Spacial Choices of Queer Urban Space: A Look into Queer Nightlife Establishments in China

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Abstract: This study examines the dynamics of queer public space in Chengdu, a major Chinese city. Considering the availability of access to different queer public spaces in China, we focus on Chengdu's night venue, entertainment, and digital public space and investigate their significance in creating queer community and sense of belonging. Observation, interviews, case studies, and document review is used to explore the queer space in Chengdu and reveal the obstacles queer community face when constituting safe queer space under the relatively oppressive ideology of the country. Investigating the problems through the lens of multi-disciplines such as urban sociology and gender studies, we take a view of the queer public space itself from an urban planning perspective which examines its design rationality as pure space constitution and analyzes the driving force for such design in gender studies perspective which involves discussion of intersectionality and analysis of patriarchal society. The queer urban space serves a critical function for the queer community by gathering the scattered population and providing a safe space to express their identities. By investigating the contemporary queer public space in Chengdu and making comparisons with that in other countries, this study uncovers the struggle and efforts of the queer community to establish their safe public space in combat with the heteronormative society.

Keywords: urban space, queer studies, Night Venue

1.   Introduction

Modern day Chinese society is deeply influenced by Confucian and patriarchal ideas. As a result, LGBTQ+ people have been marginalized. Queerness is not even allowed to be seen by the public, with media (e.g., texts, movies) and activities (e.g., parades, bars) associated with it deemed indecent and censored. Motivated by this phenomenon, this paper has investigated the queer bar and explored how it, as one of the few spaces where LGBTQ+ people gather, is established and kept largely invisible/concealed within the structure of Chinese society. This paper focuses on the queer bars in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China, visiting several representative queer clear bars (a kind of Pub) and nightclubs in the area. This paper will examine the state of LGBTQ+ people in Chinese society through the lenses of urban studies, gender studies, and queer studies by organizing the results of related literature and discussing evidence collected from the visitation to the clear bars and nightclubs. It is necessary to attempt to understand and analyze the current situation of queer urban spaces under

the social structure of contemporary China by examining spaces queer bars, which are regarded as important places for coming out.[1]

2. Background

The state of Queerness in China

2.1. Social views

It is challenging to conduct LGBTQ+ research in China. As shown in Figure 1, there is a low level of acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in China. This is the cause of the discreetness of their presence. However, this does not mean that there is no space for LGBTQ+ people in more "invisible" places. One such space is online digital space. In today's digital era, new technologies have emerged. They have developed rapidly, with online forums, social networking sites, live streaming, short videos, and many other forms of new media emerging and subsequently plunging Chinese society into an era of semi-multicultural coexistence. This space gave LGBTQ+ people a relatively safe place to express non-traditional sexual and gender identities. Here, in an example. Figure 2 is an online digital map on which LGBTQ+ people can record what happens to them as LGBTQ+ people in a way that is visible to others. However, such online spaces are not always accessible. For example, queer bars' advertisements publicized on the web are soft-banned because of the explicitly queer language used. It will be discussed in more detail later in the discussion of queer bars. Perhaps literature, books, or movies offer more possibilities for identity in a virtual space.[1] Historically, this has not been the case. In Chinese cinemas, superhero movies are full of masculinity and people can also experience sweet heterosexual romances; but when people think of Chinese films that portray homosexuality, only old films such as *Farewell My Concubine* [2] and *Lan Yu* [3] come to mind. None of these films were ever released in cinemas in Mainland China and people continue to miss out on more recent releases that feature homosexuality. The internet has failed to remedy this because with the exception of some pirating websites, all of these films are still nowhere to be found in virtual spaces. Censorship continues, and it has simply changed its form. From these examples, it can say that public spaces, including online ones, created under the Chinese social structure have a set of strict codes that are deeply influenced by patriarchal ideals and heterosexism that leave no room for LGBTQ+ people to truly "come out".
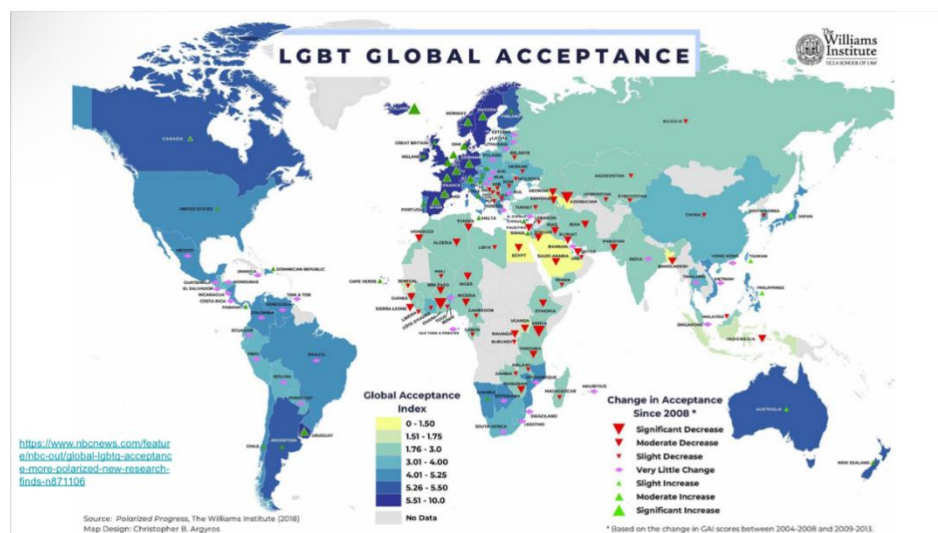

