecode=newtitle](https://m.weibo.cn/status/4229438965228604?wm=3333_2001&from=1086193010&sourcecitype=weixin&featurecode=newtitle) (translated by author)

individuals but also raises questions about discourse involving the Chinese LGBT community and their relationship with the government. The hashtag IAmGay campaign captures my attention due to two reasons. First, as a Sina Weibo user, I found that the #IAmGay trend was the number one trend on Weibo for several hours, then disappeared and was followed by an apology and policy change within Weibo, making this story a major headline throughout media agencies and platforms. Second, many friends of mine became involved in this campaign and some of them even posted this story on Twitter and Facebook, trying to bring more international attention to this campaign. For me, this is the first time to see such strong activism and unity from the Chinese LGBT community. Thus, I believe that by analyzing this case we could understand more about the discourse and activism of LGBT community in China under the context of new media and cyber social movement.

As I mentioned before, the current online world has brought many possibilities to the public for political participation and engaging in discursive expression. As Zizi Papacharissi states, "The Internet and related technologies have created a new public space for politically orientated conversation; whether this public space transcends to a public sphere is not up to the technology itself."<sup>11</sup> China, as an authoritarian country, has always followed the "from top to bottom" political model, while in the hashtag IAmGay campaign the situation changed. Facing the development of social media, the Chinese government has realized the power of netizens and has started to try to govern the country online which allows for the public to be heard in a different way. Nowadays, the interaction between the Chinese government and the public has been a unique feature of China's online democratic practice: "It turns out that Chinese government create a 'second intimate sphere' which becomes a part of the virtual public sphere and give the public opportunity to counter the government through

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<sup>11</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, "The virtual sphere: The Internet as a public sphere," *New Media & Society* volume 4 (2002):9- 27.

commentary—the forming of public opinion.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, with the understanding of the China’s special situation, this study could also lead to the discussion of a possible channel for interaction and communication between the public and the Chinese government.

Thus, in this essay I want to discuss the following questions based on the hashtag IAmGay campaign. What are the characteristics of the online discourse and activism of LGBT community in China? Why did this campaign happen and what characteristics allowed it to become the biggest online LGBT campaign so far? What possible influences or expectations does this campaign bring to the future of the LGBT community in China?

To achieve my research purpose, I arrange my essay into five chapters. Following the introduction where I have provided the basic background and research questions, the second chapter will mainly provide a literature review on Weibo and its relationship with political engagement, online activism and LGBT community discourse in China. In chapter 3, I will focus on the case study through content analysis and discourse analysis based on the top 100 Weibo under the hashtag IAmGay topic. With examined data and productive cognition towards the topic, chapter 4 will lead to further discussion about the deeper factors behind this campaign and its possible meaning for the LGBT community in China. The final chapter will conclude the study’s findings and serve as room for discussion.

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<sup>12</sup> Liangen Yin and Min Huang, “Governmental Weibos: A Combination of Public Sphere in Appearance and Pseudo Private Sphere,” *Journalism of International Communication* (2016): 31-51

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Online activism and its presentation in China

With the proliferation of the Internet and digital tools, more and more people have become involved with the technology boom and Internet opinion leaders are trying to use this unprecedented opportunity to make political and social change. Due to the convenience of online social networks, web-based communities are interacting in new and different ways unique to the Internet, in contrast to traditional communities which are mostly based on face to face interaction and communication. "Web-based communities constitute a fluid and open-ended social body that primarily relies on voluntary participation, collaboration, mobility and flexibility."<sup>13</sup> Thus, online communication activity has shown greater possibilities in terms of widespread communication and engagement, which not only represents the power of cyberspace interaction but also give births opportunities for online activism.

Sandor Vegh defines online activism as a "politically motivated movement relying on the Internet."<sup>14</sup> In other words, activists now take advantage of the Internet revolution to pursue their traditional goals, which mainly focus on confronting and resisting the authorities whose political interest is counter to that of the activists.<sup>15</sup> It is important to define the concept of the type of online activism I aim to study in this essay. In the digital world, many activists or communities try to use activism to cause irrational discussions or exhibit offensive actions to empower their positions against the government which is considered a traditional version of activism. Others, however, are now trying to use the Internet, forming opinion groups, participating in political activities

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<sup>13</sup> Yang, Guobin, and Zhang, Ning. "Web-based Backpacking Communities and Online Activism in China: Movement without Marching," *China Information* 28, no. 2 (2014): 276-96.

<sup>14</sup> Sandor Vegh, "Classifying forms of online activism: The case of cyberprotests against the World Bank," in Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers (eds) *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, New York and Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2003, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

or mobilizing netizens to engage with the society, in a more political way. The new version of activism shows more peace and rationality, making this type of activism more popular and useful when it comes to political deliberation. Therefore, in this essay, the activism I will examine highlights the pacifistic nature of activists or netizens, noting how they “do not call for cyberwar, acts of hacktivism or other sorts of offensive online and offline actions but seek to bring social justice and improve well-being within their sphere of influence, sometimes even soliciting support from the government to achieve these goals.”<sup>16</sup>

Online activism first appeared in China in the late 1990s.<sup>17</sup> Over the years, despite tight censorship from the government, it has become more frequent and influential. The fast-growing Internet gives the public another window to capture information or news outside the mainstream media framework and break the limitation of the traditional “watch and listen” model. Yang Guobin defines online activism in a broader level. In his words, there are four types of online activism: “cultural, social, political, and nationalistic.”<sup>18</sup> Cultural and social online activism often focus on lifestyles, identities and the rights of disadvantaged groups. However, political online activism stands out for its function of expressing concern for “human rights, political reform, and other issues that touch directly on how China is governed, by whom, and on what basis.” Lastly, there is nationalism which “stands out by virtue of its frequency, scale, and impact. Nationalistic protest in cyberspace often involves large-scale online mobilizations and the use of radical tactics such as ‘hacktivism.’<sup>19</sup>

Here, based on Yang’s definition, the LGBT activism should be included in cultural or social online activism instead of within political forms of activism. However,

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<sup>16</sup> Yang, Guobin, and Zhang, Ning. “Web-based Backpacking Communities and Online Activism in China: Movement without Marching,” *China Information* 28, no. 2 (2014): 276-96.

<sup>17</sup> Yang, Guobin. “Online Activism.” *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 33-36.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



from my perspective, I argue that even though cultural and social online activism mostly focus on life related content, they still have the potential to help and mobilize people engaging with the political discourse. For instance, a 21-year-old man named Wei Zexi passed away on April 12, 2016 due to unsuccessful treatment by the Second Hospital of the Beijing Armed Police Corps, a fact discovered by Wei's family through a Baidu search (Chinese Google).<sup>20</sup> The story has reignited public concern over Baidu's advertising ethics, following an earlier scandal where it admitted it allowed healthcare companies to moderate online health forums. On the popular microblogging network Sina Weibo, the hashtag #Wei Zexi Baidu Advertising Incident# has been trending for days as netizens have called for a boycott of Baidu.<sup>21</sup> After the explosion of public opinion on Weibo, the government launched a campaign against online advertisement by the Cyberspace Administration of China. In this case, online activism started in a social way based on Yang's definition yet turned political in the form of an appeal made by the public. Thus, I argue in this essay that like the similar to the previous example, LGBT activism in China could also be seen as a political type of online activism due to its interaction with the government and policy change.

