

Not your “Emerald Girl”
In Defense of Tongqi Victimization Discourse
Jiahui Vivian Zhu, Stanford University '23

Abstract: In studying queerness and queer relationships, gender and sexuality scholars have long attempted to expand the definition of kinship beyond the heteronormative, nuclear family centered mold. Some of these attempts have focused on the “queering” of intimate relationships, which often involves celebrating opaqueness and rejecting normative definitions of “legitimate” intimacy. This approach stands in stark contrast to mainstream and feminist discourses in contemporary mainland China which universally criticize the practice of “marriage fraud” – gay men marrying unsuspecting heterosexual women (*tongqi*). By analyzing a romanticized example of opaque kinship depicted by author Yiyun Li in her short story *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*, this paper problematizes the ideal vision of “queer kinship” presented by scholars and defends the victimization narrative advanced by millions of Chinese *tongqi*.

In her essay on Yiyun Li's short story *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*, critic King-Kok Cheung describes the union of Li's protagonists as a "somewhat queer" and "unconventional love triangle" (Cheung, 2015, p. 88). This description is indeed fitting for a story about Siyu, a recluse in her late thirties, who agrees to marry Hanfeng, a man returning to Beijing after decades in North America, because of her attraction to his mother, her college mentor Professor Dai. Since Hanfeng is also implied to be gay, the relationship(s) at the center of this story can be mapped onto the concept of queer kinship, a term used to describe social connections constructed by and between queer individuals that transgress the bounds of traditional kinship. Indeed, the field of queer studies has long attempted to broaden the definition of kinship to more than just the "lived relationality" that emanates from "the heterosexual couple and the parent-child unit" (Freeman, 2007, p. 295). In appropriating and transforming kinship terminologies, queer people can emphasize "freedom, creativity, and flexibility" in the formation and definition of their relationships (Freeman, 2007, p. 304).

In stark contrast to the terms of empowerment employed by queer kinship theories, popular opinion in contemporary mainland China would likely disapprove of the marriage between Siyu and Hanfeng. Since same sex marriage is not legal in mainland China (Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China, 2001), homosexual individuals, especially gay men who face pressures to continue the patriline often choose to marry unsuspecting straight women (Liu & Tang, 2014a, p. 131). Gay men who engage in this practice are widely judged as immoral for their instrumentalization of their wives to "deflect social and family obligation pressures" (Tsang, 2020, p. 794). Contrastingly, heterosexual women who enter these marriages have come to receive widespread sympathy. These women, known as "*tongqi*" (同妻 – the wife of a homosexual), are considered victims of "marriage fraud," and are "commonly described as 'damaged' or 'spoiled' goods" (Tsang, 2021, p. 794). In recent years, these women have publicized their predicaments through various media, organized in offline and online communities, and have constructed a collective identity around their victimhood (Zhu, 2018).

Unlike the Chinese public, who is almost uniformly critical of the gay husbands in different-sex marriages, some scholars have argued that the discourse of *tongqi* victimhood is essentializing and ultimately homophobic. In her article published in *Sexualities*, Jingshu Zhu, a lawyer turned researcher of LGBT+ issues in China at Leiden University, argues that rather than stigmatizing gay men who enter different-sex marriages, one should consider such marriages as a form of queer kinship that "put(s) the concept of kinship into question" (Zhu, 2018, p. 1086). In particular, Zhu addresses two societal expectations underlying the *tongqi* victimhood narrative: first, that marriage "should ideally provide hetero-romantic-sexual love and a stable family life"; and second, that "only heterosexuals should be entering different-sex marriages" (Zhu, 2018, p. 1077). The problem with these expectations, Zhu argues, is that they leave gay men with no realistic option. For the vast majority of gay men, coming out is forbidden by societal homophobia, yet they are also unable to fulfill their socially expected duties as a heterosexual husband. To resolve this dilemma, Zhu advocates the deconstruction of the "problematic truth regime" that prohibits mixed-orientation marriages on the grounds of morality (Zhu, 2018, p. 1085). Instead, she proposes "opacity as a queer tactic in marriage," and an expansion in the definition of kinship to include mixed-orientation relationships, which may still offer "care, support and companionship" despite a partner's undisclosed sexuality (Zhu, 2018, p. 1087).

