

## Unpacking the Stances and Affects in Weibo Comments on the Policy of Same-Sex Guardianship Agreements in China

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This article examines the comments of Weibo users' on Same-sex Guardianship Agreements in China. Through a discourse analysis of the stance differentials and affective tensions that manifest in Weibo users' comments on the policy and other related stance objects, this article offers a situated perspective for understanding discourses of gay rights in China. The analysis shows that some self-identified gay and lesbian Weibo users, by evaluating the policy as a good start, display their vulnerability, resistance, hopes, and misgivings toward gay rights development in China. Meanwhile, others are inclined to evaluate the policy as excessive promotion of homosexuality. Such an oppositional stance is couched in the feeling of being victimized and in an ambiguous stance of neither supporting nor disagreeing with homosexuality, which conceals the real-world inequalities that gay and lesbian people face. Sociocultural factors contributing to these different stances are discussed in this article.

*Keywords: Same-Sex Guardianship Agreements, stance, affect, gay rights, China*

Research on homosexuality discourses in China has mostly focused on representing gay and lesbian people ("tongzhi"<sup>1</sup>) in news media and Internet forums (e.g., Liu, 2021a; Wang & Ma, 2021; Zhang, Lu, & Zhang, 2022; Zhang, Zhang, & Lu, 2022), uncovering hidden ideologies of homophobia, patriarchy, and heteronormativity in Chinese society. This study, by focusing on a small step forward for Chinese gay and lesbian communities, namely, the policy of Same-Sex Guardianship Agreements (SSGA), a guardianship system that grants same-sex couples the right to assign legal guardianship for medical emergencies and manages the beneficiary for their commonly owned assets (see the following section for more details), attempts to highlight this positive development of the gay rights situation in China. It aims to contribute to the literature that explores discourses about gay rights issues in non-Western countries or the Global South (e.g., Milani & Lazar, 2017) and questions the homonationalist (and homocolonialist) representation of China, a non-Western country, as inherently homophobic (Liu, 2021b; cf. Dhoest, 2020; Puar, 2013; Rahman, 2014). Specifically, this article examines how people with opposite ideologies evaluate and

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Date submitted: 2023-06-10

<sup>1</sup> *Tongzhi*, literally meaning comrade, has taken on new meanings to refer to Chinese sexual minorities, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people (for a review of the semantic shift of this term, see Chou, 2001; Zhang, Lu, et al., 2022).

comment on the SSGA policy on Weibo (microblogging), one of China's biggest social media platforms. It illustrates the competing stance differentials and affective tensions around this policy to shed light on discourses of gay rights in Chinese online spaces.

### Research Background

The study is situated against a social-historical background in China, where diversified sexual ideas and practices have advanced following the opening up and reform policy. Within the new environment of opening up, the identity-based conception of same-sex people has become mainstream, and gay and lesbian communities have visibly emerged (see Bao, 2020; Cao & Lu, 2014; Engebretsen, Schroeder, & Bao, 2015; Ho, 2009; Kam, 2013; Kong, 2010; Rofel, 2007; Sun, Farrer, & Choi, 2006). For example, China's first gay male social network app, Blued, was founded in 2012, and there have been many lesbian social network apps, such as LesPark. Varying online gay and lesbian social media content, microblogs, and materials, despite some degree of censorship, are available, and offline clubs and leisure activities are provided by independent organizations and private businesses, particularly in large cities. Domestic and global exchanges of diversified sexual ideas and images have also contributed to the spread of sexual diversity in China. However, while sexual diversity is (or is becoming) a matter of fact in contemporary China, there is still a long way to go before everyone values it. This is because the dominant social norm concerning sexuality and gender continues to be Confucian conservatism, which shapes and regulates many people's sexual performances through the indoctrination of heteronormative sexuality and family ethics (Choi & Luo, 2016; Chou, 2001; Huang & Brouwer, 2018; Li, 2006). These ethics continue to reinforce heteronormative ideology and social structure by requiring everyone, heterosexual or not, to marry a person of the opposite sex, form a heterosexual family unit, bear children, and have an heir to carry on the family's bloodline. Accompanied by this conservative ideology is the relative inadequacy of recognition and protection for gay and lesbian Chinese citizens (Parkin, 2017; United Nations Development Programme, 2016; Wang et al., 2019). For example, although the Chinese Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in 2001, some educational textbooks still depict gay and lesbian people as mentally ill (Chen, 2020), and even though LGBT content emerges in public spheres, official publicity and representation are still restricted and even banned as a result of the guidelines posted by the China Television Drama Production Industry Association in December 2015. Homophobic discourses also emerge in China's public sphere, both online and offline.

