

From *Zhiqing* to “Mothers of *Tongzhi* Children”: Linkages between the Socialist Past, Reflective Present, and LGBT Future in China

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ABSTRACT: This paper mobilises interactionist sociology to explore the biographies and moral careers of two former *zhiqing* who emerged, circa 2007, as well-known mother figures in a dynamic *tongzhi* blogosphere. Their encounter with young *tongzhi* inaugurated parental advocacy for their sexually nonconforming children in China. By anchoring *tongzhi* activism in contemporary Chinese history and reconstructing two parallel processes of activist-becoming, this paper seeks to better understand how political agency emerged in an authoritarian setting while making a case for studying activism as historicised meaning-making activities.

KEYWORDS: *zhiqing*, love, motherhood, autonomy, generation, homosexuality, activism, blogging, self, agency.

Introduction

On a sizzling summer day in 2019, I arrived at a Guangzhou city park for an appointment with Mama Wu.¹ “Come meet me around noon,” she wrote in an email, “I’ve moved to a bushy area next to Passion Square for my daily solo dance routine.” Indeed, after some meandering under a scorching sun, I saw a fan-dancing woman who was none other than Wu. The 72-year-old greeted me as I approached, asking me to wait until she finished her exercise performance, then changed her dancing prop to a five-meter-long rainbow-coloured ribbon. She wielded it with poise, moving in light steps to a nostalgic tune. “Do you know this song?” she prompted me. “It’s adapted from a Soviet song; we listened to these a lot in the old days. Of course, you youngsters don’t recognise them.” As we walked off to a nearby Cantonese tea house, she casually struck up a conversation, explaining her daily routine and her habit of making vegetable broth, as “wholesome meals led to a healthier life.”

Gracious yet spontaneous, self-asserting but caring: I could easily imagine this was how Wu stood before those young *tongzhi* (同志)² who came looking for her about a decade ago. As the first mother in the country who openly supported her gay son (who came out in 1999), her determination caused quite a stir in her social circle and beyond in 2005. Back then, mainstream discourses on homosexuality barely departed from tabloid-press voyeurism (Shu 2009; Shen 2010), and most sexually nonconforming youths led a shadowy, if not necessarily tortured

existence. On the rapidly expanding but unevenly accessible Internet, a minority discovered Wu through her blog *Viola Tricolor*, and her open acceptance of her gay child, patient advice to *tongzhi* help-seekers and provocative advocacy for coming out came as a touching revelation. Nevertheless, Wu was not the only motherly figure in the burgeoning online *tongzhi* community: she was soon joined by Lu, a Beijinger and also a recent retiree who embraced the *tongzhi* cause after stumbling upon a blog, and who befriended a number of young *tongzhi* through her blog *Old Lotus*. Both became active participants in the *tongzhi* blogosphere around 2007 and came to be known as “Mama Wu” and “Auntie Lotus.”

Emerging at a historical juncture of *tongzhi* community-making in China, Mama Wu and Auntie Lotus were two pioneers in what was to become a major task force in *tongzhi* activism: parents of *tongzhi* children. Involvement of (presumably) heterosexual parents was not rare in LGBT history, as dedicated organisations existed since the 1960s and in many parts of the world. Indeed, when Wu established the first family-oriented *tongzhi* organisation in mainland China in June 2008 (along with a young *tongzhi* and well-known blogger), she was emulating Jeanne Manford, the US mother who founded PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and

1. For privacy concerns, this article refers to the two protagonists by their family names and other persons by their pseudonyms.

2. Literally “comrades,” *tongzhi* is a politically charged term taken up by pan-Chinese gay communities to articulate new social queer identities since the late 1980s (Wong 2011; Li 2012).

Gays) in 1973, credited by Wu as "the first mother who openly supported her *tongzhi* child."³ The organisation, which until recently went by the name of Tongxinglian Qinyouhui (同性戀親友會, Society of families and friends of homosexuals, henceforth Qinyouhui), went on to become the biggest LGBT association in the country, bringing together thousands of parents and *tongzhi* youths who dedicated themselves to easing family suffering and promoting social acceptance of LGBT persons (Wei and Yan 2021).

As vocal supporters of the *tongzhi* cause, the two mothers were ahead of their time. It is necessary to distinguish them from the latecomers, inspired by the two pioneers as they might have been. Wu and Lu were recognisably exceptional, and not solely for their capacity to engage in activism without organisational support: Lu was an obvious outlier as the only parent-activist with no LGBT offspring, while Wu distinguished herself by her composure in dealing with her son's homosexuality, as mourning for "lost heterosexual children" was a major component at Qinyouhui and PFLAG meetings and a strategy for fostering community belonging (Broad 2011).

This paper sets out to investigate how they became involved in *tongzhi* advocacy through a biographical (Passeron 1990), more specifically "activist career" method (Fillieule 2001, 2019). Inspired by symbolic interactionism (Strauss 1997), this approach promises to shed light on the conditions of activist-becoming, which remain obscure in most social movement studies. My analysis is essentially based on the close reading of Wu and Lu's blogs: some 800 entries written mostly *before* their involvement in *tongzhi*-related activities properly speaking (up to June 2008 for Wu and May 2009 for Lu). Containing (auto)biographical essays and daily records, these materials offer detailed, continuous, and almost in situ access to two parallel processes of advocate-in-the-making.⁴ The two biographies were reconstructed in the manner of a narrative sociology (Maines 1993; Plummer 2001), and organised into three parts: preretirement socialisation, blogging activities since retirement, and engagement with the *tongzhi* community.