Figure 1: LGBT Global Acceptance [4].

Figure 2: Queering The Map [5].

2.2. Queer Bars

There aren't many spaces that belong to LGBTQ+ people. Among those that do belong to them, bars are some of the most well-known. To put in a bit of thought, what role do bars play in people's lives? Bars have been a quintessential commonplace in modern society. In this space, people can communicate, entertain and socialize. People have the right to go to a bar to celebrate, dance, play cards, watch shows, and meet new people. It can be said that it is a joyful place with relaxation, festivity, and communication.

On the other hand, in the past related studies, Frable, Wortman and Joseph [6], Harper and Schneider [7], and Riggle [8] have reached a consensus. They suggested that in the festival scene, LGBTQ+ people form social circles and perform related activities. Such community organizations can be extremely beneficial for those involved. Often, they can help queer people consolidate their identities by providing information, resources, opportunities, a sense of community, and collective self-esteem. A great example of this is that a sense of self-belonging and self-efficacy are what often draws queer people to participate in LGBTQ+ lead parades.[9][10] Festivals and events that include LGBTQ+ parades are seen as celebrating and pushing the individuals in such communities to resist their inner insecurities, sense of unworthiness and alienation.[11] However, in China, events as parades are challenging to organize. In the absence of more public showings of queerness, this paper turned attention to how a fixed and confined space such as a queer bar, which is also characterized by a festival atmosphere, is established. This paper attempts to understand how they solicit business, maintain operations, and especially what difficulties encountered in the process.

2.3. Why is this research important

LGBTQ+ people are still marginalized in China. There are very few queer bars, and it is hard to run them for an extended period of time. Business for them is difficult due to a multitude of barriers including but not limited to the aforementioned soft ban on advertising. Through this research, this paper intends to understand and bring attention to the dilemmas faced by a marginalized community.

Another reason for doing this research is that there is still a lack of understanding of gender and sexuality. This paper intends to expand the tools that can be used to further understandings of them. The word gender, according to Judith Butler, can be used to express both sex and gender.[12] Furthermore, by the concept of performativity, [12] gender is temporarily constituted in the flow of

time rather than something stable that is the origin of various actions. This paper wanted to examine the relationship between queer spaces and gender expression.

From Derrida's concept of "differance",[13] Bodily existence cannot converge on a single identity. Understanding LGBTQ+ identities are of importance to everyone because it is all about human. The spaces that are of importance to them are worthy of closer examination. Even if having two sexual organs that distinguish between so-called men and women, the interlocking marks of many differences over time constitute the male, female, and LGBTQ+ people.