Against this backdrop, it is vital to explore what people think and feel about the gay rights situation in China. This study uses the Same-Sex Guardianship Agreements (同性意定监护) as the focal point for exploration. The policy was a result of the revisions to the General Rules of the Civil Law of PRC on October 1, 2017, which, for the first time, allowed the voluntary guardianship system to expand from the initial age of 60 to adults with full capacity for civil conduct. The first voluntary same-sex guardianship agreement was notarized by the Nanjing notary office, and after this, several other cities across China began to notarize guardianship agreements for same-sex couples. Because same-sex marriage is not yet legalized in (mainland) China, the policy of voluntary guardianship agreements allows same-sex couples to voluntarily establish a legal relationship and be legally responsible for each other (i.e., as legal guardians for each other). The voluntary guardianship system helps protect both parties' rights in cases where one partner loses the ability to make important decisions, such as illness or death, and another partner has to make

decisions in the best interests of the two. Such rights include deciding on medical care, property management, inheritance, and so on, depending on the terms of the guardianship arrangements.

Although the policy differs from same-sex marriage, as the latter officially grants same-sex couples legal status and benefits due to married couples, the policy can still be deemed a small step forward, since it grants real benefits and protection to Chinese gay and lesbian couples if they become each other's legal guardians (Büchenbacher, 2019). Thus, some Weibo commenters have evaluated the policy as "a positive step" (e.g., Tianlan112, 2019). However, people with oppositional stances expressed their concerns and disagreements about the policy. Through a detailed discourse analysis of Weibo users' comments on the policy, this article delineates these competing stances and analyzes how they are invested with affective force. By investigating Weibo users' stances and affects toward this policy, this study aims to contribute to a further understanding of discourses on gay rights issues in China. As we will see in this article, the policy has become a catalyst for people to discuss the broad issues of gay rights in China, which is why this policy deserves the researcher's attention. In the following sections, I introduce the data and research method, followed by an analysis and discussion. The final section concludes this study.

### Data and Method

To unpack people's stances and affects on the SSGA policy, a discourse analysis was conducted to examine the stance-taking actions and affective-discursive practices underlying Weibo users' comments. Weibo is an "event-oriented" platform where different opinions about certain events and issues are produced, debated, and circulated, and ordinary people's voices and social needs are articulated (Han, 2019, pp. 380–382). To capture the range of comments, data were collected from Weibo users' comments on three Weibo posts. These posts shared a hashtag of "北京首例同性伴侣监护公证" ("Beijing's first public notary service on same-sex guardianship agreements"). This was the only popular hashtag that was generated on Weibo to describe this event, and it was posted by *Fengchao Technology* (锋潮科技, a privately owned blog), *The Beijing News* (新京报, an official state-owned news report blog) on August 8, 2019, and *Danlan LGBT Information* (淡蓝LGBT资讯, a privately owned LGBT-focused blog) on July 28, 2019. Comments were collected only from these three Weibo posts because they had a diverse readership and were the few that had reported this event. Furthermore, at the time of collecting these data (a day after each post was made), these Weibo posts had received more than 1,000 comments (respectively 1,437, 2,721, and 3,623 comments), outnumbering other Weibo posts. For this qualitatively oriented discourse study, the top 20 comments on each post were selected, as well as replies to these comments.<sup>2</sup> In total, 60 comments and 840 replies were collected. Top comments are the most popular comments on a post, as calculated by Weibo's popularity algorithm. Sometimes, Weibo deletes comments that may have violated Weibo's user policy. Since these deleted comments and replies could not be accessed for this study, they were excluded.

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<sup>2</sup> These comments were respectively retrieved from <https://www.weibo.com/1796445350/I1hIhvbMe?type=comment>, [https://www.weibo.com/1644114654/I1hY8j7il?type=comment#\\_rnd1566890426151](https://www.weibo.com/1644114654/I1hY8j7il?type=comment#_rnd1566890426151), and [https://www.weibo.com/1703524110/HFxdblcIb?type=comment#\\_rnd1566888783557](https://www.weibo.com/1703524110/HFxdblcIb?type=comment#_rnd1566888783557).

The data were analyzed using the concepts of affect and stance. The realm of affect and stance is a growing interest among communication scholars as researchers strive to investigate how people with opposite ideologies can mobilize stance and affect to legitimize certain societal views, such as sexual values and norms, and invest them in affective force (Ahmed, 2014; Breeze, 2019; Gafter & Milani, 2021). Affect, on the one hand, is people's bodily experiences, that is, the embodiment of being affected by a chain of physiopsychological intensities (Gould, 2010). On the other hand, it is indexed and represented through language, which signals the intensity and types of affect (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989, p. 9). In this study, following Wetherell (2012, p. 4; emphasis in original) and Wetherell, McCreanor, McConville, Barnes, and le Grice (2015, p. 59; emphasis in original), affect is understood as affective-discursive practices or "*embodied meaning-making*," which are codified and conveyed as "*human emotion*," i.e., the more specific and packaged conventional cultural categories of feelings, such as fear, anger, and hope. From a sociocultural approach to affect, affective-discursive practices are intersubjective social actions where affects/emotions are felt toward objects, events, and people. In Ahmed's (2014) words, affects/emotions do things, as she illuminates:

[E]motions are a matter of how we come into contact with objects and others. [...] To be affected by something, such that we move toward or away from that thing, is an orientation toward something. It is in the intensity of bodily responses to worlds that we make judgments about worlds [...]. Those judgements are enacted: they do not lead to actions; they *are* actions. (pp. 208–209)

To investigate emotions as doing things (Ahmed, 2014), this article will analyze the discursive realization of affective judgments and movements in people's texts and talk. Specifically, I draw on the analytical concept of stance (Du Bois, 2007; Du Bois & Kärkkäinen, 2012), which involves a set of three entities (first subject, second subject, stance object) and a set of three actions (evaluations, positioning, alignment). By taking a stance, the person (the first subject) evaluates something (the stance object), positioning themselves in regard to the object, and showing degrees of alignment or nonalignment with others (the second subject). Stance is ideologically formulated. As Du Bois (2007) suggested, taking a stance means positioning oneself "with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" (p. 163). For example, in an oppositional stance toward equal rights for gay and lesbian people, such as marriage equality rights, stance takers may align themselves with heteronormative values. Stance can be analytically categorized into epistemic and affective stances. Affective stance is "a mood, attitude, feeling, and disposition, as well as degrees of emotional intensity vis-à-vis some focus of concern," such as the rejection or support of gay rights, and epistemic stance is the "degrees of certainty of knowledge, degrees of commitment to truth of propositions, and sources of knowledge" (Ochs, 1996, p. 410) expressed by the certainty of rejecting or supporting gay rights. For this study, I explore Weibo users' stances, particularly affective stances, toward the SSGA policy and other objects, including gay rights, China, and the Chinese government, made relevant by Weibo users in the data. Special attention is given to the competing and contrasting stances that people take in the data, defined as "stance differentials" (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen, 2012, p. 440), i.e., differences in stance. These differences, when expressed as differences in affects/emotions, constitute affective tensions resulting from competition among different affects. Furthermore, by displaying these differences in affects, people work to achieve affective convergent or

divergent alignment with each other (Du Bois & Kärkkäinen, 2012, p. 440). As the analysis shows, affective tensions emerge in Weibo users' comments on the SSGA policy and the broad gay rights situation in China.

Multiple close readings and inductive coding were conducted to excavate the clusters of stance and affect in the data. To facilitate coding, affects were categorized into positive emotions (e.g., happiness, joy, and satisfaction) and negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, envy, fear, and dissatisfaction; Solomon, 1980). These emotions were explicitly expressed in the data. Positive emotions were primarily expressed through evaluative adjectives and predicates indicating satisfaction and hopefulness, such as *great*, *a good start*, and *it is progress*, while negative emotions were articulated through expressions such as *sad*, *it is a pity that*, and *there is no hope*, indicating sadness, disappointment, and dismay. Some instances of sadness were further coded as vulnerable feelings. The author of this article and a fellow researcher first independently coded the data and then cross-checked the coding results to ensure agreement. Two clusters of stance and affect were identified, including (1) a positive stance to evaluate the SSGA policy as "a good start" toward addressing the problems gays and lesbians face in China and (2) an oppositional stance to evaluate the policy as excessively promoting homosexuality. A detailed discourse analysis shows that the first stance is discursively mixed with the emotions of "vulnerability and resistance" (Butler, 2016) and hopes and misgivings toward sexual equality in China. In contrast, the oppositional stance is couched in the feeling of being victimized (which may also be a form of vulnerability) and an ambiguous stance of neither supporting nor disagreeing with homosexuality and gay rights. This ambiguous stance is not interpreted as neutral because deep down, it is strategically used by some people to disregard, trivialize, or even oppose gay rights. These stance differentials and affective tensions help reveal competing discourses about gay rights issues in Chinese online spaces. Other types of affects and stances are not discussed in this study because they are mostly irrelevant to discussions about gay rights issues in China.

In line with the principle of self-reflexivity, I explain my positionality in doing this research. My own stance toward the SSGA policy is a positive one, as I have described this policy as a small step forward, and regarding gay rights issues, I maintain a humanitarian stance since I believe that gay rights are important for non-heterosexual people. This positionality inevitably influences my interpretation of the data. However, as van Leeuwen (2009) suggests, discourse analysts "are aware that their work is driven by social, economic, and political motives, but they argue that this applies to all academic work," and discourse analysts at least make their position explicit, so "they feel no need to apologize for the critical stance of their work" (pp. 278–279). Thus, I follow this suggestion in conducting this study.

