



# Navigating Advocacy and Resilience: Strategic Advocacy Progression in a Chinese Lesbian Organization

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## Abstract

**Introduction** This article introduces strategic advocacy progression to explain how a Chinese lesbian organization sustains advocacy despite restrictions, balancing adaptability with efforts for change.

**Methods** Our first author conducted 10 months of fieldwork (August 2022–May 2023), using archival research and semi-structured interviews with 16 staff members, legal experts, and human rights activists to explore the lesbian organization’s advocacy strategies and challenges.

**Results** Employing a multi-layered strategy, including an oral history project, direct legal support for survivors of gender-based violence, online events, and integration into mainstream initiatives, the lesbian organization engages in advocacy with tactical precision, remaining sensitive to political constraints.

**Conclusion** Strategic advocacy progression advances the theory of visibility and invisibility in global LGBTQ+ activism by offering a nuanced, context-sensitive strategy that navigates between confrontation and concealment. It also provides a useful lens for understanding the unique challenges faced by lesbian organizations within China’s broader LGBTQ+ movement.

**Policy Implications** Strategic advocacy progression provides an adaptable framework for LGBTQ+ movements in restrictive environments, emphasizing a flexible continuum of visibility. For lesbian activism, this approach shifts the focus from symbolic legal victories to addressing everyday violence and discrimination within China’s legal constraints.

**Keywords** Strategic advocacy progression · LGBTQ+ activism · LGBTQ+ rights organizations · Social movement · China

## Introduction

The scholarly discussion on visibility and invisibility in social movements, particularly within LGBTQ+ activism, has evolved to highlight the nuanced strategies marginalized groups employ to navigate complex sociopolitical landscapes (Chua, 2022; Jenness & Broad, 1994). Visibility has long been associated with public engagement, media representation, and political advocacy (Acconcia et al., 2024). It serves as a crucial mechanism for raising awareness, reducing stigma, and mobilizing public support to exert pressure on policymakers. By securing visibility, marginalized groups

can challenge dominant narratives, demand policy changes, and foster solidarity within and beyond their communities (Chua, 2015). However, visibility is not inherently beneficial in all contexts; it can also expose activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to risks, such as surveillance, backlash, or targeted violence (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). In hostile political environments, the very act of being seen can invite repression, legal consequences, or social ostracism. Consequently, invisibility functions as an alternative or complementary strategy that enables movements to operate under restrictive conditions. While invisibility may limit direct engagement with broader society, it allows NGOs to build internal solidarity, establish networks of support, and develop long-term strategies without immediate suppression (Gash, 2015).

Authoritarian regimes pose unique challenges to NGOs, particularly those focused on human rights and marginalized communities. In China, the political and cultural landscape for LGBTQ+ NGOs is shaped by strict government control over civil society and deeply ingrained societal conservatism

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regarding gender identities (Iii et al., 2015; Ren & Gui, 2024). The concern over social stability leaves minimal room for independent advocacy, and NGOs focusing on minority rights face stringent legal and regulatory restrictions, including limitations on foreign funding, heightened surveillance, and the risk of forced shutdowns (Hildebrandt, 2012; Hsu & Hasmath, 2017). Cultural factors further exacerbate these challenges: Confucian values emphasize family lineage, heteronormativity, and social conformity, positioning LGBTQ+ individuals as deviations from societal norms (Lee, 2016). The intersection of state repression, censorship, and deeply rooted societal norms therefore creates a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ activism, where excessive visibility can lead to crackdowns or the dissolution of NGOs. Despite these barriers, some NGOs have developed adaptive strategies to navigate the restrictive landscape. Among them, a lesbian organization has adopted a nuanced approach that we term “strategic advocacy progression.” This approach involves carefully calibrated public engagement that allows activists and organizations to selectively advocate for LGBTQ+ rights while minimizing the risks of state repression. Unlike the binary framework of visibility versus invisibility, strategic advocacy progression offers a third option: it organizes different types of actions as the levels of public exposure expand. Strategic advocacy progression also involves integrating community-building, direct legal support, digital activism, and carefully managed public engagement in nonthreatening ways. By pursuing advocacy through low-profile, context-sensitive avenues, the organization sustains its activism while avoiding direct confrontation with the state. This adaptive strategy highlights the resilience of LGBTQ+ movements in authoritarian settings, demonstrating how activists and NGOs recalibrate their methods to persist within highly restrictive environments.

This article begins by outlining the theoretical foundations of visibility and invisibility in social movements, drawing on key scholarly literature to contextualize the discussion. It examines how visibility has traditionally been framed as a tool for empowerment and mobilization, while invisibility has often been viewed as a limitation or defensive strategy. The challenges of LGBTQ+ activism in China, especially those affecting lesbian individuals and organizations, are also examined in depth. Following the literature review, the research method section details the qualitative research design employed in this study. This includes in-depth interviews with the lesbian organization’s leaders, lawyers, and activists. Given the sensitivity of researching marginalized groups in authoritarian regimes, the article also addresses key methodological challenges, such as securing access to participants, ensuring confidentiality, and maintaining the safety of both interviewees and the researcher. The next section presents major findings that illustrate how the studied lesbian organization implements strategic

advocacy progression in practice. These findings highlight specific layers where the organization has selectively increased its visibility, such as leveraging online events and engaging in reproductive rights advocacy, while simultaneously exercising discretion in domestic engagements, such as the oral history project and direct legal support for survivors of gender-based violence, to avoid state repression. Through this nuanced approach, the organization balances the need for public presence with the imperative of self-preservation in a restrictive political climate. In the discussion section, these findings are situated within broader social movement theory. By analyzing the lesbian organization’s strategies, this article highlights how grassroots movements can maneuver within structural constraints while still advancing their goals. Policy implications are also examined. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader implications of this research, suggesting that strategic advocacy progression provides a viable model for rights-promoting NGOs operating under authoritarian rule. While this study is rooted in the experience of a Chinese lesbian organization, the concept of strategic advocacy progression holds relevance for movements worldwide.

## Literature Review

### Conceptualizing Visibility and Invisibility in Global LGBTQ+ Activism

In the study of social movements, the dynamic interplay between visibility and invisibility has been a central and enduring topic of analysis (Jenness & Broad, 1994). Rather than merely binary opposites, these concepts represent a spectrum of strategic choices that movements, particularly those advocating for marginalized groups, must navigate to achieve their goals (Chua, 2022). Visibility typically entails attracting public attention, mobilizing support, and exerting pressure on political institutions to acknowledge and address grievances (Gash, 2015). It can yield significant benefits, including increased political leverage, greater public recognition, and enhanced legitimacy (Thompson, 2005). Historically, visibility has played a pivotal role in shaping legal and policy reforms, such as the decriminalization of same-sex relationships, the establishment of anti-discrimination protections, and the introduction of hate crime legislation (Ayoub, 2016; Taylor et al., 2018). Beyond its impact on law and policy, visibility also serves as a powerful tool for building community, fostering solidarity, and reinforcing a sense of collective identity among LGBTQ+ individuals (Hartal, 2016). Yet visibility is inherently double-edged. The increased exposure that comes with public recognition can make activists and NGOs more vulnerable to heightened scrutiny, discrimination, and even violence (Hildebrandt &

Chua, 2017). In regions where robust legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals are lacking, visibility can result in targeted repression, including police surveillance, employment discrimination, and physical attacks (Angotti et al., 2019).