Misogyny, homophobia, and discrimination against sexual minorities still exist in the society. Indeed, under the power, women/LGBTQ+ people are always on the "outside of the structure"[14] whether they are considered as subjects or objects, because in the context of patriarchy and heterosexism, "women&LGBTQ+ people" are not "men". There is a need to bring to light, the struggles of people who are not privileged.

3.   Methodology

A two-part process is used to get the conclusions.

Studies on space and queerness outside of China are the main subjects of the literature review section. This is because there isn't enough information available on gay venues in China or even about Chinese queer communities in general. The goal of the literature review is to examine queer experiences in westernized nations in order to create a proxy for what queer experiences would be like in China. The review also provides direction for how to interpret the results of own inquiry.

To prepare for field research. In order to get a better understanding of the challenges queer individuals in China confront, archival data was being consulted first. Additional data about which Chinese letters, letter combinations, and phrases are censored on different Chinese sites was taken from social media. Then, research the symbols and fashion trends that the queer community in China was using is being conducted. This was done in order to prepare for the conversations on the representation of queer places.

The research is carried out through in-person interviews and direct on-site observation. The goal was to look into the real-world experiences of gay individuals with a focus on the places they hang out. The nature of this research led to the conclusion that the only accounts that would be meaningful were those that came from LGBT individuals or those who frequented queer businesses. As to keep the research more open, so interviews were a better option, interviewees are not experts on lived queer experiences, therefore it seemed possible that if asking the respondents open-ended questions, they would reveal new information. The decision to undertake on-site observations was made purely out of an interest to learn how these places are presented, which can only be satisfied by visiting the establishments and observing how it is.

4.   Literature Review

4.1.   The constitution of space

An important concept relevant to the investigation is space. In order to analyse queer spaces, the concept of space in relation to urban studies needs to be introduced: what is space, how is it different from location, different types of space, and how the internet also constitutes space. According to Tim Creswell's book *Place*, "Space, then, has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning-as "fact of life'', which like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life.''[15] He suggests that "space", rather than merely a three-dimension medium, is filled with a "fact of life'', which involves the actions of and interactions between socialized humans and other creatures. In fact, space is all about human life, as suggested by Yi Fu Tian in "Topophilia",[16] "People everywhere tend to structure space---geographical and cosmological—with themselves at the center and with concentric

zones (more or less well-defined)" This indicates that when learning about space, it is actually learning about humans, the social identities behind them that shape their actions. The intersectionality of different social positions that leads to the different constitutions of space, via involvement of physical geography such as geopolitics, is what shall be focusing on. Hence, when investigating queer urban space, not only the location itself should be focused but also on how it relates to metaphysical concepts present in queer theories, gender theories, economics, and politics.

Moreover, compared to other minority groups such as race minority group, which have a geographical connection with one another due to the origin of tribe and immigration. LGBT community spread more scattered geographically and is harder to identify each other based on appearance. In fact, compared to the mainstream spread of certain public facilities which are spread through planning and organizing, the queer community often produces urban spaces in which called "constellations'' [17]. There's no such linear pattern that people in a queer community follow to find queer urban space. Hence, digital space plays a significant role.

Digital space is constituted by media, which users post content on a public platform, while others, no matter from where, could have access to the content. It is a public space where everyone could get equal access to all information. However, one of its main features ---orientation--- creates layers of privacy in different communities. Searching engines are able to detect users' preferences through analyzing users' records and hence would recommend similar content to those with same preferences.[18] In doing so, individuals in the queer community could identify and meet with each other easier and hence, constitute communities and space together.

Taking advantage of the features of the digital world, the queer community thrives prosperously. The trend of using queer-oriented dating apps such as Blued (for gay and bisexual men) and Rela (for lesbian and bisexual women) creates a pathway to connect queer individuals together, and hence provide a safe space where people can express their identities without having worries or getting harassed. Queer community code also plays a critical role in constituting queer spaces, on social media, to walk past the sensor for LGBT elements, people have created certain diction that only people in the queer community could have a grasp of their meaning. The presence of the code prevails in social media and is being used in many real queer urban spaces to constitute the queer element in a certain space.