### **Analysis**

Before setting out to analyze each cluster of stance and affect, an overview of the three Weibo posts and the comments they received is needed to provide context and showcase the general dispersion of positive and oppositional stances in the data. In its Weibo post, *The Beijing News* quoted an article titled "我处办理全市首例特殊群体意定监护公证" (Beijing's first public notary service provided to special groups) from the official WeChat account of Beijing Guoxing Public Notary Office (2019), which provided the first notary guardianship agreement service to a same-sex couple in Beijing. The "special groups" referred to in the title refer to sexual minorities in China. The adjective "special" is used because, in the past, the notary office did not provide this service to gay and lesbian people. On *Danlan LGBT Information's* Weibo post, it also attached

an article titled “南京公证处撑同志,让同性伴侣名正言顺” (Nanjing notary office supports *tongzhi*, letting same-sex couples have proper titles and names), a commentary article written by *Danlan* (2019). Here, “*tongzhi*” refers to Chinese sexual minorities. “Proper titles and names” are metaphorical expressions that, according to the context, stand for respect and recognition, as Chinese sexual minorities seldom appear in government documents. Moreover, this policy is a rare case in which gay and lesbian people’s interests are considered by the government. In its article, *Danlan* narrated the story of a same-sex couple named A and B, who had been together for 25 years until A passed away because of an accident. After A’s death, B was evicted from A’s house by A’s parents. As their relationship was not legally recognized, B could not inherit A’s house even though he had paid part of the mortgage. The story ended with how the new policy might help same-sex couples deal with problems such as property management and inheritance issues. From both Weibo posts and articles shared, we can conclude that both *The Beijing News* and *Danlan LGBT Information* exhibit positive attitudes toward the policy. A preliminary analysis of Weibo users’ comments on these two posts also showed that more users tended to align with this positive attitude, which would not be surprising.

In contrast, *Fengchao Technology* did not provide any commentary. It simply reported the news without any comments. A close reading of Weibo users’ comments on *Fengchao Technology*’s posts showed that, unlike comments made on the other two posts, this audience seemed to disproportionately express a negative attitude toward the policy. This discrepancy is noticeable when we read the top comment made on *Fengchao Technology*’s microblog, which states,<sup>3</sup> “it’s over. It’s over. This [referring to the SSGA policy] should not be started. Homosexual people should not exist on earth” (Tingjianweixiao321, 2019).

This overt homophobic expression is in stark contrast to the other two top comments made on *The Beijing News*’ and *Danlan*’s microblogs, which, respectively state that:

“This is progress!” (Tianlan112, 2019);

“What touches me most is not losing the house after a ten-year mortgage is paid off, but that the person, who, with me, had received cold eyes from others for 25 years, is gone” (youmadipan, 2019).

The different attitudes expressed in these comments reveal that Weibo users’ comments on this topic do not form echo chambers that repeat the same opinions but “enclaves” (Lim, 2020, p. 187) of contesting clusters of voices. A detailed analysis of these comments and others is presented in the following section to illustrate competing stances and affective tensions.

### **“A Good Start”: Vulnerability, Resistance, Hopes, and Misgivings**

In this section, I delineate the cluster of positive stances and affective movements Weibo users displayed toward the objects of SSGA policy and the gay rights situation in China. As mentioned above, positive stances toward the SSGA policy are foremost seen in the articles posted by *The Beijing News* and

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<sup>3</sup> Due to space constraints, all Weibo comments are presented in the English-translated versions. The analysis is based on the original Chinese data.

*Danlan LGBT Information*, where the word 保护 “protection” is used in both articles to depict a situation where gays and lesbians in China are in a precarious position, needing protection from the government. The SSGA policy can provide some level of protection, so it is evaluated positively.

Under this protection framework or a paternalist model of protection (Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016; Fineman, 2016), gays and lesbians in China are attached to a feature of vulnerability commonly seen in human rights discourse, where sexual minorities are positioned as vulnerable groups that need top-down protection from the authorities, with the state being called upon to protect, regulate, and control (Butler et al., 2016). However, Butler et al. (2016) also suggested that gay, lesbian, or queer people’s articulation of vulnerability can be seen as “part of the resistance,” since in the articulation process, they are both “affected and acting,” that is, being affected by the “failing infrastructural conditions,” i.e., the insufficient physical and social “networks of support and sustenance,” while simultaneously acting on these failing infrastructural conditions to demand better support (pp. 7, 21, 25–26). Therefore, rather than treating gays and lesbians as being “fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency” (Butler et al., 2016, p. 25), this conceptualization of vulnerability alternatively conceives vulnerability as a “part of resistance” (Butler et al., 2016, p. 7) that attaches agency to gay and lesbian people and emphasizes their power and efforts in making use of vulnerable conditions for a better future. This articulation of vulnerability and resistance is partly expressed in *Danlan’s* (2019) commentary article, particularly in the last paragraph, which writes:

A and B’s story is a wake-up call for LGBT communities. It prompts LGBT communities to be aware of the importance of drafting legal documents to protect themselves and their partners in cases of emergencies. After all, their (A and B’s) relationship is the most intimate relationship, but it is heartbreaking to see that without protection (from legal documents), their relationship is neither accepted by others nor recognized. (para. 9)

