

Coded Desires: Platform Governance, Censorship, and Queer Cultural Production in Sinophone East Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines how tongzhi (queer) communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China negotiate platform governance as a condition of cultural production and public belonging. Drawing on interviews with LGBTQ individuals and cultural creators, alongside close readings of fan practices, memes, short-video cultures, and platform policy materials, it traces how algorithmic ranking, content moderation, and commercial imperatives shape the forms of queer visibility that can circulate within Sinophone digital environments. In Mainland China, overlapping censorship regimes and risk-averse corporate enforcement incentivize everyday subterfuge, including creative punctuation, homophones, visual remix, coded references, and platform-switching that keep narratives legible to insiders while remaining ambiguous to automated and human reviewers. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, where formal restrictions are comparatively lighter, market and algorithmic pressures still privilege advertiser-friendly, commercially legible, and politically moderate representations while reducing the reach of more critical or non-normative queer politics. I develop the concept of coded visibility to theorize these practices as a situated mode of platform citizenship, one that leverages consumer-friendly aesthetics and layered communication to secure circulation while carrying critique through memes, fan rituals, in-jokes, and ephemeral content. The paper contributes to cultural studies debates on platform governance and to queer theory on uneven sexual citizenship by demonstrating how human and artificial intelligences co-produce the boundaries of recognition, participation, and risk across Sinophone East Asia.

Keywords: coded visibility, platform governance, tongzhi media ecologies, algorithmic censorship, queer cultural production

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Introduction

Platformed cultural life is often narrated through a simple opposition between expression and repression, yet queer cultural production rarely inhabits either pole cleanly. Across Sinophone East Asia, tongzhi publics take shape through commercial social media infrastructures that simultaneously extend reach and regulate forms, genres, affects, and styles of visibility. These infrastructures govern not only what appears online, but also what becomes discoverable, monetizable, searchable, recommendable, and safely shareable. Visibility therefore becomes inseparable from risk management and from the labour of interpreting platform codes.

This paper examines how queer users and creators in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China negotiate platform governance as a condition of participation in digital cultural life. Rather than asking whether platforms simply liberate or censor queer expression, I ask how digital infrastructures organize the boundaries of recognizability and circulation. Put differently, the concern is not only whether queer content survives moderation, but how governance systems shape the cultural forms that become sustainable, visible, and socially intelligible.

The paper approaches platforms as cultural institutions that organize contemporary forms of sexual citizenship in practice. Recommendation systems, moderation infrastructures, monetization thresholds, advertiser guidelines, and user-reporting systems collectively shape what kinds of queer visibility can circulate at scale. These systems are experienced unevenly across Sinophone East Asia, where platform capitalism intersects with different histories of colonialism, authoritarian governance, neoliberal restructuring, and national identity formation.

The post-1990s tongzhi generation examined in this research has come of age in a period marked by decriminalization, expanded consumer cultures, dating applications, social media publics, and new queer infrastructures. Yet these conditions have not produced a simple movement from silence to freedom. They have emerged alongside China's rise, the intensification of authoritarian state power, the democratic consolidation and international marginalization of Taiwan, the post-handover transformation of Hong Kong, and the neoliberal organization of work, intimacy, and selfhood. Digital infrastructures are therefore not external tools that queer subjects merely use. They are part of the historical environment through which post-1990s Sinophone queer subjectivities are produced.

Rather than treating Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China as points on a simple continuum ranging from repression to openness, this paper approaches them as differentiated yet interconnected media ecologies. Each site is shaped by shared linguistic repertoires, overlapping platform infrastructures, and transregional cultural flows, yet each also operates through distinct political and commercial conditions. A comparative Sinophone framework makes it possible to analyze how similar platform logics become locally specific through policy interpretation, corporate compliance cultures, state pressure, market incentives, and everyday cultural tactics.

The paper develops the concept of *coded visibility* to theorize how queer users negotiate these conditions. Coded visibility refers to a situated mode of cultural production that secures circulation through ambiguity, layered meaning, insider references, and commercially legible aesthetics. It is a form of double address: content must appear sufficiently ordinary, entertaining, or advertiser-safe to survive algorithmic and human scrutiny while simultaneously remaining meaningful to queer publics who know how to interpret the code.

Coded visibility therefore operates not merely as style, but as a governance practice produced within conditions of uneven platform citizenship.