This essay will challenge Zhu's solution to the aforementioned dilemma, arguing that in advocating opacity she obscures the very real suffering of many *tongqi*. Furthermore, this essay will rationalize the primary demands of *tongqi* – fewer gay-straight marriages and more "coming

out” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1085), as an alternative solution to the moral dilemma facing gay men. The marriage in *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*, one that seemingly fits Zhu’s definition of a mutually-beneficial, “opaque” relationship, will be used to frame the plight of real-life *tongqi*. By contrasting Li’s story, which describes a positive mixed-orientation marriage, and the negative experiences of many real *tongqi*, the following sections will argue that these differences are precisely why Hanfeng’s marriage can be characterized as non-exploitative “queer kinship,” while other gay men may reasonably be accused of committing “fraud.”

“Marriage Fraud” as a Broken Promise

The first major difference between Siyu and most *tongqi* is her lack of expectations when it comes to what Zhu terms the “ideal package of marriage-love-sex” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1077). In her own vision of her post-marriage life, Siyu pictures not the usual images of conjugal romance, but herself “standing by the window and listening to Hanfeng and Professor Dai play four-hand” at the piano (Li, 2010, p. 221). In fact, not only does Siyu have no expectations for Hanfeng, for whom she likely harbors no romantic or sexual feelings, she does not even expect reciprocation from Professor Dai, for whom she had “remained unmarried” for more than a decade (Li, 2010, p. 220). Indeed, the younger woman’s expressions of love are extremely subtle, almost undetectable – in college she arrived early each day at the biology building only to receive an imperceptible nod from the professor, and since graduation she “tried to keep herself uncommitted” every New Year’s Eve in case the older woman required her companionship (Li, 2010, p. 204).

Unlike Siyu, most women expect more from their marriages than just living with the object of their desires and occasionally listening to them play piano. When asked by researchers about their husbands’ sexual and emotional unavailability, *tongqi* used phrases like “pain,” “irritation,” and “trauma,” in describing their disappointment (Wang & Li, 2015). In her article, Zhu takes issue with blaming such feelings on “marriage fraud,” observing that “many wives with heterosexual husbands...are enduring similarly indifferent or even tormented marriages, but none of them have collectively formed an identity based around victimhood” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1080). Instead, Zhu attributes these feelings of victimization to “the unmarked expectation...that both spouses should be straight” in a different-sex marriage, an expectation that unfairly classifies all gay men’s “straight” marriages as inherently fraudulent (Zhu, 2018, p. 1080). There are two potential counterarguments to Zhu’s assertion.

Firstly, even if it is unhelpful or unreasonable for women to expect romance and sexual fulfillment from their marriages, the psychological harm suffered due to these unfulfilled expectations cannot be negated. In addition to unfulfilled sexual desires and emotional unavailability, women often also feel traumatized when they discover that their husbands have been seeking sexual and emotional fulfillment with other men. Scholars who have conducted extensive ethnographic work on *tongqi* groups report that many women question their own attractiveness and actions within their relationships, which often results in depression and shame (Liu, 2017). In extreme cases, these negative emotions, along with the failure to come to terms with one’s spouse’s infidelity, may lead to self-harm. According to a systematic review by Wang et al. (2020), multiple surveys have shown that a majority of *tongqi* experienced depressive symptoms including suicide ideation, and over 10% of them have had suicide attempts (p. 4). One high profile example of such a tragedy was the suicide of Luo Hongling. After documenting her life as a *tongqi* online and revealing that her husband interacted “sexually and romantically

with multiple men through social media channels,” the Sichuan University lecturer took her own life in 2012 (Ying, 2018).

Secondly, Zhu misattributes the “*pian*” (騙 – deceive, fraud) accusation in “marriage fraud” to women feeling cheated solely because of their husbands’ sexuality, thereby suggesting that those hurt feelings are intertwined with homophobic attitudes (Zhu, 2018). She further argues that hiding one’s sexuality cannot be unequivocally construed as fraud, since “the withholding of information (an inaction) is not widely considered fraud (an action)” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1077). In the context of the Chinese Marriage Law, however, definitions of “marriage fraud” include “the withholding of truthful information” in order to convince another party to agree to marry (Liu & Tang, 2014a, p.133). Although in practice Chinese divorce courts only allow accusations of “marriage fraud” in cases where the fraud is committed for financial gain, legal scholars have argued that *tongqi* should be able to use this definition as well (Wang, 2015). Moreover, many gay men enter into marriages with women *after* coming out to their families, contrary to Zhu’s characterization of widespread confusion about their sexuality (Zhu, 2018, p. 1085). In a study conducted by Liu and Tang (2014a), many of the gay men interviewed revealed that they had decided to marry after their families reacted negatively to their coming out. One *tongqi* interviewee even revealed that when she confronted her mother-in-law about her husband’s sexuality, she was told that his whole family knew all along and that it was her fault for not “fixing him” (Liu and Tang, 2014a, p. 131). Another survey conducted by Zhang et al. (2014) revealed that 86.3% of the *tongqi* subjects would “definitely not have gotten married” to their current husbands had they known their true sexuality. Combining these findings, it is clear that the hiding of their sexualities, often with the help of their families, is a *necessary condition* of many gay men’s heterosexual marriages. Withholding information with the explicit intent to convince another party to enter an agreement, knowing full well that the information is crucial to their decision, can definitely be reasonably described as “fraud.”