Conversely, in repressive political regimes or societies with deeply conservative norms, LGBTQ+ movements frequently resort to strategies of invisibility as a means of survival and resistance (Meyer, 2012; Uldam, 2018). These tactics are not merely defensive; they are often intentionally crafted to sustain activism in environments where overt resistance carries severe consequences. For example, in Uzbekistan and Russia, laws against the propagation of non-heteronormative identities, combined with pervasive surveillance and police crackdowns, render public demonstrations, media visibility, and legal challenges highly risky (Currier, 2012; Thoreson, 2014). The consequences of exposure can range from social exclusion and job loss to imprisonment, torture, or even death (Kondakov, 2024). As a result, activists and NGOs must carefully assess when and how to engage in advocacy, weighing the potential benefits of raising awareness against the immediate risks of persecution. In these contexts, many activists and NGOs have developed a range of strategies to continue their work while minimizing the risks of exposure. Some organizations prioritize essential support services, such as mental health counseling and emergency shelters, ensuring that vulnerable individuals receive crucial assistance without actively participating in high-profile advocacy (Ojanen et al., 2016; Reda & Proudfoot, 2021). Others rely on digital communications, using private messaging apps or encrypted platforms to organize discreetly and share resources (Rodriguez, 2016). These underground networks serve as lifelines for community members, offering them protection, solidarity, and a means of navigating hostile environments without attracting unwanted attention (Rahman, 2014).

### LGBTQ+ Lives and Activism in Contemporary China

In China, scholarly reports reveal that LGBTQ+ individuals continue to encounter substantial discrimination, stigma, and violence, perpetuated not only by society at large but also within their own families (Lu, 2023; Wang et al., 2020). Confucian cultural norms, such as the expectation of heteronormative marriage and the emphasis on filial piety, continue to place intense pressure on LGBTQ+ individuals (Lee, 2016). Many experience rejection, forced conversion therapies, or even disownment when their gender identities are disclosed (Whyke, 2023). At the institutional level, while homosexuality is not explicitly illegal in China, there are no anti-discrimination provisions for sexual minorities, leaving LGBTQ+ individuals vulnerable to exclusion in employment, healthcare, and education (Wang et al., 2019). In recent years, however, the emergence of what is often

called the “pink economy” in urban areas has increased the visibility of non-heteronormative groups in consumer spaces (Tan, 2023: 135). Businesses have begun to recognize LGBTQ+ communities as a lucrative market segment, leading to the rise of queer-friendly cafés, nightlife venues, and same-sex dating apps that cater to diverse gender identities. This growing commercial presence has helped normalize LGBTQ+ existence in certain metropolitan areas, especially among younger, urban populations (Liu, 2022). However, the growing commercialization and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in consumer culture have not been matched by meaningful legal reforms. A notable example is the case of Qiu Bai vs. Ministry of Education, in which a university student challenged the state over the continued use of textbooks that described homosexuality as a mental disorder. Despite garnering significant domestic and international media attention, the lawsuit was ultimately dismissed in its final appeal. This outcome revealed the shortcomings of legal channels and the state’s persistent reluctance to substantively engage with LGBTQ+ rights claims (Fugazola, 2023). Bernot and colleagues (2025: 1003) describe this as “queer necropolitics,” referring to the authoritarian state’s necropolitical treatment of LGBTQ+ communities through mechanisms of legal invisibility and ambiguity. This highlights that the advancement of LGBTQ+ activism in China must rely primarily on grassroots efforts, rather than on state-led initiatives.

China’s LGBTQ+ movement has long been shaped by fragmented, guerrilla-style organizing, particularly in its early stages (Iii et al., 2015). Events such as the 1996 Stonewall Commemoration Birthday Party and the short-lived operation of a tongzhi pager hotline in the summer of 1997 illustrate these grassroots initiatives, which were facilitated by early LGBTQ+ advocates like He Xiaopei (He, 2020). These initiatives primarily took the form of semi-clandestine gatherings and private social events, offering safe spaces for self-expression, community building, and identity formation amidst pervasive societal stigma and political surveillance. The inaugural ShanghaiPRIDE in 2009, China’s first large-scale public LGBTQ+ event, also deliberately avoided overt political messaging, instead centering on cultural activities, such as film screenings, art exhibitions, and panel discussions. Similarly, the 2013 International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia event in Changsha was tactically framed as a casual public walk to circumvent legal restrictions on public assembly. These cases demonstrate how activists employ cultural and performative tactics to engage public sentiment, foster solidarity, and share LGBTQ+ narratives in ways that resonate with local cultural norms while minimizing political risks (Bao, 2020; Iii et al., 2015).

Another compelling example of this approach, which illustrates the intersection of cultural performance and

digital technology, is the production of short-form online dramas designed to communicate LGBTQ + perspectives to wider audiences (Zhou, 2024). Termed “platform presentism,” Tan (2023:117) found that these media texts employ a deliberately light-hearted tone, moving away from dominant narratives of suffering, marginalization, or victimhood. Instead, they embrace everyday storytelling infused with humor, romance, and relatability, an approach that resonates strongly with younger audiences and aligns with the aesthetic and temporal demands of mobile-first platforms. By normalizing LGBTQ + experiences through accessible and engaging formats, these dramas serve as subtle yet powerful tools for LGBTQ + identity affirmation and public education in an otherwise restrictive media environment. In addition to this media-driven, culturally grounded resistance, the 2000s saw the expansion of gay organizations across China, which benefited from increased state and international investment in public health (Hildebrandt, 2012). These organizations capitalized on three types of opportunity structures: partial state tolerance, access to domestic and international funding, and informal personal ties between NGO leaders and sympathetic bureaucrats (Hildebrandt, 2013). In contrast, lesbian activists were structurally excluded from these health-based funding channels. In recent years, however, authorities have increasingly adopted a more cautious approach toward non-state actors, imposing strict regulatory oversight, restricting operational autonomy, and, in some cases, engaging in overt repression of civil society organizations (Ren & Gui, 2024). A prominent example is the implementation of the Foreign NGO Management Law in January 2017. This law requires all foreign NGOs, as well as domestic ones receiving foreign funding, to register with the Ministry of Public Security and obtain approval for their activities. Such stipulations have restricted LGBTQ + NGOs’ access to international support, which has long been a crucial source of financial stability for many organizations (Hildebrandt, 2012). Maintaining international partnerships that once funded LGBTQ + advocacy efforts has thus become increasingly challenging as organizations grapple with bureaucratic scrutiny and political suspicion. This financial precarity has hence created a double dilemma for LGBTQ + NGOs. On the one hand, they struggle to secure domestic funding because their advocacy for rights and social change is perceived as both culturally and politically sensitive. On the other hand, seeking financial support from foreign governments or international NGOs, which is often their only viable alternative, makes them even more suspect in the eyes of the Chinese authorities (Zhan & Tang, 2013). Consequently, some LGBTQ + NGOs have had to embrace strategies of invisibility, redirecting their efforts

from public advocacy to more discreet forms of activism (Miller, 2016).