In terms of the special conditions required for Chinese online activism to occur, Yang Guobin argues that there are three necessities. First is "the existence of a fledgling civil society of grassroots civic groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and online communities." Here Yang Guobin stresses the importance of online communities in their capacity to contribute to action and change in the real world, given that "anonymity can make senseless verbal attacks easier, but it also allows netizens to express themselves more freely than usual." Second is the development of the Chinese Internet economy. Third is the creativity of Chinese netizens.<sup>22</sup> Based

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<sup>20</sup> "China Focus: Investigation into Baidu after student death," *Xinhua News*, accessed June 24, 2018, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/02/c\\_135328902.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/02/c_135328902.htm)

<sup>21</sup> "China investigates search engine Baidu after student's death," *BBC News*, accessed June 24, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-36189252>

<sup>22</sup> Yang, Guobin. "Online Activism." *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 33-36.

on my own experience, the creativity of Chinese netizens makes a huge contribution to the online activism which not only has effective influence on challenging the authority of the Chinese government, but also is tactful in avoiding strong censorship and algorithmic language with purified function. Guobin argues that Chinese netizens have negotiated political control in cyberspace through rightful resistance, artful contention, and digital hidden transcripts.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Chinese netizens bring digital contention to another level, making online protests more playful and even entertaining. Yet, scholars like Jens Damm challenge the optimistic situation of online activism in China. Damm argues that the internet is leading to the spatial fragmentation and localization of Chinese society, creating numerous "isolated niches," and commercialization of the Chinese internet has rendered most online discourse trivial and apolitical.<sup>24</sup>

Based on these statements towards online activism and its presentation in China, I argue that Chinese online activism is the result of interaction among technology development, awakening of democratic consciousness and political censorship. The concept of online activism should include more variables under the context of Chinese political structures. With the playfulness of online discourse, Chinese netizens are attempting to break political limitations and facilitate democratic deliberation. Undoubtedly, the Chinese online activism I will study in this essay is a progressive signal and complement to Chinese political life.

## **2.2 Chinese LGBT community, identity, discourse and activism**

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<sup>23</sup> Yang, Guobin. *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online / Guobin Yang*. Contemporary Asia in the World. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 57-60

<sup>24</sup> Damm, Jens. "The Internet and the Fragmentation of Chinese Society." *Critical Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2007): 273-94.

As online activism is dependent on the formation of certain communities and opinions, it is important to understand the Chinese LGBT community and internal dynamics to comprehend LGBT discourse and activism. First, I would like to explain what “community” means for Chinese LGBT people. As Chinese scholar Wu Changchang argues, the LGBT community in China carries different connotations and experiences than LGBT communities in the western world. The LGBT community in the western world is defined with relation to a more mature and real life-based space for forming community and uniting people for social movement. However, “community” in China is translated into “she qu” which generally means a national management model at the grass-roots level. Thus, “community” for China is more of a political concept, referring to an administrative region.<sup>25</sup> Since parades and protests are sensitive in China, the Chinese LGBT community is more virtual and online-based, utilizing the anonymity and virtual environment of the Internet to establish an ideal and safe place for Chinese LGBT people to socialize and communicate with one another.

“In many parts of the world, the wide availability of information and communication technologies (ICTs) makes it possible for ordinary citizens, especially those from marginalized communities to express themselves and advocate for different causes in a public space.”<sup>26</sup> With the formation of LGBT online communities, Chinese LGBT people have a public yet private place to exchange opinions, form interest groups and identify themselves with practical actions—coming out online or in real life. As Amit Kama states, mainland China is currently undergoing a global-to-local transformation by which LGBT individuals and communities are beginning to conceptualize their existence in terms that demarcate their identities as different from

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<sup>25</sup> Wu, Changchang, “Tongzhi, Identity and Space.” *Communication Forum of China*, (2006): 698-14.

<sup>26</sup> Cao, Jin, and Lei Guo. “Chinese “Tongzhi” Community, Civil Society, and Online Activism.” *Communication and the Public* 1, no. 4 (2016): 504-08.

previous generations of homosexuals.<sup>27</sup> However, forming identity for the Chinese LGBT community is not easy. According to Timothy Hildebrandt, "being gay in China involves crossing both cultural and national boundaries; transcending local identities is necessary for owning a global gay identity."<sup>28</sup> Altman makes a similar argument that globalized gay identity makes it different for local LGBT people to assert an authentically 'gay Asian' identity.<sup>29</sup> In fact, what it means to be "Asian gay" or "Chinese gay" is missed through the popularization of being a "Western gay" (coming out of the closet). Thus, Timothy continues to argue that the globalized identity (European and American identity) could have practical implications for the LGBT activism.<sup>30</sup> Unlike LGBT groups within Europe and America, Chinese LGBT activists are more likely "disinterested in same-sex marriage, placing it relatively low on the list of priorities for their organizations. They desire more fundamental 'gay rights' such as eliminating employment discrimination and diminishing family pressures,"<sup>31</sup> because they know that Chinese LGBT community should put their priority in solving the most urgent local problems.

As Timothy Hildebrandt states, three key factors could help us understand the existence of Chinese LGBT activism in general: governmental policy change, economic development and the government's interest in controlling the growing problem of HIV/AIDS in China which creates an NGO base for the LGBT community.<sup>32</sup> Legalization of homosexuality is a big step for the Chinese LGBT community. The fast-

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<sup>27</sup> Kama, Amit. "Glocalization Trajectories of LGBT Identities and Politics in China: A Review of Queer/Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism, and Media Cultures." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 14, no. 2 (2017): 237-40.

<sup>28</sup> Hildebrandt, Timothy. "Development and Division: The Effect of Transnational Linkages and Local Politics on LGBT Activism in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 77 (2012): 845-62.

<sup>29</sup> Altman, Dennis. "Global Gaze/Global Gays." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 418.

<sup>30</sup> Hildebrandt, Timothy. "Development and Division: The Effect of Transnational Linkages and Local Politics on LGBT Activism in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 77 (2012): 845-62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

growing economy has given many Chinese LGBT people the chance to move from rural areas and work in a bigger city, with potentially greater opportunities and avenues for self-expression. With the importance of controlling HIV/AIDS, more NGOs have money to deliver better public services which bring positive influences on the LGBT community. These three key factors deeply change the living situation for Chinese LGBT people, not only do they provide help and service to the people in need, but they also unite people and give them chances to form an alternative “society”. Due to the specificity of LGBT activism in China, the discourse of Chinese LGBT communities is different from the western world. As Cao Jin and Guo Lei states, “in a heavily regulated political environment, many civil rights organizations choose to take a non-confrontational approach, demonstrating a type of activism with Chinese characteristics,” and the discourse tends to “play it safe and test the limits.”<sup>33</sup>

Based on the argument about the Chinese LGBT community, identity, activism and discourse, the authors draw a bigger picture for us. Under the political economic structure of China, LGBT people have to overcome social, cultural and political obstacles to form community, identify themselves and fight for a better living space. As Liu Petrus states, “a culture of homonormativity has emerged in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) after the state officially entered a postsocialist era by adopting experiments in neoliberalism and privatization.”<sup>34</sup> Due to the limitations imposed by current social and cultural policy and regulation, Chinese online activism lacks the independence to engage with political discourse which makes it more playful and private.

## **2.3 Sina Weibo, democratic discourse and public sphere**

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<sup>33</sup> Cao, Jin, and Lei Guo. “Chinese “Tongzhi” Community, Civil Society, and Online Activism.” *Communication and the Public* 1, no. 4 (2016): 504-08.

<sup>34</sup> Liu, Petrus. “Chapter 1,” *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas / Petrus Liu*. 2015.

Sina Weibo, unlike other social media in China, not only concentrates on building online interpersonal relationship and promoting social interactions within a virtual society, but also generates wide participation of group discussion, opinion formation and online activism with large number of web-based users. With its advanced technology, Weibo makes sure every user has their own space to voice opinions and form discussions under their own posts and also in the broader Weibo society. Normally, people use hashtags to categorize related topics for certain issues or emergency events. Tracking specific hashtags makes it easier for users to follow the process of the events they are interested in and form discussions with other people. As Wendy Su points out, “user relationships on Weibo may be asymmetric; any user can follow any other user and add comments to a feed while reposting. The simple, asymmetric and distributed nature of Weibo allows an original feed to become a live viral conversation stream.”<sup>35</sup> Under the agenda-setting of Weibo, users are encouraged to create more content in the commentary rather than create a new post. Through viewing and discussing the popular commentary determined by the number of “likes”, more people would get involved in the discussion for certain issues, making the public voice louder and stronger. Gillian Bolsover describes this function as a snowball effect, arguing that the structural choice would likely enlarge the influence of popular comments “where the number of users who have performed one of these functions is presented in a different location from the button that would allow the viewing user to do the same.”<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, due to the complexity and interaction between Weibo and the Chinese government, it is important to point out the censorship and governmental purpose of Weibo. On the one hand, the Weibo community has its own regulative

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<sup>35</sup> Wendy Su, “A virtual public sphere and its limitations – microblog, online civic engagement in China and its interplay with the state,” *The Journal of International Communication*, (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2015.1076734>

