

LGBTQ+ Activism in the Post-2020s China: Activists' Resilience in Difficult Times

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ABSTRACT

Since 2020, the crackdown on LGBTQ+ activism in China has further intensified. This thesis applied semi-structured interviews, online observation, and autoethnography, combined with framing theory and queer resilience theory, to analyze Chinese LGBTQ+ activists' perceptions of and responses to current challenges. This thesis found that activists attribute the difficulties they encounter to government oppression, internal community issues, and attacks from counter-movements. These challenges result in mental stress, moral dilemmas, and disenchantment with the movement. Despite facing these difficulties, activists demonstrate resilience. This thesis argued that this resilience is related to the characteristics of activists' diagnostic frameworks for their own situations, prognostic frameworks for coping strategies, and mobilization frameworks for future actions. Activists refuse to blame community members, prioritize solidarity, lower expectations for the future activism, adopt a pragmatic stance, reflect on past experiences, focus on present opportunities for action, embrace negative emotions, and emphasize the moral necessity of action. Additionally, the coping strategies they propose are inward-looking, seeing retreat as a way of making progress, which contributes to the self-care of activists and the maintenance of community vitality. This queer resilience is the driving force behind the sustainable development of China's LGBTQ+ activism during difficult times.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ activism; China; Queer; Activists; Resilience

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Jinyan Zeng, for her comments on the earlier version of this thesis. Her feedback inspired me to refine the research questions and the interview outline. I am also grateful to her for providing an opportunity for me to gather together with other feminists from China in Lund to share our experiences. Additionally, I appreciate the Centre for affording me the chance to participate in an exchange program in Singapore. During that semester, I acquired extensive knowledge related to the LGBTQ+ movement in authoritarian countries, which greatly informed the contents of this thesis.

I would also like to thank all the people who participated in this research. Their resilience, wisdom, and courage have encouraged me to follow my heart and do the right thing.

Finally, I extend my thanks to my coworkers and friends who have worked with me over the past three years. One day, after we had discussed a lot of negative news, my friend said to me, “Activists are also ordinary people, and there is a limit to the number of winters one can spend in one’s life.” Indeed, we get tired, we experience failures, and we don’t know when the winter will be over. Yet, I will always stand by your side.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Research Problem and Significance of the Study	2
1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions	3
1.4 Thesis Structure	5
2. KEY CONCEPTS	6
2.1 LGBTQ+	6
2.2 LGBTQ+ Movement and Activism	7
2.3 LGBTQ+ Activists	8
3. LITERATURE REVIEW	10
3.1 LGBTQ+ Activism: Motivations and Barriers	10
3.2 China's LGBTQ+ Activism: Difficulties and Responses	12
3.3 Queer's Attitudes Toward Difficulties	15
3.4 Conclusion	17
4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	18
4.1 Framing Theory	18
4.2 Queer Resilience	20
5. METHODOLOGY	21
5.1 Research Design	21
5.2 Data Collection	22
5.21 Semi-structured Interviews	22
5.22 Online Observation	24
5.23 Autoethnography	27
5.3 Ethical Issues	28
5.31 Safety	28
5.32 Trauma and Negative Emotions	29
5.4 Limitations and Reflections	30
5.5 Data Analysis	31

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS.....	34
6.1 Diagnosis of the Difficulties: Origins and Consequences	34
6.11 Origins of the Difficulties	34
6.12 Consequences of the Difficulties	36
6.13 Summary and Discussion.....	38
6.2 Attitudes Toward Difficulties	40
6.21 Pragmatic Realism	40
6.22 The Moral Necessity to Take Action.....	44
6.23 Summary and Discussion.....	45
6.3 Strategies and Future Action Plans	47
6.31 Transformation.....	47
6.32 Compromise and Cooperation	49
6.33 Focusing on Self-care	50
6.34 Summary and Discussion.....	51
7. CONCLUSION	53
REFERENCES.....	55
APPENDIX 1.....	67
APPENDIX 2.....	68

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

For over a decade, LGBTQ+ activism in China experienced a significant period of progress. This golden era started in 1997 when homosexuality was decriminalized, followed by a critical development in 2001 when both homosexuality and bisexuality were no longer classified as mental disorders, being officially removed from the list. This development was supported by transnational funding, which significantly contributed to the rapid growth of LGBTQ+ civil society organizations (CSOs) and many of them increasingly focused on public involvement, aiming to raise public awareness and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights (Moreno-Tabarez et al., 2014). As a result, there was a notable increase in LGBTQ+ friendly media and an expansion of related public spaces (UNDP, 2014). In 2006, there were more than 50 LGBTQ+ organizations existed China (China News, 2006).

Nevertheless, the dynamic of China's civil society has significantly changed in the mid-2010s. The repression of rights-advocated NGOs and individual activists has intensified, shifting from intimidation to a law-based, systematic crackdown (Howell, 2021; Zhu & Jun, 2022). LGBTQ+ activism in China has also been affected. After years of operating in the gray area permitted by the "Three NOs Policy", namely "not encouraging, not discouraging, and not promoting" (不支持、不反对、不提倡), the LGBTQ+ organizations and activists have faced severe attacks in recent years. In 2017, with heightened concerns for public security, the Law on Administration of Activities of Overseas NGOs in Mainland China (中华人民共和国境外非政府组织境内活动管理法) was enacted, making many local LGBTQ+ NGOs lose their international donors (Ren & Gui, 2022). Moreover, following the 2018 #Metoo movement, both feminists and LGBTQ+ activists were targeted by cyber-nationalist (Dian, 2023).

In the post-2020s era, the government's control-based and restrictive policies were continued due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sidel & Hu, 2021). LGBTQ+ and feminist

activists were actively involved in protests against the Zero-COVID policy (The China Project, 2022), which has made the identity of gender justice activists become further sensitive. In 2020, Shanghai Pride (上海骄傲节), the largest and longest-running LGBTQ+ festival in China, was compelled to cancel due to local government pressures. The year 2021 witnessed the sudden deactivation of WeChat official accounts of numerous LGBTQ+ student organizations and local branches of Trueself (出色伙伴, formerly PFLAG China 同性恋亲友会). Organizations such as LGBT Right Advocacy China (权促会) and Beijing LGBT Center (北京同志中心) were forced to stop operations, despite having eliminated sensitive terms such as homosexuality, networks, or advocacy from their organization names.

This systematic suppression has significantly affected both organizations and individual activists, who have had their careers suspended, and community members, who lost their safe spaces. Negative emotions, including trauma related to the social movement, fear, disgrace, and political depression, have been frequently highlighted in recent research and reports on China's LGBTQ+ activism (Foreign Policy, 2023; Wang, 2023a). The chilling effect of these measures has built up a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty and apprehension within the LGBTQ+ community in China.

1.2 Research Problem and Significance of the Study

The intensification of the crackdown on LGBTQ+ activism in China after 2020 marks a significant escalation in both form and severity from previous years. Given this backdrop, it is crucial to explore why and how activists can sustain and grow their activism despite the prevailing negative collective sentiments and frustrated experiences of being cracked down.

The discussion of this topic is noteworthy not only for its practical significance in this new social-political environment, but also for its academic significance. In previous research on the sustainability of China's LGBTQ+ activism in hard times, organizational-level coping strategies have been well recognized, including exploring

local funding sources, changing organization names and meeting venues, and transitioning into social enterprises to survive (QUARTZ, 2017; Ren & Gui, 2022; Wang, 2023b). However, few studies have been able to focus on individual-level responses, for example, the attitudes, emotions, and responses of activists in the face of difficulties. As Adams (2002) criticized in the study of social movement decline, scholars' attention is typically on the reasons of failure and political responses of activists to the decline. However, the more personal aspects of activists' lives during movement decline, such as their emotions, ideas, and new concerns, have been overlooked. The focus on activists is also important for the study of China's LGBTQ+ activism. An activist once mentioned that the most valuable resource in China's LGBTQ+ activism is the people involved in it (Moreno-Tabarez et al., 2014). In an era where political opportunities and resources are diminishing rapidly, focusing on "people" becomes even more essential. The ways in which activists interpret their current circumstances, manage burnout and negative emotions, and plan their future actions remain unexamined topics that are crucial to the survival of China's LGBTQ+ activism in the face of hardship.

1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this thesis is to identify the driving forces of the sustainable development of LGBTQ+ activism in China during difficult times (post-2020s) from an activist perspective, by analyzing activists' understandings of and responses to the current predicament through interviews, online observations and autoethnography.

To address this research aim, the research questions are formulated as follows:

(1) What difficulties have the activists experienced in LGBTQ+ activism in recent years? And how do they understand these difficulties?

Activists' different understandings of the predicament may lead a social movement in different directions. As Voss (1996) noted, activists have the agency to reframe the

experience of defeat and create a “fortifying myth” that motivates participants to persevere until new political opportunities arise. By contrast, considering defeat as actual “failure” can lead to feelings of burnout and despair, which in turn create the self-fulfilling prophecy of “failure” (Moyer, 2001). Therefore, by analyzing activists’ attitudes and their ways of understanding the difficulties they have suffered, it is possible to know what kind of ideas or beliefs that encourage them to take action in this difficult time.

(2) What strategies did activists apply to respond to difficulties and challenges? And why did they choose these strategies?

The resources that activists can mobilize and the political opportunities that they can seize may change during the period when the movement is declining and the repression is intensifying. As concluded by Tran (2023), during crackdowns, activists adopt unique strategies, such as mobilizing networks through familial bonds and long-term friendships, building collective capacity for protest safety, and updating their knowledge on self-defense. For LGBTQ+ activism in China, there is a need to analyze whether there are new strategies adopted by activists and why they did so. This analysis can shed light on the sources of their resilience in the face of difficulties.

In addition, as Tarrow (1993, p. 286) suggested with his theory on the cycle of protest, the frames and repertoires tested in previous protests can become part of future movements. Studying activists’ strategies to stay resilient in a period of intensified repression can also provide insights for future activism, thus answering the question about the sustainable development of China’s LGBTQ+ activism.

(3) How do activists imagine the future of their activism?

LGBTQ+ activists in China experience a double dimension of uncertainty. One is the uncertainty of the boundaries of permissible political activity (Stern & Hassid, 2012) that they face as activists who want to make social change. The other is the

precariousness of their personal lives as sexual minorities living in China (Huang, 2017). Some research have found that, for LGBTQ+ activists in China, their imagination of queer utopia and their beliefs of living a fantastic life in the future have become supportive dynamics for them in the dark time (Dian, 2023; Huang, 2017) . However, the optimistic imagination of the future can also become “cruel”. As defined by Berlant (2011, p. 1), a cruel relation of optimism is “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing”. Being optimistic about things that are unlikely to be achieved also has the potential to increase the possibility of activists’ burnout. Are activists optimistic or pessimistic about the future of activism? Is the future still something that can be imagined in the current situation? Answering these questions will help explore the sustainability of China’s LGBTQ+ activism.

1.4 Thesis Structure

The first chapter of this thesis presents the background of the study as well as the research questions. Chapter 2 clarifies the usage and meaning of three LGBTQ+ related concepts in the Chinese context. Chapter 3 provides a literature review from three perspectives: the motivations and barriers to the development of the LGBTQ+ movement, the difficulties encountered by LGBTQ+ activism in China and the strategies adopted by activists to respond to them, and the attitudes of the queer community in the face of difficulties. Chapter 4 presents the theoretical framework. Chapter 5 describes the research methodology. Chapter 6 presents the research findings and discusses the resilience of LGBTQ+ activism in China. At the end, a summary of the contributions and shortcomings of this thesis, and suggestions for future research are presented.