### Chinese Lesbian Activism Under Compounded Constraints

Lesbians in China face distinct challenges within the broader LGBTQ + activism landscape, experiencing dual marginalization as both sexual minorities and women (Lo, 2023). This compounded disadvantage further exacerbates their vulnerability. In addition to the systemic discrimination and legal barriers affecting all LGBTQ + individuals, lesbians must navigate deeply entrenched gender norms and patriarchal structures that restrict women’s social and political agency (Ji et al., 2017). In a society where traditional family values emphasize marriage and reproduction, lesbians often experience heightened familial and societal pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations, including entering heterosexual marriages and bearing children (Cheng, 2018). Despite these challenges, cultural activism, which Bao (2020: 112) refers to as “soft activism” and defines as a form of cultural production that negotiates boundaries, has emerged as a crucial way for lesbians to assert their identities, foster community, and resist marginalization within both the broader LGBTQ + movement and society at large. An influential example of grassroots lesbian activism is the *Les +* (2005–2013), widely recognized as China’s first and longest-running lesbian magazine (Han, 2022). Founded as a volunteer-led publication, *Les +* initially focused on community-building, self-expression, and mutual support among lesbian individuals. Over time, it evolved into a more politically conscious platform, contributing to broader LGBTQ + rights advocacy and discourse production. Beyond publishing articles and personal narratives, *Les +* played a critical role in establishing a national lesbian network, facilitating communication and solidarity among fragmented local groups. It also built transregional ties with activists in Taiwan and Hong Kong, thereby expanding the horizons of Chinese lesbian activism beyond national borders. However, like many grassroots LGBTQ + NGOs operating without formal recognition, *Les +* remained unregistered and lacked access to stable funding, institutional support, or legal protection. These structural limitations, combined with increasing state surveillance, financial precarity, and the exhaustion of its volunteer base, culminated in its closure in 2013. Still, the magazine’s decade-long existence left a lasting legacy: it carved out a rare space for lesbian visibility, nurtured a sense of collective identity, and challenged the heteronormative and patriarchal structures dominating both state and civil society spheres.

Yet even with such efforts to foster visibility and solidarity, lesbian communities continue to be marginalized within both mainstream society and the broader LGBTQ+ movement. The systematic overlooking, sidelining, or subsuming of lesbian experiences and subjectivities in dominant discourses makes it more difficult for their support organizations to establish visibility, gain recognition, and advocate for their needs (Tan, 2023). Additionally, the challenges faced by lesbian organizations are compounded by their ongoing invisibility within both academic and activist arenas. Despite growing scholarly interest in LGBTQ+ issues in China, lesbian organizations remain underrepresented in the literature (Ren & Gui, 2024). Much of the existing research on LGBTQ+ activism in China focuses on gay men, particularly in the context of HIV prevention and public health initiatives, as these topics have received state endorsement (Hildebrandt, 2013). In contrast, lesbian issues, ranging from domestic violence to reproductive rights, have been largely overlooked in both policy discussions and scholarly work. This lack of representation not only reflects broader societal biases but also reinforces the marginalization of lesbian communities within the LGBTQ+ movement itself.

This article seeks to address this empirical gap by offering a focused examination of the strategies employed by a lesbian organization in China, analyzing how it navigates societal, cultural, and political pressures to advocate for lesbian rights within a highly constrained environment. Beyond documenting these strategies, this article contributes to the theoretical discourse on the visibility and invisibility of social movements. It introduces the concept of *strategic advocacy progression* to capture the nuanced balance the organization strikes between advocacy and self-preservation. Rather than seeking full visibility, which could invite state repression, the lesbian organization employs selective, calculated forms of engagement that enable it to advance its cause without directly confronting political restrictions. The experiences of this organization illustrate the broader tensions at play in LGBTQ+ activism, particularly the trade-offs between visibility and survival, local adaptation and global influence, and, activism and state control. By examining this case, this article offers insight into how marginalized communities navigate constraints, deepening our understanding of contemporary social movements and their adaptive strategies.

## Research Method

This article employs interviews as the primary research method, allowing for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences and strategic responses of individuals involved in a lesbian organization in China. The volatile political environment surrounding LGBTQ+ advocacy necessitates

an approach that captures the complexity of survival and activism under governmental scrutiny (Ren & Gui, 2024). Interviews provide an effective means of accessing first-hand accounts, offering insights into how individuals and organizations perceive and respond to shifting regulatory frameworks and societal attitudes (McGuirk, 2018). They also allow participants to articulate experiences in their own words, ensuring that their voices and concerns remain central to the research (Offen et al., 2008). Through participants' reflections on their day-to-day experiences and their aspirations for the future of LGBTQ+ advocacy, this study sheds light on how the lesbian organization under study sustains its mission despite the governmental constraints on civil society.

In research involving hard-to-reach communities, gaining the acceptance and trust to be regarded as an insider is not just advantageous but often pivotal to the success and depth of the inquiry (Michaud, 2010). The first author was able to engage closely with a prominent thriving lesbian organization in China, allowing for immersion into the community's activities and advocacy efforts. Established in Beijing in January 2005, this organization is one of the pioneering LGBTQ+ NGOs in China, dedicated to advocating for the rights, visibility, and well-being of lesbian individuals. Rooted in the foundational values of equality, diversity, and openness, it has played a transformative role in shaping the landscape of queer activism both within China and internationally. The organization's core team consists of four to six dedicated members who oversee the strategic direction, program development, and community engagement. They are supported by a dynamic network of interns and volunteers who contribute to initiatives such as legal aid, social work support, and digital communications. Over the years, the organization has gained recognition for its innovative programming, sustained grassroots activism, and intersectional approach to social justice. To facilitate this research, the first author secured a short-term contract as an assistant manager within the organization. This position enabled her to contribute meaningfully to its work while simultaneously conducting fieldwork. She worked with a diverse range of stakeholders, including staff members, legal experts, and human rights activists, who shared the common goal of advancing LGBTQ+ rights and improving the living conditions of lesbian individuals. The fieldwork spanned ten months, commencing in August 2022 and concluding in May 2023. During this period, she actively participated in and observed the organization's regular activities, internal discussions, and external engagements. This immersive involvement offered valuable insights into the organization's operational challenges, evolving strategies, and resilience mechanisms. As part of the data collection process, she conducted 16 semi-structured interviews, complemented by extensive archival research. Each interview lasted approximately one hour,

providing a substantial foundation for qualitative analysis. The primary aim of these conversations was to gain an in-depth understanding of the inner workings, challenges, and strategic maneuvers of the lesbian organization, particularly regarding how they navigate advocacy within restrictive political conditions.

