

QUEER RESISTANCE

CONTESTING STATE, FAMILY, AND INEQUALITY
IN POST-SOCIALIST CHINA



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Susanne Y.P. Choi



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*For my family, my students, and all those who see the diversity
of love, whose hearts are big enough to include and accept
people different from themselves, and who treat others with
equality and humanity*

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PREFACE

It is estimated that there are around seventy million LGBTQ+ people in China, referred to in official and popular discourse as *tongxinglianzhe* (同性恋者, “homosexual people”), often with derogatory undertones. *L* stands for “lesbians,” most of whom self-identify as “lala” or “les” and are officially described as *nutongxinglianzhe* (女同性恋者). *G* refers to gay men, who may call themselves gay, *ji* (基, a transliteration of “gay”), or *tongzhi* (同志, literally “comrades”), and are officially labeled as *nantongxinglianzhe* (男同性恋者). *B* refers to bisexual people (双性恋者, *shuangxinglianzhe*), *T* to transgender people (跨性别者, *kuaxingbiezhe*), and *Q* to queer people (酷儿, *ku er*).

This population lives in a paradoxical, rapidly changing, and unequal environment. On the one hand, China hosts one of the world’s largest gay dating apps, Blued, along with numerous other LGBTQ+ online platforms. On the other hand, since 2016 the government has intensified censorship of LGBTQ+ content and cracked down on civic organizations serving this community. Scholars in China note that it has become virtually impossible to obtain funding for LGBTQ+ research, while Chinese-language academic publications on the subject face steep odds of passing state censorship. Although strong family norms related to heterosexual marriage and childbearing have long been the major source of pressure on LGBTQ+ people, intergenerational relationships in Chinese families are rapidly changing (Yan 2018), creating spaces for adult children to cope with and resist parental pressures.

Although English-language articles on Chinese LGBTQ+ people have grown outside China, they are concentrated in specialist journals and often take a narrow focus. English-language academic books on gay men (Rofel 2007; Bao 2018; Cummings 2022) and lalas (Engelbrechtsen 2013; Kam 2013) in China mostly draw on experiences from before or around 2015. An exception

is Kong (2023), which includes fieldwork from 2017 to 2021. His study of three Chinese societies (mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) makes an important contribution through its comparative framework, though its coverage of gay mainland Chinese men's everyday experiences is necessarily less extensive. Most books also focus only on gay men or lalas, or on LGBTQ+ people from a specific age cohort or social class, limiting comparisons across gender, class categories and cohorts.

Against this backdrop, this book has three aims: 1) to document the challenges and resistance of LGBTQ+ people; 2) to provide a broad, historically informed overview of how their lives have changed since the economic reforms of the late 1970s; and 3) to foreground how class, gender, age, rural-urban inequalities, and HIV/AIDS status have mediated the pressures they face, the possibilities and forms of their resistance, and the outcomes of such resistance. While the book centers individual and collective predicaments and resistance, it situates them within China's cultural legacy and transformations and within shifting political, social and familial landscapes. It shows that state, economic, social and familial powers work in complex ways to constrain and facilitate LGBTQ+ people's construction of community and identity and their pursuit of intimacy outside the model of heterosexual dating, marriage, and procreation.

The book draws on a ten-year research project (2015 to 2025) that employed in-depth life story interviews, a questionnaire survey, ethnographic observation, and archival and internet research. The resulting dataset is, to my knowledge, the largest qualitative record of LGBTQ+ life in China. It is notable not only for the number of life stories collected but also for their richness and the comprehensiveness of the data on policies and collective actions affecting the community. As a cisgender heterosexual sociologist, I am often struck by respondents' openness in sharing intimate details of their lives. Their willingness seems to stem, at least in part, from an awareness of the state's systematic attempt to muffle their voices and erase their history. In this context, to speak is to resist against silencing and erasure.

With the help of full- and part-time research assistants, I recruited 187 respondents through LGBTQ+ civic organizations (民间组织, *min jian zu zhi*), social media, and snowball referrals. About one-third of the interviews took place between 2015 and 2016, another third in 2018, and the remainder between 2022 and 2025. Fieldwork was interrupted twice, first by the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong, and later by COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021.