2. KEY CONCEPTS

Before delving into the main text, there are several concepts whose meanings in the Chinese context need to be clarified.

2.1 LGBTQ+

In the Chinese context, there are different ways for people who do not align with heterosexual or cisgender norms to refer to themselves, such as “*tongzhi*” (同志, have the meaning of both comrades and homosexuals), “*tongxinglian*” (同性恋, homosexual), “queer”(酷儿), or “LGBTQ+”.

There are subtle differences in the meanings of these terms. In the 1990s, the word “*tongzhi*” was queerized. Activists in Hong Kong used this term, which came from the communist revolutionary era and represents people with the same ambitions, to refer to gay and lesbian people, as a way to counter the claim that “homosexuality is a product of Western culture”. Unlike the English term “LGBTQ+”, the term “*tongzhi*” has a strong sense of “Chineseness” and local consciousness. On the other hand, the term “*tongxinglian*” is more frequently used by the public, often with stigmatizing connotations. As a result, gender minority groups prefer the term “*tongzhi*” to identify themselves (Bao, 2018, pp. 73-79). However, as Kam (2013) pointed out, female homosexuality in China is marginalized in public discussion because it seems to be less threatening to public health and the dominant social order. *Tongzhi* activism and scholarship in China are criticized for being male-dominated. Therefore, lesbians are more willing to use the terms “*nvtongzhi*” (女同志, female *tongzhi*) or “*lala*” (拉拉, lesbians) to refer to themselves to show the distinction between lesbian and gay. The term “*kuer*” (酷儿, queer) was known to the local community with Li Yinhe’s translation of Queer Theory in the 2000s. The year 2011 saw a famous online debate on whether queer theory can be applied to China’s social-political environment. In this debate, some lesbian activists supported theories of gender fluidity and constructivism, while other gay activists supported the essentialism of sexual orientation. Influenced

by this debate, the term “queer” is more embraced by young, well-educated females in China, with a specific focus on its potential to bring diverse narratives, the fluidity of sexual identity, and the rejection of the normalization of same-sex sexuality (Fugazzola, 2023, pp. 23-44; Kam, 2013, pp. 106-108).

This short introduction shows the inner diversity of China’s gender minority community. As pointed out in the book *Queer/Tongzhi China* (ed. Engebretsen et al., 2015), the discussion around the use of these terms has shown the tension between western queer theory and local knowledge production in China, and people’s different subject positions in activism, in research, and in their intimate relationships. Thus, it is better not to be trapped in the definition, but to derive the meaning of these terms from people’s detailed life experiences. As the participants involved in this research are not only *tongzhi* (homosexual), this thesis prefers to use the term “LGBTQ+” to increase inclusivity, and if the respondents used other terms to describe themselves, this thesis will align its presentation with their choices.

2.2 LGBTQ+ Movement and Activism

Another question that needs to be clarified is whether there is an LGBTQ+ “movement” in China. One popular saying is that “there are only *tongzhi* activities (*huodong*) in China, but no *tongzhi* movement (*yundong*)¹” (“中国只有同志活动，没有同志运动”). Understanding this question depends on how we define social movements and activism.

Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 11) defined “social movement” as “a sustained campaign of claim-making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities.” This definition focuses on criteria such as the movement’s advocacy for political change, and the degree of professionalization and organization. However, the political environment of authoritarian states should be taken into consideration. Collective

¹ Radio Free Asia. (2019). 从台北到北京，一位男同志的彩虹路 | 专题 [From Taipei to Beijing, a Gay Man’s Rainbow Road]. Available online: <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/duomeiti/tebiejiemu/tz-08072019124149.html> [Accessed 19 October 2023]

actions in authoritarian states are difficult to meet these criteria. Scholars criticized that Western LGBTQ+ activism, which is based on public visibility and “coming out”, is not always applicable in non-Western countries. For example, LGBTQ+ activism in Singapore, Russia, and Kazakhstan all takes the form of non-confrontable and invisible resistance (Chua, 2012; Levitanus & Kislitsyna, 2024).

The definition of activism also faces the same problem. Feminist scholars have extended the definition of activism from directly targeting political change in the public sphere to everyday acts of resistance (Bobel, 2007; Martin et al., 2007). As hinted by the concept “the personal is the political”, the domestic space can also help feminists build their personal autonomy when the public sphere is under political repression (Zeng & Xu, 2024). In the context of China’s LGBTQ+ movement, scholars reject seeing the overt, confrontable protest or pride parade as the only type of LGBTQ+ activism, because cultural production, community meetings, or the simple activity of “just having fun” also have political significance (Bao, 2020; Schroeder, 2015).

Considering the aforementioned discussion, this thesis recognizes the existence of the LGBTQ+ movement and activism in China in a broad sense. However, as this thesis focuses primarily on the experiences and strategies of individual activists rather than the organizations or networks involved, this thesis prefers to use the term “LGBTQ+ activism”.

2.3 LGBTQ+ Activists

In Chinese, the term “activists” can be translated as “行动者 (*xingdongzhe*, someone who is actively involved in a particular activity)” or “活动家 (*huodongjia*, someone who is actively engaged in promoting social or political change).” Schroeder (2015) noted that many people who are involved in LGBTQ+ activism in China often reject the label of “activist”, even though, in the researcher’s view, what they do in fact express some kind of activism. The reasons for this rejection are complex. People may refuse to be identified as “activists” because they have different definitions of what

constitutes “social change”, or simply because this term is sensitive in authoritarian countries. Craddock (2019) noted that the narrow definition of “activist” hinders women’s participation in social movements, as the idealized “activist” is usually defined as someone who does a sufficient number of aggressive direct actions, such as physical confrontation, and it is usually the male participant who can meet this definition. Therefore, there is a need to broaden the definition of “activist”.

This thesis developed an operational definition of “activist” based on the aforementioned discussion. In this thesis, the activist is “an individual who engages in actions related to LGBTQ+ issues and through those actions has some impact on society, the community, or even just the people around them.”

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis presents the literature review from three perspectives: activists' motivations and barriers to engaging in LGBTQ+ activism, specific difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ activism in China and activists' responses to them, and queer attitudes toward difficulties.

3.1 LGBTQ+ Activism: Motivations and Barriers

The reasons why people participate in or leave movements have received a great deal of attention in social movement research. As Snow et al. (1986) concluded, scholars have proposed various theories to explain people's motivations for movement participation, including convergence theory, the hearts and minds approach, breakdown theory, and resource mobilization theory. The perceptions of grievance, the calculation of cost and benefit, the opening up or closing of political opportunities, and the deployment of material resources have been seen as driving forces for movement participants. In terms of why people leave the movement, Tilly and Tarrow (2015) proposed several mechanisms of social movement demobilization, including the competition of resources, goals, and ideologies among the participants; leaders' defection; disillusionment from leaders and followers; direct and indirect repression; and the polarization of movement caused by the institutionalization strategy and escalation strategy. Cox (2010) focused on the problem of movement sustainability from an activist's personal perspective. He argued that the lack of visible results, sectarianism in organizations, overwork, and the lack of self-care will cause activists' burnout.

In the case of LGBTQ+ activism, the reasons why people join and leave the movement have some similarities to the findings above, as well as characteristics that are unique to the LGBTQ+ community. People get involved in the LGBTQ+ movement for a variety of reasons. One reason relates to personal experiences of being discriminated against as a gender minority. Experimental research has shown that experiencing

heterosexist discrimination can motivate people to join LGBTQ+ movements (Frost et al., 2019; Swank & Fahs, 2013). Another reason is related to community. The impact of social networks has not only motivated sexual minorities to join the movement (Montagno et al., 2021; Swank & Fahs, 2012), but also heterosexuals (Calcagno, 2016). Identity is equally important, Swank (2018) found that sexual minorities were more likely than heterosexuals to join four kinds of social movements, such as the LGBTQ+ rights movement, the peace movement, the environmentalist movement, and Occupy Wall Street. But just as Duncan et al. (2017) pointed out, not all people politicize their sexual orientation, being a sexual minority does not necessarily make one an activist. Thus, she argued that regardless of sexual orientation, the strength of queer consciousness is related to whether one is politically active or not in LGBTQ+ activism.

In terms of the difficulties in LGBTQ+ movements, in addition to the obstacles mentioned above at the resource, organizational, and personal levels, activists face other specific challenges related to their gender identity. Vaccaro and Mena (2011) noted that queer activists experience burnout when dealing with the intersection of multiple identities, such as being both a gender minority and an ethnic minority. The fear that participating in a movement will reveal one's sexual orientation is also a barrier for people to participate in the LGBTQ+ movement (Frost et al., 2019). For activists in authoritarian states, the barriers they have faced are not only "hard repression" from the state, such as the death penalty, but also "soft repression" from non-state actors (Ferree, 2004). Ferree (2004) argued that the ridicule in face-to-face interaction, stigma at the group level, and silencing at the institutional level are three key causes of the demobilization of gender-based movements. In non-western countries, because LGBTQ+ culture is perceived as a Western culture, activists have also suffered accusations of being "unpatriotic" (Chen, 2023; Levitanus & Kislitsyna, 2024).

In conclusion, the reasons that motivate or prevent people from engaging in LGBTQ+ activism are diverse. As socio-political contexts and the intersectionality of identities

can present different obstacles, the motivations and obstacles faced by activists in China's LGBTQ+ movement require a particular examination.

3.2 China's LGBTQ+ Activism: Difficulties and Responses

According to van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009), the paradigms of studying social movement can be divided into structural paradigms and social constructivist paradigms. The former focuses on the structural pressures on social movement participants and the availability of material resources and political opportunities. The latter focuses on microelements, such as the identities of the participants in a social movement, the cultural frameworks, and emotions. For previous research, answers to the question of how China's LGBTQ+ activism can be sustained in the face of difficulties can also be divided into structuralist and constructivist approaches.

From a structuralist perspective, previous research on LGBTQ+ activism in China has focused on the different difficulties the movement faces and how it mobilizes resources and seizes political opportunities to respond.

The first major difficulty is the limited political environment and the censorship from the government. To operate in such a condition, LGBTQ+ activists found several alternative strategies rather than confrontable protests or demonstrations. Bao (2020) and Fan (2015) pointed out the important role of queer cultural production, stressing the significance of queer literature, film, art, and performance for increasing queer visibility, shaping identities, and constructing communities. Online activism is another frequently used strategy. Although the Internet in China is heavily censored, young netizens creatively use coded terms, humor, Photoshopped photos, and puns to express themselves (Tan, 2017; Yang, 2014). Previous research has shown that websites and social media can increase the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community by disseminating knowledge and information to build community (Deklerck & Wei, 2015) and by calling for collective action such as "collective coming out" (Yang, 2019) and hashtag activism (Chia, 2019a) to counter discriminatory policies. There are still activists who organize

offline events, but adopt a strategy that Engebretsen (2015) called the “guerrilla” style. Activists have renamed their organizations (Ren & Gui, 2022), changed the venue of their events (some organizations even held activities directly on international waters, see QUARTZ, 2017), or adopted a de-politicized discourse that reduces the connection of their activities to the human rights discourse (Hildebrandt, 2011; Wei, 2005) in order to make the action continue under the monitor and regulation from the government.