<sup>36</sup> Gillian Bolsover, “Harmonious communitarianism or a rational public sphere: a content analysis of the differences between comments on news stories on Weibo and Facebook,” *Asian Journal of Communication* (2017):115-133, DOI:10.1080/01292986.2016.1214743.

policy and censorship rules, but it is criticized for its intimate relationship and cooperation with the government. According to the Regulation of Weibo Community, “those postings that oppose the cardinal principles of the PRC’s Constitution, endanger national unification, sovereignty and territory integration, disclose national secrets, ...and incite illegal association and protests are forbidden.”<sup>37</sup> Under the tight policy control, the public have demonstrated great adaptability and creativity when posting their opinions as a form of contestation. As Han Rongbin points out, “in the cat-and-mouse censorship game, though the state enjoys the advantage of coercive power over forum managers and netizens, forum managers and netizens evade state censorship through technological know-how and creativity.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, “often times before the authority aware, live streams of multimedia postings already cause big stirs in the online community.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Weibo appeals to the Chinese government in a number of ways: promoting transparency, fighting corruption and publicizing information.<sup>40</sup> The interaction between the Chinese government and the public has been a unique feature of China’s online democratic practice. The central government and local governments now become active on Weibo, not only having their own accounts but also creating substantial content and responding to social issues daily. Thus, the interaction between Weibo, the public and the Chinese government does not follow a typical top-down model, but rather a more dynamic one with strategy, openness and democratic possibility.

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<sup>37</sup> “Regulation of Weibo Community,” Sina Weibo, accessed July 9, 2018, <http://service.account.weibo.com/roles/guiding>

<sup>38</sup> Han, Rongbin. "Challenging the Regime, Defending the Regime: Contesting Cyberspace in China." 2012, 172.

<sup>39</sup> Wendy Su, “A virtual public sphere and its limitations – microblog, online civic engagement in China and its interplay with the state,” *The Journal of International Communication*, (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2015.1076734>

<sup>40</sup> Bei Guo, “Social Media in Contemporary China: A Transformative Public Sphere?” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, volume 119, (2017) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Considering the powerful social and cultural function of Weibo, many scholars have argued the possibility of Weibo promoting democratic discourse and building a public sphere; however, others find it difficult to discuss democratic discourse and political deliberation under the authoritarian national structure of China.<sup>41</sup> They acknowledge the importance of Habermas's idea of a complete independent public sphere without governmental constraints placed on publics. Under this reflection, Huang strongly argues that the "binary oppositions between state and civil society, and public and private, upon which notions of civil society and the public sphere are predicated, are not appropriate for China."<sup>42</sup> He proposes a ternary conception, the third realm between state and society within which both parties participate.<sup>43</sup> Based on his argument, we could further discuss the implications for Weibo and its function in building an online public sphere. In contemporary China, the interaction between the public and the state is not a one-way engagement. The public do not want to destroy the authority of the state. Instead, their aim is to use collective actions to negotiate with the state for social justice and necessary policy change for the betterment of society. In return, the state uses political surveillance to protect its authority while allowing certain communication and tries to build more public trust and solve social issues. It is important to understand the online politics in China with the understanding of ideology of Chinese netizens' interaction with the government. As Han states, "Understanding netizens' activism merely as a strike against censorship or the regime has the danger of over-interpreting netizens' online activities while adopting a very limited view of political participation."<sup>44</sup> Through theorizing the relationship between Weibo, online activism, democratic discourse and the public sphere, we could understand the transformation of contemporary China and how its political structure influences online

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<sup>41</sup> Wakeman, Frederic. "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture." *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993): 108-38.

<sup>42</sup> Zhang, Ning, and Guobin Yang. "Web-based Backpacking Communities and Online Activism in China: Movement without Marching." *China Information* 28, no. 2 (2014): 276-96.

<sup>43</sup> Huang, Philip C.C. "'Public Sphere'/'Civil Society' in China?: The Third Realm between State and Society." *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993): 216-40.

<sup>44</sup> Han, Rongbin. "Challenging the Regime, Defending the Regime: Contesting Cyberspace in China." 2012, 172.



democratic participation. With the flourishing of modern technology, the Chinese government and netizens are changing the traditional political discourse into a more dynamic and interactive form within which policy change and social movement are possible.

## Chapter 3 Analysis on #IAmGay Campaign

### 3.1 Methodology

Based on the discussion and arguments in the literature review, this chapter will detail the hashtag IAmGay campaign through content and discourse analysis and try to distinguish the basic characteristics of Chinese online LGBT activism and discourse in this campaign. According to Gay Voice, the hashtag IAmGay campaign is the most viewed LGBT Weibo topic in Chinese internet history with 500 million views in less than 48 hours. Until now, the topic already has 710 million views. With the positive response of Chinese mainstream media and quick policy change administered by Weibo, the author believes this case is more representative for analyzing Chinese LGBT online activism and discourse due to the interaction among three parties.

Content analysis is defined as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use.<sup>45</sup> In hashtag IAmGay campaign, the coding rules are targeted at user type, gender, theme, sentence length, tone and form. At this point, content analysis as a methodology reflects the complexity and composition of this campaign through numbers and calculation. It follows the loop of texts-content analysis-results-texts. However, without any help of computer science and algorithms, I try to use top100 Weibo instead of all Weibo to analyze the characteristics of this campaign. Thus, the conclusion and consumption of this case is based on the popularity and representation of data which mainly shows the mainstream trend, tendency and current situation of Chinese LGBT online activism in the hashtag IAmGay campaign.

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<sup>45</sup> Krippendorff, Klaus., and Mary Angela. Bock. *The Content Analysis Reader / Klaus Krippendorff, Mary Angela Bock [editors]*. 2009.

To understand the discursive implications of the Chinese LGBT community, the author believes that the elements of discourse analysis can be useful for this case. As Potter and Wetherell argue, discourse analysis focuses on the text or the talk itself without seeing them as a medium or tool. Instead, it is interested in the world that the text and talk are articulating.<sup>46</sup> For analysts, the purpose of discourse analysis is to “explore the relationship between discourse and reality,” and “without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse, we cannot understand our reality, our experiences, or ourselves.”<sup>47</sup> The complexity and multi-meaning of Chinese language is hard to understand when it comes to avoiding censorship. Under these arguments, discourse analysis could help us understand the dynamics within the Chinese LGBT community, and also bring discursive connections between the interactions between the LGBT community and the Chinese government. In this chapter, the author will bring specific examples to analyze the discursive characteristics of hashtag IAmGay campaign.

### **3.2 Content analysis design**

To analyze the characteristics of Chinese LGBT online activism in hashtag IAmGay, as shown in the table below, the coding categories are designed into six categories: user type, gender, theme, sentence length, tone and form. The top100 Weibo inside the hashtag IAmGay topic are listed in order based on the number of likes and comments they receive. Due to the openness of Weibo topics, everyone can engage with the topic using hashtag IAmGay whenever they want, meaning some of the top Weibo examples were not sent when during the campaign. In this sense, the

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<sup>46</sup> Potter, Jonathan, and Margaret Wetherell. *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour* / Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell. 1987.

<sup>47</sup> Phillips, Nelson., and Cynthia Hardy. *Discourse Analysis Investigating Processes of Social Construction* / Nelson Phillips, Cynthia Hardy. *Qualitative Research Methods*; v. 50. Thousand Oaks, [Calif.] ; London: SAGE, 2002.

author set the time duration between April 13 to 16<sup>48</sup> to ensure the collected Weibo data can be representative for the online activism in study.

In this paper, the identifications for certain coding categories are as follows.

User type is divided into two types, ordinary user and verified user. On Weibo, if you are active and influential enough, you can apply to become a verified user as an identity in Weibo community. There are three major types of verification: “Red Star” and “Yellow V” are for active users and self-media, “Yellow V” can be upgraded into “Red V”; “Blue V” is for government, company, media and organization; “Golden V” is for public figures and web celebrities whose Weibo followership surpasses ten million every month.

Attitude and tone are identified as positive, neutral and negative. Here, the author wants to clarify the difference between attitude and tone on Weibo. Weibo allows users to use text, pictures or video to express their feelings and opinions. Thus, attitude on Weibo is reflected by various content forms which means the content itself is usually the combination of text plus pictures or text plus video. However, when it comes to the tone of Weibo, it is generally reflected through the analysis of text itself.