In sum, although Zhu may reasonably argue that it is wrong for heterosexual women to expect their husbands to be straight, and that sexuality *should not* be crucial to a woman’s decision about marriage, her arguments cannot negate the trauma suffered by many *tongqi* within their marriages and upon discovering the intentional deceit by her husband and in-laws.

The Inescapability of Unhappy Marriages

Another predicament faced by most women in China, including *tongqi*, but virtually absent in the case of Siyu, is the ubiquitous pressure to get married, and, more importantly, stay married. When Siyu finally meets Hanfeng at the age of thirty-eight, she has already “developed a reputation as unmatched” (Li, 2010, p. 206). Although she too once experienced “neighbors and acquaintances” eagerly trying to “find a husband for her,” this stage of her life is decidedly behind her (Li, 2010, p. 206). Additionally, Siyu faces little pressure to get married from her natal family – her mother has long since passed away, and she has come to maintain “a respectful distance” from her father’s family upon his remarriage (Li, 2010, p. 204). Furthermore, Siyu is described as having “not changed much” from her days in college, where she was quirky and relatively friendless (Li, 2010, p. 206). Indeed, her current job as a librarian probably also does not bring with it a gaggle of nosy coworkers interested in her private life.

Resultingly, Siyu’s life is far removed from the experiences of most *tongqi*, since she could independently decide to marry Hanfeng at age thirty-eight, and would face minimal social pressure if she were to choose divorce in the future. For most *tongqi*, however, pressures by their families and society to marry in their twenties are immense (Murti, 2019, pp. 41-42), and upon

discovering their husbands' sexuality, most are forced to stay in the marriage by both legal barriers and the fear of social consequences (Wang et al., 2020, p. 4). Remembering how she met her ex-husband, one *tongqi* interviewee told researchers that she got married after being "pressured by her parents to attend countless blind dates after graduate school" (Wang & Li, 2015). This particular woman divorced her husband after an instance of domestic violence, but many others stay in their unhappy marriages.

In general, divorce is inaccessible for Chinese women due to the relative difficulty for women to be financially independent as a result of a gendered lack of economic opportunities (Liu, 2017). Moreover, divorce is still considered a "disgraceful act" in China, especially for women (Zhang et al., 2014, p. 102). Certainly, such shame and financial hardship is experienced by all women in China, not just *tongqi*, and scholars like Zhu may argue that the agony of *tongqi* "is an epitome of many interwoven socio-economic problems in contemporary China, rather than simply the result of a 'gay' secret" (Zhu, 2018, p. 1082). Yet this assertion cannot nullify the unique harms experienced by *tongqi* when it comes to being trapped in their marriages, for two reasons.

First, there are additional barriers preventing *tongqi* from obtaining financial compensation during divorce settlements compared to women with husbands who commit (heterosexual) adultery. According to Zhou Dan, a lawyer specializing in gay rights cases, obtaining evidence to prove their aggrieved status is a near-impossible task for most *tongqi*. This is because under Chinese law, evidence of a spouse cohabitating with another individual can only serve as proof of infidelity when that individual is of the opposite sex (Ying, 2018).

Second, women who divorce a gay husband may face more severe stigmatization compared to other divorcees. For example, while many *tongqi* subjects of a 2014 study wanted a divorce, most of them did not see it as a practical option. When asked to explain her reasoning, one woman replied, "I may be stigmatized for being a gay man's wife, suspected of carrying that unspeakable disease...and be ridiculed by my family and friends" (Liu & Tang, 2014b, p. 35).

In acknowledging the additional legal and social barriers faced by *tongqi* considering divorce, one can no longer simply equate the experiences of these women trapped by "marriage fraud" to other women who choose to stay in unhappy marriages due to socio-economic factors.

