The Absence of Tongqi Identity in Societal and Media Discourses

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the social identity construction of the marginalized female group known as "Tongqi" (wives of gay men) and their representation in visual media. By employing the "Muted group theory (MGT)," this study encompasses various aspects ranging from social experiences (education, law) to personal journeys (family background, social expectations). It analyzes the invisibility and dispersion of Tongqi in Chinese society, as well as their portrayal in art forms such as films.The study points out that despite the increasing acceptance of sexual minorities, the Tongqi group continues to face severe marginalization and neglect. As a significant narrative tool, films often overlook the complex emotions and social dilemmas of Tongqi, merely depicting them as victims of homosexual marriages or as simple supporting characters.

1. Introduction

Tongqi, the wives of gay or bisexual men, number approximately 16 million in China, yet they remain largely hidden from public and academic view. According to researcher Beichuan Zhang, there are about 20 million gay men in Chinese mainland, around 80% of whom are married or in a marital relationship.[1] This phenomenon has led to the emergence of the unique and complex social phenomenon of "Mixed-orientation marriage" or "heterosexual-homosexual marriages." It not only reveals the widespread contradictions in Chinese society regarding sexual orientation but also reflects deep-seated distortions and repressions within the social structure.

2. Mechanisms behind the Social Phenomenon of Heterosexual-Homosexual Marriages

2.1 Traditional Chinese Marriage Culture

According to sociologist Professor Yinhe Li, traditional morality and heteronormative hegemony oppress and discriminate against Tongqi to a greater extent than against gay men. She argues that traditional Chinese marriage and romance culture are the main culprits behind the Tongqi phenomenon.[2] Chinese society has long adhered to the principles of "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them" and "establish a family and set up a business," which have gradually become fundamental behavioral norms for traditional men.

Marriage is seen as a significant milestone in life, symbolizing the transformation from boyhood to manhood and showcasing the so-called masculine virility. Additionally, marriage is not only an important event in an individual's life but also the foundation for maintaining family and social stability.

In addition, the continuation of the family line is considered a primary purpose of marriage, especially the birth of male offspring to carry on the family name. This notion, rooted in Confucian thought, emphasizes family continuity and ancestor worship, thus assigning marriage a high value in Chinese society. Despite the rise of ideas like late marriage and late childbirth due to social development and cultural diversification, the traditional belief that "A man should get married on coming of age" remains deeply entrenched.

Under immense social pressure, many gay individuals, in an effort to alleviate inner conflict and reduce the risk of societal conflict, choose to hide or change their original attitudes and views, and conform to socially accepted behaviors and willingly enter into heterosexual marriages at the appropriate age. This phenomenon is called "heterosexual-homosexual marriages."

2.2 Chinese Marriage Law

The widespread existence of "heterosexual-homosexual marriages" in Chinese society is closely related to not only traditional social norms but also strict marriage laws. Before 1997, individuals with homosexual tendencies or those engaging in homosexual activities could face criminal penalties, and it was not until 2001 that homosexuality was removed from the official list of mental illnesses. Although the acceptance of homosexuality in Chinese society has improved with modernization, the legalization of same-sex marriage faces numerous challenges due to the combined influence of traditional culture, legal and policy frameworks, the political environment, social acceptance, and moral and educational factors. As a result, many homosexual individuals are forced into heterosexual marriages to meet societal and familial expectations, giving rise to the unique social phenomenon of heterosexual-homosexual marriages in China.

China's legal system remains relatively behind in addressing issues related to homosexuality, making it extremely difficult for Tongqi to protect their rights when they discover they have been deceived. Although divorce is allowed under the marriage law, there are no specific provisions or guidelines for marriages involving homosexual partners. In divorce proceedings, Tongqi finds it challenging to provide legal evidence of their spouse's homosexual tendencies, complicating and prolonging the divorce process. While there are many legal aid organizations in China, very few specialize in helping Tongqi. Therefore,Tongqi often struggles to find professionals and experienced lawyers to handle their unique situations when seeking legal assistance.