Central to this process is how political agency is produced and affirmed. Following the lead of Mead's theorisation on self and time (Mead 1929, 2015; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Flaherty and Fine 2001; Maines 2001; Järvinen 2004; Jackson 2010), I conceive agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement. Such a process is moored to the present, but necessarily enlists selected facets of the past to construct a coherent, unified self that buttresses current and possibly future endeavours. In the case of Wu and Lu, their agency as political actors, informed and mediated by widely circulated new interpretations of collective memory, emerged as they reviewed, reconstructed, and incorporated their socialist past into the present. Narratives of past suffering and heritage became cognitive resources, enabling them to elaborate new schemes of the self in relation to others, and to challenge the dominant order of family and romantic intimacy.

Drawing on a growing literature mobilising "generation" to study the legacies of the 1968-1980 Down to the Countryside Movement (Liu 2007; Bonnin 2013), including on ageing (Rochot 2019), I argue that LGBT community mothering in China was born out of the encounter between two generations on the

blogosphere: two ex-*zhiqing* (知青, educated youth or sent-down youth) mothers learning to navigate retired life while critically reflecting on the personal and collective past; and "marital-age" *tongzhi* youths facing social stigma and marginalisation while seeking to build community solidarity and reclaim family warmth. This argument comprises three interlocking claims. First, Wu and Lu's understanding of homosexuality and determination grew out of the gendered experience of a troubled political past and a (post-retirement) journey of post-traumatic soul-searching, which shaped their visions of romance, parenthood, and politics. Second, their reflection and intervention were enabled by a dynamic blogosphere appearing as a space for critical discourses and a social arena for self-(re)invention. Third, their commitment was carried forward by a strong social demand from *tongzhi* youths, whose support in turn injected new purpose into their retired life: that of contributing to a future where love prevails.

By anchoring parental *tongzhi* activism in contemporary Chinese history and reconstructing two parallel processes of activist-becoming, this paper seeks to better understand the emergence of political agency in an authoritarian setting while making a case for studying activism as local processes and historicised meaning-making activities.

A tale of two zhiqing

Wu and Lu were no strangers to the political turmoil of the Mao era. Born to a high-ranking cadre family, Wu (b. 1947) grew up in Guangzhou and enjoyed the best education before the Cultural Revolution shattered her family fortune and college dream in 1966. Two years later, with both parents arrested, she was sent to rural Guangdong for four years before being transferred to a county-level bureau as a writer-propagandist. In 1974, she married an overseas Chinese who graduated college in China (b. 1940), but the couple lived separately, uniting only in 1978 in a seaside city. They returned to Guangzhou one year later to work for a literary magazine (Wu as a proofreader and later editor) and at an elite high school, respectively. As a Beijing native, Lu (b. 1950) spent her first years in a modest *hutong* neighbourhood before moving into the residential compound of an important daily where her cadre father worked. She had just finished junior high when the Cultural Revolution was launched. In 1968, she was sent to Beidahuang (whereas her father went to a May Seven cadre school), working first at a farm and then becoming the only teacher in the local primary school. Upon returning to Beijing in 1976, she was employed as a warehouse worker in a collective firm, missed recruitment opportunities for both her father's daily and university, then married a co-worker soon after. Wu and Lu each had their only sons in 1980.

Wu and Lu's youths echoed each other. Growing up in a family of urban Party intellectuals, both enjoyed a good educative environment and then experienced sudden status change. Both

3. Wu 20070119. All the quoted blog entries as such are referenced in the primary sources at the end of the article.

4. Their blogs were still accessible as of June 2021, although some entries had been deleted or hidden.

combated their political stigma by responding to the Party's call and were shut out of their home city for years. Their career paths diverged, however: Wu left the countryside earlier, and upon returning to her city she landed a better and more stable job. These developments probably reflected the rank discrepancy between their fathers and confirmed past findings on life chances of the Cultural Revolution generation: while no social groups were spared by adverse state policies, high-ranking bureaucrats were better positioned to mitigate the negative effects on their children (Zhou and Hou 1999; Hung and Chiu 2003). Nevertheless, structural privileges did not confer a dramatic advantage to Wu, who made a point of not “pushing in through the backdoor.”⁵ As long sent-down periods equalled disadvantages in urban employment, both women experienced downward mobility (Davis 1992; Deng and Treiman 1997). Lacking a college degree, Wu only became a cadre late in her career, while Lu, like many other *zhiqing* from white-collar families, was stuck with a non-cadre status.

China's economic liberalisation in the 1990s ended employment stability, but it also brought about the fresh air of entrepreneurialism. Wu's desire for a new departure was palpable when she embarked, after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour, on an audacious project of publishing a photo-book: a collection of some 320 pictures of herself accompanied with poems by writer friends. Its significance was immediately intelligible to her fellow *zhiqing*: the album captured “the spirit of the *laosanjie* (老三届) and the self-awakening of Chinese women;” it was “an ode to life, to the kind of beauty that stood the test of time, and a resounding statement for *our generation*.”⁶ In 1995, feeling repressed by her new boss, Wu quit her position at the age of 48 to serve at a new bimonthly catering to retired Party cadres. Two years later, she took “internal retirement”⁷ but actually kept her job while working as a freelance editor to supplement an average household income. To her relief, her son was admitted to a good university. After renting a government-allotted apartment of 50 m² for a decade, the couple benefitted from a new policy supporting nearing-retirement cadres and in 2006 acquired a second-hand apartment twice as big. She officially retired the next year but kept working part-time.