The sample includes 56 women, 129 men, and 2 trans men. It also includes 24 respondents with a rural background and 35 respondents without a university or higher education. Among those with a university degree, I further distinguish between those who obtained their degree in China and those who studied overseas. Educational attainment serves as a proxy for class status. Overseas education generally indicates an affluent family background, while higher education levels in China remain a strong predictor of income and life chances (Churchill and Mishra 2018). Because the hukou (household registration) system classifies people as either rural or urban residents and ties access to social benefits to their registered location, a rural-urban comparison is essential to capture the full complexity of LGBTQ+ lives.

Given the recruitment channels, people who have decided to follow a normative lifestyle underscored by heterosexual marriage and procreation would be less likely to participate in the study, although not entirely impossible. Eight respondents say they plan to marry an unknowing heterosexual person. Most participants reject a normative lifestyle. Resistance, in varying forms, emerges as a central theme in their narratives, ranging from overt political actions associated with social movements to everyday acts that refuse, contradict, or subvert dominant norms of heterosexual marriage and procreation. Their resistance thus varies in form, intensity, intentionality, and visibility. It is also often partial—many challenge certain aspects of heterosexuality while reproducing others. The capacity to resist differs across gender, class, and rural-urban lines.

A major debate among researchers of resistance is whether everyday forms of resistance should be considered genuine resistance. Skeptics argue that resistance should be defined narrowly as collective actions such as protests, riots, rebellions, or revolutions (Rubin 1996). Furthermore, the everyday practices of queer people, which often involve the pursuit of privatized and domesticated intimacy, are sometimes viewed by Western queer scholars as assimilation into the normative framework rather than resistance against it (Berlant and Warner 1998; Duggan 2002). In the Chinese context, the everyday strategies of LGBTQ+ people may be regarded more as survival, accommodation, or compromise than resistance.

My response to the first concern is that if the central aim of resistance scholarship is to understand social change, we cannot limit our scope to large-scale political mobilizations. Everyday actions, small, individual, and unorganized, may accumulate into significant social change over time. In authoritarian contexts, where mass mobilization is dangerous, costly, and

difficult, such actions are the most viable form of resistance (Scott 1985). Restricting the definition of resistance to large-scale acts also blinds us to everyday practices that nurture political consciousness and provide the countercultures and repertoires upon which collective actions and movements draw (Kennedy and Davis 1993). That said, I do not mean that resistance can be used to describe any actions. As Hollander and Einwohner (2004) argue, it involves two core elements: action and opposition.

To the second concern, I note that power is seldom singular or monolithic. Even when LGBTQ+ people refuse to marry heterosexually, they may find the social status and privilege accorded to heterosexual intimacy and marriage appealing. The Chinese regime does not rely solely on repression or coercion to govern; it also engineers economic and administrative reforms and cultivates patron-clientelist networks to gain popular support and legitimacy (Dickson 2016; Lee and Zhang 2013). The family functions simultaneously as a source of both stress and support. These complexities make wholesale rejection of family, state, and heterosexual norms uncommon. Resistance, even partial and modest, creates spaces for autonomy and preserves human dignity.

To the third concern, whether an act is radical or transformative depends on its context. In a climate where LGBTQ+ civic organizations are being shut down, shifting from advocacy to service provision can be a refusal to disappear, not an act of cowardice. Emerging from the totalitarian regulation of sexuality during Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the pursuit of domesticity can signal a rejection of political intrusion into private life rather than submission to heteronormativity. In a society with strong family norms, balancing familial expectations with personal sexual autonomy is not obedience devoid of agency (Mahmood 2005) but an effort to honor both familial love (亲情, *qinqing*) and romantic love (爱情, *aiqing*). It also signals a refusal to sacrifice the self entirely for the family, pushing back against a central tenet of authoritarian cultural tradition.

