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From skepticism to hope: A thematic analysis of comments on Chinese social media on the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan

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From skepticism to hope: A thematic analysis of comments on Chinese social media on the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan

Master Thesis

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1. Introduction

17 May 2019, a very rainy day in the Taiwanese capital Taipei. But as the famous saying goes: if you want the rainbow, you have to put up with the rain. And that day, the rainy streets of Taipei were filled with thousands of rainbows. It was as if every resident in Taipei took to the streets to celebrate the fact that starting from the 24th of May that year, same-sex marriage would finally be legalized in Taiwan. This legalization of same-sex marriage in May 2019 was not something that happened completely unexpectedly. It had been on the anti-discrimination agenda for many years and social mobilization and pressure had been going on for decades already (Kuo and Chen 2017, 91).

One of the main events that led to an increasing awareness regarding this topic among the Taiwanese was the public coming out on national television of Mr. Chi Chia-wei in 1986 (Hsu 2015, 155). In that same year, he filed a petition with the Legislative Yuan to challenge a court decision rejecting his request to marry a male partner (Ho 2019, 482). Eventually he received a dismissive response and he was jailed for several months due to his 'unconventional behaviour'. However, he never stopped fighting for LGBT-rights and on 24 May 2017, he was among the petitioners to the Constitutional Court in its interpretation on same-sex marriage (Ho 2019).

Though the awareness regarding this topic has been present in Taiwan for several decades already, in the early period the protests that were held were mostly aimed at challenging discrimination and stigmatization rather than advancing political and policy demands. The main reason for this being that people saw marriage equality as unrealistic (Ho 2019, 386). Nevertheless, this gradually changed over the years and eventually – in May 2017 – the Constitutional Court of Taiwan reached the decision that same-sex couples would have the legal right to get married within two years (Liu 2020). This was the beginning of the road to real equal rights. However, during a referendum in November 2018, the electorate voted against amending the Civil Code to legalize same-sex marriage equality (Liu 2020, 2). Despite these results, the parliament ultimately passed a bill that would offer same-sex couples comparable rights to heterosexuals on 24 May 2019. The legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan evoked a lot of different reactions among people all over the world (Cho and Kam 2019, 289). Considering the complicated relationship between mainland China and Taiwan and the fact that there is no marriage equality in China, I decided to look at the way people in China responded to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan.

To be more specific, this study will further look into how people on Chinese social media responded to this news. The paper's research question will therefore be: 'How did users of the Chinese social media network Zhihu respond to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan?'. Zhihu is a popular Q&A style type of social media platform in China on which users can ask questions or answer other people's question on a variety of topics.

The period studied for this research covers a total of four years: starting from 2 February 2018 to 27 July 2021. The posting date of the article ‘Why did Taiwan become the first region in Asia where same-sex marriage is legal?’ (为什么台湾成了亚洲第一个同性婚姻合法的地区?) that was chosen for this research covers a central period in the process of legalizing same-sex marriage in Taiwan and was therefore found suitable for this research. Though this might seem like a relatively long period of time, the total amount of comments was still manageable. The comments of this post were analyzed using a thematic analysis to gain an understanding of Chinese netizen’s opinions regarding this topic. It also compares those findings to previous literature on this topic in general and in China in particular.

There are several reasons why analyzing comments on social media platforms is of great importance nowadays. First of all, as the topic of same-sex marriage is sensitive in China (Hua et al. 2019), it can be difficult to find public statements on the subject in traditional media or when conducting interviews. However, depending on the level of censorship, it is achievable online. The possibility for people to express their opinions increases because of online platforms such as Zhihu. Because although censorship in China often silences collective expression, social media empower Chinese (sexual) minorities to promote information publicity and increase public visibility (Yang 2019). These online platforms thus give the civil society the opportunity to have moral discussions and to raise societal concerns (Fincher 2018). A second reason would be that in an era in which social media is playing a very important role in many people’s daily lives, it becomes more interesting to look at the way users of online platforms engage with news about topics such as legalization of same-sex marriage.

In addition, complicated China-Taiwan relations make this research even more interesting. Although Taiwan is governed independently of China since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China regards the island as their own territory and assures that Taiwan will eventually be unified with the mainland (Maizland 2021). The current principle is that of ‘one country, two systems’, which maintains China’s state sovereignty while also taking into account Taiwan’s specific conditions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. n.d.). Tension between the two places has always been present, but with the election of the current Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 these tensions have escalated. One of the main reasons for this being that Tsai has a different attitude regarding cross-strait relations than her predecessor Ma Ying-jeou, who increased cross-strait ties during his governance (Maizland 2021). Since 2016, Chinese measures to intimidate Taiwan – such as surveillance aircrafts and fighter jets flying over the island – have increased. The fact that tensions have intensified, could possibly mean that changes may take place within the next couple years. This could very likely mean that Taiwanese laws – for example those that legalized same-sex marriage – will eventually be alternated to something more consistent with the laws of the PRC.

The chapter-by-chapter outline of this thesis will be as follows: introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis and discussion, conclusion, bibliography and appendix. In the literature review I discuss how different authors have researched topics such as same-sex marriage and the LGBT community in Taiwan and China. In the methodology I discuss thematic analysis, the advantages of using Zhihu as the main data source, as well as a step-by-step explanation on how I conducted my research. Consequently, in the analysis & discussion part I examine the themes that emerged from my thematic analysis and make connections between my results and the already existing literature. Ultimately, the key findings and contributions of my research to the existing literature are summarized in the conclusion. I have included the necessary information about the comments I analyzed in the appendix at the end of this work.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the topic of same-sex marriage in Asian countries and the LGBT community in both China and Taiwan, many recent studies have focused on topics such as discrimination (Hua et al. 2019; Hsu 2015; Wang et al. 2020; Yang 2019) and challenges in terms of health (Burki 2017) and relationships (Shieh 2016) members of this community often have to face. This chapter will provide an overview of existing research that has been conducted on the topics of same-sex marriage and the LGBT community in China and Taiwan. To be more specific, it will start off with a focus on the attitudes both the Chinese people and the Chinese state have towards the LGBT community. Thereafter, we will look more into what existing research says about the fight for the legalization of same-sex marriage in China. Finally, the last part of this chapter will focus on the LGBT community in Taiwan.

2.1 Attitudes in China Towards the LGBT Community

Across different studies, there is consistent evidence that although the Chinese Society of Psychiatry declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 2001 and even though China is home to the world's biggest LGBT community, the community itself usually remains invisible in society and the related stigma and discrimination against them remains (Wang et al. 2020). The fact that modernizing factors (e.g. education, exposure to internet information, and liberal inclinations) are often lacking in China in comparison to Western countries, could be one of the reasons for this. Previous studies have illustrated that economic development and modernization could increase tolerant attitudes towards sexual minority groups (Xie and Peng 2018). Besides this, unlike Western countries, Chinese people's view of the LGBT community is strongly impacted by the distinctive Chinese cultural context. Because of Confucianism's historical legacy, there is a strong focus on following the 'rules of nature' and on conforming to sexual orientations that the majority of the population accepts (Wang et al. 2020).