Sentence length is put into three categories: 0—50 words, 50—140 words and above 140 words. In the past Weibo enforced a word limitation of 140 words. On November 14, 2016, Weibo announced that it would break the 140-word limitation and

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<sup>48</sup> On April 13, Weibo announced the “clean-up” campaign which started the online activism. On April 16, Weibo apologized with a policy change saying this campaign does not include homosexual content which basically ended the online activism. However, the topic #IAmGay does not disappear, it becomes an open forum for people to discuss about LGBT related issues. For instance, @蒋阿沐 sent a Weibo about protecting LGBT community as a policeman’s obligation and became viral on May 16, the International Day Against Homophobia. But this Weibo is not included in the data due to its posting time.

extend it to 2000 words. So, 140-word becomes a standard to identify short Weibo and long Weibo.

**Table 1: #IAmGay campaign content coding table**

<b>User Type</b>	Ordinary user			
	Verified user	Red & Yellow V	Blue V	Golden V
<b>Theme</b>	1. Attitude towards LGBT community (positive/neutral/negative) 2. Knowledge popularization 3. LGBT activities 4. Identity confirmation 5. Rights and law 6. Health issues 7. others			
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Female	Unknown	
<b>Sentence Length</b>	0—50 words	50—140 words	Above 140 words	
<b>Tone</b>	Positive	Neutral	Negative	
<b>Form</b>	Text only	Text+Pictures	Text+Video	

### 3.3 Content analysis and findings

As for user type, 51 users within the study are ordinary users and the remaining 49 are verified users. From the composition of user type, more ordinary users participate in the campaign. As mentioned before, opinion leaders (verified users) are influential in Weibo society and normally they receive more likes and comments so that more people will see them and eventually become their followers. Therefore, it is normal to see more verified users at the top of certain topics. However, as shown in Figure 1, only 8 verified users appear in the top20. Among 49 verified users, 9 of them are Golden verified users and only 3 of them are Blue verified users. Under this circumstance, we can see more ordinary users appear in the topic instead of verified users, meaning the campaign has a large mass foundation and the discussion itself are relatable to many people. It also implies that people are generally active and passionate about this campaign due to the fact that the achievement of hashtag

IAmGay campaign is great even without the engagement of more influential opinion leaders such as Golden and blue verified users.

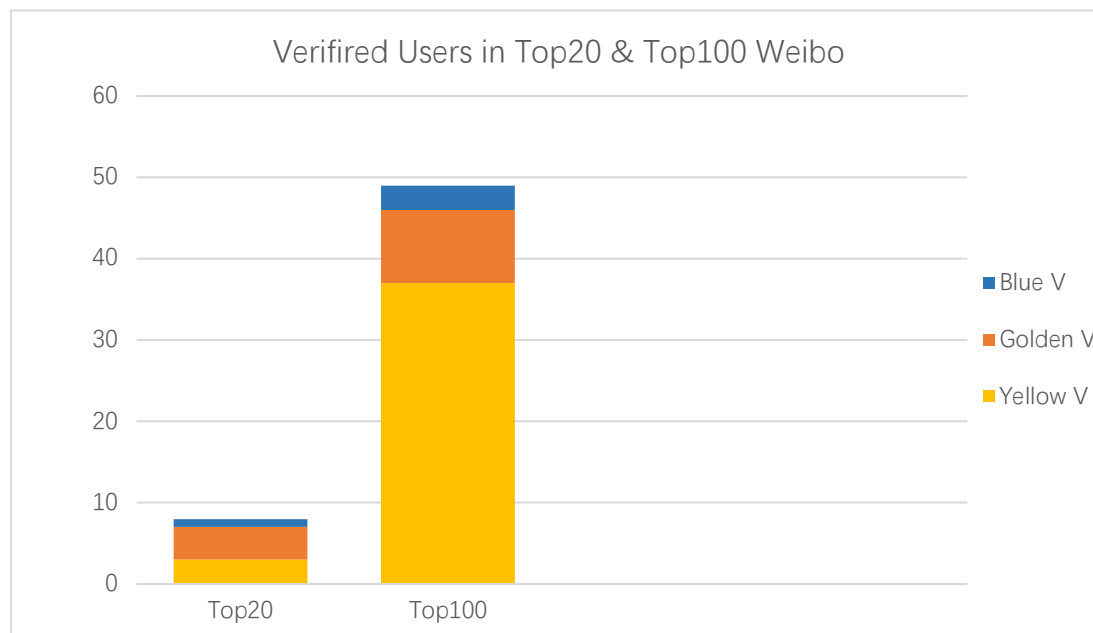


Figure 1: The number of verified users in Top20 and Top100 Weibo

As for gender, 60 of the users are male, 37 of the users are female, and 3 users' genders are unknown because they are the official account of CGTNAmericia, Guizhou University Weibo Association and Gay Voice. From the gender category, we can see that the majority of users of hashtag IAmGay campaign are male (most of them identified as gay) which reflects the gay community as being more active in this campaign and is also in accordance with the traditional gender perception of LGBT community being male dominant. Considering that "lesbianism in the current Chinese community has developed in invisible and neglected conditions,"<sup>49</sup> it is surprising to see a number of women stand out for the lesbian community; however, the inequality of gender representation in LGBT community can still be shown in top100 sample, especially with no transgender representation.

<sup>49</sup> Leung, Helen Hok-Sze. "Thoughts on Lesbian Genders in Contemporary Chinese Cultures." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2002): 123-33.

Figure 2 presents the themes of the top100 Weibo. Weibo can carry more than one theme due to the complexity of context and different combinations of forms. Overlapped themes are also calculated in this study (collected data is 156 in total). According to the chart, the most prevalent theme is attitudes towards LGBT community (43% of the 156 themes). Among 67 users' attitudes, all of them are either positive or neutral towards LGBT community, no negative attitudes were found in the top100 sample. The emotional tendency is regularly expressive of love, support, sympathy, compassion and normalization. Many Weibo uses "love is love" with a rainbow flag emoji to show their support to the Chinese LGBT community. Although it is predictable that the overall mainstream attitude is positive reflected in the most liked Weibo posts used in the study, the fact that the acceptance level towards LGBT community has developed in Chinese society cannot be neglected.

The second most common theme is identity conformation (31% of the 156 themes). Forty-nine out of 100 users have identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual with text or through selfies. Apparently, the hashtag IAmGay campaign not only stresses the equality and validity of being gay, but further emphasizes the importance of "coming out", a final path for LGBT people to live as themselves. As for other categories, 4% of the 156 themes are about LGBT rights and law, and knowledge popularization and LGBT activities account for 2% and 1% respectively. Surprisingly, a theme related to health issues is not present in the top100 Weibo. It is understandable that this theme is not a focal point of the campaign; however, we should notice that the Chinese LGBT community is trying to change their image by reframing HIV/AIDS related narratives. 19% of the other themes are not included in the chart. Among them, 5 users use hashtag IAmGay to do promotions for themselves and their idols; 3 users show love to their partners; and 2 users express complicated feelings with love and hatred towards the country and hope international pressure such as media coverages may bring light to Chinese LGBT issues. At the same time, rational

discussions about the influence of the campaign are noteworthy. User @Zhudingzhen says that hashtag IAmGay presents LGBT identity cognition which should be carried on emphasizing the significance of the Chinese LGBT community.<sup>50</sup> User @Dudaqierhejiaoshou supports the LGBT community but disagrees with the idea of making the campaign more influential and fighting for marriage equality, which he believes will attract more oppression from the government.<sup>51</sup> Based on the most popular themes, the hashtag IAmGay campaign can be identified as a cultural and social campaign. The Chinese LGBT community does not show much interest in fighting for rights and laws, but rather stresses strong a purpose of identity formation and changing social stereotypes held by the public. Moreover, it subtly changes the ideology of how the LGBT community is portrayed in Chinese mainstream media through self-identification and normalization.