To ensure the security and confidentiality of participants, all interviews were conducted in private spaces, free from third-party presence. To maintain participant anonymity and mitigate any potential risks, note-taking was used instead of audio recordings, reinforcing the confidentiality measures. Additionally, personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, and participants had the option to use pseudonyms. They were not required to disclose any personal information, allowing them greater control over their level of disclosure. To further protect organizational confidentiality, some interview questions were designed to focus on broader trends rather than specific details, enabling participants to discuss the development of LGBTQ+ NGOs in China without naming any specific organizations. The research followed strict ethical guidelines, with all procedures reviewed and approved by the first author's institutional ethics committee. A thematic analysis approach was employed to examine the interview transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, key themes, and underlying meanings within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

A crucial aspect of this study was the first author's dual role as both a researcher and an assistant manager within the lesbian organization. This positioning blended insider access with an outsider's analytical perspective. By disclosing her research intentions from the outset, she occupied a unique "insider–outsider" position, offering intimate insights into the organization's daily operations, decision-making processes, and overarching challenges (Wei et al., 2025: 1232). Her direct involvement in the organization's projects, trust-building with staff, and active contributions to advocacy initiatives afforded her unparalleled access to internal operations, resulting in a richly detailed account of the intricacies of LGBTQ+ advocacy in China. However, this dual identity also posed methodological challenges (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). While her embedded role fostered trust and facilitated deeper conversations with colleagues, some interactions were still somewhat staged: in certain interviews, staff members presented information in ways that aligned with the organization's public agenda, emphasizing successes while downplaying internal challenges, such as strategic disagreements and financial constraints. This tension between transparency and organizational self-presentation highlighted the complexities of conducting research within advocacy groups, where maintaining a positive public image is vital to securing funding, community support, and political survival (Mitchell & Stroup, 2017).

## Major Findings

The relationship between the Chinese authorities and domestic LGBTQ+ NGOs is complex and often fraught with tension (Wang, 2021). Navigating this restrictive political landscape, these organizations must contend with state policies, governmental censorship, and entrenched public attitudes (Hildebrandt, 2012). Fieldwork conducted by the first author reveals that one lesbian organization has managed to sustain its advocacy work despite significant risks and constraints. Rather than engaging in direct political confrontation, the organization has adopted a nuanced, multilayered strategy to enhance visibility and promote rights: the first layer of this approach focuses on cultivating internal solidarity. By creating safe, supportive spaces, the organization fosters a sense of belonging and mutual care among community members. The second layer of action centers on supporting survivors of gender-based violence. The organization provides vital resources, guidance, and platforms for survivors to be heard. This not only addresses urgent needs within the community but also affirms the organization's broader commitment to intersectional justice. The third layer involves carefully curated online engagement. Instead of hosting fully open-access events, the organization hosts online forums with invited speakers and selective participants. These events allow for strategic discussions and knowledge exchange while minimizing exposure to political or social backlash. The fourth layer consists of embedding lesbian rights within wider social issues. By linking their advocacy to reproductive justice, the organization leverages public discourses to advance visibility and acceptance. Importantly, these layers are not implemented in a rigid or fixed linear sequence. Instead, the organization adapts its tactics in response to shifting circumstances, including financial capacity, public sentiment, and the political climate. This layered, context-sensitive strategy exemplifies what we term strategic advocacy progression: a model that balances careful risk management with an unwavering commitment to community resilience and long-term change. Through this adaptive model, the organization demonstrates how grassroots queer activism can persist even within highly restrictive environments.

## Core Community Cohesion: The Oral History Project

The first layer of the strategic advocacy progression focuses on engaging the core community by systematically documenting oral histories. This initiative seeks to preserve the voices and stories of past and present activists who have been instrumental in shaping and advancing public awareness of lesbian rights through publications and activities. Since its launch in 2009, the oral history project has captured

the stories of 38 queer activists and community leaders, recording over 50 h of in-depth interviews. These personal narratives offer rich insights into critical historical moments and transformative shifts in the social, cultural, and political landscape of lesbian life in China. Through storytelling, this organization fosters a shared identity and collective memory, enabling members to connect with their history and draw inspiration from the resilience and determination of those who came before them. This internally focused strategy is also essential for strengthening the organization's foundation: it facilitates intergenerational dialogue and ensures that the knowledge and lessons accumulated over time are preserved. The manager (No. 3, September 2022) elaborated on the impact of the oral history project:

“When we immerse ourselves in these oral histories, we are doing so much more than just looking back at the past. We are breathing life into the voices of those who dared to stand when the world told them to sit down. These are not just stories; they are lived experiences, moments of defiance, and an unshakable belief in a future that was never guaranteed but always fought for. Think about it: every struggle we face today, every injustice we push back against, has been met with resistance before. And yet, time and time again, our lesbian community has risen. These voices, these histories, are not just echoes of another time; they are here with us, reminding us that we belong to something bigger, something unstoppable. For anyone who has ever felt isolated in their fight, who has ever wondered if their voice makes a difference, these stories are proof that it does.”

This testimony highlights how historical narratives function not only as retrospective reflections but also as active sources of motivation and mobilization. By engaging with first-hand accounts of past activism, participants gain a deeper appreciation of the historical context of the lesbian movement and the ongoing efforts required to advance LGBTQ+ rights in China. The oral history project also plays a role in strengthening intergenerational ties within the organization. It creates opportunities for mentorship, allowing seasoned activists to guide newer members, equipping them with knowledge and strategies that have been refined through years of experience. This process empowers emerging leaders while ensuring the continuity of advocacy efforts in an increasingly challenging political landscape. We also found that optimism and awareness of the movement's journey, as emphasized in the quotation below, are crucial for maintaining morale and nurturing persistence. Social movements, especially those addressing deeply entrenched societal norms and injustices, often demand significant emotional energy (Jasper, 2011). In this context, storytelling offers more than a means of documenting history; it

becomes a vital tool for emotional healing. An activist (No. 6, November 2022) reflected on this emotional dimension after contributing their own story to the project:

“Engaging with our oral history is not just about looking back at where we have been; it is about healing. When we revisit those stories and listen to the voices of those who came before us, it is like a powerful reminder of just how resilient we are. It is more than just history; it is emotional support, something that lifts us up in the here and now, reminding us we are not alone in this. Each story builds on the next, giving us solidarity and a sense of mental well-being that we can lean on when we are facing our own struggles. We keep hearing it, over and over: our collective journey, the love, the fight, that unbreakable spirit that has carried us through. That is what keeps us going.”

This powerful reflection illuminates the profound emotional resonance that oral history holds within lesbian rights advocacy. Beyond simply recording past experiences, oral history emerges as a crucial practice of healing, fostering connection across generations, and affirming identities that have often been marginalized or rendered invisible. In doing so, oral history acts not only as a strategy for survival, but also as a subtle yet powerful form of resistance.

### **Direct Legal Support for Survivors of Violence: The Anti-Violence Center**

The next layer of the organization's strategic advocacy progression moves beyond fostering internal cohesion to focus on strengthening individual protection by leveraging existing legal frameworks. A central component of this approach is the Anti-Violence Center, which has served as a crucial resource for lesbian individuals affected by gender-based violence since its founding in 2016. In the years leading up to its establishment (2009–2016), the organization's efforts focused more narrowly on rights advocacy, offering sporadic legal assistance and limited mental health support to lesbians encountering discrimination. With the creation of the Center, these initiatives were consolidated and expanded into a more structured program of assistance. Operating primarily through WeChat and other social media platforms, the Center now disseminates vital contact information, raises awareness of available resources, and delivers immediate emotional and practical support to individuals experiencing distress or imminent danger. When survivors request assistance, a trained staff member assesses their situation and connects them with LGBTQ+-affirming lawyers, ensuring that the legal support offered is tailored to their needs and circumstances. This coordinated system helps survivors navigate the legal process with expert guidance, increasing

their chances of achieving justice while minimizing personal risk. By the end of 2022, the Center had provided assistance to 615 survivors. To reach survivors living outside of Beijing, the Center also published a comprehensive resource document aimed at helping individuals identify nearby support services and legal aid. The deputy director of the Center (No. 1, September 2022) reflected on the importance of this work:

“Over the years, we have offered legal advice and support to lesbian individuals who have faced physical or emotional violence at the hands of their families or partners. The longer we have been doing this work, the more we realize just how crucial it is for those victims who reach out for help, often feeling alone and unheard. That is one of the reasons we started offering LGBTQ+ awareness training for lawyers six years ago. We wanted to make sure we have the right legal professionals who truly understand and are ready to stand up against the violence that lesbians face. We are also grateful for the younger generation of people who have stepped up and supported us, whenever and however they can. Honestly, without their energy and commitment, we would not be able to provide the timely support that is so necessary for our members.”

