

China's LGBTQ+ community seize census chance to stand up and be counted

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The once-in-a-decade population survey has enabled same-sex couples to register their status

China's LGBTQ+ community has seized a once-in-a-decade chance to be counted with the launch of the nationwide government census.

More than seven million workers have been going door to door across China this month, on a mission to capture the demographic changes among its 1.4 billion people. Guangzhou-based LGBTQ+ [Rights Advocacy China](#) is calling on same sex couples to declare the status of their relationship. The campaign, under the tag line, "they are not my roommate, they are my partner," aims to get Chinese policymakers to pay attention to their community.

"Usually the LGBTQ+ community in China is invisible in terms of policy making and social life. We hope that through this the government will consider the needs of the LGBTQ+ community as a part of the Chinese population when it makes policies in the future," said Peng Yanhui, director of the group leading the effort. "Through the census this community can be made visible."

When census-takers in Guangzhou came to the door of Ah Qiang, an LGBTQ+ activist, the questioner ticked "other" for Ah Qiang's partner's "relationship to the head of the household." In a space on the form, the census-taker hand-wrote "couple".

While Ah Qiang feels a little upset at labelling the most important person in his life as "other", he is happy that he answered honestly. "It took a lot of courage and I hope others can also speak out proudly rather than hide."

Same-sex couples in China often obfuscate the status of their relationships to others by describing their partners as roommates. According to [a UNDP survey in 2016](#), just 5% of the more than 28,000 people polled had come out to people outside of their families, and less than 15% had told their families.

China decriminalised homosexuality in 1997 and in 2001 it was removed from the official list of psychiatric disorders. China still does not recognise same-sex marriages and last year a spokesperson for [China's legal affairs commission said](#) the rule suited its "national condition and historical and cultural traditions".

Last year Weibo cracked down on any LGBTQ+ content and the year before, the e-commerce site Taobao took down rainbow-themed products. At the end of 2015, content related to homosexuality was banned on Chinese television programmes.

But in the meantime, the Chinese public has grown more supportive of LGBTQ+ rights. The legalisation of same-sex marriage was one of the top requests for changes to China's civil code,

which was passed earlier this year. In [an online survey](#) by the local media company Ifeng, more than 67% of roughly 10 million people online said they supported legalising same sex marriage.

The “they are not my roommate, they are my partner,” campaign has gained traction on social media where dozens of internet users have left comments pledging to declare their status on the census. “Only after we speak can we be seen,” several said, under a WeChat post by the LGBTQ+ rights advocacy group.

“I have decided to cherish the opportunity of this once-in-a-decade census and say bravely that I live with my girlfriend,” another wrote.

It is not clear that the data from their efforts will inform the census. China’s statistics bureau told Reuters that any additional information beyond the predefined responses for the “relationship to head of household” category would not be recorded.

Still, those who came out on the census feel that they have achieved something. Lauren, 26, who works for a tech company in Shanghai and lives with her girlfriend, said: “At first I didn’t feel like I was speaking up when the census-takers came. But now looking back, I think I was quite brave.”

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