Recognizing the importance of context, chapter 2 traces shifts in state governance of homosexuality and public attitudes, and chapter 3 examines the impact of economic reforms on migration, family, and marriage. These contexts frame the analysis of LGBTQ+ people's community life (chapter 4), identity formation (chapter 5), intimacy (chapter 6), coming out to parents (chapter 7), and marriage practices (chapter 8). They reveal much about the changing nature of power and domination in post-socialist China and about the intersection of multiple forms of inequality. In this sense, the book is as

much about evolving configurations of power and inequalities as it is about resistance. In other words, power and resistance are interdependent, and as Abu-Lughod (1990:41) argues, resistance can therefore serve as a “diagnostic of power.”

While it is beyond the scope of this book to provide an in-depth discussion of the concept of power, I feel that a few words are needed to clarify my positionality in relation to this concept. I adopt Lukes’s (1974) specification of power as the capacity of an individual, group, organization, or institution to condition preferences, set agendas, or shape and determine decision-making. I also incorporate Foucault’s insight that power is not essentially repressive but productive (1978), that it is local and capillary, operating through social practices in everyday life. These two insights reorient me to attend to the politics of everyday life.

At the same time, I concur with Habermas’s critique of Foucault’s theory of power for overgeneralizing his empirical analysis of the early emergence of modern power to all forms of power in modernity, without adequately illustrating how such power was later challenged, revolutionized, and transformed. As Habermas (1987) points out, Foucault neglects “the development of normative structures in connection with the modern formation of power. As soon as Foucault takes up the threads of the biopolitical establishment of disciplinary power, he lets drop the threads of the legal organization of the exercise of power and of the legitimation of the order of domination” (290).

In Habermas’s view, this overgeneralization and omission of later developments lead Foucault to a one-sided theorization of power as a mechanism of domination, rather than also a “mechanism for social integration” based on “values, norms, and processes of mutual understanding” (286). For Habermas, the very process of rationalization that Foucault describes in predominantly negative terms is, in fact, a complex and nonlinear process: While rationalization helps to secure freedom, it also threatens to endanger this very freedom. To resolve this dilemma of modernity, Habermas distinguishes between instrumental rationalization, which is partial, one-sided, and insufficient, and a fuller practical, political rationality that underscores communicative action as the foundation for securing freedom.

Fraser (1989) similarly argues that Foucault subsumes too many different phenomena, including authority, domination, and subjugation, under the concept of power, and that he refuses to differentiate legitimate from illegitimate forms of power. This refusal may stem from Foucault’s treatment of

norms such as reason, right, autonomy, and dignity simply as instruments of domination. The logical conclusion of his analysis, then, is resistance to disciplinary power without clarity on why such power is problematic (since a Foucauldian cannot return to the norms of reason, right, autonomy, or dignity for justification) or for what ends it must be resisted (27).

It will become apparent to readers that the respondents whose life stories form the basis of this book have a rather clear idea of what is wrong with state censorship and repression of homosexuality, the marginalization and stigmatization of homosexuality by heterosexual norms, and the imposition of familial pressure to conform to heterosexual expectations. All these forms of power are perceived as illegitimate because they deny individuals the right to sexual autonomy and self-determination (Plummer 2003; Richardson 2017). Although respondents often disagree on how sexual autonomy should be realized (a normative question) and how it can be achieved (a strategic question), they share a common understanding of the desirability and legitimacy of sexual self-determination.

With this in mind, my empirical analysis of power must therefore also differentiate among the various effects of power and examine how these effects constitute strategies of resistance. It is also imperative that I situate my analysis within China's cultural traditions and their transformation, and the country's specific political and economic contexts. At the same time, I pinpoint the dilemma of modern forms of power, such as those enabled by digital capitalism (chapter 6), as well as the complexities LGBTQ+ people face in navigating the affective and paternalistic dimensions of familial power, in contrast to their ease in rejecting authoritarian parental control (chapters 7 and 8).