As China embraced the market economy, collective firms were phased out. Lu “retired” in the early 1990s to join a leading US market research firm that had just opened its Beijing branch. Nonetheless, she abandoned her career in 1995 to accompany her son in his high school studies for three years. Then, at the age of 48, she founded a small enterprise to fund her son's future studies, but he decided to skip college altogether. As a response, her husband, whom she and her son did not get along with, stopped providing for him. Lu finally divorced in the early 2000s but had to move out of their 80-m² apartment with her son to rent a 50-m² one. She left her company to her son in 2005. As buying an apartment became increasingly unattainable for average Beijing residents, Lu preferred to spend her state pension on living a life of leisure that had been denied to her.

From the city to the countryside then back again, from state employment to entrepreneurship: Wu and Lu's life courses bore witness to the sweeping social changes experienced by their

generation. Both ended up belonging to the middle-income stratum and the first generation of urban retirees poised to take advantage of expanding sociability and leisure opportunities. As mentioned, these biographical data were mostly gleaned from the two protagonists' own writings. “Symbolically reconstructed,” the narrated past has an irreducibly (implied) “objective” part and carries a force that is “social structural” (Maines 2001). Notwithstanding, what prompted them to write about it?

Blogging about the present and the past

Narrating the “authentic” and “autonomous” self

Blogging took off in China after Sina, a leading online news portal, launched the service in 2005.⁸ But the boom was essentially a youth phenomenon: when Wu and Lu created their blogs, most in their age and gender group didn't even have access to the Internet. Indeed, only 10% of the population did as of late 2006, and a mere 3.1% of those were over 50 years old (0.9% over 60). Female users were in the minority (41.7%) and increasingly so at older ages.⁹ Wu had “never touched a keyboard before” and Lu called herself “Internet-blind,” but time and the desire to write motivated them to dabble in the digital world. Lu discovered the blogosphere one year after retirement and was so amazed by the intellectual exchanges happening on it that she bought a computer just to blog in June 2006. Though she had never written, she did grow up surrounded by writers and had a craving for writing like many *zhiqing* from intellectual families (Bonnin 2013: 434). Wu wanted to get back to writing after being mostly an editor for a decade. Seeing it as an ideal self-publishing platform, she launched a blog in November 2006 in anticipation of retirement. Her expertise in “dealing with words since the age of 25” served her well in her new hobby. As she grew at ease with the tool, she churned out essay after essay with staggering speed and consistency. Wu published about two blog posts every three days and Lu half as many.

As Mead (1929) reminded us, remembering is always accomplished from the perspective of the present. Biographical disruptions heighten self-consciousness and entail renewed efforts at finding coherence in life and identity (Strauss 1997; Voegtli 2004). For the *zhiqing* generation, retirement represented a crucial occasion to re-evaluate their life course (Yang 2003). Remembering past selves “prevents dissociation from the self” (Jackson 2010: 127). Wu and Lu's first blog entries were essentially autobiographical. Wu's blog opened with a three-

5. Wu 20071111.

6. Wu 20061127. *Laosanjie* (老三届), literally “old three classes,” refers to the high school graduates of 1966–1968 whose education was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution.

7. “Internal retirement” is a mechanism akin to early retirement which keeps an employee on the payroll but frees up the post. See Rochot (2019: 146).

8. 2007年中國博客市場調查報告 (2007 nian Zhongguo boke shichang diaocha baogao, Blogging in China: 2007 market report), China Internet Network Information Centre (中國互聯網絡信息中心), December 2007, <http://tech.163.com/special/000915RB/blog2007cnnic.html> (accessed on 30 June 2021).

9. 第十九次中國互聯網發展狀況統計報告 (Di shijiu ci Zhongguo huliangwang fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao, 19th statistical report on Internet development in China), China Internet Network Information Centre (中國互聯網絡信息中心), January 2007, http://www.cac.gov.cn/2014-05/26/c_126548288.htm (accessed on 30 June 2021).

entry article about her photo-book, followed by an emotionally charged portrayal of her father ("A selfless warrior, a man with feelings")¹⁰ and some other morally impeccable but historically wronged Party figures. Mostly previously published pieces, these texts, though carrying a distinct flavour of official writing, were nonetheless critical assessments of an eventful past with lingering, muted traumas. One essay lamented that the only souvenir left of her first trip to Beijing, in her 18th summer, was a photo, all her 12 dairies having been seized when Red Guards sacked her family home. She concluded:

The 10-year-catastrophe brought the national economy to the brink of total collapse. Only after the removal of the Gang of Four were the people able to rebuild our land. Thirty years have passed, there is no denying that the economy has recovered, and our nation is as strong as ever. But who can pretend the wounds have healed? Who dares suggest "letting go of the past"?¹¹

Drawing on Party-sanctioned historical narratives, her critique carefully navigated the boundaries of official admissibility while reasserting an unflinching commitment to moral integrity, here embodied by various Party veterans and *zhiqing*.