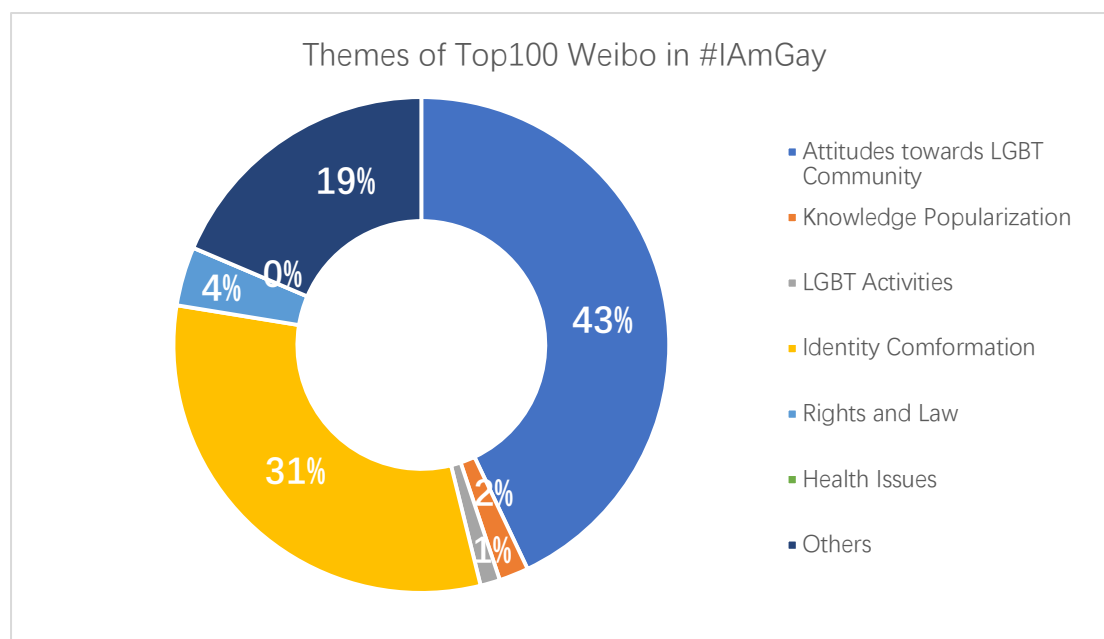


Figure 2: The ratio of different themes in Top100 Weibo

<sup>50</sup> 竹顶针(@竹顶针), “在中国这片土地上, 需要“被撑”的同志, 究竟是谁? 谁也不站出来承认自己“是同性恋”, 那么需要“被撑”的实质如何被广大的受众认知? ...对于任意概念、任意身份的认知、吸收、实践、转化和抛弃, 都有不可违逆的必经过程。” Sina Weibo, April 15, 2018, [https://www.weibo.com/1947798232/Gcl5L7Et0?refer\\_flag=1001030106&type=comment#\\_rnd1531461522602](https://www.weibo.com/1947798232/Gcl5L7Et0?refer_flag=1001030106&type=comment#_rnd1531461522602) (translated by author)

<sup>51</sup> 毒打妻儿何教授(@毒打妻儿何教授), “这条微博我表达了如下观点, 1.反婚。2.支持性自由, 包括性行为个性取向。3.劝你们别闹大, 现在的情况你要闹容易被拍的更狠。” Sina Weibo, April 13, 2018, [https://www.weibo.com/2930723404/Gc1tABeKt?refer\\_flag=1001030106&type=comment](https://www.weibo.com/2930723404/Gc1tABeKt?refer_flag=1001030106&type=comment) (translated by author)



As we can see from Figure 3, users who participate in the hashtag IAmGay campaign mainly use three forms to engage with the discussion: text only, text with pictures and text with videos. 67% of users post their Weibo with pictures, making it the most popular format in the campaign. 25% of users just post text and only 8% of users post with videos. Among 67 users who posted with pictures, three major kinds of pictures can be identified. Twenty-seven users posted selfies to show their identities publicly. Twenty-eight users posted symbolic pictures such as rainbow flag, movie shots or comics to obscurely show their identities or their support for the Chinese LGBT community. For the remaining 12 users, 8 of them posted screenshots of an article named “ScumbagSina hello, I am gay” which was deleted during the announcement of the clean-up policy. The other 4 users posted screenshots of their unsuccessful Weibo<sup>52</sup> as another posting method to avoid censorship. Here, different kinds of pictures have different purposes. People use selfies and symbolic pictures to show their identities or support to the LGBT community. With the consideration of self-protecting, symbolic pictures are safer for certain groups of people to engage with the conversation but are not strong enough to expose identities. Screenshots are considered a strategic way to contest against Weibo and inform more people about important yet deleted messages.

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<sup>52</sup> After the announcement of clean-up policy, any gay related content cannot be posted on Weibo. The page would send you a message, saying your Weibo failed to send because of the regulation policy of Weibo society. However, if users post screenshots of their failed Weibo, using pictures instead of text, their post can avoid the censorship. Also, this type of expression become a symbol of people contesting against Weibo and the state.

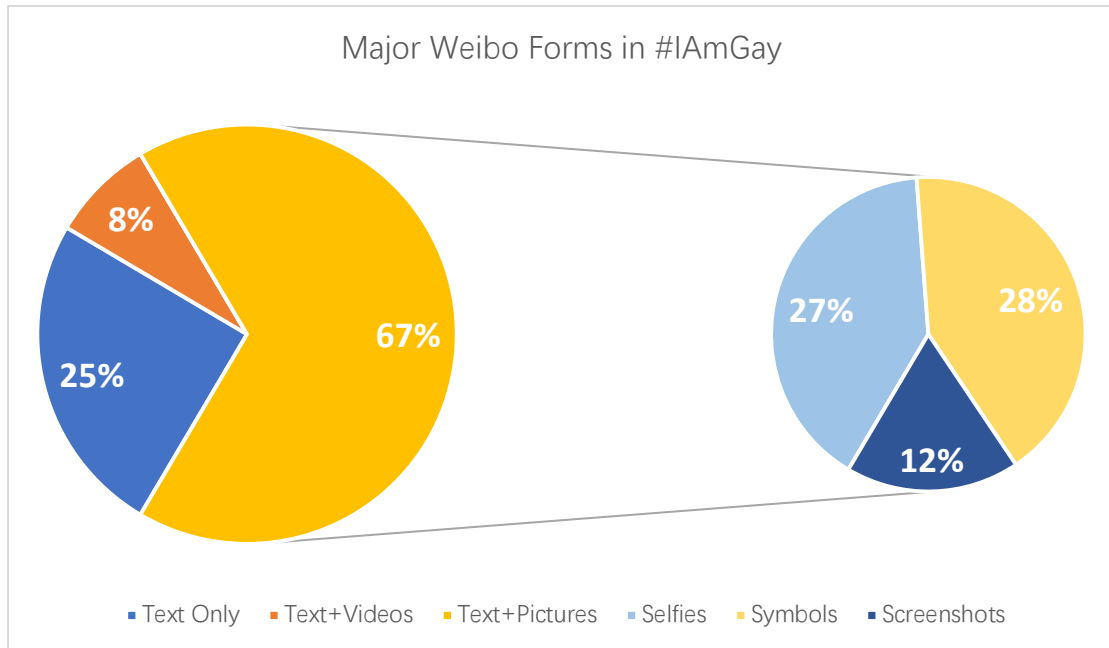


Figure 3: The ratio of major forms for Top100 Weibo

As for sentence length, 53% of the Weibo messages are between 0—50 words. The proportion of Weibo posts between 50—140 words and above 140 words are similar with 24% and 23% respectively. Chinese scholars Hou Min and Li Xueyan find in their study that normally topic-oriented Weibo are composed of short sentences with an average of 20.11 words per sentence. Topic-oriented Weibo tend to have more negative views, stronger sentiments and weak rationality due to short and direct expression.<sup>53</sup> It is not surprising that more than half of the users use short sentences to express their opinions. However, the rationality and positivity presented in the top100 Weibo shows that sentence length has a weak influence on Chinese LGBT discourse and expression in the hashtag IAmGay campaign. Instead, it helps the Chinese LGBT community normalize their existence and identity and follows the ideology of “we don’t have to explain much if something is so natural and right.”