Beyond that, as Chia (2019b) mentioned, although the state regulation on the LGBTQ+ issue is strict, it is also fragmented. Some activists have seized the political opportunities to operate at the margins of China’s legal and policy framework. Gay men’s organizations have grown with the help of international funding from AIDS-related funds and international organizations (Hildebrandt, 2012). Although lesbian organizations were overlooked by AIDS-related funds, they have gained space through their “invisibility” at the government level compared to gay men’s organizations, and have been able to focus on the needs of their own constituencies (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). Some “rainbow lawyers” have made use of the Chinese representative’s positive statement on the protection of LGBTQ+ human rights in the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council to file influential lawsuits in China to advocate for LGBTQ+ human rights (Jeffreys, 2018; Peng, 2018).

Another major difficulty is heterosexual family norms and filial nationalism. The pressure of filial piety, regulation from parents, and the state’s relational repression have been seen as challenges for China’s LGBTQ+ groups (Wang, 2020; Wei & Yan, 2021). However, the cultural capital and moral authority of parenthood in Chinese family culture are also used by some NGOs to promote LGBTQ+ rights. Wei and Yan (2021) noticed that the familial model of coming-out promoted by PFLAG China makes it possible for parents of LGBTQ+ youth to form alliances with other parents. This family-centered action strategy mitigates hostility from the state and creates new spaces for civil society.

From a constructivist perspective, the related research is limited. Some studies have focused on interpretive frameworks and shared emotions of the activism in the face of difficulty. For instance, Schroeder (2015) noticed the “whateverness” in China’s LGBTQ+ activism. Activists are relaxed about the goals of the campaign, welcoming both politically motivated participants and those who are simply here to have fun. Furthermore, Deklerck's (2020) study found that local activists have developed a queer optimism of “having fun” as their “playful resistance”, organizing activities that evoke a sense of joy, fun, and escapism to make up for the powerlessness of not being able to promote direct activism. Huang (2017) found that the lesbian community in China has developed a collective emotion of insisting on romance and relying on the imagination of queer utopia daydreams to fight against the precariousness of the present. Recent research also found that activists’ belief in living a fantastic life in the future has become a supportive dynamic for them in this dark time (Dian, 2023) .

According to shared emotions, previous studies found that China’s LGBTQ+ community used to share an optimistic feeling structure during the new millennium, with the decriminalization and de-pathologization of homosexuality bringing new hope (Bao, 2020). Some activists also regard the efficient top-down implementation of Chinese state policies (if they are LGBTQ-friendly), the fragmentation of state regulation means, and some friendly jurisprudence as reasons for their optimistic attitudes (Chia, 2019b; Hildebrandt, 2011; Siodhbhra, 2018). However, with relatively little recent research from an emotional perspective, it’s unclear whether activists can remain optimistic about the current predicament.

To conclude, existing research on China’s LGBTQ+ activism has paid more attention to the response strategies adopted by activists, but less attention to activists’ understandings and feelings about the difficulties. The problem within this research paradigm is that the effectiveness of these strategies is tentative. As Spires (2011) argued with the concept of “contingent symbiosis”, in an authoritarian state, the relationship between ostensibly illegal grassroots NGOs and the government is both

fragile and contingent. It is crucial to acknowledge that no strategy is foolproof in China's political environment, where uncertainty is wielded by the state as a control strategy to instill fear and dissuade citizens from engaging in politics (Stern & Hassid, 2012). For example, the control of overseas organizations and the Internet has been tightened in recent years. There are also new policies that recently prohibit lawyers from publicizing cases on social media to provoke public opinion, which could lead to an unstable society (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Studies relying solely on structuralist perspectives cannot explain the recent situation in which activists are still willing to continue to act after the disappearance of these political opportunities and resources that were previously available to them. Therefore, the study of strategies needs to be updated according to changes in the political environment, and more attention should be paid from a constructivist perspective.

3.3 Queer's Attitudes Toward Difficulties

As Cox (2010) argued, how to manage the experience of current defeat or blockage for one's own actions is the central problem of activist burnout. To analyze the question of how the LGBTQ+ movement continues in difficult circumstances, the attitude of activists toward the experience of difficulty and failure is also worth discussing.

One typical attitude is "pride". Facing homophobia, stigma, and the AIDS crisis, the concept of gay pride was promoted by queer organizations to build community solidarity and counter the image that queer people are passive, shameful victims (Gould, 2009; Rand, 2012). Other positive attitudes include "queer optimism" (Snediker, 2006) and "queer utopianism" (Muñoz, 2009), which believe in the queer potential of the future. Furthermore, with the rising of queer theories, the LGBTQ+ community creatively transformed the word "queer" from "being strange" to a concept that has an anti-normative essence (Smith, 1996) and political potential to transform stigma, shame, and oppression into a source of momentum and energy (Kornak, 2015; Sedgwick, 1993).

Recent queer theories have criticized the concept of “pride” and have argued that negative emotions and experiences of failure are valuable. The queer refusal of “success”, “happiness”, or the “promised future” came from the criticism of the affirmative turn in the gay and lesbian movement in the post-Stonewall era. Heather Love (2007) argued that post-Stonewall gay identity is a declarable, dignified identity rooted in community and enjoys the feeling of “pride” based on that affirmation. With increasing legal protections and temporary inclusion in many areas of civic life, homosexuals no longer consider themselves inevitably damned. But there is a condition for moving into the bright future: the negative feelings and the miserable past must be left behind.

Love (2007, pp. 12-13) criticized the ideology of “progress” in the movement, and argued that the negative and “useless” feelings are political, because confronting them directly can show us how and why our action is blocked, and how to find motives for political action when none is visible. Sara Ahmed (2010) also criticized the notion of “happiness” in queer life. She argued that the illusion that the choice of same-sex objects has been accepted conceals the continuing reality of discrimination, non-recognition, and violence. Recognition is a “gift” from the heteronormative world to homosexuals at the cost of the moral obligation of homosexuals to behave decently and to be the “happy queer” with good manners, or their right to coexist will be denied. That is why she said, “we must stay unhappy with this world” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 106). Similar to Love, Ahmed noted the political potential of the negative feelings and experiences. She argued, with the concept of “queer fatalism”, to be queer is to hurtle toward a miserable fate.

For the experiences of being defeated and failure, Jack Halberstam (2011) challenged the dichotomy of success and failure with the idea of “queer failure” in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*. He argued that the standard of success is constructed within a heteronormative society. In such a society, “failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3).” Failing, losing, and undoing

can serve as alternative ways to live a creative and rebellious queer life. Similarly, Muñoz (2009, pp. 172-173) argued that queer utopianism's rejection of pragmatism is often perceived as a failure, but he defined queer failure as "more nearly about escape and a certain virtuosity". Escape does not mean surrender, but a rejection of the dominant order and systemic violence.

In conclusion, positive and negative attitudes are equally important to queer politics.

3.4 Conclusion

This thesis identifies a research gap in existing studies on how Chinese LGBTQ+ activists perceive difficulties, and argues that analyses of their coping strategies need to be updated in line with changes in the socio-political environment. Since previous research has found that both positive and negative attitudes have a motivational effect on queer politics, this thesis argues that attention should also be paid to the role of negative affect in analyses of the Chinese LGBTQ+ movement, which has been overlooked in previous research.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

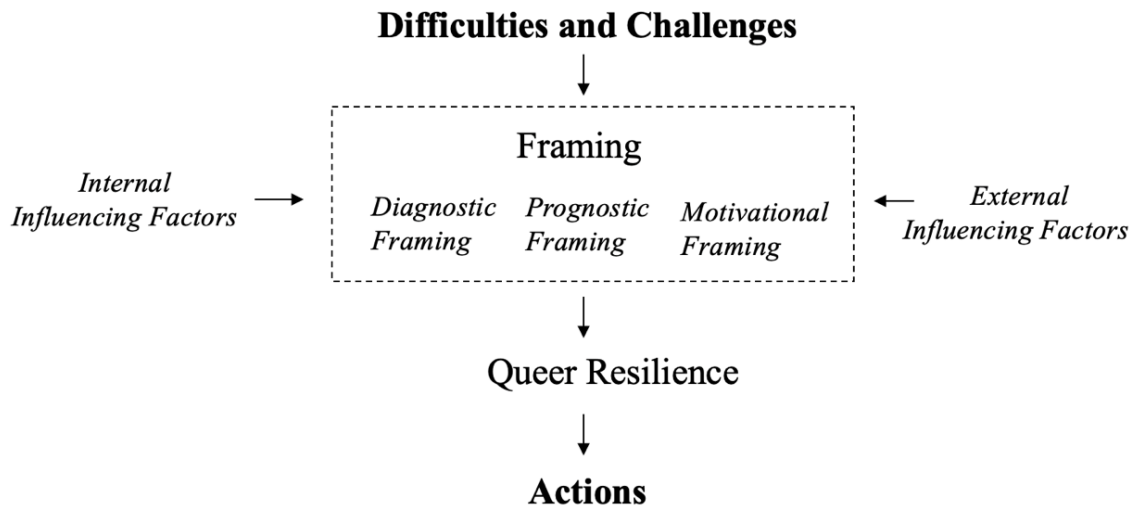


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

This thesis combines the framing theory in social movement studies and the theory of queer resilience to explore activists' understandings of and responses to the current predicament in China's LGBTQ+ activism.

4.1 Framing Theory

As this thesis seeks to explore activists' perceptions of the difficulties of LGBTQ+ activism and how these perceptions influence their actions, framing theory is adapted as a part of the analytical framework for this thesis, because it is a theory that brings "ideas" back in social movement studies (Oliver & Johnston, 2000).

McAdam et al. (1996, p. 6) defined framing as "conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action", and argued that the framing process is the mediation between political opportunity, organization, and action in social movements. There are various factors that could shape the framing process, including external factors such as the state, countermovement, culture and general belief system in society, and the broader cycles of protest, as well as internal factors such as actors representing

the movement (McAdam et al., 1996; Snow & Benford, 1988). Emotion is another important factor that could influence the framing process (Kemper, 2001). Goodwin et al. (2001, p. 9) mentioned that “it is difficult to study frames [...] without noticing people’s feelings about specific beliefs and understandings.”

Snow and Benford (1988, pp. 199-202) proposed three main tasks of framing, including (1) diagnostic framing, through which activists identify a problem and attribute blame or causality; (2) prognostic framing, by which activists identify strategies, tactics, and targets to solve the problem; and (3) motivational framing, which provides rationale for sequent collective actions to make a change.

These three tasks become the main analytical structure of this thesis. By analyzing the diagnostic framing process, I am able to know activists’ attitudes about the difficulties they have experienced. Are these difficulties a death blow or common setbacks for them? Who/what factors contributed to the difficulties that they have suffered? Suh (2001) argued that misframing will create the understanding of both “pseudofailure” and “pseudosuccess”. “Pseudofailure” means that social movement participants blame counter-movements (such as the government) for their failures, even though the outcome is more likely to be due to their own incompetence. “Pseudosuccess” means that social movement participants attribute the realization of their collective demands to organizational efficacy, when in fact it stems from a favorable expansion of political opportunities. The findings of the diagnostic framing process are helpful in exploring activists’ understandings of structure pressure and organizational operation. By analyzing the prognostic framing process and the motivational framing process, I am able to answer the second and the third research questions on how the activists cope with the difficulties and keep the movement going under the unfavorable circumstance.

4.2 Queer Resilience

Resilience theory is concerned with how people cope with stress and recover from trauma. The definition of this concept refers to both the ability of individuals to access the psychological, social, cultural, and material resources that sustain their well-being, and the ability to negotiate individually and collectively for these resources to be provided (Ungar, 2006). Tran (2023) argued that activist resilience plays an important role in the resilience of social movements under repression, because it can help activists survive and pass down their knowledge and experience to new movement participants. Previous research on queer resilience has mostly focused on exploring how LGBTQ+ youth grow up with resilience in a heteronormative society (Asakura, 2017; Cover, 2013; Peel et al., 2023).

