

# Social Support Network of Tongqi Group in China

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**Abstract.** This study focuses on the Tongqi group - that is, women who are married to gay- a special social group and the challenges they face. With the gradual opening up of society's recognition of sexuality and the development of online media, the issue of "Tongqi" has gradually attracted widespread attention. Even though society is growing more accepting of "sexuality" in general, many Tongqi still see little progress in overcoming societal obstacles such as unhappiness with requests for divorce and the prevalence of violence against intimate partners. This study is based on social support theory and aims to analyze the structural and functional aspects of the support networks of the "Tongqi" at the levels of family, community, nation, and society. The goal is to analyze the impact and role of these support networks on the challenges faced by the "Tongqi", in order to help people better understand the situation and needs of this special group and to provide important references for improving the living conditions of these wives.

**Keywords:** Tongqi; homosexuality; social support theory; social support networks; intimate partner violence.

## 1. Introduction

The term Tongqi refers to women who married gay men. As a derivative vulnerable group of "male homosexuality", they are hidden from the public's views. However, with the growth of social media and the public's growing interest in the community of male homosexuals, Tongqi has also attracted a lot of attention in recent years. In 2018, the well-known Chinese sociologist Yinhe Li estimated that the number of Tongqi in China was 3.87 million. Though society is becoming more accepting of diverse sexualities, the social problems that the vast majority of Tongqi confront have not much improved. Academic research on Tongqi is not extensive, with past studies mainly focusing on two aspects: First, from a sociological perspective, research on the issues surrounding the creation and existence of the Tongqi group. Professor Li believes that the fundamental reason for the emergence of Tongqi lies in the marriage and reproductive culture in Chinese culture, similar to "compulsion", compelling male homosexuals in China to enter into straight marriages one after another [1]. Secondly from a legal standpoint, examining the challenges and solutions facing the Tongqi in marriage is necessary because of China's legal vacuum in marriage and family law, which means that even in cases where the Tongqi are violated, their rights and interests cannot be effectively protected. As a result, it is critical to find a means of defending their rights and assisting the Tongqi in resolving a variety of real-world problems [2]. In conclusion, current research mainly focuses on the current status of the phenomenon of Tongqi and future solutions. Professor Tang, through social construction theory, found that the problematization of the hidden phenomenon of Tongqi in traditional society is a social problem under social construction, neglecting the fact that the phenomenon of Tongqi, as a social fact, is subject to the control of social networks [3]. However, there is currently little systematic research analyzing the Tongqi group from the perspective of social support theory. Using social support as a theoretical framework, this study seeks to investigate the difficulties encountered by the Tongqi group in the social support network.

## 2. Literature Review

Social support as a social fact has been present since the emergence of human civilization. In real social life, people seek help from others in times of distress, and people extend a helping hand to others in need. This mutual care between individuals is an objective social support fact. With the

development of the division of labor in human society, the advent of risk society, and the increase in uncertainty in human life, the interdependence of support between people has become increasingly close, and mutual support among individuals has become a fundamental way of life for human existence. In the late 1960s, social support as an academic issue was formally proposed in the attachment theory of Bowlby. By the 1980s, research on social support theory in the United States entered a prosperous stage, while Chinese scholars' attention to social support began in the 1980s, with Xiao starting research. He categorized social support into three aspects: objective or visible support, including material assistance and participation in social networks and group relationships; subjective, experiential emotional support, including individual experience of being respected, supported, and understood in society and the degree of satisfaction with this experience; and the utilization of social support perceived by individuals [4]. Li Qiang believes from the perspective of the relationship between social psychological stimulation and individual psychological health that social support includes the impact on individuals in reducing psychological stress responses, alleviating mental tension, and enhancing social adaptability through their social connections [5]. Qiu, through an analysis of laid-off workers in state-owned enterprises, believes that social support involves both internal and external family support and maintenance, as well as various formal and informal support and assistance, and is not just one-way care and assistance but is mostly a form of social exchange [6]. The above three are classic studies of social support theory in China. In this situation, social support theory has reached unprecedented prosperity, forming a new perspective for analyzing individual and societal issues from the perspective of social support theory.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

As a theoretical framework, social support suggests that the basic theoretical assumption in the process of understanding individual and societal problems is that the source of individual or societal problems arises from the breakdown of their social support network. Therefore, in defining a problem, an assessment of the social support network of the client is required. Firstly, it is necessary to evaluate whether the client's social support network structure is complete. Overall, in the context of China's hierarchy language environment, the social support network structure of individuals can generally be divided into family support, community support, national support, and societal (organizational) support levels [7].

#### **3.1. Family Support Network**

The concept of a family support network revolves around kinship, primarily consisting of household members such as parents, siblings, and grandparents who live together with an individual. This network acts as a fundamental source of support, offering a comprehensive range of resources including financial, emotional, and acceptance support.