The tone used by a majority of users is either positive (54%) or neutral (34%). Only 12% of the users projected negative (in a critical way) tones. Compared with 88

<sup>53</sup> Hou, Min, and Li, Xueyan, “Study on the Linguistic Features of the Topic-oriented Microblog and the Strategies for its Sentiment analysis,” *Applied Linguistics*, no 2 (2013): 135-44.

other users, people who use negative tones mainly criticize Weibo, society and celebrities. Five users believe that the clean-up policy is a violation of people's rights and as an influential social media platform Weibo should take responsibility. Four users argue that they are frustrated to see a society without any acceptance and tolerance. Two users criticize celebrities who have large LGBT fan bases remaining silent. Overall, the tone of popular Weibo is basically positive or neutral. Even when they are negative, their arguments are controlled in a rational and reasonable way. For instance, they tend to use the sentence norm like "I love China, but...is wrong," or "I don't want to leave my country, but...."

### 3.4 Discourse analysis

First of all, the discourse of the hashtag IAmGay campaign is social and cultural. This feature is presented in both text and pictures. As mentioned before, the campaign is a celebration of being gay through which many people are encouraged to show their identities and attitudes. During the collective activity, self-identification is intertwined with community formation and interpersonal relationship building. For instance, user @Zhudingzhen posted a selfie with "#IAmGay, what about you?"<sup>54</sup> during the campaign. Under this Weibo, people started to post selfies with their partners plus the response: "so are we," as comments. As Wendy Su points out, "user relationships on Weibo may be asymmetric; any user can follow any other user and add comments to a feed while reposting. The simple, asymmetric and distributed nature of Weibo allows an original feed to become a live viral conversation stream."<sup>55</sup> As a matter of fact, this Weibo went viral at the beginning of the hashtag IAmGay campaign and became a forum where people were able to make friends and build an online community. Thousands of comments have been shared with selfies and the answer "so are we" or

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<sup>54</sup> 竹顶针(@竹顶针), "#我是同性恋, 你呢?" Sina Weibo, April 13, 2018, [https://www.weibo.com/1947798232/GbVZqbUTi?refer\\_flag=1001030103\\_&type=comment#\\_rnd1531480320007](https://www.weibo.com/1947798232/GbVZqbUTi?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1531480320007) (translated by author)

<sup>55</sup> Wendy Su, "A virtual public sphere and its limitations – microblog, online civic engagement in China and its interplay with the state," *The Journal of International Communication*, (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2015.1076734>

“so am I” which became a popular sentence norm for LGBT people coming out during the campaign.

The name of the campaign itself also has a deeper cultural meaning. Before hashtag IAmGay campaign, there were other similar LGBT-related topics on Weibo, including a famous one named #Chengtongzhi Fanqishi, claiming that the society should support the LGBT community and against discrimination. However, it is not as influential as hashtag IAmGay. On this issue, there are some arguments inside the LGBT community. On the one hand, some people state that #Chengtongzhi Fanqishi has a specific claim about fighting against discrimination for the LGBT community while #IAmGay does nothing but presents a vague slogan. On the other hand, people who support #IAmGay argue that a campaign lacks the essence of being a member of the LGBT community if they do not show and embrace their identities. Thus, “who are we fighting for” becomes the ideology for the hashtag IAmGay campaign and the discourse around this topic has been social and cultural. As Timothy Hildebrandt points out, “the LGBT movement is often credited when gay and lesbian activists ‘come out of the closet’ in developing countries,” and “being gay in China involves crossing both cultural and national boundaries.”<sup>56</sup> Social discourse has played a significant role in the hashtag IAmGay campaign, making “coming out of the closet” much easier for Chinese LGBT people through social media, online friend-making and selfie identification.

Second, it is playful. Many scholars have been amazed by the playfulness and creativity of Chinese netizens. For instance, Yang Guobin states that Chinese netizens have developed ingenious ways to deal with internet control and censorship. Many of them know how to use the versatility of the Chinese language to beat the best filtering

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<sup>56</sup> Hildebrandt, Timothy. "Development and Division: The Effect of Transnational Linkages and Local Politics on LGBT Activism in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 77 (2012): 845-62.

technologies.<sup>57</sup> The complexity and variety of created words not only makes the Internet control less effective but also attracts more people to engage with the conversation due to the entertainment from playing with censorship. After the announcement of the “clean-up” policy, many users on Weibo found out that they could not send the word “gay” or any related content. Soon after this discovery LGBT activists used hashtag IAmGay to create the topic as a counterstrike so that more people would be informed when they checked out the Hot Topic section (same as Twitter trend) on Weibo. Considering the possibility of being blocked, LGBT activists used “我是同性戀” instead of “我是同性恋”, a traditional version of Chinese character, when creating the topic IAmGay. By doing this, the filtering technologies cannot block the topic in a short time. Consequently, the Internet control became more sophisticated—but the creativity of activists and netizens also underwent sophistication.

During the campaign, a popular article named “ScumbagSinaHello IAmGay” came out and soon became an argument used by many LGBT people to confront Weibo. This article listed several negative media and TV regulations announced by the government during the past year and argued that LGBT people deserve more equality and freedom. As a response from Weibo, the article was taken down soon after it became popular. LGBT activists had prepared for this moment, and they swiftly began another counter measure of posting screenshots with the article instead of any words. Once again, the “escaping” strategy worked. Since then, the hashtag IAmGay campaign became less verbal and more picture-driven. The playful strategy is not just for fun, but more for showing the resistant attitude of the LGBT community fighting against abnormal regulation and pursuing a healthy online space.

Third, it is appealing and engaging. Appealing story-telling is an important and unique feature of LGBT online discourse in the hashtag IAmGay campaign. From the

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<sup>57</sup> Yang, Guobin. "Online Activism." *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 33-36.

author's observations, many Weibo users draw on their personal experiences in this campaign which makes their discourse emotionally universal and appealing, especially through love story sharing and identification-centered self-expression. For instance, a LGBT rights activist Pu Chunmei(@Shanghaimeijie)'s impassioned post accompanied with pictures of her together with her gay son quickly went viral during the campaign. This is what she wrote in her post:

"I am a mother of a gay son, me and my son love our country. No matter where we go we would tell anyone that we are from China as loudly as we can. We are proud to be Chinese. However, I saw the Weibo announcement today. It treated LGBT-related content as same as pornography and violence. I cannot believe that Sina Weibo as a media company would discriminate against a minority community in such a violent way."

Under this Weibo, she added some comments.

"Please give our children a happy and healthy environment to live in. I agree with the idea of regulating inappropriate Internet content. However, we cannot deny certain feelings just because you don't understand. Love is love. No more discrimination. No more violence."<sup>58</sup>

Until now, Pu Chunmei's post has become one of the hottest Weibo in hashtag IAmGay topic. What makes this Weibo popular is that it draws from a mother's perspective. As mentioned before, pressure experiences by gay people is from both within familial settings and throughout society. Due to traditional family relationships and social value, it is hard for Chinese LGBT people to come out to their family members which makes it even harder for parents to understand and accept such "abnormality". The acceptance from family members has been considered a significant step for Chinese LGBT people to be themselves. From Pu Chunmei's Weibo, many young people were touched by the great and selfless love from a mother. The appealing story-telling and "mother and son" selfies reached out to the Chinese LGBT

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<sup>58</sup> 上海梅姐(@上海梅姐), "我是同性恋孩子的母亲, ...请给我们的孩子一个宽松快乐幸福的生活环境, 不要歧视, 不要暴力," Sina Weibo, April 14, 2018, [https://www.weibo.com/1819775844/GbXoUtQXZ?refer\\_flag=1001030106\\_&type=comment#\\_rnd1532237150634](https://www.weibo.com/1819775844/GbXoUtQXZ?refer_flag=1001030106_&type=comment#_rnd1532237150634) (translated by author)

community with universal emotions and empathy. Pu Chunmei is not the only one.

Elwin Aierwen said in his Weibo:

“I didn’t break any laws or commit a crime. I work hard, love my life and strive for the society. I want to make friends with anyone regardless of their gender or sexuality. I love my parents and family. I don’t feel ashamed about myself. I am male. I am a man. I am gay. I am normal.”<sup>59</sup>

Through short sentences, Elwin uses common sense to attract people’s attention from a man’s perspective. The slogan-type of sentence makes the messages more appealing due to its rationality and peacefulness. Moreover, it stresses the importance of normalization. As a matter of fact, most of the Weibo under hangtag IAmGay topic are normality-oriented. Appealing story-telling is a type of discourse strategy through which the LGBT community is trying to show society that they too are morally upstanding citizens who are no different from anyone else no matter what perspective it comes from.