In a nutshell, when understanding the space overall and specific features that contribute to the constitution of queer urban space, the research methods and results will look into specific methodologies and hence present the findings that could hit the essence of queer urban space.

4.2. China and Queer

The queer social movement in the West has a rather short history. The Stonewall Riot in 1969 was the first outstanding social movement that the LGBT community participated in to fight against the oppression and discrimination of queer community. Still, in Western countries, there is 50 years of queer social activism. In China, even general awareness is a recent development. There is some queer activism in China. For example, the director He Xiaopei has filmed several films containing queer and gender-related themes in an attempt to raise awareness of how the queer community is being deprived of their rights. [19] However, there's still a lack of queer social activism that is outstanding enough to be a milestone of China's queer social activism, let alone bring about actual change.

Even in the digital space, where queer communities tend to thrive, those in China still face lots of obstacles. The strong censorship on China's social media sites will filter out LGBTQ+ related content and queer-themed media work is directly banned in Mainland China. Under such an oppressive political environment, half of China's LGBTQ+ community confessed that they had received discrimination from strangers, with even more of them saying that discrimination from family could be even more severe. [20] To summarize, LGBTQ+ identities are less accepted by mainstream society

when compared to their Western counterparts, leading to different expectations for queer spaces and a set of very different conditions under which they can form.

In most Western countries where same-sex marriage is legal and extensive efforts have been made to spread awareness of LGBTQ+ right, the function queer urban spaces served and how they operated was very different from how it is in China. In those countries, queer urban spaces existed to provide a safe and private space for LGBTQ+ individuals to express their identities.[21] However, the specific nature of the queer urban spaces provided differed across space and time. Take the United States as an example, the author of the book *Gay bar* [22] described modern-day gay bars as a "crude tool of fiction". She suggested that they no longer serve their purpose of being a place for queer people to gather simply because there's no need for such entertainment facilities to serve this purpose anymore. Queer communities could express their identity smoothly under the mainstream society and compared to bars which only serve the entertainment and social function, more educational NGOs are needed for better development of gaining more queer community's rights. However, in China, the mainstream still holds an oppressive attitude toward the queer community. Chinese society lacks an understanding of queer community overall and the hinder of policy makes it nearly impossible to start up large numbers of NGOs that provide educational assistance to queer community. As a result, queer bars still play a critical role in providing individuals with comfortable spaces to show their identities.

On the whole, after looking into the conditions that China's LGBTQ+ community faces, there is now necessary tool for analyzing the field research findings.

5.   Findings

5.1.   Part1 - Location choice

By using digital maps and social media, a map of all the queer public facilities in Chengdu is being plotted. more detailed information is gathered after visiting three of them. Through the combination of macro and micro investigations, the conclusion that location choice was linked to the amount of/lack of economic and political power could be drawn.

According to the map, all queer bars were located more than three kilometers away from the city center - a square that holds political importance. Moreover, none were located near major shopping developments. Aside from these observations, there was no discernible pattern.

"Jiquan", a lesbian bar, is located under the intersection of two highway overpasses. To get to it, one would have to cross a five-lane road without the help of a traffic light. The establishment is almost entirely obscured from the nearest sidewalk by highway foundations and traffic. Basically, all of these factors made "Jiquan" physically invisible to the public. Five out of six customers in total said that they relied on a map to find the place. Furthermore, many first-time customers needed assistance from bar owners to find the exact location of the bar. Ultimately, due to the bar being circumscribed by fast lanes with heavy traffic, the accessibility of the bar is low. To get to this bar, one must cross the multiple lanes of traffic unassisted, being exposed to a high level of danger.

"Muchroom" and "AMO" were located in much less harrowing locations. "Muchroom" and "AMO" are both located on pedestrian streets near residential complexes where they are neighbored by other vendors. When walking on the streets, people can clearly see the storefronts and come to consume. Despite their status as queer spaces, both "AMO" and "Muchroom" were located no differently than other businesses.