In this quote, the interviewee underscores the urgent need for accessible legal aid tailored to the challenges faced by lesbian individuals confronting violence and discrimination. This call for support did not emerge in isolation; rather, it coincided with the rapid growth of lesbian activism in the 2000s and its dynamic “cross-fertilizations” with broader women’s movements, which created new avenues for solidarity, advocacy, and institutional engagement (Tan, 2023: 39). At the same time, the interviewee highlights the crucial contributions of younger activists whose dedication and solidarity have played a key role in sustaining and expanding these efforts. Together, these reflections reveal how grassroots, community-driven legal advocacy not only fills critical gaps left by mainstream institutions but also serves as a vital source of protection, empowerment, and hope for those most marginalized. Beyond offering direct support, the Center also works proactively to raise public awareness. It collects and presents impact litigation cases from across China in an accessible format. These casebooks and brochures, widely circulated among LGBTQ+ NGOs and legal professionals, serve as both an educational tool and an advocacy resource. By presenting well-founded legal arguments and real-world cases, these publications play a crucial role in debunking misconceptions about LGBTQ+ rights, affirming that gender identity should never be a barrier to equal treatment under the law. As expressed by a legal advocate

(No. 7, October 2022) who described the purpose of this initiative:

“A lot of people, including lawyers and police officers, do not realize that LGBTQ+ individuals have equal rights under the law. This lack of awareness can lead to discriminatory practices. Our casebook aims to change that by gathering and examining important court rulings where judges have upheld LGBTQ+ rights. By documenting these cases, we want to educate legal professionals and create a database that can help strengthen future legal arguments in favor of LGBTQ+ protections. The more these legal victories are recognized and talked about in mainstream legal discussions, the stronger the case for equality becomes. So this casebook is not just an educational tool; it is also an advocacy tool, reminding everyone that sexual orientation should never stand in the way of justice.”

The interviewee highlights a critical gap in institutional understanding of the legal rights guaranteed to LGBTQ+ individuals in China, particularly among legal professionals and law enforcement. To help bridge this gap, the legal consultant of the lesbian organization compiled a casebook in 2019, bringing together key court decisions that recognize and uphold LGBTQ+ rights. By documenting and disseminating these legal precedents, the casebook challenges prevailing ignorance and helps lay the groundwork for more inclusive legal interpretations in the future.

### **Targeted Engagement: Online Events with Invited Speakers and Selective Participants**

As the organization’s audience expands, its strategy evolves. The third layer of the strategic advocacy progression focuses on organizing online forums and webinars, which provide a controlled yet meaningful platform for LGBTQ+ allies, such as academic scholars, legal professionals, and community members, to discuss LGBTQ+ rights in China. These online forums were inaugurated in 2020 and are held biennially. Since its launch, 19 speakers have been invited to share their research and creative work, offering a wide array of perspectives on queer issues. These forums have also drawn more than 1500 participants, reflecting a growing interest in LGBTQ+ discourse across academic, activist, and public spheres. Despite their popularity and contributions to the development of queer knowledge, these events remain highly exclusive. Guest speakers are carefully curated, with priority given to trusted allies and established figures within the community. This deliberate selectivity, along with restricted access for audiences, serves a protective function. It ensures that the visibility generated through the forums remains within a manageable scope, striking a delicate balance between public engagement and the need

to avoid unwanted scrutiny by state authorities. In contrast to the first and second layers, where exchanges are largely limited to participants' contact with the organization, the third layer introduces an interactive dimension. It provides a safe platform for members of the targeted audience to share experiences, exchange ideas, and engage in mutual dialogue.

Webinars typically address timely and relevant themes, often prompted by trending social issues, court decisions, or newly introduced legislation affecting LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, after the enactment of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in March 2016, concerns arose regarding its applicability to same-sex couples, given that these relationships lacked formal recognition by the state. In response, the organization hosted a webinar featuring legal experts to address these concerns. This event empowered attendees with crucial knowledge of their legal rights and provided practical advice on how to seek legal recourse, even in the absence of official relationship recognition. Such initiatives also foster a collaborative space where lesbian individuals can connect with legal professionals, policymakers, and human rights advocates, thus strengthening their networks. As one event organizer (No. 11, January 2023) shared with us:

“The goal is to create a welcoming and inclusive space where our members can explore LGBTQ+ topics thoughtfully and engage in meaningful conversations. We want to give participants a chance to exchange ideas, share their research, and have constructive debates. Given how sensitive LGBTQ+ issues are in China, we are mindful of the risks that come with being too visible or too open. Because of that, we carefully choose our audience: only inviting individuals, researchers, and advocates who share our commitment to advancing LGBTQ+ rights in a respectful and safe way. This approach helps ensure that the space stays focused on productive discussions while minimizing the risk of external threats or opposition from people who might try to undermine our efforts.”

In a political landscape where even subtle forms of activism can attract negative attention, shifting discussions to digital spaces has become not just a precaution but a necessity. Traditional in-person gatherings, while valuable, often carry risks, whether through surveillance, infiltration, or the fear of exposure. Digital spaces, by contrast, allow for greater accessibility, enabling participation from those who might not be able to attend in person due to geographical, social, or security constraints. They also provide a structured environment where safety measures, such as invitation-only access, encrypted communication, and moderated discussions, enhance participant safety. This selective approach also maintains the depth and significance of the conversations, fostering a sense of shared purpose among

participants. By balancing visibility with caution, the lesbian organization can sustain its advocacy work for social change without compromising the safety and well-being of those involved. Another event organizer (No. 12, January 2023) shared the following with us:

“We often use coded language in our invitations to the event, and that is by design. For those of us who have been around for a while, it is almost like a secret code; they get it immediately. But if you are new or just happen to stumble across our work, it might not make a lot of sense at first. That is okay though; it is part of the way we keep things secure. The reason we do this is because it helps build a sense of community among those who truly understand the context and purpose of what we are talking about. We do not want to open things up to just anyone, especially when the topics we are addressing can be sensitive or even risky. We also limit our updates to a newsletter exclusively for registered subscribers.”