Attitudes of the People

The cultural roots in Chinese-speaking Asian societies give much weight to patrilineage and filial piety and they privilege family and marriage over individuality (Cho and Kam 2019). As just mentioned here before, we could say that the Chinese cultural context does affect people's attitude towards members of the LGBT community. As marriage is generally believed to be a necessary component of one's life in China, a way to fulfill filial piety and a way to be a productive citizen, gay people are doubly stigmatized as unmarried and sexually deviant people (Cho and Kam 2019, 291). Members of the LGBT community face social, cultural and political discrimination, which may be why they usually remain a hidden sub-population (Ren and Yuan 2018).

A number of scholars state that the discrimination members of the LGBT community in China have to experience on a daily basis, often stands in direct relation with these kind of cultural values

considered to be of great importance in the Chinese society (Cho and Kam 2019; Hua et al. 2019; Liu 2020; Wang et al. 2020). Besides that, not creating a family nor having a child to maintain the continuity of heritage is regarded as unfilial (Hua et al. 2019). According to a study by Wang et al. (2020) – among both heterosexual participants' attitudes towards LGBT individuals, and LGBT participants' self-perceived discrimination – aimed at assessing the discrimination experienced by LGBT individuals in China, we could say that there is some kind of a paradox. According to them, in terms of heterosexuals' acceptance of the LGBT community, heterosexuals reported a high level of acceptance of social relationships with LGBT individuals. However, they also reported that it was hard to accept their own children identifying as LGBT (Wang et al. 2020, 7). This once again shows that one of the greatest sources of pressure to conform to societal norms of sexuality and identity comes from family members. Just like Hu and Wang (2013, 670) write in their article, marriage occupies a central role in sustaining and practicing Chinese family values and is regarded as a mandatory duty that has important social implications within Chinese society. Not getting married or being in a same-sex relationship is therefore often perceived as non-filial (Hu and Wang 2013, 671).

Nonetheless, this does not mean that there is no acceptance of LGBT individuals at all in China. For example, in 2009 the country's first gay pride festival was held in Shanghai (Qian 2009). Additionally, both people's and businesses' attitudes toward LGBT people are changing. According to the US-China Institute of the University of Southern California only 9% of those born since 1990 said a gay child would be rejected and that Chinese companies increasingly depict gay and lesbian couples in their ads as well (USC US-China Institute 2020). So even though same-sex marriage is not legalized in China and homosexuals still do face many difficulties within the Chinese society, change in attitudes is taking place on a small scale.

Attitudes of the State

Though it is important to know about what the common Chinese people's attitude is towards members of the LGBT community in the country, it is just as important to get to know about the attitude of the Chinese state regarding this community. This is because the Chinese state is a powerful institution that has – both consciously and unconsciously – great influence on people's daily lives.

There is a long-running tradition of accepting homosexuality in China. The native religions have not issued serious condemnation, and there are notable historical examples of same-sex relationships in the country (Burki 2017). However, with the arrival of the communists and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the attitudes towards same-sex relationships changed significantly (Hua et al. 2019). From that period onward, same-sex relationships were increasingly characterized as socially deviant, which according to Hua et al., has now been reinforced by the PRC for years (2019, 442). Discrimination towards people that were in same-sex relationships became even

worse during the Cultural Revolution that took place between 1966 and 1976. In this period, homosexuality was heavily persecuted, regarded as both 'disgraceful' and 'undesirable'. It was even the case that exposed homosexual individuals often underwent public denunciation, examination and in some cases were even beaten to death (Hua et al. 2019).

In 1979, the Chinese government enacted a new law that would criminalize any male who conducted *ji jian* (sodomy) with another male (Hua et al. 2019). They revised this so-called Criminal Code in 1997 which meant that consensual anal sex between men would no longer be criminalized.

Although these important developments could have facilitated a change in attitude towards the LGBT community, many scholars agree on the fact that on state-level there has been relatively little progress in different areas regarding this community (Burki 2017; Cen 2017; Hua et al. 2019). Burki (2017) and Cen (2017) both agree that though there is an absence of punitive legislation, there are also no laws that protect the rights of the LGBT community. These people are also not protected from employment discrimination under China's labor law (Cen 2017). Additionally, there is a lack of adequate information and education on HIV and AIDS and there are censorship protocols that prohibit homosexual content from appearing in films and television shows (Burki 2017). Besides all this, a very recent example of a rejection of a lawsuit concerning a Chinese college textbook that described homosexuality as a mental disorder (Chen and Ji 2021) only proves the fact that there has been little progress over the years in China. Despite the fact that homosexuality was decategorized as a mental disorder by the Chinese Psychiatric Association in 2001 (Reuters Staff 2021), the book – 'Mental health Education for College Students' – published in 2013 by Jinan University Press still described it as such. Hence, the Chinese state does not necessarily forbid same-sex relationships, but it also does not actively protect this group of people.

2.2 Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage in China

Even though being in a same-sex relationship in China is no longer criminalized, Chinese law neither explicitly prohibits nor recognizes same-sex unions. The Chinese national legislature, China's National People's Congress, and the Chinese Supreme Court have kept silent on same-sex unions since homosexuality was decriminalized more than two decades ago. Until now, no same-sex union has ever been recognized officially by or in China (Liu 2020) and same-sex marriage is still not allowed. However, since October 2017 Beijing has legally recognized mutual guardianship between two people of the same sex (Cui 2019). This implies that same-sex partners are given the authority to make critical choices concerning medical and personal care, property management, and the protection of their rights and interests, also in the event that one of the partners loses the ability to make such critical decisions (Chen and Wang 2019). Nevertheless, there have been no specific policies put in place to protect legal rights of homosexuals (Yang 2019; Liu 2020).

Additionally, though same-sex unions are not officially recognized by the Chinese state up to the present day, this does not mean that there have not been any more attempts to achieve equal rights for LGBT people. According to Hildebrandt (2011) and Yang (2019), lobbying for same-sex marriage is largely non-existent in China as people are more worried with short-term concerns such as health matters and social problems. However, Hildebrandt also comes with a different point of view in which he states that instead of marriage equality becoming reality in China because of the civil society, it will presumably come from the top-down. This will not necessarily happen out of altruism or in response to outside pressure, but more because publicly extending marriage rights to same-sex couples could help China shed its reputation as a violator of human rights and thereby increasing its international legitimacy (Hildebrandt 2011).

Hildebrandt's point of view perhaps makes it seem as if equal marriage rights for same-sex couples will never be achieved through the effort of civil society, however, a great amount of scholars do agree on the fact that over the past few decades, there have been many different groups trying to improve the rights of LGBT people and to take steps towards legalizing same-sex marriage (Cao and Guo 2016; Cen 2017; Yang 2019). According to Yang (2019), Han et al. (2019) and Chase (2012), social media have helped Chinese sexual minorities increasing their social visibility and promoting the acceptance of LGBT individuals.

Social media also allow them to negotiate with the state regarding specific governmental regulations and policies (Yang 2019). It enables Chinese sexual minorities to raise their visibility by sharing information about LGBT people, while also enabling them to negotiate with the government by disseminating information about lawsuits files against government departments for LGBT people's legal rights (Yang 2019, 664)

Hence, the majority of scholars agree that even though same-sex couples in China still do not have the exact same rights as different-sex couples in the country – for example with regard to adoption, as same-sex couples are only allowed to adopt children that are genetically related to either of them (Taipei Times 2019) – the possibilities to fight for their rights for members of the LGBT community in China have increased in the past decades.