The Curse of Motherhood

The final aspect of Siyu's character that distinguishes her from most *tongqi* is the unlikelihood of her ever having children with Hanfeng. Beyond the fact that Siyu is probably physically less able to become pregnant due to her age, her distance from her immediate family and apparent lack of married-with-children friends also reduces the pressure to choose motherhood. The demand for children is equally absent on Hanfeng's side, since his father has also passed away, and Professor Dai makes no mention of any desire to become a grandmother.

Most *tongqi*, on the other hand, do become mothers. In fact, *tongqi* "often discover their husbands' secret after giving birth" (Tsang, 2021, p. 794), that is to say, after they have fulfilled the Confucian filial obligation of continuing the patriline, which remains important for most Chinese families (Eklund, 2018, p. 297). Of course, many women in unsatisfactory heterosexual marriages also become mothers, but motherhood also brings unique harms to *tongqi*. For example, many *tongqi* experience anxiety relating to their children's development. One woman expressed fear about her son being exposed to "gay circles" (Wang & Li, 2015), others revealed anxieties surrounding bringing up children who are "ashamed of their fathers" (Liu & Tang,

2014b, p. 35). Despite the fact that these anxieties may be derived from homophobic stereotypes about the promiscuity of gay men, the torment endured remains genuine and impactful.

Beyond such anxieties, *tongqi* often struggle with feelings of alienation and instrumentalization. Compared to most Western countries, the pressure to have children is “extraordinarily pronounced in China” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1076). As a result, *tongqi* report feeling like “a tool for continuing the patriline” (Ying, 2018), and their anxieties are often validated when their husbands’ attitude towards them suddenly deteriorates after childbirth (Liu & Tang, 2014b). Although the pressure to bear children is ubiquitous for most Chinese women, not just the wives of gay men, the revelation that their worth is no more than their uterus is particularly traumatizing for *tongqi* (Zhang et al., 2014, p. 101, 105).

Conclusion

Arguments like Zhu’s shine a much needed light on “the heteronormative prejudices behind the seemingly gender-neutral virtues of ‘spousal love’ and ‘communication’” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1085). Certainly, her problematization of some aspects of the discourse surrounding *tongqi* is also entirely reasonable – it is true that some older gay men chose to get married in an era in which the categorial “gay” identity was not yet accessible, and that essentializing gay men’s sexuality erases bisexual identities and “forecloses the possibility of sexual fluidity” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1085). Suggesting opacity as a solution to these problems, however, denies the lived realities of women who consider themselves the victims of “marriage fraud.” Indeed, Zhu herself, in assessing her interviews with one gay man, acknowledges that by listening to only his side of the story, his wife’s “emotional and sexual needs might be trivialized” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1084). Despite this, Zhu still seems to sympathize more with the plight of gay men, reasoning that once these men get married, they will be hurting their wives regardless of whether or not they are entirely truthful. Yet the logic of *tongqi* activism and their self-constructed narratives do not operate in a “should he tell the truth or not” dichotomy, but rather advocates for a world where gay men do not, and are not required to get married to women. In fact, many *tongqi* actually acknowledge the victimization of gay men by a homophobic society, while also judging it inappropriate to harm another marginalized group “just because of one’s own suffering” (Ying, 2018).

At the end of her analysis of *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*, Cheung (2015) suggests that the characters arrive at a state of “compromised domesticity,” reflecting a cultural ethos “that puts a great stock in interdependence, including filial obligation” (101). In Li’s story, this compromise appears willingly chosen by all parties, connecting three lonely people who together can “make a world that would accommodate their loneliness” (Li, 2010, p. 221). This is also a story in which none of the characters explicitly reveal their sexuality, a creative choice which fits both Li’s literary aesthetics of subtlety and ambiguity, and Zhu’s conceptualization of “opacity” as a means to “radically queer kinship (studies)” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1075). Nevertheless, this opacity is neither what many *tongqi* would accept nor the only solution to the double bind of a homophobic society and marriages that demand truthfulness. Certainly, there may be women like Siyu who are willing to be the “emerald girl” to Hanfeng’s “gold boy,” for whom achieving “genuinely inclusive and flourishing queer kinship” (Zhu, 2018, p. 1087) is possible or even desired. Yet perhaps it is also reasonable for *tongqi* to frame their experiences as one of victimization by their husbands, their families, and oppressive notions of gender relations, and to wish for a world in which the way out of the double bind does not involve their pain or the compromising of their desires. Perhaps in wishing for a world without “marriage fraud,” they are simply wishing for a world where the solution is less homophobia in the first place.

