Living with censorship

The political economy and cultural politics of Chinese gay dating apps

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This dissertation studies the political economy and cultural politics of Chinese gay dating apps, namely, Blued, Aloha, and ZANK. Unlike their Western counterparts such as Grindr and Jack’d whose functionalities are concentrated on location-based browsing, Chinese gay dating apps frequently integrate new features into their basic dating structures. Examples of which include live streaming, gaming, shopping, and overseas surrogacy consultation. Drawing on internet ethnographic data and interview data with their founders and users, this dissertation addresses two major questions. First, how do businesses based on gay dating apps develop amid close state surveillance? Second, how do users’ sexual and intimate desires shape and transform China’s digital pink economies and homosexual cultural politics? As China continues to problematize homosexuality in terms of obscenity and pornography in its regulatory documents, the booming economy of gay dating apps provides an entry point for rethinking the role of censorship in shaping Chinese gay lives. Using censorship as an analytical tool, I first show that Chinese gay dating apps can maneuver censorship in their favor to carry out economic activities. In this process, gay dating apps and the government become interdependent in the aspects of economic development, HIV/AIDS prevention, and internet security. I then examine how censorship has been woven into the everyday use of gay dating apps. As censorship increasingly disciplines users’ dating and live streaming activities, it has also inspired creative ways to satisfy their same-sex sexual/emotional needs in a regulatory environment. Together, this study shifts the focus in thinking about China’s homosexual cultural politics from identity formation, community organization, and media (mis)representation to the everyday sexual and emotional desires and related personal and bodily performances afforded by gay digital platforms.

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Living with Censorship: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Chinese Gay Dating Apps

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Notes: Because of the following publications, there will be some repetitions of contexts and methods particularly in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Parts of literature review in Chapters will also be repeated in the Introduction for better situating the whole study in the current literature.

Chapter 2: Calculating Dating Goals: Data Gaming and Algorithmic Sociality on Blued

Status: Published

Chapter 3: Live streaming, intimate situations, and the circulation of same-sex affect: Monetizing gay affective encounters on Blued

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Chapter 4: Chinese affective platform economies: Dating, live streaming, and performative labor on Blued

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