This quote reveals the lesbian organization's thoughtful approach to balancing visibility with safety in a restrictive and potentially hostile environment. The distinctiveness of coded language lies in its dual function: it simultaneously mitigates external threats of surveillance while fostering internal recognition and solidarity within the community. At the same time, their decision to restrict updates to a private newsletter for the registered subscribers also reflects a cautious and intentional mode of outreach. These protective measures ensured that information reached a deliberately limited audience, consisting mainly of trusted community members and LGBTQ+ allies. To maintain communication when accounts are suspended or data is lost, organizations often turn to secure messaging apps and decentralized networks (Bernot et al., 2025). Altogether, they demonstrate a smart, adaptive strategy that maintains group cohesion, protects participants, and preserves the integrity of their work in a politically sensitive context.

### **Mainstream Integration: Embedding Lesbian Rights within Broader Social Issues**

The outermost layer of the organization's advocacy strategy encompasses the public. Aligning lesbian advocacy with broader social issues, such as reproductive rights, allows for a high-profile approach that maximizes visibility while minimizing confrontation. The lesbian organization has taken an active role in advocating for the reproductive rights of single women, strategically aligning this effort to China's national agenda of encouraging population growth (Zeng & Hesketh, 2016). While the state policy permitting married women to freeze their eggs was initially introduced as a

pronatalist measure, the organization has skillfully reframed it to benefit lesbian individuals seeking parenthood. This advocacy is particularly important for lesbian mothers, who, in the absence of legal recognition for same-sex marriages, are classified as single women under Chinese law. To challenge this, the organization mobilized both its members and allies to participate in targeted lobbying efforts. They were encouraged to share personal testimonies, expert opinions, and policy recommendations through official suggestion channels of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). This grassroots effort created a ripple effect, drawing attention from policy advisors. As a result, several CPPCC delegates took up the cause and submitted formal proposals during the conference's annual session, calling for the legalization of egg freezing for single women. These proposals directly contested deeply entrenched norms that tie reproductive rights and access to medical technologies to marital status. In doing so, they opened up space for broader discussions on gender equality, bodily autonomy, and family planning in contemporary China. This strategic maneuver demonstrates how existing policies, even those not originally designed to support LGBTQ+ individuals, can be leveraged to advance rights while aligning with state priorities. A manager of the organization (No. 14, March 2023) explained to us:

“This idea started in 2012 during an online discussion with a group of lawyers and academics. It was around that time when they pointed out something significant: the economy was in a downturn, and the government was looking for ways to stimulate growth. They made an educated guess that the two-child policy was likely on the horizon and would be put into place sooner rather than later. At that point, we saw an opportunity. If the government was exploring ways to support families, it seemed natural for our organization to step in and advocate for policies that would benefit the lesbian community, with a particular focus on access to egg freezing. It gives us the freedom to delay starting a family until we feel emotionally and financially ready, without the pressure of a ticking biological clock. It is also about ensuring that our community has access to the same reproductive rights and options that everyone else has. So, by advocating for this policy, we are not just supporting a medical procedure; we are standing up for the freedom to choose when and how to create a family, regardless of our gender identities.”

This example illustrates how the organization identified an opportunity to promote reproductive rights for its community in response to shifting socio-political dynamics. During the early 2010s, discussions around reproductive rights were largely confined to the discursive space of online activities, where activists experimented with framing

strategies. Yet, transforming these efforts into tangible policy influence required a convergence of enabling conditions. It was not until around 2018, as specific egg-freezing cases began to gain legal traction and attract public attention that the lesbian organization identified a pragmatic entry point for advancing its advocacy. In contrast to the third layer, which emphasizes relying on existing statutes to safeguard LGBTQ+ rights, the fourth layer involves aligning organizational initiatives with broader state priorities, thereby creating opportunities to deliver tangible benefits to community members. In our conversation with another manager (No. 9, December 2022), she also highlighted the importance of aligning advocacy efforts with national priorities. This approach not only enhances visibility in a strategic manner, making advocacy efforts more acceptable in the public sphere, but also strengthens the foundations for future progress in lesbian rights by gradually shifting societal and legal frameworks toward greater inclusion. In this way, the organization showcases an adaptive approach, balancing the urgent need for substantive rights with the equally important need for strategic discretion:

“Our approach is not just about making noise; it is about being strategic and intentional. We focus on securing real, concrete reproductive rights that directly benefit our community in ways that truly matter. In today's political climate, we have to be smart about how we advocate. Pushing too hard, too fast can trigger backlash, and that is the last thing we want. By framing our advocacy within widely accepted legal and social discourses, we gain credibility, visibility, and the leverage needed to push for change. And most importantly, we minimize the risk of government or societal pushback that could undermine our progress. At the end of the day, this is about results. It is about making sure the rights we fight for do not just exist on paper but translate into meaningful, lasting improvements in the lives of lesbian individuals. And that is why we do this work.”

The manager's feedback underscores the strategy of integrating the specific needs of lesbian individuals into broader, mainstream conversations rather than seeking mere visibility or attention. Recognizing the delicate and often hostile political environment, they deliberately avoid overly confrontational tactics that might provoke backlash or jeopardize their progress. Instead, they work strategically within existing legal and social frameworks, carefully framing their advocacy to build credibility, gain visibility, and leverage influence without attracting undue risk. This measured, long-term focus reflects a deep understanding that meaningful change requires patience, persistence, and trust-building.

Overall, our key findings reveal that the lesbian organization adopts a nuanced and multifaceted strategy, structured

around four layers of engagement. These layers represent a dynamic spectrum of actions, ranging from efforts aimed at strengthening internal community cohesion to broader initiatives that seek to influence public discourse and policy. While this model offers valuable strategic depth, our interviews and archival research revealed notable variations in how advocacy efforts were operationalized. Some initiatives, such as organizing online events and aligning lesbian advocacy with state policy priorities, tended to be ad hoc, emerging in response to specific constraints or opportunities. These actions often reflected the need for flexibility in a rapidly shifting sociopolitical environment. In contrast, other efforts, including the oral history project and the operation of the Anti-Violence Center, have been more systematically developed and maintained over the years. These longer-term initiatives demonstrate a deeper institutional commitment and continuity, suggesting a dual approach within the movement that combines both responsive and enduring strategies.

Moreover, each layer of the model presented its own unique set of challenges and limitations during implementation, highlighting the complex and uneven nature of advocacy work on the ground. The first layer, which focuses on internal community-building through the oral history project, is constrained by financial instability and resource scarcity. High-quality oral history work demands substantial resources, such as time, skilled personnel, professional transcription, secure archiving, and data protection protocols, all of which require sustained funding and technical expertise. Despite the importance of this work in preserving the community's collective memory, it is often carried out by a small, overextended team juggling multiple responsibilities. This combination of limited resources and labor-intensive demands puts the sustainability and scalability of oral history projects at risk. The second layer, centered on legal aid for survivors of gender-based violence, remains largely urban-centric. Although the Center has made efforts to distribute legal resources beyond Beijing, its operational capacity, lawyer networks, and institutional reach are still concentrated in the capital. This urban bias limits the accessibility and effectiveness of support for lesbians in rural regions or smaller cities where LGBTQ+-affirming legal professionals are scarce. The third layer, which involves hosting invitation-only online forums and webinars, grapples with issues of unintended exclusion. While the selective approach helps maintain security and protect participants from external threats, it may inadvertently marginalize newer activists or those who lack access to advocacy networks. As a result, these events may reproduce existing divides, even as they aim to broaden dialogue and connection. The fourth layer, which seeks to integrate lesbian rights into broader national discourses, confronts entrenched socio-economic and regional disparities. Although the campaign to legalize egg freezing for single women aligns strategically with state