At last, the discourse is challenging. The Chinese LGBT community has its goals. Being social, playful and appealing is not just for fun but for policy change and national recognition. Scholars studying internet politics in China tend to see online activism either as an extension of offline protests or as a form of radical online communicative contention such as digital contention.<sup>60</sup> As Han Rongbin has argued, “In the realm of cyber-bounded digital contention, there is often the unquestioned assumption that netizens are engaging in online activism to challenge the censorship regime or express their discontent towards the regime in general.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Elwin 艾尔文(@Elwin 艾尔文), “我没有违法, 我没有犯罪...我的性取向是同性, 我是一名同性恋者,” Sina Weibo, April 13, 2018, [https://www.weibo.com/1734076020/GbWnW8lYo?refer\\_flag=1001030106\\_&type=comment](https://www.weibo.com/1734076020/GbWnW8lYo?refer_flag=1001030106_&type=comment) (translated by author)

<sup>60</sup> Yang Guobin, “Contention in Chinese Cyberspace: A Field Approach,” in O’Brien, Kevin J., and Blackwell Echo. *Popular Protest in China / Edited by Kevin J. O’Brien*. Harvard Contemporary China Series; 15. 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Han, Rongbin. “Challenging the Regime, Defending the Regime: Contesting Cyberspace in China.” 2012, 51.

Hashtag IAmGay campaign is targeted at Weibo and its policy while it has the intention of garnering attention from the regime as well. For instance, some people posted screenshots of deleted content with sentences like “my last post was deleted, but I could send it again,” or “you can keep deleting my post, but you cannot stop me doing this,” or “Weibo is so powerful, I am so scared.” It seems like a fact statement; however, within the context of hashtag IAmGay campaign, the tone itself making it a challenging expression. It indicates that LGBT activists will not give in under this issue and they also mock and make fun of the filtering technology in certain levels. Instead of being irrational, many Weibo users put their disagreements into practical actions by reposting deleted content, implying that censorship is not going to work, and they will keep posting till the problem solved.

In terms of the screenshot’s content, it is not only about the “clean-up” policy of Weibo, but more about the unfair treatment LGBT community received during previous years from the Chinese government. Many people believe one of the reasons the article was deleted is that it listed several abnormal policies announced by the government last year. Thus, using challenging discourse is a strategy for the Chinese LGBT community to ask for policy change, fight against discrimination, avoid censorship and confront the Chinese government. As Han Rongbin points out, “online activism is not simply digital contention while the creativity and playfulness of netizens are more than means to resist censorship. It is also a process through which political topics, censorship in particular, are turned into targets of popular entertainment.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



## Chapter 4 Discussions on #IAmGay: Meaning and Future for LGBT Community

### 4.1 From cultural regulation to online activism

The official Chinese government's attitude towards LGBT community has always been "neither supportive nor against". Homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and was removed from the list of mental diseases in 2001 which makes homosexuality legal and normalized at a national level. Despite the legal amendment, the Chinese government has never made a public statement about LGBT rights. Conservative attitudes have always been an obstacle for the Chinese LGBT community. The coverage of LGBT people by Chinese mainstream media are is often focused on HIV/AIDS related issues and the content tends to focus on health knowledge popularization rather than social and political issues. Without the help from media coverage and official support from the Chinese government, the discrimination and stigma the LGBT community experience is difficult if not impossible to change.

As mentioned previously, in part due to the development of the Internet and the influence of the global LGBT movement, China's LGBT movement emerged in the 1990s along with a more tolerant attitude from the government and society.<sup>63</sup> Nowadays, Internet and social media have developed in such a way that LGBT activists have more alternative space to express their opinions and make critical suggestions for the LGBT community. LGBT rights advocates such as Li Yinhe have used Weibo to spread the idea of same-sex marriage in China for a long time. However, the strict and arguably excessive cultural regulations in recent years have limited the appearance of the LGBT community in media and television. In March 2016, the Chinese government began to ban all depictions of LGBT people on television, as part

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<sup>63</sup> Cao, Jin, and Lei Guo. "Chinese "Tongzhi" Community, Civil Society, and Online Activism." *Communication and the Public* 1, no. 4 (2016): 504-08.

of a cultural crackdown on “vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content.”<sup>64</sup> In June 2017, China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA) announced that a television program will not get air permission if it “includes content about abnormal sexual relationship such as incest, homosexuality, sexual abuse and sexual violence.” In the context of Internet reform, a substantial amount of LGBT related content has been deleted, including short videos, Internet reality shows and some radio episodes on Himalaya.<sup>65</sup> LGBT activist and professor of sociology, Li Yinhe even got banned by Weibo for three months after speaking out about homosexuality normalization. Under the “reform” pressure, Weibo announced the “clean-up” campaign which would remove images, videos, text and cartoons that were related to pornography, violence, or homosexuality for the next three months.

As we could see above, these announcements have a common target— inappropriate sexual content. However, homosexuality being listed as inappropriate sexual content has angered the Chinese LGBT community, especially after the “clean-up” announcement made by Weibo. Many people believe that pressure from the “top” could be one of the reasons for Weibo to make such an announcement considering the fact that Weibo is relatively LGBT-friendly, and it even allowed users to choose their own sexuality designation category back in 2009. Thus, the “clean-up” campaign could be seen as a policy over-reaction from a business-developing perspective of Weibo. As a media company, Weibo has to work with the Chinese government in order to peruse a promising business future with fewer obstacles. In fact, Weibo has been working with the Chinese government during these years. In April 2018, the Chinese LGBT community could no longer tolerate the restrictions when they realized how dangerous the situation could become if they lost the representation on a relatively free social media. It is the strive for expression and freedom and year-lasting cultural

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Himalaya is a famous audio sharing platform in China.

depression that sparked online activism. As Cao Jin and Guo Lei state, “the Internet has showcased its power in many socio-cultural contexts to facilitate social changes.”<sup>66</sup> It is not surprising to see the Chinese LGBT community using online activism to confront a media company for policy change, with the intention to challenge the government in a non-confrontational way.

## **4.2 Special interaction between LGBT community and Chinese government**

Heavy censorship has always been a special feature of the Chinese government’s regulation. With the cooperation from mainstream Internet companies, regulation for the Internet is valid in terms of legality most of the time. However, as mentioned before, the playfulness and creativity of Chinese netizens is challenging and a contesting force for the Chinese government to deal with. Over the past few years, the interaction between the LGBT community and the Chinese government has been strategic.

“Chinese LGBT activists are generally disinterested in same-sex marriage, placing it relatively low on the list of priorities for their organizations. They desire more fundamental ‘gay rights’ such as eliminating employment discrimination and diminishing family pressures.”<sup>67</sup> Based on this point, LGBT online activism has been non-confrontational and less challenging which generally expresses the desire for cultural change and social recognition. During the hashtag IAmGay campaign, LGBT activists targeted the over-reacted policy to confront Weibo while they also showed respect for the state. Many users have posted that they do not want to leave the country and all they expect is that the Chinese government could step up and protect

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<sup>66</sup> Cao, Jin, and Lei Guo. "Chinese “Tongzhi” Community, Civil Society, and Online Activism." *Communication and the Public* 1, no. 4 (2016): 504-08.

<sup>67</sup> Timothy Hildebrandt, ‘Same-sex marriage in China? The strategic promulgation of a progressive policy and its impact on LGBT activism’, *Review of International Studies* 37, (2011), pp. 1313–1333.

their rights as Chinese citizens. Here, the Chinese government becomes a positive figure inside the community which reflects that the LGBT community wants to take the chance to build a relationship with the Chinese government. From my perspective, it is a strategic move for the community. From doing this, the Chinese LGBT community is trying to prove the rationality and positivity of their campaign and to show the government that they are not a threat to the regime. Through indirect and testing methods, the LGBT community finds the balance to deal with the Chinese government, making their campaign and movement more effective than contentious forms of activism.