Platform Governance, Sexual Citizenship, and Queer Asia

Critical platform studies has demonstrated that content moderation is not a neutral technical function but a distributed set of normative decisions enacted through policies, contractors, machine-learning systems, monetization structures, and ranking infrastructures (Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019). Platform governance operates through multiple layers simultaneously: formal community guidelines, probabilistic detection systems, user reporting mechanisms, and opaque recommendation algorithms that collectively determine whether content is promoted, buried, demonetized, shadowed, or removed. These infrastructures increasingly shape cultural production itself. Platformization reorganizes creative labour around metrics of engagement, watch time, visibility, monetization, and brand safety (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Srnicek, 2017).

Algorithmic power is not experienced only through explicit rules. It is also felt through anticipation. Bucher (2018) argues that algorithmic systems become politically significant because users orient themselves toward what they imagine algorithms to reward or punish. Cotter (2019) similarly describes creators as playing a “visibility game,” in which platform users produce folk theories about ranking systems and adjust their behaviour accordingly. This dynamic is crucial for queer cultural production because users often interpret reduced reach, unstable searchability, or sudden demonetization without receiving clear explanations. Governance therefore operates through uncertainty as much as through enforcement.

Queer theory has long emphasized that recognition and belonging are distributed unevenly through norms of intimacy, respectability, consumption, and public legitimacy (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Weeks, 1998). Sexual citizenship has historically depended on demonstrating forms of identity and intimacy deemed socially intelligible within dominant institutions. However, digital environments intensify these dynamics by transforming recognition into a measurable and algorithmically sortable property. On many platforms, queer visibility is evaluated simultaneously through engagement metrics and brand compatibility. Visibility is tied not only to legality or social acceptance, but also to monetization thresholds, advertiser friendliness, and recommendation potential.

This paper extends sexual citizenship into the concept of *platform citizenship*. Platform citizenship refers to conditions in which participation depends upon navigating opaque technical systems, corporate governance structures, and commercial visibility regimes. In this framework, belonging is not only legal or cultural. It is infrastructural. Participation depends upon understanding how to remain legible to algorithms, moderators, advertisers, and audiences simultaneously. Following Isin’s (2002) broader attention to citizenship as a field of practice rather than only a formal legal status, platform citizenship highlights how users enact claims to presence within systems that distribute recognition unevenly.

Situating these questions within queer Asia scholarship is essential. Rofel’s (1999) work on gay identities in China emphasizes that Chinese queer subjectivities are not simply imported from Euro-American sexual modernity, but are produced through negotiations among desire, nation, consumption, and cultural citizenship. Altman (2001), Wilson (2004), Yue (2003), and Benedicto (2014) similarly show that queer globalization is never only the diffusion of Western identities. It is also a process of regional translation, commodification, urban restructuring, and aspirational mobility. For Sinophone queer publics, online cultural production often moves

through shared linguistic and regional repertoires while being shaped by distinct political conditions and platform infrastructures.

Within Sinophone contexts, these dynamics are amplified by the coexistence of state governance, platform capitalism, and regionally specific histories of sovereignty and belonging. Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China all participate in transregional digital cultures while simultaneously producing distinct conditions of risk, circulation, and public expression. Coded visibility names how queer belonging is made under these uneven conditions.

Sinophone Media Ecologies and Postcolonial Differentiation

A Sinophone framework helps resist simplistic China-versus-West binaries and avoids treating Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China as merely more or less democratic versions of the same social formation. Instead, Sinophone studies foreground relational histories of language, migration, colonialism, nationalism, and uneven sovereignty (Chiang & Heinrich, 2014). This perspective is particularly important for studying queer digital cultures because media flows across these sites are deeply interconnected. Tongzhi users frequently consume similar popular culture, engage shared online references, and move across overlapping digital infrastructures. Yet these flows occur within dramatically different governance arrangements.

In Mainland China, digital life operates within systems shaped by state censorship, platform compliance cultures, and expanding surveillance infrastructures. In Hong Kong, the political environment has shifted significantly under the National Security Law era, generating new forms of caution and uncertainty around political expression. Taiwan, by contrast, maintains comparatively expansive democratic protections and legalized same-sex marriage, yet still operates within neoliberal platform economies that privilege commercial palatability.

A comparative Sinophone approach therefore avoids treating visibility as equivalent to freedom. Liberal environments may still produce market-based exclusions and algorithmic marginalization, while authoritarian environments may generate highly inventive cultural practices through ambiguity, code, and infrastructural adaptation. The central question is not which society is simply more open, but how visibility regimes become locally specific through political conditions, corporate interpretation, and everyday tactics.

These differences also shape how queer users imagine risk. In Mainland China, risk may involve account deletion, state scrutiny, reputational harm, or collective censorship campaigns. In Hong Kong, political uncertainty increasingly intersects with anxieties around surveillance, self-censorship, and the narrowing of civic expression. In Taiwan, risks are more often linked to commercialization, algorithmic deprioritization, anti-LGBTQ backlash, and the marketability of particular queer identities.