An important example of a person that cannot be ignored when talking about this topic is nationally and internationally-known sociologist, sexologist and prominent LGBT rights activist in China Li Yinhe (Cochrane and Wang 2020, 446). Although her arguments were considered quite bold in the 1990s, she is a conversation starter in homosexual issues in China (Zhang 2020). In 2003 Li Yinhe submitted her first proposal to legalize same-sex marriage. Despite the fact this proposal was not passed, she continues to submit these kind of proposals until this day. She remains one of the few scholars in China to do research on topics such as sexuality, LGBT activism and same-sex marriage

legalization (Zhang 2020). It is people like Li Yinhe that inspire and encourage other people to stand up for LGBT rights.

2.3 The LGBT Community in Taiwan

After discussing the LGBT community in China, it is now time to shift our focus to the LGBT community in Taiwan. This is of great importance here because this is the place where the legalization of same-sex marriage itself took place. As Taiwan is the first Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage, it is important to know how the LGBT community here is perceived.

In contrast with its neighbor China, same-sex couples in Taiwan are officially allowed to get married. There are many scholars that have conducted research on the process of legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan (Ho 2019; Hsu 2015; Kuo and Chen 2017) and on the LGBT community in the country (Cheng et al. 2016; Cho and Kam 2019; Shieh 2016). According to Wang et al. (2009) there have been three main periods of representation of gay men in the media in Taiwan: the period in which homosexuality was portrayed as a disease of sexual perversion; the HIV and AIDS period when the sexual behaviour of gay men became the focus of news and finally the human rights period when gay activism provided new discourses in the newspapers. When looking at gay women, we see something rather different. Though same-sex relationships between women have been heavily criticized by society, sex between women – on the other hand – has never been criminalized (Cen 2017).

Among the studies of scholars focusing on this community in Taiwan, both Cheng et al. (2016) and Cho and Kam (2019) conclude that the public awareness of LGBT rights has increased after the lifting of the martial law in 1987 and that conservative values regarding topics such as family and sexuality have become more liberal eventually. Additionally, the public coming out on national television of Mr. Chi Chia-wei one year before the lifting of the martial law, also led to an increasing awareness regarding this topic among Taiwanese (Hsu 2015, 155). Though in the early period, protests were not yet aimed at advancing political and policy demands – as people saw marriage equality as unrealistic (Ho 2019, 486) – this gradually changed over the years.

Whereas Hsu (2015) in her work writes about how the success of the Taiwanese Diverse Families Movement has possibly influenced the realization of marriage equality laws in the country, Ho (2019) states that political processes such as the electoral system reform in 2008, the eruption of the Sunflower Movement in 2014 (a successful attempt by Taiwanese university students to block the Taiwanese Congress from approving the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement with China (Wu 2019, 289) and the electoral victory of the Democratic Progressive Party in 2016 stimulated Taiwan's LGBT mobilization and have facilitated the movement for marriage equality. We could say that the combination of these different things and events have had great influence on the increased awareness regarding the topic of same-sex marriage among the Taiwanese population.

2.4 Conclusion

It is clear that there is a lot of extensive research done on the topics of the legalization of same-sex marriage in both China and Taiwan and about the attitudes of the common people toward the LGBT community in both places. Nonetheless, my thesis adds to the already existing literature on this topic in different respects.

Given the wide range of societal concerns expressed in various online communities after the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan and the sensitivity of this topic in general, I decided to take advantage of this opportunity to examine the Chinese online discourse around the period of legalization. This thesis focuses on the perspectives of the common Chinese people as it analyzes comments on a popular Chinese social media platform. Through the lens of a thematic analysis, I consider the discussions that arose on Zhihu as a way to learn more about the Chinese people's thoughts on the legalization of same-sex marriage.

3. Methodology

The research I conducted can be described as a thematic analysis with an inductive approach. In this chapter I am going to explain what kind of analytical framework I used. I will start by providing an explanation on thematic analysis in general and on why I have decided on using this specific type of analysis for my research.

Thematic analysis is often used as a method of analyzing qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing and reporting themes found within a larger data set. It can be a useful method for examining perspectives of different research participants and for summarizing key features of a larger data set (Nowell et al. 2017, 2). Although there are various approaches to conducting thematic analysis, it usually follows a set pattern that starts with familiarizing yourself with the data and ends with producing the report by using the identified themes.

The reason why I chose a thematic analysis for my research is because – just as Nowell et al. (2017, 2) state – it provides a highly flexible approach and a rich and detailed account of data. Besides that, a thematic analysis allows to collect more data in a shorter amount of time in comparison to other methodological approaches such as conducting interviews.

3.1 Zhihu as the Main Data Source

In this part of the chapter I will explain more about the data I used for this research. I will start by shortly introducing the Chinese social media platform Zhihu, whereafter I will continue by justifying the reasons why I chose this platform specifically.

Zhihu (知乎) – meaning ‘do you know’ in Chinese – is one of the most popular knowledge-oriented Q&A communities in China (Hong et al. 2021, 2). After its establishment in 2010, Zhihu opened to the public three years later in March 2013. On the platform, users can ask questions regarding various topics and can share their opinions and expertise. According to Guan et al. (2018, 142), Zhihu its Q&A mode enables it to gather professionals in related fields and produce more original and professional answers. As of November 2018, Zhihu has 220 million registered users of which 34 million are daily active users (Xu, 2019). At that time, 78.2% of Zhihu users were 25 years old or older and 46.7% of the users were women (Walk the Chat 2018).

The first reason why I decided on using Zhihu as the main source for my research instead of any other popular Chinese social media platform is because Zhihu provides a relatively safe space for the discussion of certain topics that normally are not allowed in China’s state education system (Wong 2014). Even though discussions on sensitive topics the Chinese government does not approve are deleted on Zhihu, the platform is still often seen by experts as one of the best places for deep and

meaningful discussions according to Wong (2014). Besides that, in comparison with Weibo – another very popular Chinese social media platform – there is no word limit on Zhihu posts which allows for more in-depth discussions compared to the discussions on Weibo. Additionally, because of the Q&A nature of Zhihu, discussions are easily started.

The second reason for choosing Zhihu is that on Zhihu there was a much bigger collection of posts in relation to the research topic than on other platforms. As same-sex marriage is a sensitive topic in China (Cao & Guo 2016), it was rather difficult to find sufficient posts and comments about it as there is a large amount of censorship on the internet. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to monitor and control the content of news at all levels in society (Tai 2014, 189). Though it has become more difficult for the CCP to stop the circulation of unwanted topics online due to overseas Chinese news outlets and the prevalence of microblogs (Liebman 2011), the CCP has developed and implemented automated programs to screen content generated by users of social media. Posts that cross the lines defined by the CCP are eventually deleted (King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 326). This even made it nearly impossible to find any articles on the topic on Chinese news websites such as Southern Weekly (南方周末) or Nanfang Daily (南方日报). However, it is important to be aware that the reason why there were no articles found, could also be because journalist simply never attempted to publish them. Nonetheless, even if there were articles or posts on this topic, there was no strong discussion among the readers which made other platforms less applicable to my specific research than Zhihu, on which the discussions were more active.