3. The Framework of the Muted Group Theory

Muted Group Theory (MGT) is a communication theory developed by cultural anthropologist Edwin Ardener and feminist scholar Shirley Ardener in 1975, that exposes the sociolinguistic power imbalances that can suppress social groups' voices.[3]The main idea of the MGT is that the power structures in society determine who can speak out and whose voices are heard. Dominant groups (typically males, white people, heterosexuals, etc.) control language and communication channels, while less powerful groups (such as women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, etc.) struggle to express themselves through mainstream channels. Silent groups are often marginalized in society, and their views and experiences are ignored or misrepresented. Later, this theory was widely used by feminists to analyze how patriarchy naturalizes and normalizes class divisions between men and women, making women's subordinate status to men appear natural and unremarkable.In 1971, Shirley Ardener cited instances from feminism movements to articulate how

women as a muted group used body symbolism to justify their actions and arguments in her article "Sexual Insult and Female Militancy".[4]

Despite the large number of Tongqi, society has long ignored their voices. As emphasized by the Muted Group Theory above, less powerful groups lack effective communication channels. Due to their unique marital situations, Tongqi often struggles to find appropriate avenues to express their emotions and needs when facing marital difficulties. Even when they muster the courage to speak out, societal prejudices often lead to their suffering and dilemmas being downplayed or ignored in mainstream discourse, further weakening their voices. This difficulty in self-expression exacerbates their silence and isolation.

Kramarae points out that the muted group as "the oppressed" are people who don't have a "public recognized vocabulary" to express their experience.Their failure to articulate their ideas lead to their doubt about "the validity of their experience" and "the legitimacy of their feelings."[5]The framework of MGT deconstructs why it is so difficult for the voices of the Tongqi to be heard. Currently, academia has not applied this theory to explore the silent Tongqi group; it has primarily been used to study women's health issues in other groups. For example, Anderson et al. (2013) analyzed how women with postpartum depression experience passive or active marginalization and silence in at least four ways. Burnett et al. (2009) found that the emergence and perpetuation of campus date rape culture could be partially attributed to the silence of women about their date rape experiences.[6] Regardless of the specific group or issue it addresses, the MGT provides an excellent framework for examining the personal experiences of women living on the margins of society.

4. Social Circumstances and Online Image Construction of Tongqi

4.1 The Image of Tongqi

Carol Grever (2001) has documented more than 26 tongqi, including herself, and their relationships with their gay or bisexual husbands.[7] Through this book, she brings the isolation, neglect, and absence faced by Tongqi into the spotlight. Influenced by different factors such as growth experience, educational background, and social class, the respondents showed different feedback mechanisms.Negative responses including breakdown, self-doubt and suicide in despair, while positive responses included attempts to work to save the marriage, mutual support and harmony with gay husbands. However, despite the differences in feedback mechanisms, the risks they face are surprisingly similar: loneliness, meaningless emotional labor, the threat of domestic violence, economic crisis, loss of security, infection with sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, and an uncertain future.

The emotions of Tongqi fluctuate between hope and despair, denial and regret, fear and calm. In this unstable state, their self-confidence and self-awareness are constantly consumed and destroyed, as an extension of the gay community, their identity may just be a means for their husbands to transfer family responsibilities and social pressure. The suffering experienced by Tongqi is not only the result of personal moral transgressions hidden under the secret of "homosexuality," but also a reflection of the intertwined social, economic, and political issues in contemporary China. Their predicaments reveal deep-seated contradictions within the social structure and reflect the complex and profound oppression women face under the influence of traditional marriage concepts, gender role expectations, and the inadequacy of legal and social support systems.

4.2 Network image construction

In real life, the social identity of Tongqi bears a hidden and dispersed nature. Internet media has become the primary channel for the audience to perceive and construct the image of Tongqi. As a

tool capable of partially reflecting reality, movies possess the power of visualization and representation, making them a significant narrative art form through which people perceive social experiences and realities. Movies also serve as an important source of public awareness and understanding.

From the perspective of artistic creation, in the century-long history of cinema, there has been an increase in the number of mainstream films presenting homosexuals, and the number of strictly defined "queer films" has also risen. The representation of LGBTQ+ groups has garnered increasing social attention. However, it is worth noting that apart from gay men as main characters, other important roles in films (especially the heterosexual spouses of homosexual individuals) receive relatively little attention. Their stories are often limited to simple descriptions of their husbands' infidelity and basic emotional portrayals, lacking in-depth emotional and psychological depiction.

Scholar Rongna Ma article "A Research on the Images of Gay Wives in Contemporary Gay Films" delves into the association between the bodily representation and cultural construction of the Tongqi image in homosexual films from the perspectives of body sociology and feminism.[8] She highlights that the portrayal of Tongqi in these films reflects their social status, rooted in the gender-cultural mechanisms of social conditioning. The study traces the cultural origins shaping the Tongqi image and explores the cultural mechanisms that influence image construction. Through case analysis, it is revealed that the portrayal of Tongqi in the films is a result of gender discourse conditioning, shaped to conform to the requirements of gender order.