Situating China's LGBTQ+ experiences in their specific historical, political, and social contexts does not mean denying multifaceted local, regional, and global engagements. My respondents, whether from the metropolises of Beijing and Shanghai, the new industrial zones of Shenzhen, or small cities and towns, have been impacted by technological advances and the globalization of gay identity categories, lifestyles, and rights claims (Altman 2001). The tightening of state control prompts the Chinese queer diaspora to take on a greater role in preserving community history and advocating for rights (chapter 4). My respondents do not simply emulate their Western counterparts. They critically reflect on and debate the applicability of Western identity categories, challenging the assumptions underlying some rights claims. They indigenize these categories and adjust their politics to suit

their circumstances and local realities. As Lisa Rofel (1999b:453) remarks: “The emergence of gay identities in China occurs in a complex cultural field representing neither a wholly global culture nor simply a radical difference from the West. Rather, Chinese gay identities materialize in the articulation of transcultural practices with intense desires for cultural belonging, or cultural citizenship.”

This remark serves as a rejoinder to the assumption of a unidimensional West-to-the-rest influence. We should also be mindful not to essentialize the West, assuming uniform experiences in different Western countries (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2016). Building on this caution, scholars studying non-Western sexual and gender minorities have stressed the importance of paying attention to the agency of local players and sociopolitical and cultural contexts in contesting the normalizing power of heterosexuality (Manalansan 2003; Boellstorff 2005; Massad 2007). Their pioneering work demonstrates that comprehending global influences and the local articulation of sexuality demands close attention to class and gender inequalities in the national context, addressing the role of different family patterns, and examining interactions between diasporas and local populations. This book builds on and extends this agenda.

Highlighting local specificities does not mean falling into the trap of moral relativism. Most respondents affirm that freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is a human right. Many support equal marriage and adoption rights not out of a personal desire to marry or parent but because these rights symbolize the dismantling of institutionalized stigma and affirm equal citizenship.

Although China’s case is distinct in its history, culture, and sociopolitical contexts, it shares many challenges with LGBTQ+ communities elsewhere. Like many of their counterparts globally, they face the erosion of LGBTQ+ rights because of state backtracking on liberal reforms (Cooley and Nexon 2022; Pauselli and Urzua 2024). Like queer communities elsewhere (Duggan 2002), the Chinese LGBTQ+ community is fractured by widening economic and regional inequalities that marginalize those already disadvantaged by class, gender, and other structures of inequality. These shared challenges underscore the need for critical dialogue across national contexts.

Whether China will follow a trajectory similar to that of some Western countries, winning equal marriage and parental rights and expanding civic freedoms as a result of long-term social movements, seems unlikely in the near future. The Western trajectory occurred in the context of democracies

with independent courts that played decisive roles in granting protection against discrimination and equal rights. The Chinese regime has proven resilient in defending its monopoly of power (Nathan 2003) while severely constraining civil society. What may happen is that the Chinese government will gradually and slowly improve protections for LGBTQ+ people against discrimination or even partially grant them rights enjoyed by heterosexually married people, provided that the LGBTQ+ community stays atomized and weak. Conversely, it may seek to consolidate the heterosexual institution of marriage and once again intervene more directly in the private lives of citizens, particularly in their reproductive decisions. These interventions may unfold amid looming demographic crises of population aging and declining fertility (see chapter 3), which the Chinese state may consider an obstacle to realizing its project of national rejuvenation, embodied in the slogan of the China Dream (Callahan 2013).¹ Which path the state chooses will shape the future of LGBTQ+ people as well as the possibilities and limitations of their collective and everyday resistance.

Before concluding this preface, a brief note on writing style is in order. Although the project spanned ten years, I chose to write the book in the ethnographic present, except for the appendix. I made this choice because the experiences of respondents interviewed in different years show continuity. The appendix is written in the past tense because it describes my actions, the data I collected, the characteristics of the data, and the steps I took to safeguard the confidentiality of my respondents.

Although the chapters form an integral whole, each chapter is written in such a way that it can be read as a standalone text. Readers who are less concerned about how macro-structural and cultural contexts shape the experiences and resistance of LGBTQ+ people in post-socialist China can start reading from Chapter 3.