Vulnerability is expressed in the story. It emerged from B’s defenselessness and loss of social dependency when he had to face the death of his long-time partner and leave their home, an affect-attached place that provided the basic infrastructure to support his material living and literally sheltered his body from external threats taken away by others because his relationship with A was not legally recognized. This feeling of vulnerability is turned into part of resistance, as *Danlan* ends the story advising gays and lesbians to actively seek legal protection to secure their relationships with their partners. Here, the emotive story and the appeal attach agency to gays and lesbians, asking them to actively make decisions and take action to ensure the survival of their livelihoods (cf. Kabeer, 1999). The article’s last sentence, using the highly emotive adjective “heartbreaking,” further expresses gay and lesbian people’s vulnerability, highlighting the unequal infrastructural conditions that gay and lesbian people face in China, including the lack of sufficient legal protection, empathy, and recognition from the public.

The affects of vulnerability and resistance are echoed in other Weibo users’ comments, which contribute to a temporal formation of affective convergent alignment toward the shared objects of gays and lesbians and their living conditions. In the top comment on *Danlan’s* post (see above), the superlative expression “what touches me most” (最让我唏嘘的是; Youmadipan, 2019) is used to align with the affective stance expressed in *Danlan’s* (2019) article, which states that the most vulnerable thing for a gay couple is

the loss of their significant social dependence on each other. This emotive status of vulnerability is stressed to be socially induced by society's stigmatization of gay people. The affect of vulnerability is also evoked in some other comments and replies, where emotive languages, including 大哭 "crying loud," 绝望 "desperate," 难过 "sad," and sad face emojis, are used to index sorrow. These affects of sorrow and vulnerability were circulated, accumulated, and stuck to these replies. Yet, amid the prevalent feeling of sadness, a sense of resilience and hope is also felt in Weibo users' comments. One comment writes, "The one who lives [the protagonist B], please make sure to live an optimistic and strong life. There is a silver lining ahead, so please wait and wait to witness the victory" (Saodigongxiaoling, 2019).

In this comment, the author uses an imperative expression and a metaphor (i.e., when things look black, there is always a silver lining) to politely ask protagonist B to be resilient and not give up on living. As an affective movement, hope is here expressed as a spatial-temporal expectation toward something good, a forward-looking stance that gazes toward the not-yet actual but possible and potentially better future (Bloch, 1986; Kleist & Jansen, 2016). This future, according to the context, can be interpreted as better conditions for gay and lesbian people in China. Yet, the duplicated expression of "wait and wait" (再等等; Saodigongxiaoling, 2019) may indicate that hope must be held tight because it requires people not to give up on expectations; otherwise, it can be fragile. This affect of hope, on a large scale, is manifested in Weibo users' positive stances toward the SSGA policy, evaluating it as a good move toward more equality, best demonstrated in the second most popular comment made on *Danlan's* post: "As the saying goes, it is not the solution to avoid talking about the problem. To address the issue directly and correctly is the best start" (Beiweisix, 2019).

Formulated as a reported speech or proverb, the comment quotes two short and pithy sayings that may resonate with most Chinese gay and lesbian people. That is, it is important to talk about gay issues and cope with them instead of avoiding them. The hidden addressee of this comment may be the government, which should shoulder the responsibility to "directly and correctly address" (正视; Beiweisix, 2019) gay and lesbian people's conditions and difficulties in China. It is important to note that the Chinese government seldom addresses sexual equality in its national policy. Using Engebretsen's (2009) comparison, it is a Chinese version of "don't ask, don't tell" (p. 4). However, this version of "don't ask, don't tell" may be read as "an active practice of unknowing" (Dotson, 2011, p. 243), as diversified sexual ideas and practices have become conspicuous. This may be the reason many comments position the SSGA policy as a step forward that directly and correctly looks at gay and lesbian people's situations in China. The commenter's use of the verb phrase "directly and correctly address" (正视; Beiweisix, 2019) also indicates that the commenter wants to establish a respectful relationship between the government and Chinese gay and lesbian people in which the state is a responsible audience, a problem solver, and a protector who listens to the knowing speaker for gay and lesbian citizens and acts correspondingly. The establishment of such a relationship may be reckoned as an advancement, as some comments on *the Beijing News's* post put it: 这就是进步 "This is progress" ("this" refers to the policy; e.g., Tianlan112, 2019). This evaluation is similarly expressed in other comments on *The Beijing News's* microblog (see Figure 1, a screenshot with English translations), which together project a positive affective orientation toward the future of gay rights in China.





**Figure 1. Screenshot of Weibo comments expressing positive stances toward the SSGA policy. (Source: Weibo, 2019)**

Additionally, while evaluating the SSGA policy as progress, it was found that some Weibo users also displayed a positive attachment toward the nations and cities where the SSGA policy was implemented. For example, the following comments were made on *The Beijing News'* and *Danlan's* microblogs: "It's progress! Add oil, my country!" (Pailamiximu, 2019). "It's really nice. Let the world see real progress and let a small group of the special children of the motherland feel truly warm" (Qingmainmian, 2019).

