

“We are Not Monsters”: How a Hit Online Show Pushes the Boundary of Discussion on Homosexuality in China

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In 2018, during a “cleanup” campaign, China’s social media site Weibo announced to remove pornographic, violent and gay-themed content. Millions of internet users reacted strongly and pushed Weibo to scrap its plan of banning gay content. The incident demonstrates the ongoing conflict between the public’s growing awareness in gay rights and the lack of public sphere to further the discussion.

In China, if one asks a young person in big cities for their views on homosexuality, or reads the numerous online gay novels, they might get the impression that the environment has become quite open for the gay community. However, the mainstream society and legacy media still struggle with the basics about homosexuality with conservative lens. Against this backdrop, an online debate show called *Qipa* (meaning “eccentric person”) *Talk* was created in 2014, with several of its mentors and debaters coming from the LGBT community. One of its four mentors, Kevin Tsai, is the only openly gay celebrity who remains widely popular in Taiwan and mainland China. Another mentor Jin Xing is a transgender dancer, also a unique case that is generally accepted by the public.

By 2017, the show has received a viewership of 400 million. It has become influential, not only because it gathers a group of eloquent and “eccentric” talents to present entertaining arguments on topics about love, family, work and society, but many of the viewpoints challenge the deep-rooted values in a manner unimaginable on legacy media.

Despite its pioneering characteristics, the show was cautious to start conversations on homosexuality. Instead, it has established a naturally LGBT-friendly ecosystem on the screen, which assumes their audience to be supportive. Still, it is a different story outside of the studio. In one episode in 2015, they decided to face the reality and talk about the issue with seriousness.

Although in China, online media are leniently regulated compared to mainstream media, programs can still be abruptly canceled if the authorities find the content inappropriate. And as shown in the Weibo case, the boundary is ambiguous and arbitrary. Out of careful consideration, the show came up with a relatively safe topic targeting at traditional family values, rather than the society or the authorities: Whether one should come out to their parents?

Traditional Chinese family values expect children’s respect or even obedience to parents’ opinions when making their life decisions, which has been

changing but still fundamentally powerful in the society. Instead of talking about gay rights, the show focused on the conflict between personal identity and family expectations. However, when furthering the discussion on family expectations, the audience might be led to think about the overall social environment.

During the debate, one side argued that since the society was not ready yet, hiding the parents from the truth is also hiding them from harm. With no solution in sight, they found it pointless to involve people's loved ones into such a distress. In addition, they pointed out that even on seemingly open social media, many people only supported the idea of homosexuality, or those successful or talented representatives, rather than offering meaningful help. The other side contended that the social environment would never be ready if everyone chose to hide.

"If heterosexuality is a land, homosexuality is an island, then transgender is a rock in the ocean," Jin shared that her honesty with her parents gave her the strength to face the challenges. Tsai got emotional in his speech. In the show business, he was the only "go-to" person when some gay celebrities had the impulse to come out. From a "lonely standpoint", he wished more people could join him, but the reality made him hesitant to nudge anyone to come out. "We need (more successful cases) to assure the parents that we won't necessarily be marginalized...and we are not monsters," he choked up in tears.

The discussion ended on Tsai's comment with no real conclusion. However, the show did serve its purpose to raise the awareness among its audience, or at least, starting a new round of discussion. Tens of thousands of internet users left their comments, with some sharing their own stories at length. Some others felt that they could relate to the situation, not because they were gay, but they also had to fight against traditional family values. The debate went around talk on gay rights, but landed on inspiration about how to love and support.

Although the episode was removed from its site within a month, the show continues to touch on LGBT topics occasionally. In a time when gay interviewees still hide their names in traditional media, *Qipa Talk* has made remarkable progress producing this episode and introducing new opinion leaders of LGBT issues. The next round of public discussion on homosexuality in China is unpredictable, but it will most likely start from online platforms.