The reasons behind the choice of location are quite multifaceted. An interview with the bar owner who chose the location of "Jiquan" is being conducted. She said that the choice of its location is due to both economic and political reasons which were in one way or another related to the queerness of both herself and the space she provided. The main reason, as the owner suggested, that they chose to locate Jiquan, is its cheap rent. According to her, from 2020 January to 2022 before China ended its

Zero Covid policy, the bar was running in deficit somewhere else. One reason for this deficit condition is due to the covid pandemic but the other is related to the limited number of clienteles. For the bar owner, Jiquan is not only queer-oriented but also female-only. "Only when a person physically and mentally identifies herself as female/woman could she enter Jiquan", said the bar owner. She explained that as constituting a private safe space for lesbians and bisexual women, it is essential to reject men. This restriction directly reduces the consumer to half and has caused some dissents from the transgender community in Chengdu. Therefore, at that time, the bar owner had to do another job during the daytime to cover the deficit of the bar. When choosing the new location for Jiquan, the bar owner considered low rent as the highest priority. Whilst low rent was her primary consideration, she also desired privacy. Being discreet was actually desired because it would allow her to bypass laws dictating what symbols were allowed to be shown in public. Being discreet would also protect her bar from unwanted intruding men.

"AMO" was much more commercialized. The brand is a franchise with establishments in other major cities in China such as Beijing, Chongqing, and Shanghai. It is a listed brand operated with 100,0000¥ registered capital. The services provided in "AMO" are fully commercialized. There's no extra service provided though, served especially for the queer community, which also cut down the cost of its operation and hence has a more abundant budget for paying rent.

Muchroom's economic condition is in-between Jiquan and "AMO". Muchroom is labeled as a gender-friendly space, which doesn't have strong elimination to consumers outside of the queer community. Hence, the consumer base is wider, which helps increase revenue for the bar. However, to provide services and decorations that are queer relevant, one of the bartenders said, they have to spend more money. At the same time, the owner wanted to keep the establishment from being exclusionary in order to achieve the effect of helping the queer community and reaching out more to mainstream society. Their success is what allows the bar to pay rent.

5.2. Part 2 - Spacial presentation

field research was conducted based on three types of queer urban spaces in Chengdu City, focusing on their generalizability. Through analyzing these spaces, insights into the broader queer nightlife scene in Chengdu City is gained. This part primarily delves into the arrangement and ambiance of these queer spaces, and how they serve to represent the purpose and extent of privacy of these spaces.

"AMO", a chain of queer nightclubs across major Chinese cities, is a highly commercial nightclub built for socializing and entertainment. It epitomizes the commercialized queer nightclubs in mainland China.

The exterior of the building is subtly understated, while staffs await guests on the street, indicating "AMO's" commercial nature. These nightclubs, like "AMO", aim to encourage social interaction, spending, and sometimes even prostitution. This is apparent in their seating arrangement, with around 8 spacious booths and a T-shaped stage for performances in the center. Each booth accommodates 10 to 15 people, and staff often arrange strangers to sit together, encouraging interactions between guests. Overall, the space itself is semi-private from the outside. However, within the space, privacy is limited.

The commercial aspect is somewhat less overt. Upon arrival, a staff member accompanies guests, encouraging them to purchase costly beverages and services. The tactics of the staff often involve revealing certain spending rules after seating, such as a minimum spending requirement of 300 CNY, which in the researchers' case was informed only after 30 minutes when seated. The menu prices are notably inflated, and some pricey alcohol sets are given romantic names like "the best choice to show love". Indeed, the deliberate association between spending and expressions of love and affection serves as a prime illustration of the consumerism trend within commercial nightclubs like "AMO".

Despite being queer-oriented, nightclubs like "AMO" lack evident queer symbols and decorations, even the simple rainbow flag, setting them apart from queer bars and cafés. This suggests they aren't

conducive to community support. Though the guests and staff, as the researchers observed, are mainly lesbian or queer women, a supportive queer community is unseen. In addition, the environment is less than inviting, with the smoke of cigarettes everywhere and non-stop, blaring club music in the background. The atmosphere is exclusive, representing a typical image of the underground subcultural queer community that is often despised by the mainstream, as both staff and customers embody this culture. Staff demeanor is closely linked to spending levels, catering to a limited group within the queer community. This makes the queer individuals there less approachable, which is why challenges appeared in conducting interviews with both staff and guests at "AMO".