Both comments used a canonical expression of patriotism, 祖国 "my country," to express their affective affiliation with the nation. The first comment uses a short yet forceful colloquial 加油 "add oil" ("come on"), meaning "don't quit," to urge the nation to make more progress. The second comment constructs the nation's concrete policies as the origins of its national attachment, embodied as "a warm feeling." In other words, these concrete policies affectively move gay and lesbian people toward the nation. In this comment, gays and lesbians are metaphorically described as 特别的孩子 "special children," metaphorically suggesting that the country is the caring parent(s) and that they are special children who need special attention and care from their parent(s). Arguably, it may be their sexuality and vulnerable social conditions that have made them "special." In both comments, we see that national attachment is

closely related to people's embodied feelings toward the nation, which is certainly not unique in China. As studies of sexuality-related linguistic landscapes have shown, sexual identities intersect with geopolitical attachments. These intersecting identities could motivate one to feel close to or far from a nation or a place, defining it as either a gay-friendly or a "straight" space (e.g., Motschenbacher, 2020). Here, the Nanjing notary office's support for gay and lesbian people has also been taken as a public sign to index Nanjing as 民主博爱之都 "the capital of democracy and benevolence" (Hanhaicunbing, 2019) in China.

The abovementioned analysis demonstrates that many Weibo users display an affect of hope in China. Looking at these comments, this affect may immediately be noticed by the audience. However, I wish to stress that such positive affective movements need to be highlighted and documented because, from a linear timeline, when compared with the purportedly already modernized West, China is often perceived as lagging behind Western countries, lacking gay rights (Eng, 2010), and essentially homophobic (Liu, 2021b). This small step forward and the accompanied affective movements of hope thus demonstrate that, contrary to the ahistorical representation of China as inherently backward and homophobic, there is progress, and some gay and lesbian people do hold hope for a better society.

Apart from the affective movement of hoping for a better future, some comments expressed a slightly divergent emotion, i.e., disappointment toward the *Beijing Guoxing Public Notary Office*, which deleted its commentary article (one that *the Beijing News* cited in its microblog, introduced above). For example, two comments stated that "Guoxing Public Notary Office's WeChat account deleted the article [Double crying face emojis]" (Zhaoyuqin, 2019). "But unfortunately, they deleted the original article" (Peiliyasyumeilisangde, 2019).

If positive feelings are supposed to dominate the comment sections, these slightly divergent comments with the negative emotion of disappointment may stand out and even be deemed killjoys. However, to say so would be inscribing "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 56) on people, prescribing what they ought to feel. Instead, the emotion of disappointment here may suggest that these Weibo users have taken Guoxing Public Notary Office's article as an indispensable symbol of the notary office's media support for gay and lesbian people, which may be reckoned to be part of infrastructural support. In this sense, even though the notary office still provides SSGA notary services to same-sex couples, the deletion of this article may be interpreted by some Weibo users as the notary office retracting its support for gay and lesbian people. Thus, the deletion of the article becomes a stance object, generating some Weibo users' disappointment and misgivings toward the notary office.

Misgivings also manifest in some Weibo users' expressed dismay toward the object of gay rights situations in China. For example, one commenter expressed an affect of hope toward the future of gay rights situations in China by saying, "I still hope that in my lifetime I can see the realization of equal rights for gay people, and everyone can really show their love!" (HuokexiaobeiliING, 2019). In response, a Weibo user showed disalignment with this affect of hope by suggesting that it is unlikely for China to promote gay rights. The comment replies, "Chinese people have a herd mentality and don't pursue individual characteristics like Europeans and Americans do, so they don't dare to try things that few people would do. In short, I think it's nearly impossible for China to legalize homosexuality" (Xinliqiang, 2019a). Note that homosexuality is not illegal in China. Here, the comment might mean that equal rights, such as same-sex marriage and

nondiscrimination rules, have not yet been legalized. This Weibo user also replies, "but there is really no hope. At least, this is what people around me think. To my understanding, Chinese people only have one orthodox thought and don't have any other thoughts" (Xinliqiang, 2019b).

In these replies, the affect of dismay is expressed with epistemic certainty through an essentialist cultural explanation of why China will not and cannot achieve equal rights for gays and lesbians. A cultural stereotype is construed by these comments, depicting all Chinese people as conformists who are incapable of individual thinking. Overgeneralization is also invoked, dismissing heterogeneity among Chinese and Western populations. Arguably, this construction of the Chinese people may be read as a form of internalized Orientalism, since it explicitly defines Chinese people as conservative and homophobic, whereas Western people are defined as more progressive and enlightened. From another angle, it may be said that these comments represent a fatalists' narrative that depicts China as already and forever homophobic, leaving no hope for gays and lesbians here. Such a narrative ignores the actual efforts and progress that gay and gay-friendly people have made and, to some extent, may render these efforts pointless, since the future is already defined as hopeless. However, this discussion does not suggest that gays and lesbians in China should all be satisfied and have no misgivings. To do so is again prescribing feeling rules to people. Instead, the point of this discussion is to reveal the divergent affects that people have toward the SSGA policy and the broad situation of gay rights in China. As this section has revealed, some Weibo users have expressed hope and misgivings and articulated vulnerability and resistance to seeking a better future, whereas some remain an affect of dismay toward the future.