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I am incredibly fortunate to have support from my family. My parents have always been a source of inspiration. They have an extraordinary capacity to remain hopeful, even in their darkest hours. Knowing that I am writing a book about LGBTQ+ people in post-socialist China, my mother, a seventy-six-year-old woman born and raised in Fujian Province, gifted me a painting of two Chinese women in white Western wedding gowns posing for photos in front of traditional Chinese architecture. Having grown up with little

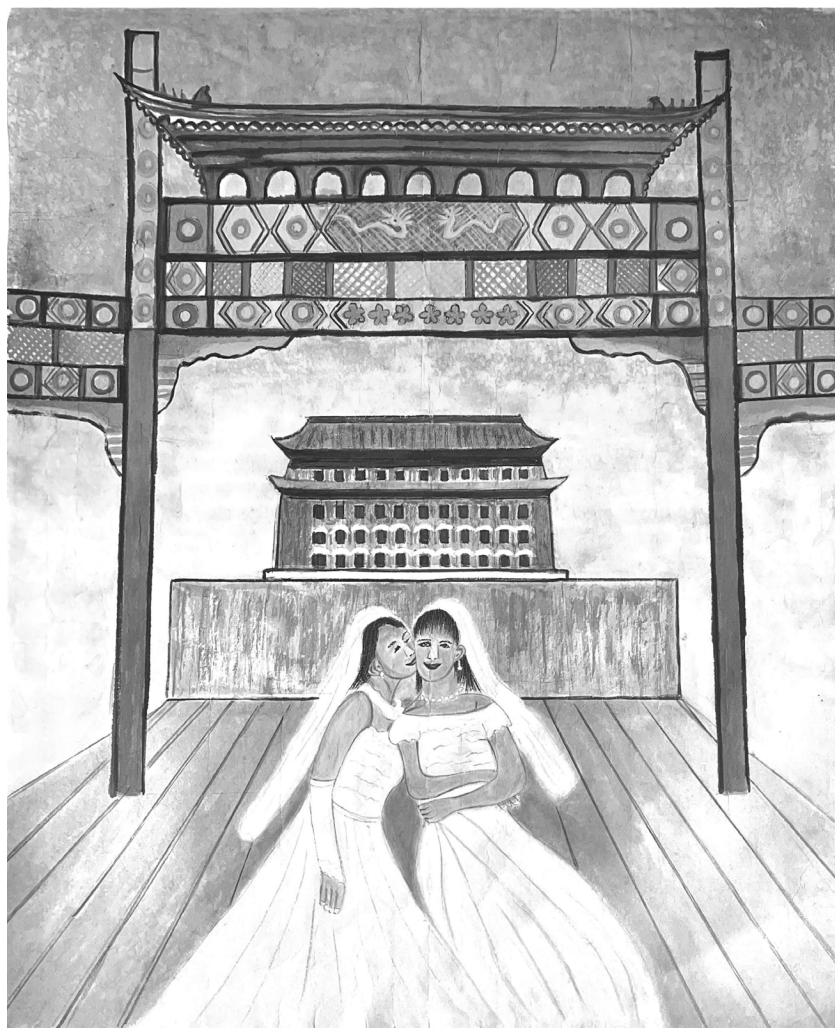


FIGURE 1. Two women in white wedding dresses stand under a traditional Chinese archway, with one gently kissing the other on the cheek. Behind them rises a large historic Chinese building. Photo by author.

exposure to the concept of homosexuality, she told me she understood very little about it. Yet her openness to diverse forms of love and her heartfelt support for my work moved me deeply. I include her painting in this book as a gesture of gratitude and hope.

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In sum, this book is a collective endeavor—but needless to say, all faults are mine.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Although this is an academic book, I want it to be accessible to the average reader. To this end, I avoid jargon as much as possible. Some jargon and Western-origin terms are, however, unavoidable. For these, I provide brief explanations, not to illustrate the theories and academic debates behind them, but to help readers gain a basic grasp of their meanings.

SEXUAL CATEGORY AND IDENTITY

No single term fits the Chinese case perfectly. The term “homosexuality” is the most widely understood in China but carries negative connotations due to state discourses that associate it with Western influence, moral decadence, and pathology. The term “sexual minorities” is widely used in public health research, but some LGBTQ+ people argue that their culture is not a minority culture. The term “LGBTQ+ people” seems most inclusive, although it may obscure indigenous categories such as “tongzhi” (comrades). The term “queer” generally refers to non-normative sexualities and genders. It is inclusive, but not many of my respondents self-identify with it. In this book, I use all five terms to preserve historical context. Overall, I use the terms “LGBTQ+” and “queer” more often because of their inclusivity. When I use the phrase “queer resistance,” I simply refer to resistance by LGBTQ+ people. I also draw on specific Chinese terms in direct quotes. I respect my respondents’ self-identification by presenting their stories as they tell them.