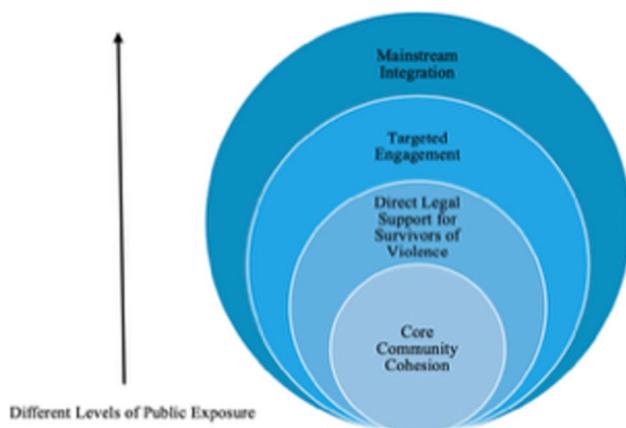
pronatalist goals, the actual accessibility of these reproductive technologies remains limited. Egg freezing services are often expensive, restricted to a handful of urban hospitals, and unaffordable for many working-class or rural lesbians. Consequently, the benefits of this advocacy may accrue disproportionately to middle-class, urban residents, deepening socio-economic divides within the community. While the layered strategy enables context-sensitive activism and offers a model for sustaining grassroots efforts in restrictive environments, it cannot fully overcome the structural constraints and inequalities shaping its outcomes. Instead, it reveals the persistent tensions between strategic ambition and structural constraint, underscoring the need for ongoing reflection, recalibration, and redistribution of resources within and across layers to ensure that advocacy remains both effective and equitable.

## Discussion

### A Layered Approach to LGBTQ + Activism in Contemporary China

Our major findings indicate that the lesbian organization adopts a multifaceted approach by employing four distinct layers, expanding its activities from inward-facing community cohesion to outward-facing social and policy engagement. This layered approach illustrates how LGBTQ + NGOs operating in restrictive environments can carefully and strategically manage their visibility to enhance advocacy impact while mitigating potential risks. Importantly, these layers do not represent a linear or chronological evolution; rather, they coexist and are strategically activated in response to shifting socio-political conditions, perceived risks, and intended audiences. This flexible and context-sensitive model enables the organization to navigate complex and hostile environments, striking a careful balance between visibility and safety (Iii et al., 2015). Specifically, the first layer of strategic advocacy progression centers on strengthening community cohesion, primarily through the implementation of the oral history project. This low-visibility activity plays a crucial role in fortifying the collective identity of the community, allowing members to connect with their shared history and cultivate a sense of belonging. Building on this internal foundation, the second layer involves direct legal support for survivors of gender-based violence. The organization leverages existing legal frameworks to provide services such as legal counselling and emergency assistance for members facing violence. It also produces brochures tailored for legal professionals, offering detailed documentation of significant court decisions that have positively impacted LGBTQ + rights. By working within the confines

of the legal system, the organization extends its impact beyond internal community-building to address tangible legal needs. This approach not only strengthens the legitimacy and safety of the lesbian community but also demonstrates that LGBTQ + rights can be supported within the existing legal structures of a conservative regime. The third layer entails hosting online events designed to connect the lesbian community with external experts, allies, and policymakers. These engagements take the form of curated webinars, virtual discussion forums, and digital networking events, fostering dialogues on LGBTQ + issues in a controlled manner. By inviting key stakeholders to participate in these conversations, the organization builds relationships with individuals and groups capable of influencing policy change. This layer expands the organization's visibility beyond its immediate community while maintaining a level of discretion that prevents public scrutiny. The final and most public level of strategic advocacy progression involves mainstream integration, where LGBTQ + rights are framed within broader social justice issues that align with state-accepted causes. By embedding lesbian advocacy within women's reproductive rights, the organization expands its reach to the societal level. This strategy enables the lesbian organization to garner indirect support for LGBTQ + rights by aligning its objectives with mainstream discourses that resonate with a broader audience. Through this measured expansion of visibility, the lesbian organization exemplifies how LGBTQ + NGOs can navigate restrictive environments while broadening their influence. The effectiveness of this strategic approach is demonstrated by the organization's emergence as one of the most resilient and proactive advocates for LGBTQ + rights in China. It is also important to recognize that such strategic progression often involves uneven movement. As illustrated in Diagram 1,



**Diagram 1** Strategic advocacy progression with different levels of public exposure

the trajectory appears to be shaped more by strategies of public exposure than by a linear upward path or direct engagement with state institutions. Diagram 1 Strategic advocacy progression with different levels of public exposure

### Theoretical and Empirical Dimensions of Strategic Advocacy Progression

The concept of strategic advocacy progression represents a significant advancement in the theoretical understanding of visibility and invisibility within global LGBTQ + activism (Chua, 2022; Jenness & Broad, 1994). Rather than treating visibility and invisibility as mutually exclusive or fixed binary states, this model proposes a more nuanced, context-sensitive strategy that carefully navigates the space between overt confrontation and complete concealment. This middle ground acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of queer existence, particularly under political regimes where open activism can provoke severe repercussions. In the context of China, LGBTQ + experiences are generally shaped by a distinct intersection of legal tolerance, social stigma, and political constraints (Fugazzola, 2023; Iii et al., 2015). These conditions significantly restrict the forms and scope of public activism, especially for LGBTQ + NGOs that often operate under heightened scrutiny (Ren & Gui, 2024). Against this backdrop, strategic advocacy progression emerges as a pragmatic and adaptive strategy that is particularly vital for lesbian organizations navigating China's challenging political terrain. Crucially, this strategy identifies the importance of embedding LGBTQ + rights within broader, socially resonant discourses, such as reproductive rights, as the most sustainable and effective pathway for long-term progress. By aligning LGBTQ + advocacy with these mainstream issues, organizations can reduce antagonism, broaden public support, and foster a more inclusive, resilient movement.

Strategic advocacy progression also offers a valuable empirical lens through which to understand the distinct challenges faced by lesbian organizations within China's broader LGBTQ + activism landscape. Unlike many gay organizations, which have leveraged economic resources, informal political connections, or personal networks to sustain their activities, lesbian organizations encounter heightened marginalization and have access to far fewer economic, political, or personal opportunities (Hildebrandt, 2013). This disparity significantly limits their capacity to engage in traditional forms of activism. Additionally, public demonstrations and street-based activism are largely impractical in China, given strict legal restrictions and the government's heightened sensitivity to anything perceived as a threat to social stability (Iii et al., 2015). While cultural activism, including

art, media, and performance, has played an important symbolic and community-building role, its tangible impact on structural, legal, or policy change remains difficult to assess (Tan, 2023). Our case study of a lesbian organization reveals a strategic orientation that diverges markedly both from mainstream gay activism and the “soft activism,” a form of cultural production that negotiates boundaries, as described by Bao (2020: 112). Confronted with persistent political repression and economic constraints, the lesbian organization deliberately avoids overt demands for political rights, which would likely provoke intensified state hostility and surveillance. Instead, it prioritizes building a protective safety net that addresses the immediate, everyday forms of violence, discrimination, and marginalization experienced by lesbian individuals. In this way, the organization crafts an empirically grounded model of activism that is finely attuned to China’s unique socio-political realities.