Lu's first blog entry was also an act of remembrance. Published on Father's Day, it recounted the difficult youth of her late father.¹² From there, Lu recalled her own childhood, that of a little girl brought up in a family of humble origin. Lu's posture as a blogger was unassuming: she was aiming for a decent literary quality and above all "truthfulness," echoing Wu's concern of "showing [her] authentic self." Set against contemporary Chinese history, speaking truth and being authentic bespoke a paramount political choice, but Lu announced straightaway her intention to shun "politics":

I hate politics so much. It hasn't always been this way. Born in that era, we were imbued with a sense of political responsibility, constantly worrying about all that was under heaven. (...) Little did I realise how naive I was. (...) I used to consider those involved in politics as individuals of integrity who served the people. Now they all look like thugs to me. (...) I do *not* dare/want/deign to have anything to do with politics.¹³

Lu's rejection of politics contrasted with Wu's willingness to engage with certain aspects of political history. Viewed through the lenses of class identification, Wu's attachment to political exemplarity was hardly surprising given her elite family background, while Lu's unmasking of politics as an unholy game of pretence betrayed a deep-seated distrust of the state probably more prevalent among politically disenfranchised intellectuals. While each insisted she was an "ordinary person," the label did not convey identical self-images. Lu often presented herself as a "retired woman worker with a junior high degree,"¹⁴ whereas Wu's later email signature read "retired editor, mother of *tongzhi*, no party affiliation, ordinary citizen."

Still, what united Wu and Lu mattered more than what set

them apart. An immediate concern for both was confronting "old age," which came with its host of new problems: finding new occupations, staying healthy, confronting separation with a grown-up child. Having been denied educational attainment, Wu and Lu were keen to learn. They prided themselves in having "a youthful spirit" and being able to "keep pace with the times" by mastering digital tools. Wu found inspiration in other enterprising elderly: "Foreigners with huge backpacks roaming our cities and countryside," "four female alumni travelling to Europe by themselves," and "retired cadres making excursions with photography 'armoury.'"¹⁵ These practices, she argued, challenged traditional attitudes cautioning against travelling afar at old age. Lu, who "couldn't sit still" after retirement, also took to travelling alone, as her peers were often sucked into family chores.

Peer socialising made up an important but ultimately minor part of Wu and Lu's retired life. Blogging, a hallmark of youthfulness, was also a journey taken without the comforting companionship of old acquaintances. After reconnecting with her alumni, Wu was disappointed by the fact that few actually visited her blog. She wept on her birthday at the thought of having no friends to talk to. Lu, a divorcee, was even more prey to solitude. When her son decided to move out in late 2006, she was assailed by an intense sentiment of precariousness. Fortunately for both, their lively personalities, writing skills, and dedication soon earned them a ready audience of "Internet friends." Blogging does not just facilitate the production of the self, but also fosters sociability in creative ways (Cardon and Delaunay-Téterel 2006). The heart-warming encouragement of a fellow blogger pulled Wu out of her birthday blues, and Lu was happy to form "age-indifferent friendships," making trips to visit her new friends around the country. These exchanges soon introduced new priorities in their lives.

Appraising the past as member of a generation

As former *zhiqing*, Wu and Lu had shared experience and trauma. A passage from Shi Tiesheng's 史鐵生 *semi-autobiographical novel Wuxu Biji* (務虛筆記, Notes on principles, 1996), quoted by Lu, brilliantly captures the sentiment of generational belonging engendered by the sent-down experience:

One day we will get old, be in our seventies, eighties, or even nineties, with our hair all greyed out and body propped up by a walking stick. (...) But if we happen to run into other "*laosanjie*," we would still act as if we knew each other all along, (...) asking, "In which year did you graduate?" (...), "And where were you sent to?" (...). We would grasp each other's essential life story with those bits of information alone. And this will always be our most intimate way of greeting each other, our most efficient tool for communication. This is the privilege of our generation.¹⁶

10. Wu 20061216a.

11. Wu 20061216b.

12. Lu 20060618.

13. Lu 20061123.

14. Lu 20061008.

15. Wu 20070426.

16. Lu 20070704, translation by the author. Shi was considered a spokesperson of the *zhiqing* generation.

References to the sent-down experience abound in both blogs. This reflected the dynamism of *zhiqing* socialising that started in the 1990s as a class-transcending phenomenon, then grew with the Internet and urban leisure culture (Bonnin 2016). Lu made her first return trip to Beidahuang in 1998, on the 30th anniversary reunion of the Heilongjiang Corps, then once again just after her retirement. Wu revisited her sent-down village as early as 1984 and kept contact with fellow *zhiqing*, mostly her high school alumni. *Zhiqing* gatherings were not necessarily conducive to critical assessment of the past, however, as “negative” sentiments might be exorcised on such “happy” occasions (Rochot 2019: 205). The souvenir book to which Lu and her fellow *zhiqing* were each invited to contribute a phrase turned out to be littered with nostalgia: “Beidahuang forever,” “Youth, without grudge nor regrets,” “Missing you forever,” etc.

More reflexive collective memories could not have survived the powerful and oblivion-inducing official narrative without special social channels and platforms (Veg 2019). As an editor and member of an elite family, Wu had privileged access to articulated critiques and even public venues to air them. She herself published stories of *zhiqing* returnees and their hardships in the early 1980s. Her photo-book, through which she reaffirmed her agency by reasserting control over her body, could also be read as an oblique indictment of Maoist policies. However, the fact that Wu partially accomplished this reflective opening of the past at a much earlier time also meant that its inner workings remained hermeneutically sealed off to us. Indeed, Wu’s narratives possessed an ideological stability that rendered them less penetrable.