This concept is also useful for the study of LGBTQ+ activists in difficult situations and can also be combined with framing theory. The theory of queer resilience pays particular attention to the agency of queers, their way of understanding the outside world, and their social support networks. For example, Asakura (2017) argued that identifying sources of stress as social issues, such as homophobia and transphobia, is more conducive for queer people to restore resilience than identifying the causes as their personal failure. Peel et al. (2023) argued that being aware of one's emotions also contributes for resilience to queer people.

For LGBTQ+ activism in China, different interpretive frameworks of the current predicament among activists may produce different levels of queer resilience, thus affecting the sustainability of the activism.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative research strategy and takes an interpretative stance to explore the meaning behind activists' perceptions of the current predicament they have experienced. Bryman (2016, p. 28) argued that the meaning of interpretative stance in social science studies has double layers: "the researcher provides an interpretation of others' interpretations". This thesis first uses methods of semi-structured interviews, online observation, and autoethnography to collect activists' interpretations of their situation. Then, this thesis draws on the aforementioned theoretical framework to interpret of activists' ideas and strategies. The ontology position of this thesis is based on constructionism, which argues that social phenomena and categories are socially constructed through interaction.

Considering this particular research subject and research topic, I also refer to the discussion on queer methodology (Das, 2020; Halberstam, 1998), and the debate on whether queer theory can be applied to the Chinese context (Liu, 2010; Yue, 2017; Zhao & Bao, 2022). Scholars argued that queer methodology should be interdisciplinary (Halberstam, 1998, p. 12-13), recognizing that the relationship between researcher and research informants will always be unstable, and that is important to provide a qualitative account of its research participants that does not hide the variability between them (Das, 2020, p. 105). To conduct queer research in China, there is an ongoing debate about whether to support or reject "China exceptionalism" (Engebretsen & Schroeder, 2015). Against this backdrop, scholars proposed the idea of "queer Asia/China as method", which rejects both the universality of Anglo-American queer knowledge production and Asia/China exceptionalism (Yue, 2017; Zhao & Bao, 2022). Zhao and Bao (2022) concluded that queer knowledge, movements, and related politics in Sinophere are simultaneously influenced by many factors, such as traditional Confucian values, authoritarian states, Marxist and socialist thoughts, and cross-cultural factors. Queer studies in China use local knowledge to show that the

connotation of “queer” can be constantly supplemented, expanded, and modified. Therefore, this thesis combined the methods of semi-structured interviews, online observation, and autoethnography together to conduct this research, and paid extra attention to the knowledge production of local activists.

5.2 Data Collection

5.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

As this thesis focuses on the activists’ personal feelings and experiences, the method of semi-structured interviews is helpful, because the flexibility of semi-structured interviews provides room for interviewees to pursue their interested topics and allows researchers to go in-depth on the topic from the interviewees’ elaborations and digressions (Bryman, 2016).

I used the methods of snowball sampling and purposive sampling to recruit interview participants. Considering the inner diversity of China’s LGBTQ+ community, for example, gay men groups are more visible than other groups (UNDP, 2014), I managed to recruit interviewees from various organizations and gender identities. I also reached out to people with different activism experiences, such as people working in formal NGOs, people working in informal student organizations, founders of organizations who have been involved in LGBTQ+ activism for a long time, as well as young or emerging participants with few experiences.

In total, ten participants took part in my research, including individuals identifying as cisgender gay, cisgender lesbian, female/nonbinary lesbian, female/queer lesbian, pansexual queer, heterosexual transman, bisexual/pansexual man, nonbinary/transmasculine/demiboy, and gender nonbinary².

² In subsequent text, I will use the gender pronouns chosen by the interviewees themselves.

I completed the interviews from February 7 to March 6, 2024, in China. Seven interviews were conducted online via Zoom. A practical reason for the online interview is that after organizations were shut down, many activists traveled abroad to focus on their mental health recovery or take a break. Three interviews were conducted offline in safe spaces. To ensure the safety of the interviewees, all of them participated in this research anonymously. Instead of assigning them generic code names like Interviewee A, B, or C, I allowed them to choose their own nicknames. Some of them chose the nickname which is meaningful in the LGBTQ+ community. Some of them chose the name which is “weird enough” on purpose to show their queerness. Background information of the interviewees can be found in Figure 2.

Name	Occupation	Pronoun
Pangolin	Volunteer for LGBTQ+ NGO A (closed) Co-founder of a LGBTQ+ social media account (the account was shut down) Staff member at LGBTQ+ NGO B	He/Him
Matthew	Founder of LGBTQ+ NGO C	He/Him
Xiaocui	Founder of a queer women-friendly space	She/Her
JoJo	LGBTQ+ blogger on Sina Weibo with 24k followers (the account was shut down)	They/Them He/Him
12	Member of LGBTQ+ student group A (closed)	She/Her
Edward	Volunteer for several LGBTQ+ organizations Staff member at LGBTQ+ NGO D (closed)	He/Him
Q	Staff member at LGBTQ+ NGO E (closed)	They/Them
Carol	Founder of LGBTQ+ NGO F	They/Them
X	Staff member at LGBTQ+ NGO B	She/Her They/Them
Monster	Member of LGBTQ+ student group B (closed)	She/Her

Figure 2: Background Information of the Interviewees

The interview outline was designed based on the three research questions (see Appendix 1 for the full interview outline). The first to sixth interview questions were designed to answer the first research question, that is, the activists’ perceptions and attitudes toward the difficulties they experienced. The seventh and eighth interview questions were designed to answer the second research question, which is the activists’

coping strategies for the difficulties. The ninth and tenth research questions were designed to answer the third research question about the impact of these difficulties and understandings on activists' future actions. In addition, as Burgess-Proctor (2015) pointed out, following the feminist research ethic, ending the interview by having the participants offer advice to others in similar situations is a good way to empower them. Therefore, I added an open-ended question at the end of the interview outline, asking them if there were any messages or suggestions that they would like to give to the LGBTQ+ community at the moment. Theoretically, it contributes to the exploration of activists' reflections of the past and the imaginary of the future.

I conducted and transcribed the interview in Chinese. After finishing the interview, I imported these data into Nvivo for further analysis.

5.22 Online Observation

The sample of semi-structured interviews is limited. Bryman (2016) noted that for the research of sensitive and covert topics, researchers are forced to gather information from whatever available sources. For the snowball sampling, the activists I was able to reach were limited to their social circles. I struggled to find valid email addresses when trying to contact LGBTQ+ student organizations, as many of these organizations were closed. Furthermore, their only public communication channel, the WeChat public account, had been shut down.

However, there are still ways to find relevant information. In a cat-and-mouse game of censorship and counter-censorship, Chinese netizens have created a number of tactics for communicating sensitive information, such as recoding messages and changing platforms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as censorship became more strict, the strategy of "online relay campaigns" became popular, through which people spontaneously copied and posted censored articles using their social media accounts, allowing the impact of the banned-article to last longer (Wu, 2024). This "online relay campaign" also happened when many LGBTQ+ student organizations had their

accounts shut down. People forwarded the announcements of these organizations in different group chats, and used their own WeChat public accounts to post related information. Therefore, I applied the method of online observation to collect additional data. Dawson (2020) noted that online observation allows researchers to be exposed to the interactions between online users, the content they generate, and the multiple meanings attached to their interactions.

I conducted searches on Google and WeChat using keywords such as “LGBTQ”, “organization”, “July 6th” (the day on which many LGBTQ+ student organizations were closed), and the name of the NGOs that had been closed. I found four in-depth interviews with activists who were affected by the current crackdown. These interviews are from transnational Chinese media such as Initium Media (端傳媒) and WhyNot (歪腦), and local independent media such as Common Knowledge (常識). Some of the activists have expressed their views to these media outlets regarding the attacks on them or their organizations (see Appendix 2 for the list of these media reports).

I also collected several organizational announcements. Some LGBTQ+ organizations published their “reincarnation” announcements³ or farewell letters in their community group chats when they were shut down (see example in Figure 3). Members of the organization expressed their feelings and attitudes towards the current situation in these documents. In total, I collected 11 announcements as well as 4 news articles (Figure 4). I imported these documents into Nvivo for further analysis.

³ Those who have had their accounts shut down are often able to sign up for new accounts using a different phone number or email address. This has been called “cyber reincarnation” (賽博轉世重生) by social media users in China. This behavior is now tightly controlled because of the new regulation issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China. See: Vice. (2021). China Orders Social Media to Block Banned Users From ‘Reincarnation’. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvzebd/china-social-media-crackdown-internet-censorship>. For LGBTQ+ organizations, many of them have had their accounts closed again after their “reincarnation”.

致每一个关注的朋友，
非常痛心地告诉大家，
的公众号在2021.7.6晚因未知原因被永久性封禁。目前已知，还有部分其他高校的彩虹小组也被永久性封禁。



一直致力于开展社群陪伴活动。公众号可以说是我们的主要宣传渠道。一切发生得过于突然，我们没有任何准备。草率地没有进行公众号推送的备份，以至于很多社群活动的回忆就这样遗失了。网络的记忆可以被夺走，但我们的切身经历不会欺骗我们。

无论怎样，我们还在。未来小组活动还将继续，我们会继续为大家提供社群温暖。同时也希望各位朋友能够继续支持我们的工作。我们也还在找找更好的进行对外宣传的渠道。

To everyone who follows X:

It is with great sorrow to inform you that X's public WeChat account was permanently closed on the night of 2021/7/6 for unknown reasons. It is now known that some other LGBTQ+ student organizations have also been permanently closed.

X was founded in 20XX, and has always been committed to accompanying the community. The public account is our main publicity channel. Everything happened too suddenly that we were not prepared. We did not make a backup, and so many memories of the community were lost. However, although the memories on the Internet can be taken away, our vivid experiences will not deceive us.

Regardless, we are still here. Group activities will continue in the future. We also hope that you will continue to support our work.

Figure 3: Example of the Organizational Announcement

Number	Source	Type of the document
1	LGBTQ+ student group A	Organizational Announcement
2	LGBTQ+ student group B	Organizational Announcement
3	LGBTQ+ student group C	Organizational Announcement
4	LGBTQ+ student group D	Organizational Announcement
5	LGBTQ+ student group E	Organizational Announcement
6	LGBTQ+ student group F	Organizational Announcement
7	LGBTQ+ student group G	Organizational Announcement
8	LGBTQ+ friendly space A	Organizational Announcement
9	LGBTQ+ NGO E	Organizational Announcement
10	LGBTQ+ NGO F	Organizational Announcement
11	LGBTQ+ blogger A	Personal Announcement
1	Common Knowledge	Media Interview
2	WhyNot	Media Interview
3	Initium Media	Media Interview
4	Initium Media	Media Interview

Figure 4: Details of the documents

5.23 Autoethnography

I've worked for a LGBTQ+ NGO in China and was involved in the activism for several years. As an activist and a researcher, in order to make my position in this study clearer, I decided to use the method of autoethnography in this research.

Autoethnography is a method that aims to understand cultural experiences by describing and systematically analyzing personal experiences. This method recognizes and accommodates the impact of subjectivity, emotions, and researcher's influence on research rather than ignoring it (Ellis et al., 2010). Autoethnography is considered both a feminist method and a queer method (Crawley, 2012; Jones & Adams, 2010), since it takes body and lived experience as standpoints and believes that researchers cannot be separated from the research. Crawley (2012) argued that autoethnography "works best as part of a larger project of interviews or fieldwork, or perhaps even a life's work."