In Ang Lee's film "Brokeback Mountain," the characters of Alma and Lureen reveal the different choices and dilemmas women face when confronted with male betrayal and societal pressure. Alma loses her trust and security in her marriage after capturing an intimate moment between her husband Ennis and Jack. Although Alma tries to maintain the appearance of family harmony, the anger and pain inside her builds up over time leading her to divorce Ennis and start a new life with her two daughters. Alma's choice represents a woman trying to escape her pain and pursue independence, but her anger and resentment towards Ennis also reflects her inability to fully escape the traditional societal expectations of women.On the other hand, Lureen is a career-oriented woman who manages the family business very independently. However, when faced with the challenges of marriage, Lureen eventually submits to the expectations of the patriarchal society and returns to the traditional role of a housewife. Despite her professional success, emotionally she shows a degree of neglect and submission to her husband's betrayal. It can be seen that even women with successful careers may choose to compromise and be submissive in the face of family and social pressures, thus losing part of themselves.

In another film directed by Ang Lee, "The Wedding Banquet, "the female protagonist, Gao Weiwei, after discovering her husband, Gao Weitong's sexual orientation, decides to marry him despite the consequences in order to obtain American citizenship through this means . The couple pretends to be in love, but an unexpected pregnancy triggers complex family and cultural conflicts. Weiwei and Weitong's mother argue fiercely over whether to keep the child. Weitong's mother is deeply influenced by traditional patriarchal norms and insists on keeping the child.[9] It can be seen that Weitong's mother's insistence reflects the importance of traditional family values in Chinese society. In the context of traditional Chinese culture mentioned earlier, carrying on the family line is regarded as an important family responsibility. She believes that keeping the child is not only for the continuation of the family, but also for maintaining family honor and traditional values.

The film "Dear Ex" is notable as the first Chinese-language film to feature a Tongqi as the main character. It directly exposes the conflicts between various identities and social recognition. Sanlian Liu is not only a victim of a sham marriage with a gay man but also a heterosexual person displaying homophobia. Her anger and helplessness in the face of family and societal pressure add depth and complexity to her character. After discovering her husband Jay's sexual orientation,

Sanlian Liu insults Jay with hurtful words and behaves in ways that defy traditional female roles. As the plot progresses, Sanlian's victimhood becomes more nuanced; her suffering is rationalized and justified, making her victim role more complex.[10]She represents a character deeply influenced by traditional patriarchal norms, and her words and actions reflect a fear and prejudice towards homosexuality. The film explores the conflict between traditional family values and modern individualism through Sanlian's struggle. Sanlian's confrontation with Jay illustrates multi-layered social and cultural conflicts: Sanlian Liu upholds traditional family values, while Jay symbolizes the lifestyle and rights of modern gay individuals.

Although characters in films, due to their wide reach and powerful symbolic function, shape the audience's subconscious impressions and contribute to cultural construction, the comprehensive portrayal of Tongqi in films and media is lacking. This deficiency leads to gender critiques often focusing on exposing the male gaze and male hegemony without offering practical solutions to improve the plight of women, especially Tongqi.

5. Conclusion

Studies on gender and media representations reveal that female characters are often objectified and stereotyped, reinforcing traditional gender roles and societal expectations. For instance, research indicates that gender stereotypes and objectification in media negatively impact women's mental health, increasing body surveillance, internalization of cultural appearance ideals, and tolerance of sexism. [11].These portrayals not only shape public perceptions of female roles but also stifle women's career-related ambitions and personal growth.

Additionally, studies show that the representation and image construction of different racial and gender groups in media significantly influence their social status and public perception. For example, research found that black women are often negatively depicted in media, which affects their actual treatment in society.[12] Similarly, Asian women are often portrayed as submissive and passive, further entrenching gender inequality.[13]

In conclusion, the portrayal of Tongqi in media and films is insufficient, failing to reflect the true predicaments of these women as briefly outlined in the earlier part of this article. This inadequate representation can deepen stereotypes and prejudices regarding gender and sexual orientation. As a result, the Tongqi group gradually disappears from every day public life and is portrayed in artistic media as innocent side characters in the romantic love stories of gay individuals, inadvertently becoming stepping stones for the gay community. Future research and creative works need to focus more on the diversity and complexity of the Tongqi group, proposing practical and effective measures to improve their situation and promote a comprehensive understanding and acceptance of gender and sexual orientation issues in society.

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