POST-SOCIALIST CHINA

I use the term “post-socialist China” to refer to the period following the start of the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, especially from the 1980s onward. The phrase “post-socialist” does not mean that China has abandoned socialism entirely, but rather that it has moved away from the strict socialist economic model (i.e., state ownership and central planning) that characterized the Maoist era (1949–1976).

The term highlights the coexistence of market reforms, capitalist practices, and continued one-party rule by the Chinese Communist Party. It captures the unevenness of changes across different aspects of Chinese life, as well as the contradictions, ambiguities, and hybridity that these uneven transformations often produce.

HETERONORMATIVITY

This refers to the ideology of assuming that heterosexuality is the default and normal sexual orientation, and that gender is binary and aligned with one’s assigned sex at birth. This ideology shapes social institutions such as the state, the market, and the family to privilege particular forms of heterosexuality and stigmatizes other sexual expressions.

INTERSECTIONALITY

This is a framework for understanding how multiple social identities, such as gender, class, and sexuality, interact to shape individuals’ experiences of oppression or privilege. It highlights that these identities do not exist independently but are interwoven, producing unique forms of disadvantage or advantage. The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to analyze how systems of power compound and intersect in complex ways. Sociologists have developed several related concepts that, like intersectionality, aim to capture the complexity of social identities and power relations. For example, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) develops the concept matrix of domination to describe how multiple forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) are interconnected and structured across individual, cultural, and institutional levels.

ABBREVIATIONS

CPC	Communist Party of China
ICT	information and communication technology
IVF	in vitro fertilization: a reproductive technology in which an egg is removed from a woman's ovaries and fertilized with sperm in a laboratory. The fertilized egg (embryo) is then placed in the woman's womb to develop.
LGBTQ+	those who self-identified as lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), transgender (T), and queer (Q). The "+" is meant to signal inclusivity beyond the core letters. It acknowledges that there are many other identities, orientations, and experiences that fall under the broader queer umbrella but are not captured by "LGBTQ" alone.
PFLAG	Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

GLOSSARY

Pinyin romanization of Chinese characters is italicized. The Chinese LGBTQ+ communities also use English words such as “one” and “zero” to denote specific identities.

ALOHA	A Tinder-like dating app for gay users launched in 2014. It was acquired by BlueCity in 2020 and renamed Finka. At the time of writing, it is the second-largest gay dating app in China.
BLUED	China’s largest gay dating app launched in 2012. In 2023, it had over 60 million registered users worldwide, and over 24 million users in China. In November 2025, the Cyberspace Administration of China ordered Apple and Android app stores to remove both Blued and Finka, although existing users may still be able to access apps already installed on their devices. Blued’s international version, HeeSay, remains available outside China.
BOTTOM	A term to describe the receptive partner in a sexual relationship between men.
CHUGUO (出国, “GOING OUT OF THE COUNTRY”)	Usually refers to international emigration for work or study.
CLOSET	A metaphor used in LGBTQ+ communities to describe a person who has not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity publicly.
COME OUT	The act of revealing one’s LGBTQ+ sexual orientation or gender identity to others.