To conduct this research method, researchers often look analytically at their memories, diaries, or photographs and seek to find themselves in the context of a larger world. In order to give the audience a better understanding of their cultural experience, interviewing others in the culture and comparing their experiences to the researcher's is also necessary (Tombro, 2016). Therefore, in this thesis, I referred to my weekly work reports, chats with coworkers, and diaries during my work to help me look back at my experiences and feelings in these years. I worked for a LGBTQ+ NGO in China for about two years as an intern, a part-time communication specialist responsible for operating the organization's social media accounts, and a part-time researcher. The WeChat public account and Sina Weibo account of this organization were shut down and banned from posting several times during these years. The output of my work—the articles I wrote, the comments I made, the followers I attracted, and the social network I built up—all disappeared with the shutdown of the account. I kept a diary as I experienced these incidents and shared my feelings with friends, which became material for my autoethnography analysis. I also followed the outline of the semi-structured interview to conduct a self-interview. In total, I wrote 3000 words about this

section and imported it into Nvivo for further analysis. To differentiate between my personal experiences and those of other anonymous interviewees, I use the abbreviation of my real name to name the Nvivo document. All documents I used in this section are shown in Figure 5.

Documents	Time
Work reports	From 2021 to 2022
Diaries	From 2021 to 2023
Chat histories with colleagues and other volunteers	From 2021 to 2022
Self-interview	Conducted in March 2024

Figure 5: Documents Used for Autoethnography

5.3 Ethical Issues

5.3.1 Safety

According to Heimer and Thøgersen (2011, p. 12), the largest challenge of doing fieldwork in China is the dominant presence of the party-state. Being regarded as a malign foreign influence by the government, the LGBTQ+ issue is a sensitive topic in China. Talking about it in public or on local social media platforms could be risky for me and my interviewees.

To mitigate potential threats, I recruited participants privately, ensuring that details about my research and personal information were confined to a small, trusted group. Online communication with interviewees was conducted through unmonitored platforms to maintain a level of privacy and security. During interviews, IT measures are taken to secure data storage. Based on my previous experience, I found that using Chinese speech-to-text online transcribing software is also subject to censorship, and some sensitive words will be automatically deleted. So, I used a voice recorder with no internet access and did the transcription work all by myself. In addition to that, to

maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees, all participants engaged in the research anonymously.

5.32 Trauma and Negative Emotions

As my research project focuses on the activists' personal experiences with the current situation of China's LGBTQ+ activism, the interview may remind them of frustrating memories. Addressing how to cope with these traumatized memories and negative emotions requires careful ethical consideration. In this context, I draw on feminist research approaches proposed by Burgess-Proctor (2015), aimed at reducing power differentials between researchers and participants by fostering care, collaboration, and participant empowerment. She argued that researchers should not presuppose that trauma survivors are inherently weak individuals who need protection from researchers, nor should they overemphasize the risks of studying their traumatic experiences. According to her, trauma survivors can find empowerment through sharing their experiences in research and using those experiences to assist others facing similar situations. Adopting this perspective, there are feminist strategies that can be employed to manage ethical risks. These include reflecting on the researcher's position, highlighting participants' strengths and insights, and sharing research results with participants and/or relevant community agencies (Burgess-Proctor, 2015).

During the interviews, I placed special emphasis on my expressions to formulate the interview questions and maintained a positive demeanor throughout the interview. Before contacting interviewees, if possible, I asked them about their mental health or life situation to see if they were suitable for taking part in this research. I informed the interviewees about the potential risks of sharing unpleasant experiences and assured them of their rights to withdraw from the research at any time. I used their chosen pronouns and pseudonyms, consistently utilized non-judgmental language, and provided positive and encouraging responses to foster a supportive environment. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community and as a former employee of a LGBTQ+ NGO, I also shared my experiences and emotions with interviewees when it was appropriate to

do so, thus building a sense of trust between us. Also, I sent them the content of our dialogue that I quoted in this thesis so that they could confirm that what I quoted would not make their personal information identifiable. When I finished the interview, I thanked them and emphasized the significance of their involvement in documenting the present history of the LGBTQ+ community.

5.4 Limitations and Reflections

The first limitation is the sample size for the semi-structured interviews. Since the sampling method is based on the social circle of the activists, it is difficult to recruit activists who have left the field and lost their connections with the local LGBTQ+ community. Another limitation is the use of autoethnography. Due to my limited experience of practicing this research method, while the result of this thesis is theoretically generalizable, it may not be easily generalized to a wider population.

The methodological rigor of autoethnographic research is a topic of debate. Bryman (2016) concluded that there are two stances in measuring the reliability and validity of qualitative research. One stance is to assimilate the measurement criteria with quantitative research, while the other aims to create new criteria. The reason for this division is that researchers hold different views on whether “there are absolute truths about the social world, and it is the job of the social scientist to reveal them (p. 384).” Since autoethnography is an empirically-focused research methodology, the researcher assumes that “truth” may change as the method of presentation changes and recognizes the importance of context and contingency (Ellis et al., 2010). Based on this stance, Le Roux (2017) suggested five criteria for evaluating the quality of autoethnographic study, including: (1) subjectivity: the researcher demonstrates self-understanding in the study; (2) self-reflexivity: the researcher is strongly aware of his or her role in the study; (3) resonance: The audience is able to relate to the author’s story on an intellectual and emotional level; (4) credibility: the research should be authentic and trustworthy; and (5) contribution: the research should help to expand knowledge, promote follow-up

research, and contribute to social change. In this thesis, I have endeavored to meet these criteria as much as possible to ensure the reliability and validity of this research.

5.5 Data Analysis

In order to identify the specific content of each process of framing, this thesis uses Nvivo to conduct a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and other documents. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis follows six steps: familiarizing oneself with the text, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. I scrutinized the data to identify common themes, including recurring themes, ideas, and patterns of meaning.

The visualization of the thematic analysis and the detailed themes I identified are shown in the following screenshots of Nvivo:

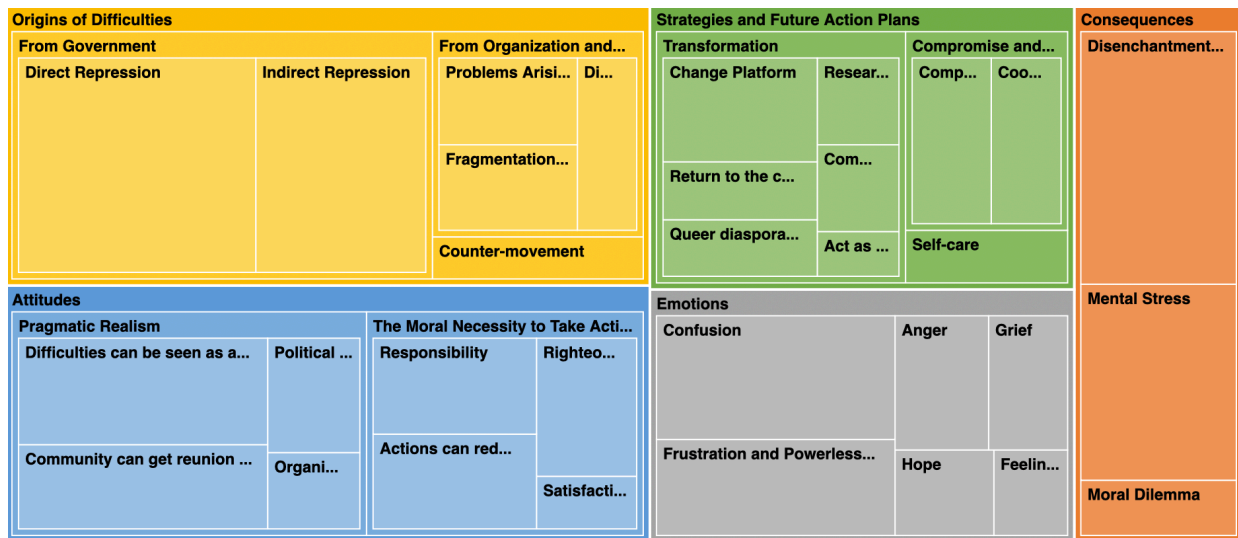


Figure 6: Visualization of the Thematic Analysis⁴

⁴ See Figures 7, 8 and 9 for full headings and detailed layers of themes. The size of each block depends on how many coding references there are in this theme.

Name	Files	References
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Origins of Difficulties	25	70
<input checked="" type="radio"/> From Government	25	46
<input type="radio"/> Direct Repression	21	26
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Indirect Repression	13	20
<input type="radio"/> Uncertainty of Government Regulation	12	18
<input type="radio"/> Relational Repression	2	2
<input checked="" type="radio"/> From Organization and Community	6	20
<input type="radio"/> Fragmentation and Misunderstanding in the Community	4	7
<input type="radio"/> Problems Arising in Organizational Management Mechanisms	3	7
<input type="radio"/> Divergence and Misunderstanding Among Organization Members	2	6
<input type="radio"/> Counter-movement	4	4
<input type="radio"/> Consequences	12	35
<input type="radio"/> Disenchantment with Activism	11	18
<input type="radio"/> Mental Stress	7	14
<input type="radio"/> Moral Dilemma	2	3

Figure 7: Origins and Consequences of Difficulties

As shown in Figure 7, activists have identified three origins of difficulties: repression from the government, problems within communities and institutions, and attacks from counter-movements. Experiencing these difficulties has had several impacts on activists, including severe mental stress, entrapment in moral dilemmas, and disenchantment with activism.

<input type="radio"/> Attitudes	20	64
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Pragmatic Realism	16	37
<input type="radio"/> Difficulties can be seen as a new beginning	7	15
<input type="radio"/> Community can get reunion after being attacked	9	12
<input type="radio"/> Political space can be found because of the fragmentation of regulation	3	6
<input type="radio"/> Organizations can maintain the link between activists and the movement	4	4
<input checked="" type="radio"/> The Moral Necessity to Take Action	13	27
<input type="radio"/> Actions can reduce future uncertainty	9	9
<input type="radio"/> Responsibility	5	8
<input type="radio"/> Righteousness	5	7
<input type="radio"/> Satisfaction	3	3
<input type="radio"/> Emotions	20	43
<input type="radio"/> Confusion	9	14
<input type="radio"/> Frustration and Powerlessness	10	11
<input type="radio"/> Anger	6	6
<input type="radio"/> Grief	5	5
<input type="radio"/> Hope	3	4
<input type="radio"/> Feeling Unsafe	3	3

Figure 8: Attitudes and Emotions

As shown in Figure 8, facing these difficulties, activists have developed many negative emotions. However, they are not trapped in these emotions. Their attitudes toward these difficulties can be concluded as “pragmatic realism”, which means that activists are neither overly optimistic nor overly pessimistic about the current situation. Instead, they learn from their “failure”, find strength in the community and organizations, and focus on the present to find the remaining political opportunities. For their attitude toward future activism, activists stress the moral necessity of continuing the action.