The last reason for choosing Zhihu that I will discuss here is because there has not yet been done much research about this topic on this specific online platform. Other researches that were based on Zhihu focused on the topics of for example post-reform gender politics and the portrayal of Theresa May on the platform (Peng, Cummings & Li 2020) or on gender stereotypes of female academics (Peng et al. 2021). The specific topic of same-sex marriage, however, seems to be under-explored on Zhihu. The only comparable research on the legalization of same-sex marriage and on people's opinion regarding this topic, is a research conducted by Liu (2020) with Baidu as the main data source.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that we have no way of knowing whether all the people posting on Zhihu necessarily are from China. As it is an online platform on which information such as nationality and gender are not known, making any statements about this is impossible. However, we can assume that the majority of them are native Chinese. This in the first place because of the use of Chinese language, which is not as commonly used by foreigners as, for example, the English language. Furthermore, it is often said to be an important source of professional knowledge and insights for Chinese netizens specifically on a variety of themes (Wan 2021).

3.2 Conducting the research

In this part of the chapter I will further explain how I selected and collected my data, following the approach of a thematic analysis. This includes the search for a suitable post, the familiarization with the data, translation, coding, the generating of themes, reviewing these themes and finally writing the analysis itself.

As mentioned before, the main aim of my research is to find out how users of the Chinese social media platform Zhihu responded to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan. Though the process of legalizing same-sex marriage in Taiwan had been going on for quite some years already, I decided that for this research, my main focus would be the period after the official legalization in 2017. The main reason for this being because I presumed that this would allow me to get a clearer idea of how people really responded to the news.

The first step was to look for a post on Zhihu that was suitable for my research. For this I have used the search option on Zhihu in which I wrote 'same-sex marriage Taiwan' (同性婚姻台湾) as the search term. In the event that a post contained at least one of these keywords, it showed up in the search system. Zhihu did not specify how many results in total were found using this specific search term and neither were the results sorted by publication date. However, every post that appeared did have an indication of the amount of likes and comments on that post. I tried to find a post that was published within a year of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan in May 2017 and that had a sufficient amount of comments as well.

Eventually I found a suitable post that was posted on 2 February 2018, almost a year after the legalization. Both the title of the post and of the article itself were the same: 'Why did Taiwan become the first region in Asia where same-sex marriage is legal?' (为什么台湾成了亚洲第一个同性婚姻合法的地区?). The post only contained the article and no other original comment. The article was originally published by GaySpot (乐点), China's longest surviving LGBT magazine. The article compared the situation in Taiwan with other Asian countries and talked about the reasons why Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. Although the writer's opinion regarding the topic of legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan was not explicitly stated, the tone of the article seemed relatively soft and positive. This is in line with GaySpot's usual writing style as according to them, articles with a narrative tone are less likely to be censored (Yin 2019). The combination of a comprehensive article on legalizing same-sex marriage in Taiwan and a rather active comment section responding to the article convinced me to use this post as the main data source.

The first comment that was posted under the article was written on the same day the article was published. When looking at the dates on which all the comments were written, it became

immediately visible that the comment section of this article is still very active up till this day. Only 22 comments of the total of 81 comments were posted in 2018, the year in which the article was posted. The other comments were posted in the three years after that: 17 comments in 2019, 18 comments in 2020 and 24 comments in 2021. The last comment was posted on 27 July 2021¹. This study will thus cover all the comments over a total of 4 years. This might seem like a relatively long period of time, however, as the comments within the comment sections were not necessarily very long – on average 37 characters per comment – I believed it to be manageable.

After having found a suitable post on Zhihu, the next step was to familiarize myself with the data. This was done by first reading and translating the article under which the comments were posted. Thereafter I read through all the 81 comments several times and translated them as well before starting the process of coding. This is because it is important to first have a general idea of the type of data you are working with before diving deeper into the research itself. Hereafter, I started coding. When reading through all the comments once again, I made notes next to each of the comments regarding the subjects as I noticed them in the data. For example, if a user commented something that showed some kind of disapproval towards the LGBT community, in my notes I would write this down as 'dislike'. Then I would highlight all the comments that showed some kind of dislike with the same color. I continued doing this until all the comments were colored. As a result, each color code denoted the concept expressed in a particular segment of text.

Following this, I continued with formulating themes. When looking over all of the codes I had created, I looked for patterns and turned them into themes. As themes are generally broader than codes (Caulfield 2019), I usually combined different codes into one theme. For instance, codes such as distrust in the Taiwanese government, resentment towards democracy and China-Taiwan relations were combined and together formed the theme 'criticism of the Taiwanese government'. Other codes that did not seem relevant for my research or that did not occur very often, I eliminated. Besides from the theme 'criticism of the Taiwanese government', the other themes I created were 'support of same-sex relationships' and 'doubts about same-sex relationships'.

As the next step in a thematic analysis is to review the themes, this is what I did next. First I made sure to list all the codes I came up with before, within the suitable theme. To make sure the themes I identified were useful and accurate representations of the data, I reread all the comments within the three different themes. At this point, I decided to combine several codes as there sometimes was quite a lot of overlap between them. For example, I decided that the codes 'dislike of the LGBT

¹ This was the latest comment written on the date of downloading all the comments, which was on 9 August 2021. Any comments posted after this date are not included in this study.

community' and 'uncertainty' should become one code within the theme 'doubts about legalization of same-sex marriage' as there seemed to be quite a lot of overlap.

Finally, I analyzed the different comments in combination with the already existing literature on this topic. This analysis can be read in the next chapter. In this part I make use of comments that are extracted from the data. These comments all have their own tag, which can be found in the appendix at the end of this work.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter is divided in different subchapters. In the first part, I present a broad explanation on the general characteristics of the comments that were posted on Zhihu under this specific post regarding legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan. Thereafter, I present an overview of the codes and themes discovered in the comments and in the second part of this chapter I continue by providing a detailed explanation of the findings within every separate theme and on how these findings relate to the already existing literature on this topic.

4.1 Characteristics of Zhihu Comments

When people in China wish to bring up societal concerns or other significant topics, they often turn to the internet as this is considered as a relatively safe space (Wong 2014). As mentioned before, Zhihu is one of the online platforms where the discussion of sensitive topics is more or less accepted and therefore it is no surprise that the discussions surrounding the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan are so vivid.

Although the majority of the comments were clearly related to the topic of the article posted, some people also took the discussion that arose as an opportunity to discuss other topics that in the first place did not necessarily relate to the main topic of legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan or China. For example, ZHP73 commented about polygamous arrangements in ancient China. These kind of comments were not included in the research.

Additionally, the comments of the Zhihu users went beyond just stating whether they supported the legalization in Taiwan or not. Although these kind of comments were present as well, the comments often went deeper into the topic by including remarks about political topics such as cross-strait relations. Aside from this, they provided ideas on how to possibly change terminology when talking about for example same-sex marriage or marriage in general as certain laws or terms that are used when talking about these topics are considered as rather outdated by many commenters.

4.2 Main Topics Raised on Zhihu

This part of the chapter will discuss the findings of the thematic analysis. I identified three most prevalent themes:

1. Criticism of the Taiwanese government
2. Support of same-sex relationships
3. Doubts about same-sex relationships

These themes emerged as a result of codes discovered during the study of 81 comments on this specific article. Table 1 shows how several codes were incorporated into broader themes that made up the majority of the analyzed comments.

The number of appearances of each theme is shown in Table 2. In this chapter, every theme will be discussed separately with the use of already existing literature on this topic and with examples from the data as further clarification.