Lu’s reflective stance was more hesitant because for her, the time for a thorough assessment of the past didn’t come until interactions with other bloggers incited her to take a hard look at life:

I’ve been fending off displeasure my whole life. But since I started blogging, I’ve made friends with some intelligent and diligent thinkers. Changes crept up on me, and I started caring about things beyond my daily life. But soon I was “assailed by sentiments of desolation and gravity,” just like [my blogger friend] said (...). Should I hide in the attic, or feel the desolation and gravity? I’m choosing.¹⁷

Thus, it was through critical writings of her recent contacts that Lu regained a political sensitivity. Her reinterpretation of the past was also mediated by the still fresh experience of divorce, which sharpened her awareness of the injustice embedded in the dominant gender/sexual order (Réguer-Petit 2016). Reminded by many unhappy marriages of her peers, Lu now claimed “the inability to love” as a collective failing of her generation:

Few in our generation understand love and can explain what it is. After the Sino-Soviet split in 1959, (...) love could only be used for “great loves” such as love for the motherland or the people. Romantic love was filthy, secretive, shameful stuff. (...) At the Corps too, boys and girls had only furtive liaisons. I remember a 24-year-old couple (...). The girl got pregnant after they “ate the forbidden food.” During the

sixth month of her pregnancy, [the authorities], without even the slightest shred of humanity, forced her to undergo an abortion before allowing the marriage.¹⁸

Recalling the sheer violence of state regulation of the body and sexuality, Lu lamented: “Looking back, I never knew what love was. (...) Who has stolen my ability and my courage to love? When did it happen?”¹⁹

Critical reflection had a cost. As soon as she started probing the past, Lu was again haunted by a once recurring nightmare: being sent back to Beidahuang. Still, she decided to revisit the place once more. Upon returning, she challenged a prevalent narrative among *zhiqing*: “If you were presented with the choice again, would you spend your youth this way? (...) If the question caught you out, then stop repeating ‘We have no regrets about our youth.’”²⁰ Reviewing past suffering was not indulging in self-pity but reaffirming agency. As Lu was settling accounts with the past, she also affirmed: “Some would say, life is not of our choosing. I say: Wrong! Choices exist aplenty. Of course, destiny may object: No! As it did many times in my life. But don’t forget this: you too can tell destiny: No!”²¹

It was then that she decided to inquire into how her generation’s self-consciousness “germinated and grew,” which evolved into a semi-autobiographical novel project dedicated to the post-Mao struggles of *zhiqing*. It was to be titled *Qing* (情),²² meaning feelings, or more precisely, emotional bonding. Lee (2007) argued that the desire for a new culture of *qing* sustained calls for political change since late imperial times and fed into political debates of the young republic: the advent of the figure of sentimental men and women, taken to be expressions of pure humanity, prefigured a new kind of political being and community. It was no coincidence that Wu’s epitaph for her father was, quoting himself, “a man with feelings” (*youqingren* 有情人), and that the harshest indictment Lu ever levelled against the Mao regime was that it produced a generation of unfeeling people.

Caught up by a status change, the two recent retirees conjured up images of past selves as, among other things, daughters of dignified fathers, ill-treated ex-*zhiqing* and, as we shall see, diligent mothers. Collective history, bound up with personal lives, invited itself into Wu and Lu’s self-narratives and became an object of critique. The difference in tone reflected class identities and the temporality of two asynchronous intellectual journeys. Nevertheless, both voiced a political critique through a language of private commitments to authenticity, love, and autonomy. These are keys for understanding their future engagement in the *tongzhi* community. For if Wu and Lu did not create blogs to air political views, their encounters with the *tongzhi* community would rekindle a sense of social responsibility and drive them to fully act upon the *tongzhi* present and the future.

17. Lu 20070131.

18. Lu 20070111.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Lu 20071102.

21. Lu 20071014.

22. Lu 20080610.

Mothers for all

Understanding homosexuality

When Wu and Lu retired in the mid-2000s, homosexuals were still a relatively invisible social category in China. The widespread adoption of *tongzhi* identities among sexually nonconforming individuals was a recent phenomenon, as many only “discovered” homosexuality via pirated films and Internet forums from the late 1990s onward. Much of the pressure endured by LGBT persons had less to do with targeted hostility than with a state-sponsored family culture extolling the virtue of filial piety and social conformity (Miège 2009). Young urbanites experienced marriage pressure from their mid-twenties, and rural residents even earlier. Meanwhile, at least for the upper social strata, cohabiting with one’s chosen partner was increasingly becoming a possibility, thanks to the expansion of privacy to which internal migration, the job market, and commercial housing all contributed. Still, the Internet was the major channel connecting *tongzhi* individuals, for it provided safer spaces to experiment with socially marginalised sexual identities. As soon as blogging became popular, some marital-age *tongzhi* started blogs documenting their sentimental life.

Few ever entertained the idea of coming out to their parents, preferring to segregate life rather than risking a family drama (Wang 2011). They also understood that the social stigma attached to homosexuality extended beyond homosexuals to their family members, more specifically parents (Goffman 1963). While China is not unique in this regard (Fields 2001; Bertone and Franchi 2014), in everyday social interactions, inquiries about marital status do come up frequently, obliging young celibates and their parents to devise counterstrategies. Chinese elderly, especially women, are also eager to attain grandparenthood, considered a defining feature of old-age accomplishment – not only because it satisfies a dominant family ideal, but also because the grandchildren form the locus of an old-age sociability still predominately revolving around relatives and acquaintances. The discovery of the homosexuality of one’s (only) child thus threatens parents’ blueprint for family joy and retired life through exclusion from major aspects of peer group socialising. As a refrain among Qinyouhui parents goes: “When a child comes out of the closet, their parents go in.”