Despite these differences, all three sites reveal how platformed participation is organized by asymmetrical power. Young tongzhi users do not simply inherit homosexuality as a stable identity category. They interpret and perform it through family obligation, education, labour, intimacy, consumer culture, dating applications, popular media, and the changing regional order shaped by China's rise. Digital visibility therefore becomes one arena in which uneven queer modernities are lived, managed, and contested.

Methodology

This paper draws on a mixed qualitative methodology informed by cultural studies, digital ethnography, and interpretive sociology. The analysis combines three primary forms of material. First, the study incorporates semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ individuals and cultural creators across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China. Participants discussed their experiences with digital visibility, platform moderation, online community formation, censorship, algorithmic change, and the everyday management of risk within platformed environments.

Second, the paper engages close readings of platform-native cultural practices, including memes, short-video formats, livestream fragments, fandom rituals, visual remix cultures, coded language practices, and ephemeral story content. These materials were analyzed not simply as texts, but as adaptive practices shaped through governance conditions. Third, the study examines platform policy documents, moderation statements, publicly available guidance concerning monetization and content regulation, and discussions surrounding algorithmic governance. This triangulation allows cultural practice to be read alongside the infrastructural systems that shape whether those practices can circulate.

Methodologically, coded visibility is treated both as an empirical pattern and as an analytic lens. As an empirical pattern, it appears in recurring tactics such as the substitution of homophones, fragmented keywords, visual overlays, altered spellings, coded emojis, and layered references that evade automated detection while preserving shared meaning for intended audiences. As an analytic lens, coded visibility foregrounds how meaning is produced through multiple simultaneous audiences. Queer creators increasingly address not only peers and followers, but also recommendation algorithms, automated moderation systems, advertisers, human reviewers, and potential political actors.

The study also adopts an interpretive ethics approach attentive to vulnerability and exposure. Because many participants operate within environments where visibility can produce social, economic, or political risk, anonymity and contextual sensitivity remain central methodological concerns. This is especially important in research on digital cultures, where quoting, naming, or describing content too precisely can inadvertently increase exposure for users whose safety depends on partial obscurity.

Coded Visibility in Practice

Mainland China: Ambiguity as Everyday Infrastructure

In Mainland China, coded visibility emerges through overlapping forms of state regulation, platform compliance, and anticipatory corporate governance. Participants frequently described governance not simply as explicit censorship, but as a broader atmosphere of uncertainty characterized by sudden account fragility, disappearing searchability, reduced reach, inconsistent enforcement, and shifting moderation boundaries. These experiences resonate with Roberts's (2018) account of censorship as a system that shapes attention and knowledge indirectly, not only through outright removal.

Platforms operating within Mainland China often engage in anticipatory over-compliance because penalties for insufficient moderation can be severe. This creates conditions where enforcement exceeds formal rules, encouraging creators to avoid topics perceived as politically

risky even when boundaries remain unclear. Governance therefore operates not only through deletion, but also through ambiguity. Participants described adapting to these conditions through a wide range of vernacular tactics. Homophones, altered punctuation, visual substitution, meme references, coded nicknames, and partial textual fragmentation allowed creators to communicate meaning while reducing detection risks. Certain keywords associated with sexuality, activism, or collective mobilization were routinely avoided or modified.

Visual culture became especially important under these conditions. Rather than relying exclusively on explicit textual identification, users embedded queer meaning through aesthetics, fandom references, symbolic objects, colour palettes, reaction images, or emotionally coded performances recognizable to intended audiences. Meaning was often dispersed across comments, image choices, livestream behaviour, and collective interpretation rather than concentrated within singular explicit statements. This dispersed structure allowed content to remain plausible to outsiders while sustaining intimacy among insiders.

Platform-switching also emerged as a recurring practice. Participants described moving audiences across multiple apps, private groups, encrypted channels, or temporary accounts. Infrastructural movement became a survival strategy. Community therefore operated less as a stable public sphere and more as a shifting network of portals, fragments, and temporary gathering points. Such movement should not be romanticized simply as resistance. Participants often described the fatigue associated with continuously interpreting rules, anticipating moderation, and redesigning expression around uncertainty. The labour of coded visibility requires constant adaptation.