Table 1: Themes & Codes

Theme	Codes
Criticism towards the Taiwanese government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distrust in the Taiwanese government - Disapproval of democracy - China-Taiwan relation
Support of same-sex relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support of LGBT people² - Idea of changing terminology - Stating the facts - 'Wait and see' attitude
Doubts about same-sex relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dislike towards LGBT community - Incorrect facts - Fear of the current situation

Table 2: Prevalence of the themes

Theme	Amount of posts the theme appears in
Criticism towards the Taiwanese government	34
Support of same-sex relationships	15
Doubts about same-sex relationships	15

4.3 Theme 1: Criticism towards the Taiwanese government

The first comments that will be discussed here are the comments within the theme 'criticism towards the Taiwanese government'. As can be seen in table 2, the majority of the comments belonged to this theme.

When reading through the comments on Zhihu, it immediately became clear that a great amount of people that commented linked the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan to political decisions by the Taiwanese government. Two different narratives are visible within the theme of

² Although the 'T' within LGBT officially refers to transgender, this group of people is not discussed within the data I used for this research. The decision for using this initialism is therefore made for the sake of convenience.

criticism towards the Taiwanese government. The first narrative is that of China-Taiwan relations and the second narrative is related to distrust and disapproval of democracy in general and the Taiwanese government specifically.

When looking at the first narrative that appears within this theme, we can see that these cross-strait relations are a recurring theme within these comments. This is understandable considering the tense relations between the two places. Beijing has long regarded – and still does regard – Taipei as a serious competitor, or at the very least a serious security concern (Scobell 2014, 449). This rivalry and especially distrust towards Taiwan and its government is clearly visible in the comments as well. It seems that from the users point of view, the decision of the Taiwanese government to legalize same-sex marriage has been heavily influenced by other democratic systems in the world and by the fact that the so-called ‘enemy’ of Taiwan – in this case China – opposes the legalization of same-sex marriage. To illustrate this, let us look at the following comment:

ZHP62: It’s probably like, we must oppose whatever the ‘enemy’ supports.
凡是“敌人”拥护的我们都要反对的思路吧

In other words, the author of this comment believes that Taiwan views China as an enemy and that – in this person’s opinion – Taiwan therefore purposefully supports things China does not approve, i.e. the legalization of same-sex marriage. This also works the other way around, according to another person that commented. Commenter ZHP83 stated that Taiwan only supports whatever America – a stable ally of Taiwan – supports.

Other users believe that other democratic countries have influenced the decision of the Taiwanese government:

ZHP86: As for why Taiwan is the first [to legalize same-sex marriage in Asia], the first reason is because there are young people that vote and the second reason because the whole of Taiwan is crazy about the so-called European human rights. It’s sick.
至于为什么台湾最优先，第一因为有年轻人选票，第二因为整个台湾都已这种所谓欧洲人权之类的虚名疯狂。这很病态

This commenter seems to harbour animosity towards European countries and their human rights. The choice of words of this person – for example ‘it’s sick’ (这很病态) – makes it seem as if they do not believe that these European rights are a good example for Taiwan to follow.

One last comment that will be discussed here is one regarding the possible future unification of China and Taiwan. I believe this comment to be worth discussing as there is a probability that reunification of the two places might occur in the near future as tension between the two places has been increasing in the past few years (BBC News 2021). The question raised by one user is the following:

ZHP51: The question is if Taiwan is unified [with China], will marriage of Taiwanese homosexuals remain legal?
问题是如果统一了台湾，台湾的同性恋还会合法吗？

This question clearly shows that the users of this platform that engaged in this specific discussion are taking into account the possibility of a unification of China and Taiwan. The question raised here seems like a fair one as the threat posed by China is rising and as Beijing is stepping up military activities around the island (Lee 2021). It is obvious that this question cannot be answered yet, as nobody knows how things will develop in the near future. However, in response to this comment, there were several people that replied by explaining the ‘one country, two systems’ policy on Taiwan. According to this concept, two systems will be practiced within the sovereign state of the PRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China). The people responding to the before mentioned comment generally believed that this policy would guarantee that the Taiwanese marriage equality laws would continue to exist, even after a possible unification.

Besides the China-Taiwan relations narrative, a second narrative that appeared was that of distrust and resentment towards democracy and the Taiwanese government. The commenters often regard democracy as the culprit of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan. As one person states:

ZHP78: Stupid tolerance! Everything that has happened in Taiwan in the past ten-twenty years can be explained by two things: votes and money.
狗屁包容，台湾最近十几年发生的所有事情都可以用两个东西解释：选票，钱。

In response to this comment, the next two replies followed:

ZHP45: The superiority of democracy.
民主的优越

ZHP09: I’m dying laughing, the superiority of democracy! Complete internal rivalry and mud.
笑死，还民主的优越呢。纯属内耗和稀泥

This thread of comments clearly shows the distrust and resentment towards democracy. Democracy is depicted as unstable and unreliable as democratic leaders – according to many of the users commenting underneath this post – often do not come clear about matters and therefore try to minimize or deemphasize certain things that perhaps would not be accepted by the common people. User ZHP07 even stated that the DPP was forced to legalize same-sex marriage because of the democratic system.

Besides from comments that attacked or doubted the concept of democracy in general, there were also users that showed distrust in the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its leader – Tsai Ing-wen – specifically:

ZHP74: In essence, it was just Tsai Ing-wen's flattery to Hillary Clinton. At that time she was sure Hillary would be elected and Hillary supported same-sex marriage. There is also a rumor that Hillary is a lesbian herself.

本质上不过是蔡英文拍希拉里的马屁而已，当初笃定希拉里当选，希拉里是赞同同性婚姻的。还有就是风传希拉里也是一个拉拉。

In other words, this user is convinced that the support of Tsai Ing-wen to legalize same-sex marriage in Taiwan was just because of the fact that she wanted to preserve the strong allyship between the United States and Taiwan. Whether this is true or not cannot be said. However, this comment does show us that there are people in China that perceive the strong relation Taiwan has with the United States as something rather negative – or at least questionable – as according to them, policies of the US clearly influence Taiwanese policies.

One last thread of comments that follows from this mistrust of the relationship between the US and Taiwan, is one that relates to the mistrust of political decision making within Taiwan itself, i.e. the mistrust of the users towards the DPP. ZHP68 was a direct response to ZHP79:

ZHP79: Does anyone know that this was a measure taken by the DPP to shift the focus of social conflicts at that time?

没有人知道这是民进党当时为了转移社会矛盾焦点的措施吗

ZHP68: Yes, it was. But the switch is turned on. If the equal rights dictatorship is passed, it can be said that it is a moral government. Taiwanese people love to engage in ideology if they are not fighting for the economy.

是啊，但開關就是被打開了阿。若平權專法通過還能說是德政
台灣人不拼經濟就愛搞意識形態

Both of these commenters seem to be of the opinion that one of the reasons the DPP decided to further implement the decision of legalizing same-sex marriage in Taiwan was because of the fact that the Taiwanese government tried to cover up other problems that were present at that time in Taiwan. For example, increasing environmental hazards because of air pollution (Chiu 2014, 16). According to the commenters, they have eventually passed these laws in order to make themselves look like a so-called 'moral government' in which all people are equal. Because of this decision, the Taiwanese people will then be satisfied and other countries will look at Taiwan with admiration. This way, they believe the focus on other problems – either economic, social, or political – will attract little attention.