<i>DANWEI</i> (单位)	A term referring to work units in China, which historically controlled many aspects of a person's life, including housing, health care, and even the choice of marital partner and the possibility of divorce.
FINKA	Aloha's successor.
FULLY COME OUT	When an individual has disclosed their LGBTQ+ sexual orientation or gender identity in all areas of life, including family, friends, the workplace, and society at large.
<i>GONG</i> (攻, "ATTACK")	Insertive or dominant partner in a same-sex relationship, particularly among gay men. It is the equivalent of "top" in Western LGBTQ+ terminology and is often associated with masculinity or a more assertive role in the relationship.
H	Meaning halfway between T and P, an androgynous identity adopted by some lesbians in China.
HUKOU (户口)	China's household registration system, which ties individuals to a registered locality and links this status to access to social services such as education, health care, and employment.
IRON T (铁T)	A term used by lesbians to describe a highly masculine-presenting tomboy (T), with the word "iron" emphasizing toughness.
<i>JI</i> (基)	The Mandarin transliteration of the word "gay."
THE L (RELΛ)	A social media app initially called Rela, later rebranded as The L. It is one of China's leading platforms for lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, providing spaces for dating, friendship, and community building.
LALA (拉拉)	A colloquial term for lesbian women in China, similar to "les" (a short form of "lesbian") in English.
LES	A short form of "lesbian."
LESPARK	A social networking app in China for lesbian users.
LOW	A derogatory term used to describe someone or something as having low <i>suzhi</i> (human quality). It refers to people perceived as lacking sophistication, taste, or social status.
ONE	A numerical slang term used to represent the insertive role in a same-sex relationship, especially among gay men.
P	Derived from the Mandarin romanization of the word 婆 (<i>po</i>), which literally means "woman." It refers to the more feminine partner in a lesbian relationship and is the Chinese equivalent of "femme."

PARTIALLY COME OUT	When a person selectively discloses their LGBTQ+ identity to certain people or groups while keeping it private from others.
PUBLIC SECURITY (公安, <i>GONG AN</i>)	The Chinese equivalent of the police.
RAINBOW	A symbol of LGBTQ+ pride and diversity, representing inclusion and equality.
SHOU (受, “RECEPTIVE”)	The counterpart to <i>gong</i> , referring to the receptive partner in a same-sex relationship. It is equivalent to “bottom” in Western LGBTQ+ discourse.
SUZHİ (素质)	A discourse about a person’s quality that is often used to justify exclusion based on class, place of origin, or social status.
T	Possibly derived from the English word “tomboy.” It refers to the more masculine partner in a lesbian relationship and is akin to “butch” in the Western context.
TONGXINGLIAN	Its direct English translation means “homosexual love.” It is a term the CPC inherited from Republican China (1912–1949).
TONGZHI (同志, “COMRADE”)	This term was first reclaimed by gay men in Hong Kong and later adopted by LGBTQ+ communities in China as a more positive identity category compared to <i>tongxinglian-zhe</i> (同性恋者, “homosexuals”).
TOP	The counterpart to “bottom,” referring to the insertive partner in a sexual relationship between men.
WECHAT	A popular instant messaging, social media, and payment app used by over one billion Chinese.
YOUXIU (优秀, “OUTSTANDING AND EXTRAORDINARY”)	This term is argued in this book to represent an intensified discourse of suzhi.
ZERO	The receptive partner in sex, who is believed to be the more feminine partner in a gay relationship. It is the Chinese equivalence of “bottom” in the Western LGBTQ+ context.
ZERO-POINT-FIVE	A numerical slang term referring to someone who does not identify exclusively as one or zero but instead switches between roles depending on preference or context. It is similar to the concept of “vers” (versatile) in Western LGBTQ+ terminology.

INTRODUCTION

LGBTQ+ Life Stories

CAIHONG (INTERVIEWED IN 2018), A twenty-three-year-old female MA student in New York, was born into an upper-middle-class family and raised in Beijing. She never feels that people pay much attention to her sexuality. The only child of a manager (mother) and a freelance lawyer (father), she came out to her parents at thirteen when she and her female classmate fell in love. Her parents did not take the relationship seriously, regarding it as a “jest” and her girlfriend as “just a very good female friend.” Neither did the affair raise any suspicion among teachers and classmates. Caihong later became an active member of her university’s LGBTQ+ student society. Upon learning about her activism, her parents did not dissuade her, aside from reminding her to “be careful” (regarding possible intervention on the part of the university or government). In response, Caihong and her activist classmates acted within the confines of the university campus, as crossing the line of permissible activism might bring serious consequences. Caihong currently cohabits with her girlfriend in New York. She wants to return to China after completing her studies, but she leaves her options open; if the Chinese government’s tightening control over LGBTQ+ civic organizations continues, she may stay in the United States.