∨ <input type="radio"/> Strategies and Future Action Plans	21	48
∨ <input type="radio"/> Transformation	17	29
<input type="radio"/> Change Platform	9	9
<input type="radio"/> Queer diaspora community	4	5
<input type="radio"/> Return to the community	5	5
<input type="radio"/> Commercialization	3	4
<input type="radio"/> Research	4	4
<input type="radio"/> Act as Individual	2	2
∨ <input type="radio"/> Compromise and Cooperation	10	15
<input type="radio"/> Compromise	7	8
<input type="radio"/> Cooperation	5	7
<input type="radio"/> Self-care	2	4

Figure 9: Strategies and Future Action Plans

As shown in figure 9, activists’ strategies to respond to the difficulties and their future action plans include transformation, compromise and cooperation, and focusing on self-care.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, this thesis reports activists' understandings of and responses to the difficulties they have encountered and their imagination of future activism. This thesis identified the content, causes, and characteristics of their diagnostic framework, prognostic framework, and motivational framework when they face these difficulties. It also discusses the relationship between these frameworks and the queer resilience in China's LGBTQ+ activism.

6.1 Diagnosis of the Difficulties: Origins and Consequences

6.1.1 Origins of the Difficulties

Activists have identified three origins of difficulties: the repression from the government, the problems within communities and institutions, and the attack from counter-movements.

At the governmental level, activists pointed out that the difficulties they face at this stage are censorship, intimidation, and repression from the state apparatus. In addition to the direct repression, such as the shutdown of LGBTQ+ organizations and their social media accounts, the uncertainty of regulation and relational repression have also been used by the state apparatus as indirect repression. In their announcements, many LGBTQ+ organizations have expressed confusion about the sudden closure of their social media accounts. The uncertainty of government regulations makes it difficult for activists to accurately assess or prepare for risks. Xiaocui described the feeling as follows:

When you are walking on the edge of a cliff, you know you might fall off at some point, but you're so used to it that you don't do anything to prepare.

The uncertainty of government regulations also forces victims to take responsibility for the difficulties they experience. Looking back at my work notes, I realize that I spent a

lot of time identifying the reasons why an article was deleted by WeChat. I constantly revised the articles and pictures, hoping they would pass that non-transparent censorship rule. I felt annoyed every time the director of our organization asked me why the article had been deleted, as well as asking me and my coworkers to appeal to WeChat. *“I didn’t cause the problem. Why am I the one who needs to reflect on it?”* This is what I wrote down in my diary at that time.

Activists also experienced “relational repression”, which refers to the state’s mobilization of people’s social relations to influence their behavior and maintain social stability (Wang, 2020). For example, Carol’s parents were threatened by the local police. The local police told Carol’s parents that their child was engaged in “illegal activities” and took Carol’s parents to see them in order to persuade them to stop their ongoing actions. Wang (2020) noted that due to the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ activists’ family ties, this use of pressure through family members, or “outing” activists’ gender identities to their families, can disrupt their family ties and thus attack LGBTQ+ activism.

At the community and organizational level, activists believed that fragmentations and misunderstandings in organizations and communities have been the most painful experiences for them in recent years. 12 told me about what happened in the student organization she participated in. As members of the organization were questioned by the police, there was a disagreement among the members about how they should respond to the police. Some people have taken a more radical approach, advocating for complete confrontation. Others have taken a more moderate stance, suggesting communication with the police. These arguments and suspicions have led to the division of the organization. What hurts 12 is that, she cannot feel the connection between people in the organization anymore, because some members believe that as long as they cannot reach a consensus on activism strategies, they are no longer allies to each other. Q also believes that the biggest challenges they have encountered come from the lack of understanding from coworkers and the LGBTQ+ community. In order

to survive under pressure, the NGO they are involved in has started a new commercial program, but this transformation has not been understood. There were skeptical voices spreading in the community, believing that the organization had betrayed its mission and was grabbing resources from LGBTQ+ activism.

Another source of difficulties is the counter-movements initiated by nationalists. Activists believe that the report made by nationalists to the Public Security Bureau and university on Sina Weibo is one of the reasons why LGBTQ+ organizations' social media accounts have been shut down. Like the state apparatus, nationalists also use uncertainty to spread fear. It is difficult for activists to identify who is next to be targeted. As a LGBTQ+ microblogger on Sina Weibo, JoJo said it is hard for them to identify the cause of the cyberbullying they have suffered, because “*nationalists just randomly grab some leftists and cyberbully them*”.

6.12 Consequences of the Difficulties

Experiencing these difficulties has had several impacts on activists, including severe mental stress, trapping in moral dilemmas, and the “disenchantment” of activism.

As the director of an LGBTQ+ organization, Matthew has to meet directly with the police responsible for national security. As these meetings are often sudden, he became afraid of receiving phone calls from people and of having a sudden knock on the door. This anxiety has led to somatic reactions, and he has even experienced a loss of appetite in recent years. He described this mental stress as follows:

If the police call me on Wednesday to meet on Saturday, I will feel terrible from Wednesday until Saturday, and this terrible feeling will continue for two or three days after the meeting.

Activists also find themselves trapped in moral dilemmas. X said, due to censorship, she often finds herself struggling between “self-censorship for the safety of the social media account” and “retaining the critical content of posts to fulfill social advocacy

goals.” Once, her coworker wrote an article with the original text stating, *“In the eyes of the authorities, the rainbow flag is an illegal propaganda item that needs to be controlled,”* but when editing this article, she had to change *“authorities”* to *“some people.”* She feels guilty about this. For me, this moral dilemma manifests in my career choices. In my internship report, I wrote that the biggest thing I got out of working for the LGBTQ+ organization was that *“I was doing something meaningful for society”*. But when it came time to look for a formal job, I was afraid to consider this job, which I found most rewarding, as the correct career choice. Throughout my time as an intern and a part-time employer, I kept telling my parents that I worked at an NGO that focuses on women’s rights. I feel like I internalized the stigma and “illegitimacy” of working for LGBTQ+ organizations.

Activists also feel disenchantment about LGBTQ+ activism. For instance, Matthew has lowered his requirements for professionalism in LGBTQ+ activism. Previously, he believed that LGBTQ+ organizations should have to focus on publicity, learn from commercial companies to have professional standard operating procedures (SOP), and focus on quantitative evaluation of activity outcomes. But now, as he described to me, it is good enough that such organizations still exist, and it doesn’t matter to him whether these organizations do a good job or not. 12 Feels that she has given up some of her fantasies about activism. She said:

Once, I was talking to a professor. I said, “I’m very frustrated right now because I feel like a lot of the work and effort that I’m putting in could be rendered meaningless by one very small decision from the government. I feel that what I’m doing is becoming very meaningless.” Then the professor said to me, “Do you still believe that the history of the world progresses in a linear way?” I heard that and thought, “That makes sense.”

Does action always make a change? Increasingly, activists are unable to give a clear answer to this question. X feels that in this current situation of increased repression, activists are mostly reactive rather than proactive in developing their strategies. She

doesn't want to expect anything from LGBTQ+ activism, as it seems to make demands on people in difficult situations.

6.13 Summary and Discussion

When identifying who is responsible for the current difficult situation of LGBTQ+ activism in China, activists summarized three sources of difficulties: the government, communities and organizations, and the counter-movement. There are three particularly noteworthy aspects of this diagnostic framework.

Firstly, while the lack of mutual-understanding in the community and organizations makes activists frustrated, rather than blaming the community and organization's members for causing this problem, activists believe that the root of the problem is the pressure from the political environment. In our conversation, Q interpreted the misunderstandings and conflicts among community members as follows:

If a billion dollars fell from the sky and each activist and organization got a share, perhaps there would be no such debates (on whether LGBTQ+ NGO undertaking social enterprise projects is a grab for resources).

In the overall political environment, there are no avenues given to the LGBTQ+ community to express their demands, so the few LGBTQ+ NGOs and KOLs (key opinion leaders) have become the avenues for them to express their demands, and there are times when those demands turn into attacks.

This way of interpreting reflects the value that activists place on solidarity within the LGBTQ+ community. As Guo (2018) noted, this solidarity used to be an important strategy for China's LGBTQ+ activism to mobilize resources under restrictive authoritarian structures. The Beijing LGBT Center, formed in 2008 by different organizations concerned with AIDS issues and gay and lesbian identity politics, is the best example of this solidarity. Now, with the closure of this center in 2023, "not blaming community members" has become a legacy of this solidarity in difficult times.

Secondly, the intersectionality of identities has influenced activists' interpretations of the difficulties they've suffered. Activists frequently mentioned the 2022 COVID-19 protest, the Hong Kong protest, and other civil society movements in our conversation. They believe that the reason they are pessimistic about the future is not simply because LGBTQ+ activism is being targeted, but because civil society movements as a whole are being attacked. Edward builds a link between the government's crackdown on protests related to the Zero-COVID policy and the repression of LGBTQ+ activism. He believes that people who dare to go out into the streets during the 2022 COVID-19 protests are probably power-sensitive people in their day-to-day lives, for example, LGBTQ+ people. This way of understanding means that activists do not see LGBTQ+ activism in China as isolated, which further suggests the possibility of its solidarity with other social movements. Recent research has also demonstrated that this intersectionality-based solidarity can preserve the viability of LGBTQ+ communities in difficult times (Dian, 2023).

Thirdly, while the crackdown has caused activists to lower their expectations for the future, they have become more focused on the present. As Xiaocui puts it, *lowering expectations can reduce self-blame, but the work that needs to be done still needs to be done.*

To conclude, the diagnostic framework focuses on internal community solidarity and external solidarity with other social movements, and reduces demands and expectations for future movements. This helps LGBTQ+ activists consolidate social support networks and focus on the present, which increases their resilience.

6.2 Attitudes Toward Difficulties

6.21 Pragmatic Realism

In the face of the aforementioned difficulties, activists have developed many negative emotions. Examples include feelings of powerlessness and anger in the face of censorship and shutdown, confusion about the rules of censorship, grief at being disconnected from the community, and insecurity in the face of an uncertain future. However, they are not trapped in these emotions. By analyzing the data, I found that activists' attitudes can be concluded to be "pragmatic realism", which means that activists are neither overly optimistic nor overly pessimistic about the current situation and focus on the possibility of continuing to take action.

The possibility of continuing to take action comes from several aspects.

The first aspect is activists' reflection on the current situation. Activists see the current setback as an opportunity for them to reflect on their past experiences, and provide lessons for their subsequent actions. Edward and Q reflected on the topic of organizational inertia. Edward told me about how he understands the loss of funding for his organization in different ways:

At first, when I heard that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was not going to continue the project with us this year, I thought that there was something we were not doing well. But then I think that losing the funding wasn't a bad thing.

In the past, we were forced to find a balance between meeting the needs of the LGBTQ+ community and the needs of the CDC. But what the community needs may not be sexual health (which is the concern of the CDC), but mental health, the need to find a job, or anti-discrimination. Instead, this year we can do a better job of responding to the needs of the community.

Q talked about their reflections on the innovation of movement strategies:

A lot of LGBTQ+ organizations were set up in 2008, and then people got used to doing things in an organization-based way all the time like this. I think we could explore some new ways of working.

The space to innovate needs to be opened up by the funders, the community, and ourselves. But in the past, we've had to be busy all the time with our projects in order to have enough money to run our organization. There is no space for that kind of innovation.

Depending on funding from international foundations and the CDC to survive is a kind of organizational inertia for LGBTQ+ organizations in China. These two ways of surviving are problematic from the very beginning. The former creates tensions between LGBTQ+ organizations and the state because of its emphasis on human rights discourse (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017), and the CDC is viewed as representing the government's will. However, the problem of over-reliance on these funding channels has not been well considered before. This is one of the reflections that the current blow brings to the activists.

Some other activists reflect on their previous experiences on a personal level. For example, JoJo said they don't want to share content about LGBTQ+ on Weibo anymore, because they feel privileged as a person living in a Western country, and they don't really know at this moment what kind of content is good for the LGBTQ+ community living in China. Thus, they decided to provide queer-friendly psychological counseling now.