Besides this, the choice of words in the second comment here of ‘equal rights dictatorship’ provides us with an idea of how this specific person thinks about the DPP and its policies. That is to say, it makes it clear that the pursuit of equal rights is not necessarily considered as something positive here according to this user. As a dictatorship usually refers to a system of governance in which a single person or a small group of people possesses absolute power without effective constitutional restraints (Britannica 1998), we could say that the commenter views the constant pursuit of equal rights in Taiwan as something that has a negative influence on the power of the ‘common people’.

All the comments posted by Zhihu users that are discussed here are consistent with a broader trend of tense China-Taiwan relations that is topic of discussion in different studies (Lai 2020; Saunders and Kastner 2009). In conclusion, the comments that were posted within this theme were somewhat negative regarding the Taiwanese way of dealing with certain political and social matters such as legalizing same-sex marriage. Hence, it appears that up until now, the key elements that seem to be causing unfavorable reactions on Zhihu regarding the discussion of legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan are often related to politics and to be more specific, to distrust of the Taiwanese government and their ‘democratic’ way of decision making.

4.4 Theme 2: Support of same-sex relationships

Even though we have seen a lot of distrust towards the Taiwanese policies in the previous part of this chapter, this does not mean that there have not been any users that had a comparatively more open and positive view towards the topic.

Although the amount of posts in this theme was considerably less than the posts within the theme of criticism towards the Taiwanese government, what does become clear however, is that a fair amount of Zhihu users do seem to support same-sex relationships in general and the legalization of same-sex marriage specifically. Whereas the commenters within the first theme generally had a more critical opinion regarding same-sex relationships, this was not the case within the second theme. A proof that there are more open-minded people as well, follows from the following comment posted by one user:

ZHP77: In my opinion, with homosexuality, it is just a coincidence that the sex of your lover is the same as yours. In other areas in life – whether it is about work, study, or making friends – there should not be a difference from ordinary people.

在我看来，同性恋只是碰巧爱人的性别和自己一样罢了，其他，在生活中，不管是工作、学习或是交友，应该和普通人没什么大的区别才对

What becomes clear here is that this person believes that people should not distinguish between different people based on their sexual orientation. It is important not to neglect them and treat them

any differently than heterosexual people are treated. This is in line with the fact that – over the past few years – there has been an increasing effort by *tongzhi* communities (*tongzhi* originally means ‘comrade’, but currently it is mainly used to refer to members of the LGBT community), legal experts and parents with *tongzhi* children for public support of homosexuals and even for the legalization of same-sex marriage in China (Cho and Kam 2019, 296). It also shows the acceptance of homosexuality which in turn corresponds to Wang et al. (2020, 7) stating that in terms of heterosexuals’ acceptance towards the LGBT community, heterosexuals reported a high level of acceptance of social relationships with LGBT individuals. Although we do not know whether the before mentioned commenter identifies as heterosexual, the comment itself does show the support.

Besides this, there are also users that go into the topic of equal treatment of homosexuals even further. The following user wrote a comment in which they specifically addressed people that are actively opposing homosexuality and LGBT activism:

ZHP15: You are all really stupid. You feel uncomfortable and not willing to accept it when you are being discriminated. But when LGBT carry out their revolutionary activities to fight for their rights, you say that they are too aggressive. What you don’t know is that opposition brings rights, being silent will not get you accepted [by society], but it will only further suppress people’s survival space. People tend to follow the crowd, but when nobody talks about the LGBT rights, the society will only become more conservative. Take America for example, the Americans don’t care what people with discriminative opinions think. Why the equality and non-discrimination of women’s rights can be turned into political correctness is because they are willing to continue to bravely keep fighting for themselves.

真的是欠，别人歧视时觉得不甘不舒服不愿意，当 LGBT 为自己的权利做出革命事业，却又说别人激进不喜欢，殊不知就是因为有反抗才会有权利，沉默根本不会获得接受，只会进一步压制自己的生存空间，人都是从众性，当所有人都不再提不再宣传，社会只会变的更加封建，美国不管底下歧视的人怎么想，为什么可以把女权平等不歧视变为政治正确，就是因为他们愿意不断的为自己勇敢发声反抗。

In other words, this person believes it to be unfair that a great amount of people usually feel offended and uncomfortable when being discriminated, however, when this discrimination does not directly involve themselves, they do not seem to care as much. They sometimes even seem to think negatively regarding LGBT people fighting for their rights. From this comment and because of the persuasive way of writing by using rather powerful words such as ‘stupid’ (欠 *qiàn*) ‘revolutionary activities’ (革命事业 *gémìng shìyè*) and including a comparison with the American fight for equal women’s rights, we could conclude that this person supports the fight for equal rights of members of the homosexuals and other members of the LGBT community as well.

Finally, the following comment was one of a collection of comments that not only showed support towards the LGBT community, but also provided a suggestion of a possible change of terminology:

ZHP76: In this kind of ‘open and enlightened’ Zhihu community, traditional ethical relationships such as family, marriage, parent-child relationships and teachers-students relationships are all targets of attack. How can radicals such as homosexual and transgender people go against the trend and advocate marriage? In addition, marriage in Chinese means that a man and a woman are married and the word marriage means a connection between man and woman. It is not appropriate to use these two words when you are united. How about creating new words, creating new laws and not hassling everyone, ok?

在知乎这样“开放、开明”的社区，家庭、婚姻、亲子、师生等传统伦理关系都是被打击的对象，同性恋、变性人这类激进分子，怎么还逆潮流而动鼓吹婚姻呢？另外，婚在汉语中的意思是男女结为夫妇，姻字意为男女联络。你们结为一体用这两个字不太妥当吧。要不另造新词，另立新法，别折腾大家了好不好？

This user was not the only one that advocated for this specific change. All through the comment section there were users that seemingly supported same-sex marriage but were stating that much of the terminology relating to marriage that is currently used is outdated and that the term ‘marriage’ is nothing more than just a noun of which the meaning is not necessarily current anymore. Commenter ZHP70 even did go a step further by stating that the marriage system as a whole should be abolished. Although it is not entirely clear whether these users really did support the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan as a whole, comments like these do show us that there is some dissatisfaction about the current situation regarding the topic of marriage and homosexuality in China. Marriage seems to be considered – by a fair amount of commenters under this post – as nothing more than just a legal basis to ensure the rights of both parties.

To conclude, the comments within this theme do show us that homosexuality and same-sex marriage are not necessarily always perceived as wrong. It shows that there are still people who are willing to stand up for people who might not always be able to do so themselves. The removal of homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in China in 2001 increased the public awareness and dialogue on homosexuality and the politics of assimilation and normalization are increasingly applied in the lobbying for public support of same-sex marriage in China (Cho and Kam 2019, 295). Though nobody knows whether legalization of same-sex marriage in China – or any adjustment to the marriage system in general – will really happen in the near future, the comments within this theme do show us that there is indeed some support for same-sex relationships.

4.5 Theme 3: Doubts about same-sex relationships

The last theme that was found within the data shows the other side of the coin when it comes to how same-sex relationships and also the legalization of same-sex marriage are perceived by users of Zhihu. This theme will particularly be focused on criticism towards same-sex relationships.

The first thread of comments that I would like to highlight here is one that shows us how certain symbols that are often used to represent the LGBT community – in this case the rainbow LGBT pride flag – are not always fully accepted or understood:

ZHP87: I am gay. To get off topic, I do not like rainbow flags.