### Policy Implications

Strategic advocacy progression has the potential to influence global LGBTQ+ NGOs, especially those working in conservative political climates. Across both the global North and South, many LGBTQ+ NGOs seek visibility, often equating it with political and social recognition (Currier, 2012). This is because recognition is an active process that affects the relationship between marginalized groups and dominant societal structures (Brighenti, 2007). However, prioritizing visibility can have unintended consequences, at times intensifying opposition rather than mitigating it. This occurs when state actors have aligned with anti-LGBTQ+ groups, framing non-cisgender identities as existential threats to national values, societal stability, or cultural authenticity (Meyer, 2015). A historical example of this backlash can be observed in Namibia in the late 1990s, where political leaders publicly condemned LGBTQ+ activism, claiming it betrayed African cultural values by adopting a Western-imported sexual modernity (Currier, 2012). Similar patterns of repression have also been documented in the Middle East and North Africa (Acconcia et al., 2024): despite a surge in LGBTQ+ visibility during the Arab Spring and Gezi Park protests, many LGBTQ+ NGOs were forced back into the shadows once these movements lost momentum. These examples demonstrate the fragility of visibility in politically volatile contexts and underscore the need for adaptive strategies that balance exposure and safety. In light of these risks, strategic advocacy progression provides a more adaptable and sustainable approach for LGBTQ+ movements operating in restrictive environments. Unlike traditional activism models that prioritize full visibility, strategic advocacy progression emphasizes a fluid continuum of exposure, allowing movements to calibrate their tactics according to shifting political and social landscapes. This dynamic strategy

reduces reliance on a singular mode of engagement, thereby strengthening the resilience of advocacy efforts and enhancing their sustainability even in unpredictable contexts.

Strategic advocacy progression is particularly beneficial for lesbian activism, which has historically been overshadowed by male-centric LGBTQ+ movements or marginalized within broader women’s rights advocacy (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). As discussed earlier, the Chinese government partners with gay organizations across the country to implement HIV programs, providing them with political, economic, and personal opportunities (Hildebrandt, 2013). In contrast, lesbian organizations are excluded from similar state-sponsored initiatives and denied access to medical funding and resources. This exclusion reflects a broader pattern of institutionalized neglect, where issues specific to lesbians are sidelined in favor of those affecting gay men (Logie et al., 2012). Similar dynamics appear elsewhere. In Myanmar, women’s rights activists have expressed concerns that openly advocating for lesbians might undermine their credibility, especially within an already patriarchal and conservative political landscape (Chua, 2016). As a result, even those sympathetic to lesbian causes often choose to remain silent to avoid confrontation or personal repercussions. The lesbian organization in China has adopted a pragmatic and context-sensitive model of advocacy designed to avoid provoking backlash from state authorities or potential allies. While earlier forms of activism, such as impact litigation in the early 2010s, were effective in raising public awareness and sparking national debate, they also carried significant risks (Fugazzola, 2023). These high-profile cases often depended heavily on media coverage, which inadvertently invited heightened surveillance, state scrutiny, and hostile responses. Over time, it became clear that while such visibility could be empowering in the short term, it could undermine the sustainability of long-term LGBTQ+ advocacy (Iii et al., 2015). In response, the lesbian organization recalibrated its strategy. It shifted away from litigation-centric, media-driven activism and toward a more discreet yet equally impactful model. Rather than pursuing symbolic legal victories, it now concentrates on addressing the everyday violence and discrimination experienced by lesbian individuals, working within the bounds of China’s existing legal infrastructure. By doing so, the organization effectively mitigates political risks, preserves its operational space, and offers a sustainable pathway for LGBTQ+ advocacy under authoritarian constraints.

### Conclusion

This article has explored how strategic advocacy progression functions as a vital mechanism for a lesbian organization operating within the constraints of an authoritarian regime.

In political environments marked by strict state oversight and deeply entrenched societal conservatism, avenues for open advocacy are often curtailed (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). In such restrictive settings, strategic advocacy progression emerges as a sophisticated and adaptive alternative to the conventional binary of visibility versus invisibility in social movements. Rather than openly confronting state repression or fully retreating into obscurity, the lesbian organization in China carefully calibrates its public presence to balance safety with impact. Through a multi-layered strategic model, combining the oral history project, direct legal support, online events, and integration into mainstream initiatives, the organization engages in advocacy tactfully, remaining acutely attuned to the surrounding political sensitivities. These layers allow it to navigate restrictive policies, circumvent censorship, and cultivate solidarity within the lesbian community without directly provoking state suppression.

Despite the insights provided in this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. One major limitation is the methodological challenges posed by the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Given the risks associated with participating in research on Chinese LGBTQ+ activism, some interviewees may have been hesitant to engage fully or to share their detailed perspectives. Concerns over state surveillance and potential legal repercussions may have led participants to disclose information selectively, thereby limiting the depth and scope of the collected data. To address such challenges, the use of encrypted communication platforms such as Signal and Telegram, as demonstrated by Bernot and colleagues (2025), can help enhance participant safety and ensure greater confidentiality during interviews. These secure digital tools not only protect sensitive information from external surveillance or breaches but also foster a more inclusive and trustworthy environment where participants feel empowered to share their experiences openly. Future research could also mitigate these challenges by employing ethnographic methods or longitudinal studies to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of strategic advocacy progression over time (Fugazzola, 2023; Tan, 2023). Such approaches could offer a richer, more comprehensive understanding of how organizations adapt to shifting political and social conditions.

Future studies could adopt a comparative approach, analyzing how strategic advocacy progression operates across diverse national contexts with varying degrees of state control and civil society restrictions. Expanding the scope to include other regions, such as Russia, the Middle East, or parts of Southeast Asia, would help refine our understanding of how this model adapts to different political landscapes. NGOs operating in similarly repressive contexts could benefit from incorporating this approach into their operational strategies, tailoring it to their specific political and cultural environments. By doing so, NGOs can find adaptive ways to

advance human rights while minimizing the risks associated with overt activism. The core principles that define strategic advocacy progression, including careful calibration, well-judged timing, and a high degree of adaptability, have broad applicability across different movements and geographic contexts. Furthermore, strategic advocacy progression can serve as a useful framework not only for LGBTQ+ activism but also for other marginalized groups facing similar constraints, including labor rights advocates and pro-democracy organizations. By employing this model, NGOs can continue to build resilient communities, forge networks of support, and advocate for meaningful change despite the formidable challenges they face. In an era where authoritarian governance is increasingly sophisticated in suppressing dissent, the ability to navigate these constraints with agility and foresight is more critical than ever. Through strategic advocacy progression, marginalized voices can persist, resist, and, ultimately, contribute to broader societal transformations, even in the face of repression.

**Author Contribution** All authors contributed to the study conception and design. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Data Availability** The dataset analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** This research study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University College Dublin (HS-22-01-Lu-Kondakov).

**Consent to Participate** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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