***"Excessive Promotion of Homosexuality": Claiming Victimhood and an Ambiguity of "Neither Supporting nor Disagreeing"***

This section analyzes how some Weibo users express their oppositional stances toward the SSGA policy and gay rights. The aim is to reveal the underpinning heteronormative ideologies by examining how these oppositional stances are legitimized and invested with affective force. As introduced earlier, the oppositional stance toward the SSGA policy manifests in the very first comment on *Fengchao Technology's* microblog, repeated here: "It's over. It's over. This should not be started. Homosexual people should not exist on earth" (Tingjianweixiao321, 2019).

Expressed in an overtly disrespectful tone, the comment resembles a practice of trolling, which intentionally expresses a negative affect to evoke readers' emotions and elicit "an indignant, angry, or tearful response" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 7). However, this instance of trolling cannot be claimed as "apolitical" or "merely a convenient tool to offend others" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 4) since it explicitly promotes bigotry against gays and lesbians. Furthermore, as seen from some replies to this comment, some Weibo users chose to fight back, using the same rhetoric to provoke the idea that it is "you," the author of this comment, who should not exist on earth. Similar to this homophobic comment, other comments with an oppositional stance have evaluated the SSGA policy as "excessively promoting homosexuality," such as the following two comments on *Fengchao Technology's* microblog: "Who dares to have an opinion? Yesterday I said, I understand [homosexual people] but I am against excessive promotion of homosexuality. I was scorned. It's better for me to choose to have no opinion" (Fanjiazidanyi, 2019).

Who dares to have an opinion? Homosexual people ought not to be recognized, but they force the public to accept them and even show off homosexuality in public space. Don't bring bad influence on children. Couldn't they just be quiet instead of publicizing their homosexuality? What they really want is to make everyone in the world gay, so after 100 or 200 years there will be no human beings left on earth. (Xiangrikuideyanlei14869, 2019)

As the second comment explicitly explains, the reason to oppose the "excessive promotion of homosexuality" (Fanjiazidanyi, 2019) is that promoting homosexuality could turn people, especially children, into gays. Gay and lesbian people's sexual orientations are thus overdetermined, as if they have excessive agency that enables them to influence and even determine their children's sexual behavior. This construction of gay and lesbian people's excessive agency works to generate fear among parents, who may fear that their children will become gay (see also Clarke, 2001). The comment further reduces gay and lesbian people's sexual identities to mere sexual acts and construes their intention ("what they really want") as trying to make everyone become gay and destroy the world. This comment is a typical homophobic discourse based on the power of "biological reproduction" (Mole, 2011, p. 547; Mosse, 1985). However, this homophobic stance is insulated by a disclaimer (Burrige, 2004), where the speaker claims to understand "homosexual people." When the claim is debunked and severely criticized (i.e., "was scorned"), this Weibo user and others invoke a victimhood discourse to claim vulnerability and construe themselves as oppressed victims who are forced to swallow their opinions (see also Turner et al., 2018). However, their claimed vulnerability differs from the abovementioned gay and lesbian people's vulnerability in that heteronormativity is a dominant structure in China, so the real vulnerable group is gay and lesbian people. It is pertinent to know that a more sophisticated interpretation can be made here if we add intersectionality to the discussion.

To respond to these overtly homophobic comments, some Weibo users explained that the issue here is not forbidding people like these commenters to speak but that they have misunderstood what gay and lesbian people want. For example, one commenter stated:

Maybe there are some misunderstandings about promotion. Promotion is not to make people who are not gay become gay, but through promotion, it is hoped that there will be less discrimination against and more respect toward gay and lesbian people. (Shiezi, 2019)

By clearly stating that what gay and lesbian people want is less discrimination and more respect, the comment effectively argues against homophobic comments. However, some Weibo users legitimize their opposition to homosexuality by expressing an ambiguous stance of 不支持不反对 "neither supporting nor disagreeing" with homosexuality. Such a stance suggests that gay rights issues should not be put on the table and that nothing should be done to change the current situation. Embedded in this ambiguous stance is, thus, a trivialization and a denial of inequalities, which makes this stance in effect homophobic. This hidden stance is forthrightly pointed out by one Weibo user, who states that "neither supporting nor disagreeing is to maintain the present situation. This is the opposition. Speak out your opposition loudly, instead of saying neither supporting nor disagreeing" (Yancyuu, 2019).