我是个同性恋，说句题外话，我不喜欢彩虹旗

ZHP77: I am not gay and I also don't really like rainbow flags. I think the existence of this flag – that is in many cases “propaganda” – highlights this group too much. In particular, there are many people under this banner that will take actions that are not accepted by the “mainstream people”.

我不是同性恋。我也不是很喜欢彩虹旗。我觉得这个旗的存在（很多时候是“宣传”）过于凸显这个群体了，尤其还有很多人在这个旗下，会做出一些并不被“主流人群”接受的举动。

ZHP61: Guys, your awareness is very high. I am supportive of your freedom, but that does not mean that I approve of the rainbow flag. Because I think that having this flag on the contrary might mean inequality.

同学，你的觉悟真的挺高。我是支持你们的自由的，但是不代表我认同彩虹旗，因为我觉得有了这个反而可能意味着不平等。

That is to say, these users assume that the rainbow flag does more harm than good. This is because, according to them, it causes the group that identifies with this flag to be more exposed and to take more action which is considered as to be possibly harmful as the ‘common people’ who do not always support these actions. Another reason for disapproving of the rainbow flag is the fact that a flag like this exists, is proof that this group is seen as different from others. These people believe that if we all are equal, there should be no need of such flags. ZHP77 eventually even went further by stating that using rainbow flags promotes same-sex relationships too much:

ZHP77: The more you promote it, the more you spread it to other people. Once you are a little bit careless or have a moment of inattentiveness, then it's easy to provoke contradicting sentiments.

越宣传越搏出位，一旦一不小心走歪了一点点，都很容易招来抵触情绪。

It seems to be as if this commenter assumes that the use of the rainbow flag will encourage people to engage in same-sex relationships and that it will thus spread homosexuality to other people. According to them, this could ultimately provoke contradicting or conflicting feelings among different groups of people which is not beneficial to the peace within society.

If we focus more on the opinions towards legalization of same-sex marriage specifically, we can see that there are people within the comment section who are skeptical. This is what we see in the next comment in which the writer uses a rather sarcastic way of writing:

ZHP28: Great, gays finally have a place to go. When I think of Taiwan's future, it has gays everywhere, this picture is really wonderful haha.
太好了，同性恋们终于有地方可去了，一想到台湾未来遍地同性恋，那画面真的太妙了，哈哈

When reading this comment, there are two things that become clear. First of all, the sarcastic undertone within this comment is evident. The use of hyperbolic language such as 'great' (太好了 *tài hǎole*) and 'wonderful' (太妙了 *tài miào*) is proof of this. Especially the use of the word 妙 (*miào*) – which can be translated in English with words such as 'excellent', 'wonderful' or even 'exquisite' – is an exaggeration in this specific context. The use of such hyperbolic words and expressions seems to be intentional and used for extra emphasis and effect. Second, because of this visible sarcasm within this comment, we could say that the person writing this does not necessarily have a positive outlook on the future of Taiwan in which same-sex marriage is legalized. Although he does not explicitly express it this way, he disapproves of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan.

In summary, a great amount of Zhihu users commenting underneath this post believe the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan and the ever-increasing emphasis placed on homosexuality and equal rights for same-sex couples to be taken out of proportion and a possible danger to society. It seems that the data used for this study tells us that people are quite critical regarding the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan and that there is even a small majority that openly disapproves of the legalization.

When looking at the already existing literature on this topic, we do read about this doubt and rather negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships – from both close relatives and other people within society – very regularly (Cho and Kam 2019; Hu and Wang 2013; Wang et al. 2020). However, we could say that overall, the attitude that was found dominant in most studies was one of a growing acceptance and understanding towards the LGBT community in general and the legalization of same-sex marriage specifically as well (Cao and Guo 2016; Chase 2012; Han et al. 2019; Yang 2019). Altman (2004) even argues that the increasing acceptance of homosexuality is happening because of the abolition of traditional cultural practices, such as arranged marriages. Another more recent reason for this increasing acceptance is the growing popularity of the internet and social media (Yang 2019, 663).

Nonetheless, this study shows that – contrary to what a great deal of previous studies regarding this topic seem to conclude – there still is a long way to go when it comes to a general acceptance and equal rights for people in same-sex relationships. However, something to be aware of

is the fact that censorship could possibly explain the results to some extent. The fact that a large part of commenters seemed to disapprove of both same-sex relationships and marriage, could be due to the fact that other more positive and approving comments regarding this topic were censored. Besides that, apart from commenter's usernames, there is no background information on the demographics of the commenters themselves. Therefore it is questionable whether the group studied is representative for the entire Chinese population. Despite this, the conclusion can be made based on the analyzed comments within this specific study and can therefore be seen as a fair one.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to answer the research question: ‘How did users of the Chinese social media network Zhihu respond to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan back in 2017?’. To answer this research question, a thematic analysis was used to analyze comments posted on Zhihu within the time period of February 2018 until August 2021.

The analysis of the different themes found within the data revealed that the topic of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan in 2017 was one that was actively discussed within this community. The thematic analysis displayed that the discussion that arose within the comment section could be divided into different themes, namely: criticism towards the Taiwanese government, support of same-sex relationships and doubts about same-sex relationships. This thesis provided a contribution to the already existing literature on the topic by identifying Chinese netizens’ perspectives of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan and the rights of the homosexuals in general. What should be noted though, is that from these findings, we should not generalize it to the entire Chinese society as this is impossible due to for example Chinese online censorship. That is to say that we will never know whether or not there were more comments within this comment section that were deleted due to sensitive content. Additionally, it is safe to say that the people who commented on Zhihu do have certain qualities that cannot necessarily be attributed to the entire population. For instance, we can assume that the commenters are digitally literate and that they are interested enough in this specific topic to have strong opinions about it and to leave comments. Generalization is therefore impossible because of this as well. However, the comments that were available still allowed us to have a distinct idea of how people responded to this news.

To begin with, the comments showed that there was a small majority of users that was rather critical towards same-sex relationships in general and the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan specifically. Especially within the first theme ‘criticism towards the Taiwanese government’, we can find a considerable amount of people with rather negative attitudes towards the decision of the Taiwanese government to legalize same-sex marriage. Additionally, these negative opinions can also be seen in the third theme: ‘doubts about same-sex relationships’. There seems to be a common belief that the increased emphasis on equal rights for same-sex couples is exaggerated and poses a threat to society. These findings are crucial as prior research on this topic, such as by Cho & Kam (2019) and Hildebrandt (2011), generally shows that – although a drastic change in marriage laws is not necessarily something that is predicted – there does exist an increasing acceptance towards same-sex relationships.

Second, something that stood out was that the comment section of the article ‘Why did Taiwan become the first region in Asia where same-sex marriage is legal?’ (为什么台湾成了亚洲第一个同性婚姻合法的地区?) was filled with comments talking about many different topics apart from same-sex marriage. This shows us that Zhihu users saw this specific article as an opportunity to talk about other present-day – and in according to them important – (political) issues. Topics such as cross-strait relations, democracy and the marriage system in general are discussed thoroughly. For example, although cross-strait relations were not a part of the research itself, we did learn a lot about how these netizens regarded this topic. Hence, we could say that the topic of legalizing same-sex marriage in Taiwan brings to light many other issues that are considered as important and urgent by Zhihu users.