This labour is generationally specific. Post-1990s queer users in Mainland China often encountered dating applications, microblogs, short-video platforms, and livestream cultures as ordinary infrastructures of sociality, yet these infrastructures were embedded in political conditions that made public queer life precarious. Digital participation could enable intimacy, friendship, and self-recognition, but it also required a disciplined awareness of what could not be said too directly. Coded visibility therefore became a learned practice of everyday survival.

Hong Kong and Taiwan: Market-Based Sorting and Algorithmic Palatability

In Hong Kong and Taiwan, participants generally encountered fewer direct forms of formal censorship regarding queer expression. However, governance still operated through market and algorithmic pressures that shaped what kinds of queer visibility achieved circulation and sustainability. Recommendation systems consistently rewarded content perceived as commercially legible, emotionally upbeat, visually attractive, and advertiser-friendly. Participants frequently observed that lifestyle-oriented queer content, romantic couple narratives, fitness aesthetics, beauty cultures, and aspirational consumption tended to receive greater algorithmic amplification.

By contrast, content associated with political critique, structural inequality, anti-capitalist perspectives, non-monogamy, gender nonconformity, or more confrontational activist discourse was often experienced as less visible, less monetizable, or less algorithmically rewarded. These forms of soft governance were not always experienced as explicit censorship. Instead, they appeared as stagnating engagement, unstable reach, or algorithmic invisibility. Participants often interpreted these conditions as requiring strategic moderation of self-presentation. Queer creators learned to package identity through emotionally consumable formats aligned with platform logics favouring positivity, relatability, and marketability.

The result is a form of governance operating through palatability rather than prohibition. Certain forms of queerness become highly visible precisely because they remain commercially compatible with platform capitalism. Other forms remain structurally marginalized even without formal bans. This dynamic resonates with scholarship on homonormativity and homocapitalism, which shows how LGBTQ inclusion can be routed through consumption, urban branding, respectable intimacy, and market participation (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Conway, 2025; McCaskell, 2016; Puar, 2007).

In Hong Kong specifically, political anxieties increasingly intersected with digital caution following broader transformations in civic and media life after 2020. Participants described heightened uncertainty concerning political speech and public expression more generally, which shaped how some queer creators approached discussions of identity, activism, and social critique online. Queer visibility could still circulate, but political critique often required careful tonal and aesthetic calibration.

Taiwan presented a somewhat different dynamic. Participants frequently described Taiwan as comparatively open and affirming, especially following the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2019. Yet they also emphasized the growing commercialization of queer visibility and the pressure to translate identity into marketable content forms. In this setting, queer visibility often appeared celebrated, but only some forms of queerness became easily legible as national progress, liberal modernity, or consumer lifestyle.

Across both sites, coded visibility operated less as evasion from direct state censorship and more as negotiation with platform capitalism and algorithmic attention economies. The distinction matters analytically: where Mainland Chinese users often coded content to reduce political or institutional risk, Hong Kong and Taiwan creators more often coded content to remain circulate-able within commercial systems that rewarded moderation, aspiration, beauty, coupledness, and emotional accessibility.

Vernacular Algorithmic Knowledge and the Labour of Interpretation

One of the central arguments of this paper is that queer visibility within platformed environments is co-produced through interactions between human and artificial intelligences. Moderation systems are neither purely automated nor purely human. Instead, visibility emerges through layered interactions among machine-learning systems, moderators, users, advertisers, platform designers, and states.

Algorithms do not merely classify content neutrally. They operationalize normative assumptions concerning safety, engagement, risk, and monetization. Recommendation systems privilege particular emotional intensities, visual formats, posting rhythms, and behavioural patterns. Moderation systems similarly embed assumptions about acceptable visibility, political sensitivity, sexual explicitness, and commercial compatibility.

At the same time, users actively interpret and adapt to these systems. Participants routinely theorized platform behaviour, shared folk knowledge concerning algorithmic changes, and collectively experimented with tactics for maximizing circulation or minimizing detection. These practices included altering posting times, avoiding certain hashtags, breaking up sensitive keywords, moving conversations into private groups, using visual rather than textual cues, and observing which types of content appeared to survive moderation. In this sense, users develop vernacular theories of governance.

Artificial intelligence systems therefore do not replace human interpretation. Rather, they reorganize it. Human creators increasingly orient themselves toward imagined algorithmic audiences whose precise operations remain unknowable. The result is a recursive process in which users continuously adapt expression according to anticipated platform behaviour. Coded visibility emerges precisely because users recognize that content is being interpreted simultaneously by multiple audiences with different capacities and interests. Content must remain intelligible to intended queer publics while appearing sufficiently ordinary, entertaining, or commercially acceptable to algorithmic and institutional systems.