The second aspect is about community solidarity. Activists regard the current crackdown as an opportunity to bring the community to reunite. This is a common point mentioned in the organizational announcements that I have collected. Emotions have a strong influence on this attitude. On July 6, 2021, the night that many LGBTQ+ student organizations' WeChat public accounts were shut down, over 400 people gathered in an online meeting room to share their feelings. Participants said "I love you" to each other at this "funeral". My interviewee, Monster, who also participated in this meeting,

said that she didn't believe in collectivism before, but at the meeting, she experienced the power of community. She showed me a screenshot of a quote from a meeting participant that she found inspiring:

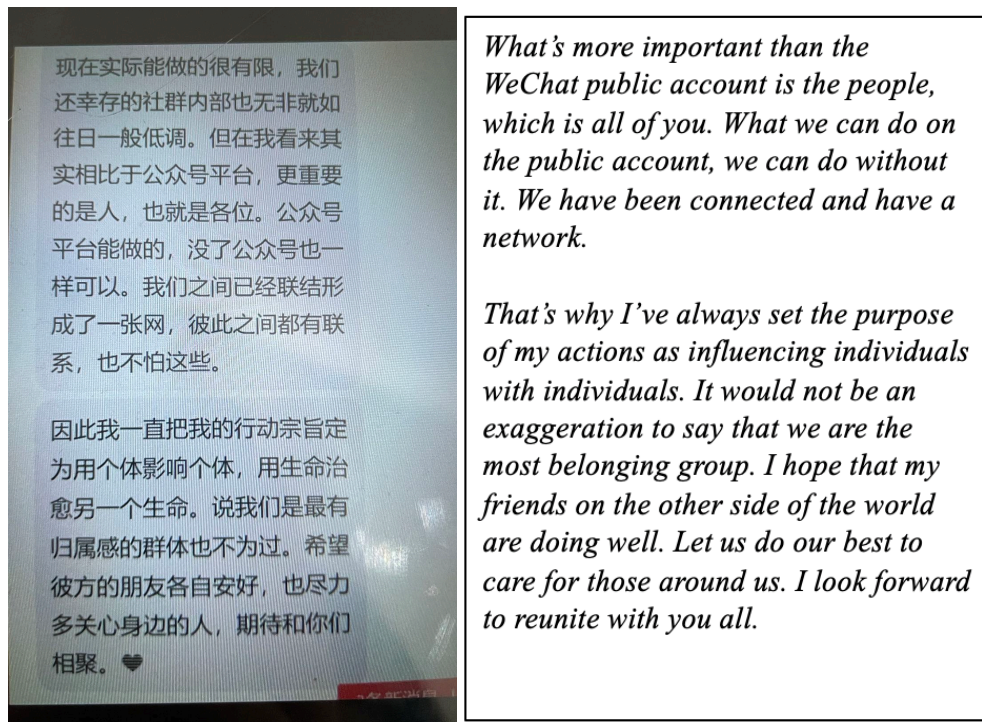


Figure 10: Screenshot of the quote from a meeting participant

For this feeling of reunion, I felt it most clearly after the “reincarnation” of the organization’s social media accounts that I worked for. When the Weibo account I operated was shut down, I had to sign up for a new account and use emoji to post a message hinting that the account was back, but soon the account went from zero to over three hundred followers, because many LGBTQ+ KOLs took it upon themselves to retweet this message. With this help, I connected with the community again. These two stories echo the idea proposed by Jasper and Owens (2014) that groups are reinforced when members have shared emotions in response to an event and when they share affective loyalties to group members, even though this emotion might be negative.

The third aspect is about the fragmentation of government control. Although the coercion from repressive state apparatus makes many activists feel stressful, the

loopholes in the control and the fragmentation of the bureaucracies make activists feel that there is still room for activism. Usually, the government officers that would be concerned with LGBTQ+ issues include the state security police, officers from the Domestic Security Department, officers from the Administrative Office of Overseas NGOs, frontline police, and internet security police. Interviewees mentioned that the information sharing between these officers is not that efficient, and their attitudes toward LGBTQ+ groups are not all antagonistic. When Xiaocui contacts them, she feels that some officers are only monitoring them to “get the job done”. Although she has to inform the local police in advance of the events she organizes, she often describes the relatively awareness-raising activities as entertainment events with drinks and parties. As she noted:

[These officers] knew I was fooling them, but they just went through the motions of finishing their work.

Sometimes, the police even taught her how to reduce the risks:

They asked me to secretly organize events, delete the promotional articles on our WeChat public account, and not promote them in group chat either. They advised me not to write phrases like ‘women and non-binary only’ in the event notices, as it may seem to incite gender confrontation. They suggested that I could create a registration form and screen applicants privately after collecting their information.

The contingent symbiotic nature of the relationship between the authoritarian state and grassroots NGOs is also one of the reasons that activists still have a certain level of hope. The relationship between Carrol’s organization and the government is, in the words of Spires (2011), that the government allows groups ostensibly inconsistent with its ideology to operate openly, in order to relieve the state of some of its social welfare obligations. Carol said their organization exists to help the community build a better living environment. They never hide from government officers about what their organization did. As they mentioned:

I would tell the officers from the Administrative Office of Overseas NGOs that I am actually helping them to take the pressure off of their work.

Through such communication, the work of Carol's organization is rarely interfered with.

The fourth aspect that makes it possible for activists to continue taking action is related to the organizations they work for. X said that she has experienced a supportive environment at LGBTQ+ NGO B, which made her less likely to feel burnout. For me, the salaried, professional position that the organization can offer me is also important, especially in this difficult time when so many organizations are closing. The NGO I worked for is still offering me new part-time and research-type remote positions after I left China. Being involved in this activism as an employee rather than a volunteer has increased my loyalty to it.

6.22 The Moral Necessity to Take Action

Regardless of whether the activists' views on the difficulties they have experienced are optimistic or pessimistic, many of them emphasize the importance of taking action. It is the core of their pragmatic and realistic attitude. As Pangolin puts it:

[The shrinking space for civil society] is not a reason for you not to do the work.

“Simply keeping on doing something” has important emotional significance for activists. From the point of view of maintaining mental health and self-care, Xiaocui said she would give up her fantasies about LGBTQ+ activism, but she wouldn't quit. She believes doing what she can is the way for her to feel less guilty. Action is also seen as the solution to the precarious future. In the organizational announcement, a LGBTQ+ student organization wrote, “*We hope that every voice that seems to have quickly faded away can bring clarity to our future.*”

There are different aspects of this moral necessity.

The first aspect is the sense of responsibility. Edward said that if he lived in a truly gender-equal world, he probably wouldn't want to do this kind of community-building work. But it is precisely because of the insecurity of the current living environment that he feels the need to build a nourishing environment for himself and for others. In other articles I've collected, activists have also expressed their responsibility to live a "*less entertainment-oriented*" and "*less cynical*" life.

The second aspect is activists' firm commitment to the righteousness of their personal values and actions. Pangolin said that he is a man with a particularly clear sense of what is right and what is wrong, and he is very firm in his belief that he has done nothing wrong. This feeling is enough to keep him moving on.

Another aspect is the satisfaction that activists derive from their actions. Although activists are not sure whether the action made a difference, they still gain very specific satisfaction from the action. For me, this satisfaction is seeing old and new fans getting to know the new account of our organization; for Xiaocui, it is seeing a gradual increase in gender awareness amongst the participants in the activities she has organized; and for Edward, it is telling other people that "you can just be yourself."

6.23 Summary and Discussion

Based on the reflections of their past experiences and observations of the current political environment, activists have adopted a pragmatic realism attitude to understand their situation. For future actions, their motivational framework is based on the moral necessity of "keeping on doing something". The emphasis on moral strength is also an expression of their realistic way of understanding the difficulties.

In Benford's (1993) discussion of the motivational framing in social movements, he noted that in order to mobilize more people, social movements often put emphasis on four aspects: the severity of the problem; the urgency of solving the problem; the efficacy of the strategies; and the moral necessity to take action. The severity and

urgency of the problems encountered by the Chinese LGBTQ+ activists can be answered in the words of Q: “*We are frogs being slowly boiled alive*”. This feeling is the same as Xiaocui’s analogy of “*walking on the edge of the cliff*”. Having lived in a repressive and uncertain political environment for a long time, it is difficult for activists to predict when the “real death blow” will come, although perhaps in hindsight, every daily blow could have brought real death. It is also difficult to draw on the efficacy of the strategies, as discussed in the literature review, the efficacy of the strategy cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, because other parts of the motivation framework are hard to utilize, activists turn to stressing moral necessity.

The queer resilience theory suggests that a clear awareness of one’s own needs, limitations, and vision for the future, as well as taking responsibility for one’s own life and making independent decisions, is the source of queer resilience (Asakura, 2017). The pragmatic attitude and the moral-based motivational framework demonstrate that activists have a clear understanding of their situation and are able to exercise agency in finding a persuasive reason to continue the action. Negative emotions also play important roles in building this resilience. Rather than ignoring their negative emotions, activists lived with them, shared them with community members, and found political potential in these negative emotions. Embracing the diversity of emotions gives the queer community flexibility in the face of repression.

6.3 Strategies and Future Action Plans

Activists' strategies for responding to the difficulties and the actions they would like to take in the future fall into three categories: transformation, compromise and cooperation, and focusing on self-care.

6.31 Transformation

Through the interviews and data analysis, I identified different transformation strategies. For instance, LGBTQ+ organizations have changed the social media platforms they use. Activists tend to redirect their focus from “educating the public” to “serving or building the community”. Commercializing, conducting research, and acting as an individual are also considered by activists. The feature of these strategies is the reduction of publicness. As Levitanus and Kislitsyna (2024) concluded, being able to manage what can appear in public is an expression of power and domination, the reduction of publicness is an act of last resort for LGBTQ+ activists in China.

In organizational announcements, many organizations have announced that they will be changing their communication channels from Weibo or WeChat to newsletters. In this way, only followers who have registered their email addresses will receive emails from the organization. Not all people can use newsletters, because some well-known newsletter platforms, like Substack, are blocked in China. So, running a newsletter may cause the organization to lose the possibility of connecting with the wider LGBTQ+ community.

Returning back to the LGBTQ+ community is another strategy. This is not only because the service-based organization is less sensitive (Howell, 2021), but it is also related to activists' concerns about protecting the intergenerational heritage of the activism. X said that she is planning to do a record of the community's history next. For example, she and a friend are planning to do an oral history record of the LGBTQ+ student organizations that were shut down. She said that because the political environment is

tough right now, many activists are focusing on how to cope with the difficulties, but neglecting to record the history. She hopes that the experience of activism nowadays can be preserved and passed on to future generations.

Commercialization is also a strategy. Under the “graduated control” system, organizations that advocate in sensitive areas and are funded by international foundations are strictly controlled (Wu & Chan, 2012). As a result, activists turned to using commercial means to find financial resources for their organizations. Both Q and Carol’s organizations are undertaking social entrepreneurship projects, for example, selling tickets for community events and providing counseling. But as Q said, they could lay out the organization’s financial problems and tell the community about the need for them to make this transformation, but “telling the truth and mobilizing” are two different things. Such transformations might be able to make the organization survive under repression, but there are still difficulties in getting the community to understand them. Wang (2023b) suggested that in China, most of the NGO projects known to the public are GONGO projects. These projects are usually based on gift-giving and donation campaigns, which makes people tend to think that NGO projects should be free. This has further exacerbated the difficulty of the commercialization transformation of LGBTQ+ NGOs.