Wu had already made a splash as a mother of a gay child before retiring. Her son came out to her in his final year of high school without causing much of a fuss, which was exceptionally rare. Notwithstanding the couple’s open-mindedness, the family situation was crucial: all four grandparents were deceased by that time, removing a potential hurdle. Reassured, her son became during university a key contributor to one of the country’s earliest gay information websites. During a 2004 AIDS Day campaign,²³ he appeared unmasked on local TV as a gay volunteer, and was recognised by some relatives who came asking Wu about it. Wu was hesitant to admit it at first, but finally decided to appear on TV by her son’s side in 2005, making her the first mother to do so in the country. Lu’s foray into *tongzhi* activism, on the other hand, resulted from pure chance. Her most cherished Internet friend was a 30-year-old blogger from Inner Mongolia. After he went missing

online in mid-2007, Lu searched for him and stumbled upon another blog by a namesake who happened to be gay. The young man struck Lu as “utterly sincere,” and she was “triple shocked”: by his frankness about his homosexuality, the complications this entailed, and how much these revolved around not hurting his parents’ feelings. She left him a comment and the two became friends and met in person by the year’s end.

Wu and Lu distinguished themselves by their capacity to *understand* homosexuality where most saw deviance. Wu seemed immune to the typical woes of parents confronted by their child’s coming out: shock, denial, anger, grief, or shame. In later interviews, she attributed her serene reaction to her knowledge about homosexuality. The first wave of empirical inquiries on homosexuality in China was published in the 1990s, of which the most influential work was written by sociologist Li Yinhe 李銀河 (b. 1952), also a *laosanjie*. Wu had read some prior to her son’s coming out and did not consider homosexuality an illness. Perhaps even more decisive, though, was that her son had over the years exposed her to gay literature, cinema, and (Hong Kong) pop icons.

Lu, on the other hand, was unequivocal about her indifference to science: “It’s the responsibility of Li Yinhe and co. to figure out the origin and whatnot of homosexuality, not mine,”²⁴ she declared. At her first encounter with a real-life *tongzhi* narrative, she instantly recognised it as an authentic expression of love: “We are talking about the most important thing in life here: love! No one has the right to belittle someone else’s love.” Lu’s admiration grew even stronger as she read through gay couple (*fufu* 夫婦) blogs.²⁵ She quoted a *fufu* blogger who blogged “to encourage and give hope to those *tongzhi* who have suffered setbacks and feel lost, by showing them that *tongzhi* too can find love and form a stable relationship.”²⁶ *Fufu* bloggers’ quest for love and family warmth struck a chord with her:

I’m an avid reader of *tongzhi* blogs, not to satisfy my voyeuristic impulses, but because I’m moved by them. Their words reveal how good they are as people, how loyal they are to their partners, and how filial they are toward their parents. They do not hold grudges against but are very considerate toward their parents who don’t understand them.²⁷

A self-proclaimed romantic, Wu also “cried [her] eyes out” reading about a Chinese émigré and his American boyfriend who died of AIDS. However, she often explained her advocacy by another kind of love – that of a mother. “We took great solace in seeing our son leading an authentic, honest, and happy life.”²⁸ Her explication came bundled with a full-fledged discourse on

23. The Chinese state officially acknowledged a national AIDS epidemic in late 2003, which kickstarted government-sponsored AIDS prevention campaigns nationwide. See Gåsemeyr (2015).

24. Lu 20080104.

25. *Fufu*, meaning husband and husband, was a neologism and wordplay on *fufu* 夫婦, husband and wife. This suggests that many *tongzhi* bloggers’ vision of ideal relationship was very much informed by heterosexual norms.

26. Lu 20080518.

27. Lu 20080517.

28. Wu 20061227.

parenting: that she had a “pal-like” relationship with her son who, growing up, never had things forced upon him. She further framed it as a family heritage:

My parents were veteran cadres who joined the Party in 1936, and it was fortunate that they were serious about being democratic and respecting personality. My husband, my son, and myself lived by their side for their last 15 years. Growing up in an upright and liberal family environment (...) made [my son] a free thinker with a sense of right and wrong.²⁹

Wu thus invested her alternative parenting style with a political (“democratic”) essence, safeguarded by her father, a figure of Mao era political martyrdom. Respecting personality hence amounts to rejecting authoritarianism, just as living out one’s “authentic self” becomes an ethical responsibility. Meanwhile, the revolutionary heritage was not disavowed, but brought back to account for the transgression of family norms. When one younger writer friend asked her if she “really did not care about being a grandmother” and who was going to “carry on the family name,” she replied that children did not live to satisfy their parents’ wishes (and vice versa), adding: “What about those revolutionary martyrs who died for the people without any offspring, nor even love relationships? Were their lives not meaningful? Haven’t they known honour and posterity?”³⁰

The self is only ever constituted in relation to others (Jackson 2010). For Wu and Lu, motherhood was an essential component of their self, hence the prominence of the parent-child relationship in their self-narratives. Wu’s parenting discourse resonated with what Brainer observed in contemporary Taiwan, where “new ideals of parents who love, know, and accept their children permeated the gatherings for parents of LGBT children” (2017: 933). This discourse, also gaining currency in China, might have had an effect on Lu, whose relationship with her son was close but rockier. A heart-rending exchange with her son sent her questioning her own parenting method:

I saw the failure of my education in my son’s behaviour. For over 20 years, I’ve created a clean, fairy tale-like world for him, (...) providing him shelter day and night (...). I felt so lost when he told me: “Mom, would you please let me decide for myself?”³¹

As Wu and Lu’s children were inventing their own lives, interactions with *tongzhi* youths compensated for their sons’ dwindling daily presence and led both to redefine motherhood as one unrestrained by blood ties.