#### **3.2. Community Support Network**

The community support network, on the other hand, is founded on geographical ties and includes the family's interactions with other individuals or organizations within the community. This network facilitates emotional connections, social acceptance, and integration by fostering a relaxed community environment, which aids in the social integration of individuals and families.

#### **3.3. National Support Network**

National support networks are established on the pillars of welfare and social policies. Through the establishment of welfare states and the development of social security systems, these networks provide social security and unemployment benefits to individuals or families, ensuring a dignified existence.

### **3.4. Social (Organizational) Support Network**

Based on social values such as fairness and justice, through the development of social organizations and public welfare initiatives, it provides individuals or families with material assistance, role partners, and common goals among other aspects of social support.

By analyzing the above four types of support networks, the research can determine the strength of the relationship between the emergence of individual or societal problems and the different support networks. This helps in better addressing the problem.

## **4. Analysis of the Social Support Network Structure of the Tongqi Group**

### **4.1. Family Support Network**

The Tongqi group is a vulnerable group behind the male homosexual community. Within the family, the majority of Tongqi often encounter intimate partner violence. The families encountered by Tongqi can generally be divided into two types: emotional absence and sexual absence. These can be seen as forms of psychological violence faced by wives driven by the lack of sexual satisfaction from their homosexual husbands. According to a data survey report of online Tongqi on Baidu Tieba, key terms closely related to Tongqi are “gay (homosexual) and marriage fraud”. Apart from these, the most closely associated topics with “fraudulent marriage” besides “homosexual” are “marriage” and “discovery”, which are frequently mentioned [8].

In the report, key terms closely related to “gay” mostly express negative emotions. In marriages, husbands’ fraudulent behavior is the beginning of negative emotions experienced by Tongqi. Through emotional fluctuations, Tongqi defines themselves as tools used by male homosexuals to fulfill their reproductive duties and hide their identities, becoming a shield against social stigmatization and parental pressure. Tongqi endure immeasurable harm and torment in this process. However, even when they know their partners are homosexual, most Tongqi still strive to save them, hoping to change their partners’ sexual orientation through care. After repeated unsuccessful struggles, the failed experiences of some Tongqi are internalized into negative self-evaluations, leading to reduced self-awareness and content with the status quo. Another group of Tongqi muster the courage, overcome the difficult obstacles faced in divorce, and gain new lives [9]. On the other hand, homosexual men in marriage exhibit rejection, indifference, and apathy towards the Tongqi, causing significant mental and psychological harm, leading to a lack of confidence and subjective powerlessness in Tongqi. Following feelings of loneliness, Tongqi gradually sinks into self-doubt, leading to mismatched low self-esteem. They often choose to endure silently and no longer fight for their rights.

For Tongqi, expecting romance and sexual satisfaction from marriage is unrealistic or unreasonable, but the psychological harm suffered due to unmet expectations is undeniable. Besides the unmet desires for sexual and emotional fulfillment, women often feel traumatized when they discover their husbands seeking sexual and emotional satisfaction with other men [10]. Furthermore, husbands often claim they only realized their attraction to the same sex many years after marriage. Some even claim they enjoy sexual relations with both males and females but do not identify as bisexual. The varying self-descriptions of these husbands demonstrate a high degree of gender fluidity. This leads to a speculation that these “husbands” primarily got married out of social responsibility rather than genuine love interests and sexual desires [11].

From this analysis, it is clear that there is a lack of family support in the issue of Tongqi. However, family support also presents a contradiction in the issue of Tongqi. The husbands’ fraudulent behavior is the beginning of the problem for Tongqi, and their long-term intimate partner’s violent behavior causes significant physical and mental torment. In the family support network of the issue of Tongqi, the husband holds a crucial role as the provider. How to transform harm into support is a critical issue in alleviating acute family issues for Tongqi.

## 4.2. Community Support Network

The community support network is an essential resource for Tongqi because the “community” can provide emotional support, legal advice, and mental health services. In the aforementioned Baidu Tieba investigation report on Tongqi, research began on October 14, 2021, focusing on the posting dynamics of the Baidu Tieba Tongqi section. Using Python to crawl Baidu Tieba, the data of 72,680 posts until November 7, 2021, was collected. The most prominent phenomenon in the Tongqi section of Baidu Tieba is the prevalence of negative emotions expressed by Tongqi. It is evident that Baidu Tieba serves as an important arena for Tongqi to express emotional stress relief [8].