X and I are both considering acting as individuals. For example, “disguising” the organizational work as individual actions. When their WeChat public platform accounts were banned, many organizations registered new accounts on a supposedly female-user-friendly social media platform in China. However, due to the many limitations of acting as an organization — for example, it is not appropriate for many organizations to make their work public on social media — it was difficult for them to attract followers on this new platform. I noticed this situation and registered an account of my own. By sharing some academic information related to gender studies, I gained thousands of followers interested in LGBTQ+ issues. I then recommended my followers to follow the accounts of LGBTQ+ organizations. Also, I often helped these

organizations post content that wouldn't be appropriate to post on their accounts. This strategy follows what Liao (2019) found that personal and highly specific narratives linked by social media can shape alternative discourses on LGBTQ+ rights, and challenge hegemonic government censorship in China.

There are also activists who have moved abroad and hope to build queer diaspora communities abroad. This action plan is particularly relevant to the phenomenon of “runaway” (*runxue*, 润学), which emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and refers to the ideas and behaviors that many young people wish to escape from China and emigrate to other countries because of political and life pressures. X said:

There are more and more LGBTQ+ young people leaving China now, whether it's to study abroad or to emigrate, so we can link everyone up and see if we can do anything to feed back to the LGBTQ+ movement in China.

6.32 Compromise and Cooperation

A common compromise is to stop promoting the work of the organization on social media. Many activists said that while their organization is still running, they have already stopped updating their organization's WeChat public accounts for a long time. They were told by the police that some community activities could still be organized, but openly recruiting participants and promoting the events were prohibited.

Other organizations try to embrace mainstream values (at least on a superficial level). For example, one LGBTQ+ student organization retweeted a post celebrating the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. But this action was criticized by the community. It did not secure the organization's safety either. The next day, the organization's account was still shut down.

How effective it is to cooperate with mainstream values and the government is a question. As mentioned before, Carol's organization keeps a relatively good relationship with the Administrative Office of Overseas NGOs, and Carol believes that

the cooperation can bring some protections. However, the WeChat public account of their organization was shut down too. When I asked them how they felt about this, they described that the account was attacked by mistake. They said:

The department that I work with, can only protect the security of my work which is under their jurisdiction. Our social media account was shut down by the cybersecurity department. There was no communication between the cybersecurity police and the officer from the Administrative Office of Overseas NGOs.

As it can be seen, the efficiency of cooperation is case-by-case.

Activists have different attitudes toward compromise and cooperation. Edward's attitude is more optimistic. He felt that the LGBTQ+ organizations could draw on more resources if they had some interaction and communication with the mainstream world. Carol was more concerned about the autonomy of the organization in the collaboration. In the articles I have collected, there are other activists who feel that not all organizations are able to adopt the strategy of compromise and cooperation because their organizations are set up to be advocacy-oriented and should monitor state power.

6.33 Focusing on Self-care

As many activists mentioned, the current repression has caused mental stress for them, so focusing on self-care has become another aspect of their actions. JoJo found that a lot of times activists act with the belief of "knowing it is impossible, yet still doing it". They think the emotional labor in the activism is also an ego depletion. When I asked Xiaocui if she had a message for the LGBTQ+ community and activists under repression, she said:

The political environment changes faster than we expect. There are times when we are so focused on our jobs and other people that we don't pay much

attention to ourselves. By the time we realize that it is a problem, it is too late.

Self-care is one thing we can definitely do in the midst of these cold winters.

According to Cox's (2010) summary, lack of self-care is one of the reasons of activists burnout. For example, activists may think it is selfish to rest when there are still social issues to be solved. They also reduce the number of beneficial activities in their lives other than work, which leads to a lack of supportive resources when they face work-related burnout.

Focusing on other social issues that interest them, and moving to an environment where they feel safe are all things that activists are currently doing to acquire a certain level of self-care.

6.34 Summary and Discussion

In the face of difficulties, activists' strategies and future action plans include reducing public visibility, reducing organizational level representation and acting as individuals, commercialization, establishing queer diaspora communities abroad, cooperating with the government, and focusing on self-care. One feature of this prognostic framework is that, these strategies have become more and more inward-looking.

On the one hand, this shift in strategy can be seen as a retreat from the public sphere for LGBTQ+ activism in China. Guo (2021) argued that LGBTQ+ NGOs in China used to gain political and social visibility by collaborating with people from different social fields, this strategy is called “chuquan” (出圈, going beyond the previous social circle). Now, the pursuit of publicness has waned. On the other hand, this inward-looking strategic transition can also be seen as an effort to maintain the strength of the community in difficult times. Compared to the previous strategy, which was called “guerrilla style”, the current strategy can be seen as a “long march”. It avoids confrontation with the coercive power of the state, focuses on the preservation of community history, and cares for the mental health of activists. These measures protect the resilience of activists. Retreat can also be a way of making progress. In the long run,

it makes it possible for the movements to reappear after having been declined under the repression.

However, resilience built on inward-looking strategies still faces an issue, which is that the responsibility of building resilience is often placed solely on the individual activist—such as engaging in self-care. However, does every activist possess the ability to practice self-care? Edelman (2020) criticized that “resiliency is an option only for those who are capable of individually overcoming systemic inequity and structures of power (p. 112)”. Thus, he supported building group resilience rather than just focusing on self-care. So far, there have been relatively few strategies for capacity building in group resilience among activists, which is a limitation of this prognostic framework.

7. CONCLUSION

	Contents	Features	Relationship with Activist Resilience
Diagnostic Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sources of the Current Predicament: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repression from the government • Problems within communities and institutions • Attacks from counter-movements ● Impacts of the Difficulties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental stress • Moral dilemmas • Disenchantment with activism ● Ways of Understanding These Difficulties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Difficulties are new beginnings” • “Communities can reunite after attacks” • “Political space can be found due to the fragmentation of regulation” • “Organizations can maintain connections between activists and activism” ● Emotions: Negative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Blaming the political environment instead of blaming community members or self-blaming ● Embracing Negative Emotions ● Pragmatic and Focusing on the Present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Solidarity within the community and between the LGBTQ+ movement and other civil society movements is protected ● Past experiences have been scrutinized ● Remaining political spaces have been identified
Prognostic Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategic Transformation ● Compromise and Cooperation ● Focusing on self-care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inward-looking ● Retreat as Making Progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Safety of activists has been secured ● The vitality of the community has been preserved
Motivational Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lowering Expectations for the Future ● Continuing Action Due to Moral Necessity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Moral-based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Self-doubt has been reduced ● Activists’ belief has been reinforced

Figure 11: The Framing Process and Activist Resilience

By analyzing the interviews, the information collected online, and my own experiences, this thesis found that LGBTQ+ activists in China believe that the origins of the difficulties they have suffered include: repression from the government, problems in the community and organizations, and attacks from the counter-movement. These difficulties resulted in mental stress, moral dilemmas, and disenchantment with the movement. Activists’ attitude toward the future of activism can be concluded as “acting out of moral necessity for a future where expectations remain low”.

Despite suffering multiple attacks, activists are still willing to continue their actions in an environment permeated by negative sentiment. This demonstrates a degree of resilience among activists. This thesis argues that this resilience comes from the way activists make sense of their situation under the current predicament (Figure 11). Activists’ diagnostic framework for difficulties is pragmatic. It refuses to blame members of communities and organizations for causing the difficulties. It emphasizes reflection on past activism experience, pays attention to the possibility of acting in the present, and lowers the request for the future movement (and thus will not be disappointed about it). This diagnostic framework can protect the solidarity of the

LGBTQ+ community. The motivational framework focuses on the moral necessity of taking action, which reinforces the perception of “I am doing the right thing” and thus reduces activists’ self-doubt. The prognostic framework for the current predicament proposes a number of inward-looking coping strategies, which are conducive to the self-care of activists and the maintenance of community vitality.

This thesis filled the research gap of previous studies that have paid insufficient attention to activists’ understanding and interpretation of the difficulties. This thesis also identified new strategies adopted by activists, such as building overseas communities and self-care, that have not been mentioned in previous studies.

For the empirical contribution of this thesis, after 2020, LGBTQ+ activists in China have lost the channel to communicate their experiences due to the closure of nationwide rallies and the closure of social media accounts. Through interviews and data analysis, this thesis has reviewed the experiences of activists in recent years. These experiences and activists’ reflections can provide lessons for activism in the future.

Future research could examine the effectiveness of the motivational framework that puts emphasis on moral necessity. Due to limitations in the research methodology, I was not able to interview activists who had completely left the activism. Why they leave is a question that deserves to be examined, which may be related to the effectiveness of the motivational framework. As Benford (1993) proposed, the over-emphasis on ethics can lead to burnout amongst activists. The question of when the emphasis on moral necessity is beneficial to mobilization and when it can be harmful deserves further research.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Outline

1. 您是如何成为一名关注 LGBTQ+议题的行动者的？ How do you become an LGBTQ+ activist?
2. 您自己或者您所在的组织开展过怎样的行动？ What do you/your organization do in activism?
3. 您或您所在的组织的行动最近遇到了什么样的困难？ What kind of difficulties have you encountered recently?
4. 您认为是什么原因导致了这些困难？ What factors do you think cause these difficulties?
5. 这些困难对您自己的工作、生活产生了怎样的影响？ How have these difficulties affected your work and your personal life?
6. 您在这些困难发生时有什么感受？ 是什么样的心情？ How did you feel in the moment when you encountered these difficulties?
7. 您或您所在的组织是如何应对这些困难的？ What did you/your organization do to deal with these difficulties?
8. 您如何评价您自己或您所在的组织对这些困难的应对策略？ 您觉得这些应对方式能在何种程度上解决当前的困境？ How would you rate your own or your organization's coping strategies for these difficulties? In your opinion, to what extent can these efforts overcome these difficulties?
9. 您在未来还想继续参与 LGBTQ+行动吗？ 如果不想的话，为什么？ 如果还想，您有什么计划吗？ Do you want to stay involved in LGBTQ+ activism in the future? If not, why? If you still want to, do you have any plans?
10. 如果您还想继续参与行动，您觉得您所经历的这些困难对您制定未来的行动计划有什么影响？ If you would like to continue to be involved in the movement, how do you think the difficulties you have experienced have affected your future action plan?
11. 您对当下的中国 LGBTQ+社群有什么想说的话吗？ Do you have anything to say to the LGBTQ+ community in China at this moment?

APPENDIX 2

Online Observation: List of Media Reports

1. Common Knowledge 常识. (2021). 封禁、污名化与存在价值：至暗时刻后，“未命名公众号”该走向何方？ [Closure, stigma and value of existence: where are the “unnamed WeChat public account” headed after their darkest time?] Available online: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/nnDARtHy8HGIH6ILfqvgVQ> [Accessed 15 February 2024]
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3. Initium Media 端传媒. (2021). 你关注的高校 LGBTQ 社团已被 404. [The student LGBT organizations you followed were shut down] Available online: <https://theinitium.com/zh-Hans/article/20210715-mainland-china-lgbtq-censorship> [Accessed 15 February 2024]
4. Initium Media 端传媒. (2021). 为了活下去，中国 LGBTQ 组织改名、商业化、接轨主流价值观. [To survive, China’s LGBTQ organizations change their names, commercialize and align themselves with mainstream values] Available online: <https://theinitium.com/zh-Hans/article/20211108-mainland-lgbt-ngo> [Accessed 15 February 2024]