References

- Cheung, K. (2015). Somewhat Queer Triangles: Yiyun Li's 'The Princess of Nebraska' and 'Gold Boy, Emerald Girl'. In R. C. Evans (Eds.), *Critical Insights: Contemporary Immigrant Short Fiction* (pp. 88-103). Salem Press, Grey House Publishing.
- Eklund, L. (2018). Filial Daughter? Filial Son? How China's Young Urban Elite Negotiate Intergenerational Obligations. *NORA: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(4), 295–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2018.1534887>.
- Freeman, E. (2007). Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory. In G. E. Haggerty & M. McGarry (Eds.), *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (pp. 295-314). Blackwell Publishing.
- Li, Y. (2010). *Gold boy, emerald girl*. Random House.
- Liu, D. (2017). Tongqi qunti shenghuo zhuagntai de kangnili fenxi [The Effect of Online Interaction for the Resilience Construction — An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis on the Online Practice of Gay Wife]. *Journal of HIT (Social Sciences Edition)*, 19(3), 81-87. <https://doi:10.16822/j.cnki.hitskb.2017.03.012>.
- Liu, D., & Tang K. (2014a). Shehui wenhua shijiaoxia “tongqi” xianxiang de shengcheng yuanyin fenxi – yixiang xuni shehuirenleixue yanjiu [Reasons for Gay's Wife Phenomenon: A Perspective of Simulated Social Anthropology]. *Journal of Eastern Liaoning University (Social Sciences)*, 16(2), 127-135. <https://doi:10.14168/j.issn.1672-8572.2014.02.020>.
- Liu, D., & Tang K. (2014b). Zaihun tongqi de hunyin shenghuo jingli: yixiang jieshixianxiangxue fenxi [The Life Experience of Gay's Wife in Mariage: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis]. *Journal of HIT (Social Sciences Edition)*, 16(6), 32-38. <https://doi:10.16822/j.cnki.hitskb.2014.06.005>.
- Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China. (2001). Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China, Chapter I General Provision, Article 2. China: Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China.
- Murti, D. C. W. (2019). Single, seventies, and stuck: a discourse analysis of the “Leftover Women” or Sheng Nu in China in the Blogosphere. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 35(1), 41–56. <https://doi: 10.17576/Jkmjc-2019-3501-3504>.
- Reuters. (2012, March 9). Texie: guanzhu Zhongguo ruoshiquanti - Tongqi [Closeup: Noticing the marginalized group of 'tongqi' in China. *Reuters*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-gaywives-gay-idCNCNE82806M20120309>.
- Tsang, E. Y. H. (2021). A 'Phoenix' Rising from the Ashes: China's Tongqi, Marriage Fraud, and Resistance. *British Journal of Sociology*, 72(3), 793-807. <https://doi:10.1111/1468-4446.12812>.
- Wang, J. (2015). Ba tongqi qingxing narudao kechexiao hunyinzhidu nei de helixing ji qizha biao zhun de jieding [Arguments for including tongqi in marriage nullification policies and the determination of fraud]. *Journal of Chifeng University (Social Sciences)*, 36 (7), 63–65. <https://doi:10.13398/j.cnki.issn1673-2596.2015.07.024>.
- Wang, T., & Li H. (2015, April 16). Tongqi zishu yayi hunyin shenghuo: Wo zhishi chuanzongjiedai de gongju [Tongqi describes her suffocating marriage: I am just a tool for reproduction]. *New Evening Post*. Retrieved from: <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2015-04-16/150831725440.shtml>.

- Wang, Y, et al. (2020). Behind the Rainbow, 'Tongqi' Wives of Men Who Have Sex With Men in China: A Systematic Review. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10* (January). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02929>.
- Ying, C. (2018, November 30). Tongqi zhi shang [The plight of tongqi]. *Xinmin Weekly*. Retrieved from: <https://m.xinminweekly.com.cn/content/1060.html>.
- Zhang, B. C., et al. (2014). Attitude and cognition of women who have regular sexual relationships with men who have sex with men. *Chinese Journal of Human Sexuality, 23*(9), 99–105. [https://doi: 10.3969/j.issn.1672-1993.2014.09.036](https://doi:10.3969/j.issn.1672-1993.2014.09.036).
- Zhu, J. (2018). "Unqueer" Kinship? Critical Reflections on "Marriage Fraud in Mainland China. *Sexualities, 21*(7), 1075–1091. <https://doi:10.1177/1363460717719240>.