

# DOUBLE-SPEAK AS LGBTQI+ RESISTANCE

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**I**MESSAGE a colourful rainbow emoji to my friend, who is an LGBTQI+ activist in the People's Republic of China (PRC), on WeChat. 🌈 'I'll be there in a minute!' she answers to let me know that she is online and available to connect to a virtual private network (VPN) and talk to me via an encrypted platform.

A clever code of rainbows and secret words that avoid online censorship is a must for talking to my LGBTQI+ activist friends in China these days. While a dictionary of this language does not exist and it is constantly changing, fluency in double-speak allows queer 酷儿 communities

to communicate without directly mentioning 'politically sensitive' and increasingly banned phrases like 'gender and sexual diversity' or 'LGBTQI+'. Just like when Chinese feminists replaced the censored #MeToo hashtag with the homophonous #MiTu 米兔, which was then translated as #RiceBunny, double-speak helps LGBTQI+ people avoid direct censorship online.

## Queer Activism in the Field

The majority of my own LGBTQI+ activism in China occurred between 2014 and 2017 when I contributed to establishing Diversity, a formally registered LGBTQI+ student society

at the Sino-foreign University of Nottingham Ningbo China. Over three years, we ran workshops within the university, created a student support group, and engaged with staff and students through awareness-raising activities, such as celebrating the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia. Although President Xi Jinping had been leader of China's party-state since 2012, many of his most restrictive policies had not yet been rolled out. Living in a second-tier city with a relatively relaxed political atmosphere, our activities were only directly targeted once, when we planned to host a national gathering with twenty attendees to support the trans community. A volunteer loosely connected to our student group told us they had been called by a police officer, who mumbled: 'What ... erm ... do you know about this event that is set to happen over the weekend?'

'I'm not a part of it, I'm not really sure what's happening,' they responded. Having inquired about the event, the police officer must have felt that his duty was complete, and he did not directly approach us.

It did, however, give us a big scare. While being invited to 'drink tea' 喝茶 — a euphemism for being asked to speak with police about something — is in some ways a badge of activist honour, the police interest prompted everyone to move their conversations to an encrypted platform and change venues. It was the sort of vaguely threatening encounter more common in first-tier cities that were political centres. Despite that isolated incident, those years were a time of flourishing community-building and awareness-raising about LGBTQI+ issues in society — a situation that began changing after Xi's ascent to party-state leadership.

## Shrinking Digital Space under Xi Jinping

The current censorship landscape is dire. In July 2022, the administration at the top Tsinghua University in Beijing issued penalties to two students for placing handheld rainbow flags at an on-campus supermarket with notes encouraging passers-by to take them and celebrate #PRIDE.<sup>1</sup> 'Raising awareness' 社会意识 is now a key term on the censorship list. National legislation that is



**A rainbow over Nanjing, China**

Source: Richard Tao, Unsplash

not LGBTQI+ friendly, such as the ‘sissy ban’ of 2021 that prohibits effeminate presentations of men in visual media, adds insult to injury.<sup>2</sup> LGBTQI+ activists speculate that the goal of increased coercive control of LGBTQI+ communities and individuals through the media, universities, and legislation is to silo queer individuals.<sup>3</sup> If authorities discover evidence of my friends’ conversations with me, a researcher in a university outside China, they will become a target of surveillance. Similarly, conversations among them about an LGBTQI+ group event or gathering are likely to draw attention from the ever-vigilant police, who monitor the

digital communications of targeted groups and individuals as a matter of course.

The surveillance and censorship of LGBTQI+ activist and advocate groups are most intense in the Chinese digital space. For example, WeChat, the ‘everything app’ of China, is known to be a window for public security agencies to directly observe the activities of both informal LGBTQI+ groups and registered organisations.<sup>4</sup> These agencies even use the collected data to map organisational relationships between activists, according to my recent research. No conversation on the app can be presumed to be private — a fact about which no repressed group can afford to be unaware.

In their recent book on China's surveillance state, Josh Chin and Liza Lin unpack how surveillance on WeChat works. The authors note that WeChat's parent company, Tencent, 'has vehemently denied suggestions that it gives police unfettered access to WeChat's treasure trove of behavioural data'.<sup>5</sup> However, numerous 'coincidences' uncovered by Chin and Lin suggest otherwise — for instance, in 2017, Hu Jia 胡佳, a civil rights activist and advocate for HIV-positive individuals, received a phone call from a state security agent, who asked why he had bought a slingshot online using WeChat Pay the day before. Dr Li Wenliang 李文亮, the COVID-19 whistle-blower, had similarly been investigated for messages sent via WeChat to a private group of other medical practitioners to raise alarm over early signs that a highly infectious coronavirus was circulating.<sup>6</sup>

Other social media apps run by Chinese companies, including Weibo and Douban, are also required to monitor for 'sensitive terms' that entails censorship and cooperation with government authorities. In some cases, user accounts that are targeted by government agencies

undergo 'account bombing' — a practice whereby authorities 'bomb' 炸号, or freeze, social media accounts they consider sensitive for whatever reason. Another covert means of online censorship is 'shadow banning', by which authorities allow social media users to see their own posts while making them invisible to others.<sup>7</sup> While significantly less harrowing than direct police harassment, such practices can seriously hamper online discourse.

My recent research suggests that, as early as 2020, COVID-19 became an excuse to justify extensive surveillance and police monitoring beyond subjects directly related to the pandemic. As many cities went into lockdown, beginning in 2020 with Wuhan, which hit the record with 76 days, LGBTQI+ communities — like many others — shifted their activities to the digital space. At the same time, the digital space available to LGBTQI+ communities started shrinking. Moving activities online also meant they became more susceptible to monitoring. Many activists to whom I spoke reported being repeatedly telephoned and even threatened by police because of their online activity. These

censorship strategies are like those that feminist activists have endured since the 2015 arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’ — five young women who were extralegally detained for 37 days for handing out anti–sexual harassment stickers in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou on International Women’s Day.<sup>8</sup> Online and offline harassment, censorship, and police intimidation have since accompanied feminist activism.

LGBTQI+ conversations on WeChat have been heavily restricted since July 2021 when hundreds of student-run LGBTQI+ public accounts on the platform were shuttered overnight and replaced with a vague message: ‘In response to relevant complaints, all content has been blocked for violating the “Regulations on the Management

of Internet User Official Account Information Services”, and the account has been suspended.’

July 2021 was the end of relatively free online communication among LGBTQI+ communities in China, which had been able to share queer content online. From then on, each LGBTQI+ group or individual posting about LGBTQI+ issues online could expect to be targeted for police monitoring and censorship. The situation is similar on Weibo, an online microblogging platform run by Sina. While LGBTQI+ groups in different geographic locations face unequal amounts of intrusive censorship and police attention, most agree that civil society under Xi Jinping’s leadership is extremely restrictive, unlike in the relatively tolerant times under previous leader Hu Jintao.

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