Notably, online advertising also plays a crucial role in these queer nightclubs in mainland China. "AMO's" online sponsored posts stress on its entertainment focus through photos and flirtatious language. These posts often subtly allude to the availability of prostitution, a hidden facet of many Chinese queer nightclubs.

Jiquan and Muchroom, on the other hand, represent quiet, queer-oriented bars designed for intimate socializing among friends and building a supportive queer community.

The seating arrangement in these quiet bars prioritizes the comfort of diverse groups of guests. It offers a variety of table sizes with adequate spacing, ensuring customer privacy. Unlike more commercial nightclubs, these spaces maintain a non-commercial atmosphere. For instance, at "Jiquan", the staff even suggests avoiding expensive liquors. Additionally, these quiet bars afford guests more freedom. Guests can come and go without obligatory interactions with staff, which contrasts with experiences in nightclubs like "AMO", where the staff's push to stay can make the researchers feel "restrictive and frightening."

"Jiquan" has a female-only policy for its guests, aiming to provide a protective and secure environment. It's well-known within the lesbian online community as a lesbian bar, primarily hosting lesbian guests and staff, along with some straight women curious about lesbian spaces or accompanying their lesbian friends. Its location makes sure a semi-private environment and the nature of quiet bar also ensures privacy within the space, allowing people to talk without disturbance. "Muchroom", on the other side, is a queer-friendly café-like bar, embracing inclusion without specific guest restrictions. Among the spaces researched, "Muchroom" is the most diverse and welcoming queer public space. Notably, its guests and staff encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from straight males to queer individuals. Spaces like "Muchroom" play a vital role in connecting the underground queer community with the broader public, offering enlightening interactions help create better understanding of the queer community.

Despite China's restrictive official attitude on public displays of queer symbols, both Jiquan and Muchroom exhibit LGBTQ+ symbols. Their spaces feature LGBTQ+ flags, handmade slogans, posters, gender-related books, and decorations. These deliberate setups create a welcoming environment, establishing safe spaces for the queer community. Interviews reveal that these bars often host events focused on feminism and sexuality, further uniting and supporting Chengdu's queer community in a public, inclusive space.

However, these more outgoing presentation has caused problems for them. "Pastorals often come to us, checking various things such as sanitation and taxes", The bartender of Muchroom said. "However, for our neighbor vendors, the pastoral won't check them as frequently as we did." She attributes this abnormal habit to a side reaction from the patrol office to Muchroom's presence of queer community elements. Due to the policy restrictions, Muchroom turned to display more feminism-related decorations and content at the front to get rid of patrols' warnings. When facing systematic oppression from the government, it seems that there are no alternatives other than compromises. This has become a mutual problem faced by all organizations and public spaces related to gender and queer in mainland China.

6.   Conclusion

This field research and exploration into the spacial choices of queer nightlife establishments in Chengdu City has shed light on the diverse landscape of queer urban spaces in mainland China. Through an in-depth analysis of three distinct queer bars, namely Jiquan, Muchroom, and "AMO", the intricate dynamics within these spaces is being studied. Combined with the literature review and background studies, the field research has underscored the significance of these spaces in not only offering safe spaces to the queer community but also acting as bridges that promote awareness and acceptance to the public.

Nevertheless, the cruel reality of harsh censorship and the challenges encountered by certain queer urban spaces remain the backdrop of the research. As the landscape of queer urban spaces in China continues to evolve, concurrent shifts in governmental policies are likely to reshape the current state. This interplay makes the fate of mainland China's queer urban spaces and living conditions uncertain.

Under this complex context, the findings serve as a testament to the multifaceted ecology of these spaces. It is ideal to hope these queer urban spaces can eventually play a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity, dialogue, and mutual respect within Chinese society. As in its final message before being banned by the government, Beijing LGBT+ Center, the largest NGO advocating for LGBT rights in mainland China, said the following:

"May every Chinese citizen enjoy equal rights and interests in all respects, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression."[23]

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