Communities can be divided into online communities and offline communities. In China, offline communities provide minimal support for Tongqi, while online communities have been somewhat helpful in addressing real-life challenges. Tongqi are seeking solace and support together in online communities, providing mutual support. In some cases, initial contact with an online gay community can lead to a journey from a newly married member to a divorced gay volunteer. Such processes are programmatic, interactive, and increasingly networked. This process is procedural, interactive, and increasingly networked [11]. However, the development of the community support network has not yet filled the gap in the issue, and it even faces some challenges. Previously popular forums like Tianya Forum stopped updating, while some discussion groups on social networking sites related to Tongqi sometimes are under an embargo. Although there are now public interest individuals or self-established social spaces by Tongqi - such as QQ, WeChat, and other social media channels - facilitating brave sharing and proactive rights advocacy, it is evident that they have not gained significant influence or official leadership in assisting Tongqi in resolving issues. Searching QQ groups using Tongqi as a keyword results in a large number of created groups with few members and low activity levels.

## 4.3. National Support Network

Marriage support is crucial in the national support network. In China, the lack of legalization of same-sex marriage is the fundamental reason behind straight marriages' existence. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, mainland China's marriage laws have never recognized the legalization of same-sex marriage. Moreover, due to the influence of Confucian thoughts on society, Chinese society still has a low tolerance for homosexuals. Homosexuals are discriminated against and condemned for not fulfilling their “reproductive duty”, leading many homosexuals to choose either a formal marriage or cohabitation with the opposite sex. Many homosexuals, especially male homosexuals, choose straight marriages based on the aims of reproduction or masking sexual orientation, establishing a seemingly normal heterosexual marriage. However, The Civil Code of the People's Republic of China has not adequately addressed the demands of same-sex individuals seeking marriage rights. As revealed in the case of Hu and Sun's marriage registration, same-sex individuals still cannot obtain marriage registration at the Civil Affairs Department. However, at the same time, the law does not explicitly prohibit same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage remains a gray area devoid of authorized permission or prohibition.

On April 13, Peng Pai News reported the first case of “same-sex marriage registration” in China [12]. The case was heard in the Furong District People's Court in Changsha, Hunan. The plaintiff, Sun, and his homosexual partner Hu appeared in court, while the defendant, the Furong District Civil Affairs Bureau, was represented by Deputy Director Huang. Nearly 200 people, including media reporters, attended as observers. At the end of the trial, the Furong District Court concluded that based on the provisions of Article 2 and Article 5 of the Marriage Law, as well as the relevant provisions of the Marriage Registration Regulations, a marriage relationship involves one man and one woman, and therefore the administrative act undertaken by the Furong District Civil Affairs Bureau is legal and correctly applies the law. Based on this, the court rejected the plaintiff's lawsuit request. Same-sex marriage is not recognized, nor is it denied, remaining intangible for homosexual individuals. In contrast, the state grants validity to the unique heterosexual marriage variant under the guise of a same-sex marriage-straight marriage (abnormal marriage). However, the most controversial aspect

now is the marriage rights protection of Tongqi [13]. In marriage rights protection, most Tongqi hopes to successfully annul their marriages. As early as January 22, 2013, the China Women's News published an article titled "The Dilemma of Tongqi is Actually Caused by Social Gender Discrimination, Legislation Alone Cannot Solve" [14]. In the article, Professor Li argues that the concealment of sexual orientation by homosexuals marrying opposite-sex individuals is "reasonable", and if processed through divorce, the women's remarriage in this context would face obstacles and disadvantages. Divorce can alleviate their pain, but it is unfair to Tongqi who suffer and have been deceived about their sexual orientations. The law should assist them, and society should also treat them more tolerably.

The root cause of marriage annulment lies in the stigmatization pressure towards divorced women in society and the virginity complex deeply rooted in social norms. This stigmatization pressure is what Tongqi are currently bearing. In terms of marriage rights protection, Tongqi also need to pay attention to child custody rights. In most divorce cases, Tongqi does not have an advantage in custody rights. As the victims, the national marriage laws do not have a legislative basis for gay marriage fraud, nor does the custody judgement consider whether the husband is homosexual as a factor. Moreover, in China, the family division of labor often involves main support earners and homemakers, although this is gradually changing, the average income of women in families is lower than that of men. This limitation often leaves many Tongqi unable to support their children due to economic constraints during divorce. Furthermore, in the relevant welfare policies of the state, there are no specific policies to assist divorced families of Tongqi. The lack of support from national welfare policies makes Tongqi feel increasingly powerless in facing real challenges. Simultaneously, in society, people often simplify the experiences of these women trapped in unhappy marriages due to "marriage deceit" as similar to those of other women who endure unhappy marriages due to socio-economic factors [10].