However, ambiguous as this stance is, a self-proclaimed gay-friendly Weibo user has expressed a slightly different stance toward it by suggesting that “neither supporting nor disagreeing is to cast a common and normal eye over LGBT issues, to treat LGBT people equally, like one treat heterosexual people. It is not to treat them differently” (Yunchacha, 2019; the term “LGBT” is used in the original comment). In other words, gays and lesbians should not seek “different” treatment but equal treatment. This interpretation of “neither supporting nor disagreeing” is a reconstruction of some homophobic people’s rhetoric. It reframes gay rights issues as normal, which may work to respond to the homophobic claim that LGBT people seek special rights or treatment (see Blain, 2005). Nonetheless, both homophobic and gay-friendly arguments seem to rely on the “coercive hold of norms” (Butler, 2016, p. 18), which shapes people’s thoughts.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

While scholars of communication and discourse studies have mostly focused on how discourses of sexism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity impact people’s perceptions and representations of gay and lesbian people and issues in China (e.g., Liu, 2021a; Wang & Ma, 2021; Zhang, Lu, et al., 2022; Zhang, Zhang, et al., 2022), this study contributes to further understanding discourses on gay rights issues by investigating how people perceive and evaluate a small step forward, namely, the policy of Same-Sex Guardianship Agreement. By focusing on this small yet forward development, this study also indirectly questions the homonationalist (and homocolonialist) discourse, which depicts China, a non-Western country, as essentially backward, unmodern, and homophobic (Liu, 2021b; cf. Dhoest, 2020; Puar, 2013; Rahman, 2014). The study reveals that people do not hold homogenous views on gay rights issues in China. On the subject of the SSGA policy, differences in stances (“stance differentials”; Du Bois, 2007, p. 440) and affective tensions exist, as people with opposite ideologies cast their evaluations and comments on this object and other relevant objects.

Affective tensions emerge “between dominant accounts of what is and what might be” (Gould, 2010, p. 32). In evaluating the SSGA policy as a positive step, some Weibo users articulated their vulnerability and resistance, exposing unequal infrastructural conditions (“what it is”) and demanding social change through better support (“what might be”). In this evaluation, feelings of hope and misgiving are invoked toward the future of gay rights situations in China. On the one hand, the SSGA policy, evaluated as a step to “directly and correctly” address gay rights issues, brings positive attachment, moving some gay and lesbian people to feel affectively close to the nation, as they hope to see more concrete equality actions. On the other hand, some Weibo users have expressed their disappointment and dismay toward the current situation and the future, as they feel they have not received sufficient support. Some express a feeling of hopelessness, claiming that China will never achieve equal rights for gays and lesbians by evoking an essentialist cultural explanation. These affective tensions reveal that within Chinese gay and lesbian communities, heterogeneous perceptions of gay rights situations exist. These heterogeneous stances suggest that even though China has achieved tremendous developments socially and economically, from a linear timeline and compared with some Western countries where certain aspects of gay rights, such as marriage equality, are protected, its gay rights situation still has room for improvement. Culturally, it is possible for China to make this progress, since more and more Chinese people, especially the younger generations in big cities, are increasingly tolerant of diverse lifestyles and do not follow the Mencius teaching

that “there are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants” as before. This cultural change may bring more people to support marriage equality and sexual diversity in China.

Similarly, in evaluating the SSGA policy as an “excessive promotion of homosexuality” (e.g., Fanjiazidanyi, 2019), opponents of the policy have evoked the power of biological reproduction, generated fear of human extinction, expressed a feeling of victimhood, and adopted an ambiguous stance of neither supporting nor disagreeing with homosexuality and gay rights. These discursive practices may trivialize and silence discussions about gay rights issues in China, reinforcing and reproducing an unequal heteronormative structure. This study reveals that heterosexist and heteronormative ideologies persist in China. Yet, homophobic stances become more covert, partially because more people are expressing their support for gay rights, which pressures homophobic people to be more strategic when expressing their opinions.

In conclusion, these stance differentials and affective tensions demonstrate that both supporters and opponents of gay rights policies in China constantly position themselves in the course of the country’s un/development of gay rights, orienting, performing, and feeling their relationship with the nation and their compatriots. In a context where gay and lesbian Chinese people are increasingly aware of and desire equal rights (Bao, 2018; Chen, 2020; Rofel, 2007) and where their conational antigay people maintain heteronormative values, it leaves the nation and people with a vision to build a community of a shared future for mankind to reconcile these stance differentials and affective tensions. By revealing and illustrating these stance differentials and affective tensions around the SSGA policy, this study provides a novel and significant perspective to look into what stances and affects should be reconciled. Future research may benefit from conducting surveys and interviews with Chinese citizens to investigate their attitudes toward the SSGA policy and other gay rights policies in China. The theories of stance and affect, as this study demonstrates, could be useful tools for future studies.

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