“Adopting” *tongzhi* children

That Wu and Lu became champions of the *tongzhi* cause was an unexpected outgrowth of their blogging activities, though critical evaluation of the past and the present had laid the groundwork for it. Wu’s first blog post about homosexuality, filed under the category “[My] son,” generated way more hits than other posts of the same period (34,330 views as of 12 June 2021, when

the average was less than a thousand). As her blog grew more popular, her articles were also frequently featured in *tongzhi*-themed blogrolls and forums. Under the new attention economy, Wu’s Internet success invited mainstream media coverage, even internationally. After an important local daily published an interview with her, her blog racked up 180,000 more views in a few days. After a well-known *fufu* blogger recommended her article “To care for others’ children like my own,” Lu’s blog also experienced a fourfold surge in popularity – though on a more modest scale, the average hit per article going from 50 to around 200.

The new visibility encouraged Wu and Lu to devote more energy to discussing homosexuality, and brought about a slew of solicitations. If their popularity paled compared to the biggest bloggers, the emotional intensity of the responses was unmatched. Many saw in them a mother they had been craving to have. As one said to Wu: “When I learnt about you, I cried, because of your greatness. If I could, I would really want to call you mom.”³² The outpouring of pent-up emotions revealed the taxing social environment in which many *tongzhi* found themselves. Lu also explained:

Recently my new visitors were mostly *tongzhi*, and most left me the exact same message: “Could I tell you words I don’t have the heart to tell my mother?” Even Zhaozhao and Mumu, whom I considered to be a most happy couple, told me: “Auntie, we wished we had known you earlier. Your words and your goodwill have not just moved us, they’ve made us feel as if being understood and accepted by our mothers.”³³

The two mothers were taken aback by those messages from young strangers, whose vocal gratitude contrasted with the discretion of their peers. As Wu ruefully remarked, even her long-time friends seldom voiced their support or applauded her for being a brave mother.

Wu soon assumed her new role as a community mother, commenting on and replying to messages with promptness, dedication, and the necessary distance of a professional editor. Lu went at it differently, treating her relationships with *tongzhi* youths as personal bonds: they were the “children-friends” with whom she spent time and exchanged text messages, who would call her late at night and in an emergency. But after promising to “Be a mother once more” (post since deleted), Lu also expressed her uneasiness at “usurping” the title, preferred to be called “auntie” instead:

“Mom” is a proper noun that befits none other than the one and only person who carried you for ten months, brought you up with heart and sweat, and values your life more than

29. Wu 20120418.

30. Wu 20071115.

31. Lu 20080318.

32. Wu 20070806.

33. Lu 20080523.

her own. I do not dare to accept this honour (...). How would I feel if my own son preferred to call someone else mom instead of opening up to me? I would've felt guilt, sorrow, and disappointment. I already feel an immense pressure to build a bridge between *tongzhi* and the society that treats you like a calamity.³⁴

Wu and Lu's concern for "*tongzhi* children" soon evolved into a full-blown vocation as they were increasingly exposed to their sufferings, but also into some timid efforts to bring about change. Lu created a new column on her blog dedicated to "*Tongzhi* children" and substituted her *zhiqing* book project with a *tongzhi* one. Likewise, Wu kept adding *tongzhi*-related posts to her "[My] son" column – renamed "For the rainbow within / [My] son" – signalling her new mission as an extension of biological mothering. Both columns grew to be their most popular content, contributing to a buzzing *tongzhi* blogosphere centred around male and especially *fufu* bloggers.

Debating *tongzhi* living

The *tongzhi* blogosphere nourished a sense of community belonging. Blogging's popularity and publicness also alleviated sexuality-based segregation and brought homosexual matters to an all-new audience. This provoked curiosity and genuine attempts to understand homosexuality, but also gratuitous insults and mockery. Wu and Lu were variously deemed "sick," "shameless," and "attention-seeking." Both dismissed these attacks.³⁵ By contrast, fatalistic attitudes from the *tongzhi* community upset and frustrated them. Lu was appalled and saddened by the following "realistic" advice offered to one blogger by a fellow *tongzhi*:

Don't make a big deal about yourself, just go with the flow. Don't tie yourself to one identity, be flexible. Look at Leizi, he has both a wife and a child, and is very deft at handling it. (...) Try to consider your parents' wish (...) and don't use "it would hurt the girl" as an excuse. Isn't it a good idea to try to adapt to society?³⁶

Most *tongzhi* did end up getting married, making even committed same-sex relationships extremely precarious. Finding a stable partner was on everyone's mind, but coming out was far from a viable option for many. A *fufu* blogger commented: "I'll never let my parents find out about myself. (...) People and gossips are just too toxic in our society. Our parents may accept us, but their entourage won't accept them."³⁷

However, coming out as a social practice was spreading. Wu first wrote about the topic in August 2007. Responding to a young lesbian who said coming out to her parents was "her worst decision ever," Wu assured her, "You did nothing wrong":

You have faith in your parents and you love them, which is why you chose to come out. Try to understand them. Give them time. (...) I don't think everyone should come out as soon as possible (...). You should consider your parents' capacity to withstand the shock, (...) prepare the ground

and find the right moment so as to maximise your chance of being understood. But (...) if, young as you are, you still prefer to hide it from your parents and marry someone of the opposite sex while looking for a secret lover, you will end up hurting all parties involved.³⁸

To Wu, coming out was an act of love amenable to a deepening of trust, understanding, and emotional bonding between parent and child. Lu shared this view, saying that letting mothers be in the know would prevent bigger disappointments, as "your *mother* will think it through, as long as you are happy" – her wording laying bare the gendered nature of parental labour.