#### 4.4. Organizational Support Network

The social organizational network serves as an important medium for the group of Tongqi to connect with the collective society. In 2011, China's largest public service website and forum for Tongqi, "Chinese Tongqi Home", was officially launched. The website provides three kinds of services to Tongqi:

Firstly, Tongqi communication: The mutual communication between Tongqi and volunteers to let more people understand this group and allow Tongqi to release their suppressed emotions and seek solace on this platform, consolidating and collecting married, divorced, and remarried heterosexual wife stories in the Tongqi story column.

Secondly, Legal exchange: "Chinese Tongqi Home" mainly to provide legal help for Tongqi seeking divorce. Due to the absence of legal provisions for same-sex marriages in China, heterosexual divorces have become a major judicial challenge. The Tongqi Home legal exchange section primarily assists Tongqi in considering divorce issues from other legal angles.

Thirdly, Psychological counseling: Tongqi are a deeply troubled group, with most suffering severe emotional harm and struggling to endure due to their husbands' deception of their sexual orientation, which is difficult to discuss.

Unfortunately, in June 2012, the website was forced to shut down due to fraud. Although it was later taken over by other teams for management, it has not had a significant impact and remains inactive in mainstream media. Directly aimed at serving the group of Tongqi in China are few public service organizations, but some LGBTQ+ public service organizations offer specialized services to Tongqi. "PFLAG China", the largest LGBTQ+ organization in China, has held several heterosexual wife-sharing sessions to help them actively defend their rights and encourage them to express their personal demands boldly. Similar activities have been held multiple times with notable results.

Through an examination and exploration of the two public service organizations, the study believes that the organizational support strength of Tongqi is inadequate, exemplified by the following points: Firstly, Government or major media outlets do not have specific sections or columns to cover the

issues or stories of Tongqi, and they are rarely mentioned even in areas related to family and marriage. Secondly, there is no organization with significant influence or public credibility specializing in solving the issues of Tongqi, and currently active organizations mostly provide specific activities rather than focusing on specific issues. Thirdly, the relief efforts of public service organizations assisting Tongqi are not intensive and lack specialized, detailed division of labor, providing minimal assistance in resolving internal conflicts within heterosexual wife families [15].

## 5. Conclusion

Through the analysis, it is evident that despite the increasing openness of society towards sexuality, the Tongqi group faces substantial challenges that have not been substantially alleviated. The group experiences support deficiencies and challenges across various levels. In terms of the family support network, Tongqi often experiences emotional and psychological abuse from their partners, lacking the necessary emotional support and understanding within the family. While the community support network provides a platform for expression and communication for Tongqi, offline support for them remains limited, and online support, while helpful, lacks the necessary influence and official recognition. In the national support network, the group of Tongqi faces significant challenges in terms of legal protection and marriage rights, lacking effective legal support and social recognition. Although the social (organizations) support network provides some assistance, overall, the level of support is insufficient, lacking effective social intervention measures.

The group of Tongqi” is a more vulnerable group hidden behind the homosexual group. Valuing the phenomenon of Tongqi and protecting this group is not only a hot topic that individuals need to pay attention to but also a pain point that the social public and the national government need to address. The exploration of social support theory focuses on the interactive relationship between individuals and society. The phenomenon of Tongqi, as an objective social fact, proves that this phenomenon cannot exist independently of society.

This research considers the issue of the Tongqi from two aspects. One is social awareness and inclusiveness: This study highlights the support gaps and challenges faced by the group of Tongqi in the family, community, and national support networks. Tongqi may experience intimate partner violence from their husbands within the family, as well as oppression of female self-awareness by traditional feudal customs in China, reflecting the limitations in societal understanding of sexual orientation diversity and the problems it brings, requiring more attention and education to promote inclusiveness and understanding. Society should increase its focus on this group, encouraging people to view families and relationships under different sexual orientations more openly and tolerantly. Secondly, the government needs to pay attention to the policy formulation and intervention of the Tongqi group, the enactment of necessary laws and regulations is a fundamental measure to protect the rights of the group of “Tongqi”. Faced with the demands of Tongqi to dissolve marriages, accusations of “infidelity in same-sex marriage”, and the pressure of single-parent families when Tongqi divorce, the government needs to pay attention to the various shortcomings faced by the group of Tongqi in the laws, and in the future, formulate more complete and targeted support measures to improve the living conditions of the group of “Tongqi”, promoting their mental health and social participation. This study only briefly analyzes, based on social support theory, the four levels of support gaps and challenges that Tongqi are facing in the social support network, without proposing targeted solutions to the existing gaps. Through social support theory, it can be discovered that solving the issue of Tongqi is not a one-off task and requires the combined effort of all levels of society to help them out of the abyss. Furthermore, society’s attention to gender and sexual orientation diversity should not be limited to surface levels only. The mass should pay deeper attention to more marginalized and vulnerable groups, aiming to promote public knowledge to a wider extent and ensure equal status and rights protection for all gender groups in society.

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