However, all things considered, the discussion that arose within the comment section regarding same-sex marriage generally was quite nuanced. Although it indeed seemed that a small majority of commenters were rather critical and skeptical towards the legalization of same-sex marriage, there certainly was a large part of users that seemed to be relatively accepting regarding this topic. According to them, no distinction should be made between homosexuals and heterosexuals. This is in line with what we often see in other literature regarding the topic of same-sex relationships in China. Despite the fact that discrimination against homosexual people still exists in China, homosexuality is not prohibited or actively suppressed and even tolerated occasionally in China (Hildebrandt 2011, 1321).

All in all, we could conclude that there is not a simple answer to the research question of this study. As can be seen in the data, different people interpret the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan in different ways. While part of the commenters are critical and skeptical, another part accepted the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan and did not see anything wrong or problematic with it.

This research contributes to the already existing literature regarding the topic of same-sex marriage in at least two ways. First of all, as the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan is something that happened very recently, there is not much extensive research regarding the topic and on how this affected people in China yet. Previous research has focused on things such as whether same-sex marriage will be legalized in China eventually and on how the state has dealt with the possibility of this and same-sex relationships in general. However, a more personal approach on how people in China really think about the possibility of legalizing same-sex marriage, has lacked. Therefore, my research offers a new perspective in the shape of a more personal approach. Second, I believe this specific topic to now be of even greater importance as current tensions between China and Taiwan are increasing and a unification of the two places is possibly more likely to happen in the near future than ever before. As mentioned before, although cross-strait relations were not the main topic of this research, we have found out that this discussion is very much active among the users of Zhihu. Hence,

this study not only provided us with an idea of how legalization of same-sex marriage currently is perceived in China, but because of the active discussion on cross-strait relations, it also makes you think about how this could develop in case of unification.

In conclusion, as this is arguably one of the first studies of its kind undertaken on Chinese Zhihu posts regarding this topic, it therefore might provide a starting point for future research in the field, which could solve some of this study's limitations.

First of all, the fact that only one Zhihu post with 81 comments was analyzed for this study means that it is not representative for all of Zhihu users' opinion. To obtain a more representative picture, analysis of more posts and a broader time period could be done. Second, as this study is a thematic analysis conducted on an online social media platform, it does not include data on the demographics of the Zhihu users. For example, we do not know anything about the commenter's age, sex, sexual orientation or if they really are from China. For future research, it would be interesting to find out whether these aspects would or would not have any influence on the way people discuss these topics. Another limitation is that – as mentioned here before – censorship could have caused certain comments considered too sensitive to be removed. Future studies could solve some of these limitations by for example conducting an elaborate qualitative research on the demographics of the research participants and by focusing on a greater amount of posts or longer time periods. Some of the limitations could also be solved by conducting interviews instead of using a thematic analysis as the research method. This is because interviews allow us to obtain more personal information on the research participants.

Despite the study's limitations, it has paved the way for further research regarding this topic. This kind of research is very important as a better understanding of things such as same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage is essential when it comes to full acceptance of this group in society. Hopefully one day, research like this will not be as urgent anymore and streets in China will be filled with rainbows too, just like they were in Taipei on 17 May 2019.

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Appendix

Username	Code of the post (ZHIHU POST + number)	Date
弑神者	ZHP01	27-07-2021
全能滑稽	ZHP02	19-07-2021
Porka	ZHP03	13-07-2021
不想取名	ZHP04	03-06-2021
是钊钊鸭	ZHP05	30-05-2021
孤独患者	ZHP06	20-05-2021
孤独患者	ZHP07	20-05-2021
莲蓉蛋黄酥	ZHP08	17-05-2021
帝国兵长	ZHP09	14-05-2021
呆萌	ZHP10	07-05-2021
知乎用户	ZHP11	07-05-2021
Dreky	ZHP12	15-04-2021
辣妈	ZHP13	12-04-2021
Bigbabol	ZHP14	22-03-2021
云烛	ZHP15	18-03-2021
全能滑稽	ZHP16	06-03-2021
Forest.恺	ZHP17	05-03-2021
学校学校牛牛女士	ZHP18	05-03-2021
全能滑稽	ZHP19	22-02-2021
556677	ZHP20	21-02-2021
荷叶	ZHP21	13-02-2021
你帅	ZHP22	04-02-2021
漾之	ZHP23	31-01-2021
花园口火烧连营	ZHP24	22-01-2021
杨涛	ZHP25	30-11-2020
杨涛	ZHP26	30-11-2020
崂山上有蔷薇吗	ZHP27	29-10-2020
田伯光	ZHP28	25-10-2020
Alma-Rao	ZHP29	07-10-2020
弯而不折才有价值	ZHP30	02-10-2020
Forest.恺	ZHP31	20-09-2020
杨翰阳	ZHP32	07-09-2020
Forest.恺	ZHP33	07-09-2020
Enokitus	ZHP34	14-08-2020
cige2013	ZHP35	08-08-2020
亡牌专业的臆害	ZHP36	09-07-2020
like	ZHP37	20-06-2020
blank	ZHP38	15-06-2020
frssegsg	ZHP39	01-06-2020
gaysprit	ZHP40	27-05-2020
邱璐	ZHP41	15-05-2020

张天师	ZHP42	08-05-2020
大大怪	ZHP43	08-05-2020
Enokitus	ZHP44	10-04-2020
o 透明 o	ZHP45	18-03-2020
张元晖	ZHP46	17-03-2020
园紧正	ZHP47	29-02-2020
仕丞	ZHP48	30-12-2019
TRQx	ZHP49	20-08-2019
TRQx	ZHP50	20-08-2019
杨翰阳	ZHP51	14-07-2019
renyuesi	ZHP52	19-06-2019
青藤	ZHP53	09-06-2019
陈春椿山	ZHP54	30-05-2019
gaysprit	ZHP55	25-05-2019
may	ZHP56	25-05-2019
azdb975215	ZHP57	23-05-2019
Bruce 陳	ZHP58	19-05-2019
人间香奈儿	ZHP59	17-05-2019
风葬秋冥	ZHP60	14-03-2019
「已注销」	ZHP61	05-03-2019
喵国带桶泳	ZHP62	05-03-2019
被遗忘权	ZHP63	24-02-2019
旁观者	ZHP64	24-02-2019
小解解	ZHP65	23-02-2019
哈哈镜	ZHP66	21-02-2019
黄少天	ZHP67	21-02-2019
台中王肥宅	ZHP68	17-11-2018
xxf	ZHP69	05-04-2018
Sharon Gao	ZHP70	05-04-2018
松松熊	ZHP71	04-04-2018
Xxf	ZHP72	04-04-2018
早大社科落榜生	ZHP73	31-03-2018
kevin.lu	ZHP74	26-02-2018
小解解	ZHP75	24-02-2018
知乎用户	ZHP76	06-02-2018
知乎用户	ZHP77	05-02-2018
Chaos	ZHP78	04-02-2018
知乎用户	ZHP79	03-02-2018
「已注销」	ZHP80	03-02-2018
「已注销」	ZHP81	02-02-2018
felix fu	ZHP82	02-02-2018
Junyuan Ma	ZHP83	02-02-2018
上古神器	ZHP84	02-02-2018
南蛮子	ZHP85	02-02-2018
达文东	ZHP86	02-02-2018
松松熊	ZHP87	02-02-2018

「已注销」	ZHP88	02-02-2018
你帅	ZHP89	02-02-2018