Still, coming out was not yet a major debate, and Wu and Lu's interventions placed a greater emphasis on self-love, for despair loomed large, becoming all the more real now that they were amplified by digital media, publicly commented upon, and collectively *felt* by the online community. Lu and fellow bloggers contacted and consoled a distressed *tongzhi* blogger for hours to dissuade him from suicide. But caring is not pampering, and solidarity no synonym for indulgence. Lu later became so dismayed at the same blogger constantly nagging others that she published an open letter pointing out everything he did wrong and urging him to change. The hugely controversial post provoked more than 20,000 commentaries, and Lu concluded by reminding everyone of the dual necessity of "Due respect and self-respect":

If *tongzhi* can be considered a vulnerable group (*ruoshi qunti* 弱勢群體), it's because their human right [to love freely] is being infringed and they cannot yet defend it. But as individuals, they are not weaklings (*ruozhe* 弱者) and have no need for sympathy from "kind-hearted bystanders." For them, I have respect, and respect only. (...) Respect yourself. And respect others (...). Those who lack self-respect will get none from others. All they will get is sympathy and pity.³⁹

"Pity his misfortune, but condemn his resignation." Wu also berated *tongzhi* who had sent her suicidal notes:

Is it really that bad? Why do you have the courage to die but none to fight against misfortune? (...) "I feel like my life is not in my own hands" (...) – how would someone capable of writing such silly words defend their right to love with confidence and might? If you only count on me or some other parents to chase the dark clouds away (...), we are in for a long wait before homosexuals enjoy equal rights in China.⁴⁰

Wu and Lu were certainly informed by their own life struggles as they urged *tongzhi* youths to take their destiny into their

34. Lu 20080531.

35. Wu 20070807.

36. Lu 20080529.

37. Wu 20070613.

38. Wu 20070829.

39. Lu 20080918.

40. Wu 20071208.

own hands. But the (perception of) the future can also affect the (interpretation of) the present (Flaherty 2001: 156): real-life *tongzhi* couples, emerging activist discourses, and advances in global LGBT movements all pointed to a hypothetical future where Chinese *tongzhi* would enjoy equal rights, in light of which Wu and Lu elaborated their critiques. In this new horizon, they painted alongside other activists, assuming individual duty became entangled with the prospect of collective rights. A new era of *tongzhi* organising was on the rise, and self-love had been identified as the first of many steps to collective salvation.

Conclusion

The mid-2000s stood as a critical juncture of *tongzhi* community-making in China, fuelled by an ever-expanding Internet, diversifying urban leisure culture, state recognition of AIDS epidemics, and globalising homosexual identities. Wu and Lu, two *zhiqing* retirees, emerged in this context as spokespersons of the parent generation who advocated for *tongzhi*'s social acceptance and family wellbeing. Through their blogs and actions, they charted out a unique and colourful old-age lifestyle while accompanying many youths in their quest for self-love, romantic bonding, and family reconciliation. Filled with emotion and reason, their part conventional, part norm-bending discourses articulated new ideals of authentic self as well as romantic, parent-child, and interpersonal relationships, and brought onto the social arena long-lasting debates on the moral propriety of coming out to one's parents.

Wu and Lu's activism came on the heels of critical reflections over their socialist past, which rekindled their sense of social responsibility. Furthermore, their commitment to the *tongzhi* cause was a by-product of interactions with a young generation of *tongzhi* bloggers, drawing on their experiences of motherhood. Accordingly, their activism can be construed as an extension of the gendered labour of motherhood and a process of reflexive, liberating self-making against the backdrop of changing selfhood and intergenerational relations under the market economy. *Tongzhi* activism granted them a rich social life as they were coping with old-age solitude, made them feel fulfilled, and opened their eyes to a new continent of possible human relationships. To her “*tongzhi* children,” Lu wrote: “Thank you for teaching me new values, broadening my horizon, and making my remaining life meaningful.”⁴¹ For Wu, what started out as a way of combatting stigma ended up bringing her a blissful feeling of accomplishment: “Bringing warmth to others is the happiest thing in my old-age life, and this happiness will keep me company for the rest of my life.”⁴²

In May 2008, Wu celebrated Mother's Day with a roomful of *tongzhi* youths in Beijing and renamed her blog column “[My] son” to “Children.” A month later, she and *fufu* blogger Ah Qiang founded Qinyouhui, ushering in a new chapter of *tongzhi* organising in Guangzhou and beyond. Lu met Wu and Ah Qiang for the first time in December and created her own *tongzhi* group and podcast several months later. In July 2011, she published her book *Those Tongzhi Children of Mine*, then joined Qinyouhui as its

Beijing chapter head. A few months later, Qinyouhui opted for a new organisational structure to gear up for an enrolment increase, geographical expansion, and operational “professionalisation.” At this very moment, Wu decided to pursue activism under her personal moniker, which she still does to this day. She published her autobiography *Rainbow* in 2019 through a publisher specialising in *zhiqing* memoirs. Lu also went independent in 2013 before withdrawing into “the comforts of family life” to take care of her newborn grandchild. Social bonds might last or fade, and there would be abundant controversies, but the legacies of Wu and Lu live on as an essential part of *tongzhi* history, attested by the daily labour of many parents and youths who joined Qinyouhui in their footsteps. With a particular salience in the Chinese context, parental activism has established itself as an essential part of larger and plural efforts to create a more hospitable environment for sexually and/or gender nonconforming people.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for directing him to recent interactionist literature on G. H. Mead, and Justine Rochot for her comments and help in trimming the article.

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Manuscript received on 10 October 2021. Accepted on 1 March 2022.

41. Lu 20080718.

42. Wu 20111204.

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