This interpretive labour is unevenly distributed. Users whose content is most vulnerable to demonetization, removal, political scrutiny, or social exposure often shoulder the greatest burden of adaptation. They must monitor shifting rules, revise language, interpret unexplained changes in reach, and manage the emotional consequences of uncertainty. Platform citizenship is therefore not a neutral condition of participation. It demands continuous labour from those seeking recognition within infrastructures that do not recognize them equally.

Discussion: What Coded Visibility Makes Possible and What It Costs

Coded visibility makes several forms of participation possible within constrained or commercially uneven environments. It allows queer users to maintain community, circulate affect, preserve cultural memory, and sustain forms of publicness that might otherwise become inaccessible. Through memes, layered humour, fandom references, visual symbolism, and ephemeral content, queer users construct recognizable publics even when explicit articulation remains risky or commercially disadvantaged. Coded visibility therefore functions as a form of adaptive cultural infrastructure.

At the same time, coded visibility carries significant limitations. Because participation depends upon ambiguity and strategic legibility, users often experience exhaustion associated with constant self-monitoring and adaptation. The labour of interpretation becomes unevenly distributed toward those most vulnerable to exposure, demonetization, or political scrutiny. Moreover, coded visibility can produce fragmented publics. Platform-switching, disappearing content, algorithmic instability, and differentiated visibility regimes complicate sustained collective organizing. Visibility becomes temporary, unstable, and unevenly distributed.

Commercial platform environments also incentivize forms of depoliticization. Queer visibility becomes increasingly tied to marketability, emotional positivity, and advertiser compatibility. Under these conditions, commercially attractive representations may expand while structural critique remains marginalized. This dynamic helps explain why visibility alone cannot be equated with liberation. Increased representation does not necessarily transform the infrastructures governing participation. Instead, governance increasingly operates through differentiated amplification. Some forms of queer life become highly visible precisely because they remain compatible with platform capitalism.

Coded visibility also complicates the language of resistance. It is tempting to describe coded practices as creative resistance to censorship or exclusion, and they often are. Yet they are also evidence of constraint. The need to code, fragment, soften, aestheticize, or reroute queer expression reveals the unequal conditions under which participation occurs. Coded visibility is therefore both enabling and costly. It permits circulation, but it does not abolish the regimes that make direct articulation risky, unprofitable, or algorithmically fragile.

This tension is especially important for understanding queer cultural production across Sinophone East Asia. In Mainland China, coded visibility allows publics to persist under censorship and compliance regimes. In Hong Kong, it increasingly intersects with the narrowing of civic space and the recalibration of political speech. In Taiwan, it reveals the limits of liberal visibility when queer life is absorbed into marketable narratives of national progress, consumer belonging, and respectable inclusion. Across all three sites, the central issue is not simply whether queer content appears, but under what conditions it appears and what forms of queer life are made difficult to sustain.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how queer communities across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China negotiate platform governance as a condition of cultural production and public belonging. Rather than approaching digital media through a simple liberation-versus-censorship framework, the paper has argued that visibility itself is governed through algorithmic ranking, moderation infrastructures, commercial pressures, and regionally specific political conditions.

The concept of coded visibility provides a framework for understanding how queer users adapt to these conditions through layered communication practices that simultaneously secure circulation and preserve community meaning. These practices emerge not simply from creativity, but from the necessity of navigating opaque and unequal infrastructures. Across Sinophone East Asia, queer participation increasingly depends upon forms of platform citizenship in which recognition is shaped through engagement metrics, advertiser compatibility, recommendation systems, and governance structures that remain partially invisible to users themselves.

The comparative Sinophone framework developed here demonstrates that governance does not operate identically across contexts. In Mainland China, coded visibility emerges primarily through negotiation with censorship and anticipatory compliance cultures. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, governance operates more frequently through market-based sorting and algorithmic palatability. Yet across all three sites, platform infrastructures shape what forms of queer visibility become sustainable.

Ultimately, platform governance should be understood not merely as a technical system but as a cultural and political infrastructure that organizes the boundaries of recognition, participation, and risk. Queer visibility within digital environments is increasingly co-produced through interactions among states, corporations, algorithms, moderators, advertisers, and users themselves.

The broader implication is that contemporary queer belonging increasingly unfolds through conditional inclusion. Queer users may be visible, but only when visibility can be rendered legible, safe, profitable, apolitical, or ambiguously coded. Coded visibility makes life possible within these constraints, but it also exposes the uneven labour required to inhabit digital publics. To understand queer cultural production today, scholars must therefore attend not only to representation, but also to the infrastructures that decide which representations travel, which disappear, and which must learn to speak in code.

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