The strong desire of controlling HIV/AIDS from the Chinese government has benefited the LGBT community as well. As scholar Timothy Hildebrandt states:

“The state’s first powerful and coordinated effort to combat the crisis came in 2006 when the central government issued the Five-Year Plan to Control HIV/ AIDS. Two years later, a three-year program was announced, increasing funding and coordination for ‘education and community mobilization’ to prevent HIV/AIDS. Gay men have been a key focus for these efforts.”<sup>68</sup>

As a matter of fact, the policy gives the LGBT community direction about how they can organize their activities and gives them space to find groups, seek help and form community. Although the discourse from the Chinese government has been health-oriented, many of the NGOs for HIV prevention have received state funding to help LGBT people. Moreover, with the good reputation of LGBT NGOs, the image of the LGBT community has improved and has become more positive than before. Social trust, political discourse space and positive images have been achieved during the fight against HIV/AIDS. To this point, the strategic cooperation between the Chinese government and the LGBT community helps both sides. Thus, under the authoritarian

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<sup>68</sup> Hildebrandt, Timothy. "Development and Division: The Effect of Transnational Linkages and Local Politics on LGBT Activism in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 77 (2012): 845-862.

regime, the interactions between the LGBT community and the Chinese government cannot be described with a binary categorization of good or bad, but more in a special way understanding the complexities of the relationship. Inside this type of interaction, both parties try to compromise on certain issues and bring out a better outcome. The Chinese government does not want to face the pressure of human rights violations, a long-time existing critique from the Western world, but also tries to maintain its authority through policy making and censorship. The LGBT community, on the other hand, challenges the government through online activism which also implies the “testing its limits” strategy. As Thomas Chase states: “In china, all types of gay and lesbian-related activities involve a process of continual testing and expansion that continues until you cross a line you are not meant to cross ... Only by continually testing the limits imposed on our activities can we know where these lines are.”<sup>69</sup>

### **4.3 A possible subaltern public sphere for LGBT community**

Based on the arguments above, the future for the Chinese LGBT community cannot be described as bright or clear; however, the positive response from the most influential and party-controlled mainstream media—People’s Daily—is somewhat meaningful. It is because of the pressure from both online LGBT activism and official opinion that Weibo was influenced to change its unjust policy. The interaction between the LGBT community and the Chinese government could suggest that China's online communication system, and perhaps its political system, is not as top-down as western understanding or concepts of an authoritarian state. So, what does LGBT online activism mean to China’s online communication? Does it contribute to the building of online public sphere?

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<sup>69</sup> Chase, Thomas. "Problems of Publicity: Online Activism and Discussion of Same-Sex Sexuality in South Korea and China." *Asian Studies Review* 36, no. 2 (2012): 151-70.

From the hashtag IAmGay campaign, the online alternative space enables LGBT people to form identities and communities, have cultural, social and political discussions, and use collective action for policy change. Moreover, with the powerful influence of hashtag IAmGay campaign, more people have joined the discussion under the IAmGay topic whenever LGBT-related issue happens. It has become an open forum for the LGBT community to follow and engage with more interest-involved discussion and use it as online collective action. The social and cultural discourse of the LGBT community has led the online campaign into a form of political online engagement. Thus, Weibo communication, at least on hashtag IAmGay campaign, is showing the characteristics of an online public sphere. Through playful and non-confrontational discourse, the Chinese LGBT community has successfully changed Weibo policy and experienced indirect interaction with the Chinese government. Moreover, it suggests that the Chinese government can communicate and negotiate with the LGBT community through indirect online communication based on the premise of keeping the regime stable and peaceful. Although this type of communication is still weak and developing, we cannot ignore the implication for Chinese online activism, online communication and maybe a new regulating model for Chinese government. As Adrian Rauchfleisch and Mike Schäfer states:

“it is useful to think about the existence of public spheres – whether in China or beyond, whether online or in traditional new media – not in dichotomous terms of a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Between both poles exists a continuum, and research should identify the instances and conditions in which public spheres emerge, the shapes they have and the degrees to which they exhibit characteristics such as openness, longevity and a large participation.”<sup>70</sup>

Chinese netizens are very aware and sensitive about online censorship and regulations, and so is Chinese government. This special online communication feature

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<sup>70</sup> Rauchfleisch, Adrian, and Mike Schäfer. "Multiple Public Spheres of Weibo: A Typology of Forms and Potentials of Online Public Spheres in China." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 2 (2015): 139-155.

highlights the “creativity and responsiveness of an active online audience”<sup>71</sup> which not only contributes to the negotiation between Chinese government and Chinese netizens but also generates the ideal public sphere into more realistic subaltern multi public spheres. With the development of technology and online communication, it is possible for China to build multi online public spheres in which online political discussion and deliberation could happen between netizens and officials with the common understanding of Party rule and regime stability. Nevertheless, even though the limitations of Weibo communication are obvious on many levels, the outcome or implications the hashtag IAmGay campaign brings out is worth studying. Chinese LGBT online activism has undoubtedly “induced changes in the behavior of the state by undermining information control and creating social pressure”<sup>72</sup> as a new form of citizen mobilization for policy change and maybe official attitude change. From this perspective, it is possible for Chinese LGBT community to engage and interact with Chinese government within a subaltern online public sphere on Weibo while the political deliberation process still has a long way to go.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Yang, Guobin. "Online Activism." *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 33-36.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

In this study, the author explored the characteristics of Chinese LGBT online activism and discourse in hashtag IAmGay campaign. From a short-term perspective, the campaign itself is a success for the Chinese LGBT community. It represents the voice of a sexual minority and symbolizes the powerful collective effort in an authoritarian state. The activism of the Chinese LGBT community is one example of the digital contention of contemporary China. More unheard voices and communities are emerging with the idea of having an equal conversation through non-confrontational yet challenging communicative language or campaigns.

Online activism and its implications have always been an interesting and meaningful academic topic for scholars to explore. Chinese online activism and discourse characteristics allow more western scholars to take another approach to understanding China as an authoritarian state. During the campaign, we could see the possibilities and implications for Chinese democratic practice. The concept of democratic discourse, public sphere and civil society could be applied to analyze social issues in China with the understanding of the specialty of “Chinese characteristics”. The purpose of this study is to try to justify the emerging democratic possibility of Chinese online space and explain the complexity of China’s social issues with the example of the Chinese LGBT community. Based on my analysis and arguments in the former chapters, the hashtag IAmGay campaign is an active and powerful collective response from the Chinese LGBT community to Weibo and the government. Through online activism, the Chinese LGBT community not only changed the unfair policy of Weibo but also united for community formation and self-identification. Undoubtedly, social and cultural value for the Chinese LGBT community is more than that of the policy change of social media. The Hashtag IAmGay campaign could be



seen as an ideological contesting strategy for the Chinese LGBT community which contains the possibility for more political engagement in the future.

Through the hashtag IAmGay campaign, the Chinese LGBT community turns online activism into government confrontation. Playfulness and creativity of Chinese netizens prove that authoritarian oppression is not acceptable to contemporary China under the emerging democratic desire of the public, fast-paced technology development and radical transformation of Chinese society. With the expansion of Chinese online alternative spaces, the Chinese LGBT community has more opportunities to explore the censorship boundaries, enlarges its online influence and eventually take LGBT rights and laws as priorities. On the other hand, the Chinese government should also take the campaign as a signal for critical change of its policy and Internet regulating model. The fact is “though such internal fragmentation has not always created opportunities for freer online expression, it nonetheless erodes the effectiveness of the censorship regime.”<sup>73</sup> Instead of rigid censorship, the government may have to take advantage of the democratic possibility of Internet and try to appropriately tolerate the criticism or online activism which not always have the intention to challenge the regime itself. It is due to the lack of valid communicative method and channels that Chinese netizens have to use such extreme ways to confront either media companies or the government. Although from hashtag IAmGay campaign, it is more of the interaction between a media company and the LGBT community. It showcases that digital contention cannot be neglected in contemporary China. How to build a virtual public sphere or multi subaltern public spheres where the public could be answered in a positive way and valid political participation is allowed is a critical question for the Chinese government in the future.

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<sup>73</sup> Han, Rongbin. "Challenging the Regime, Defending the Regime: Contesting Cyberspace in China." 2012, 112.

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