Zhenzhu (interviewed in 2023), a twenty-eight-year-old lala, grew up in a small town in central China. She left home to become a migrant worker at sixteen and fell in love with her girlfriend soon after. After they had been together for two years, she came out to her parents. They did not take her coming out or her relationship seriously, but soon forced her to move back home and find a husband. After discussions with her girlfriend, it was agreed that she would have a nominal (形婚, *xinghun*, sometimes referred to as a “contract” or “cooperative”) marriage with a gay man and that when

a child conceived through artificial insemination was born, the two would divorce and the husband would have sole custody. However, he and his family refused to look after the child because it was a girl. After Zhenzhu became a single mother, her parents financially supported her and her daughter and assisted with childcare. Zhenzhu, her daughter, and her same-sex partner now live with her partner's parents, and her parents visit them regularly.

Chang (interviewed in 2018), a thirty-two-year-old man, migrated from Shanghai to North America with his boyfriend in 2014. The two met via a dating app in 2008 and moved in together. Although their relationship went well, they felt constrained by the social stigmatization of homosexuality in China. Because they want to live in a “gay-friendly” society, they migrated under a student visa to North America. They did not disclose their sexuality to their parents before moving, telling them that their migration was to improve their career prospects and to find a place with less air pollution and more social security. Their parents paid their tuition fees, and Chang and his partner formally registered for marriage in 2015. After graduating in 2016, they bought a house together, again with their parents' financial support. In spring 2017, Chang invited his parents to visit, and he came out to them. To his surprise, they responded calmly; his mother had long suspected that he was a homosexual. Her primary concern was to ensure that he had joint ownership of the house. His father's concern was that he should be the head of his new family. Chang's partner came out to his parents in the same year; he received his mother's full blessing, but his father was ambivalent. Chang and his partner obtained permanent residency in North America in 2018. They arranged for their parents to meet each other and travel with them. Because Chang and his partner have no siblings, they plan to apply for their parents to join them in North America, where they will have access to better public health care.

Jun (interviewed in 2024), a divorced man in his mid-forties and with two adult children, was born and raised in a village in southwestern China. When he was twelve years old, he engaged in sexual play with an eighteen-year-old boy who lived next door. Despite being aroused by good-looking men, Jun did not give it much thought and, at nineteen, he married a woman. He began to have sex with men when his daughter was five years old. His desire for men was greatest when he had fights with his wife. For many years, he maintained relationships with two to three regular same-sex partners, all of whom lived in his area. They socialized, visited each other's homes, and were introduced to each other's parents and wives. When they wanted to have sex, they traveled to hostels in nearby cities. Jun says that his divorce

ten years ago had nothing to do with his affairs with men but resulted from other conflicts with his wife. He says that he and his friends have always been hiding, unable to show themselves openly. In front of friends, they pretend to be “normal” and to like women, while deep inside they feel a strong sense of rejection. For this reason, Jun considers coming out to heterosexual people impossible. He complains that, unlike big cities where there is a wide range of places exclusively for people like him to hang out and meet, in his hometown, *ji* can only meet at karaoke bars, teahouses, and mahjong houses, where they need to stay vigilant about their demeanors and discussions. After his divorce, his mother and relatives tried to help him find a new wife. He told them he already had a girlfriend. After his mother passed away, the pressure to remarry disappeared. Jun says that he definitely will not remarry, despite often feeling a sense of emptiness and loneliness (*kongxu jimo*). He laments the difficulty of finding a long-term, committed same-sex partner. Even if he could, he rules out any possibility of cohabiting with a partner. He wants to maintain a “normal way of living” in front of his children and family. Jun now mostly socializes with other gay men, saying that he can act without reservations (*meiyou guji*) with them. He also uses the commercial venue he owns (I am not revealing the exact nature of his venue, to protect his identity) as a key meeting place for other gay men, including migrant workers who return home during breaks and festive seasons.

CHANGES, HETEROGENEITY, AND RESISTANCE

Several decades ago, the kinds of possibilities my respondents now describe would have been inconceivable: Caihong’s autonomy as a lala, the parental support and acceptance eventually received by Zhenzhu and her partner, Chang and his now-husband’s ability to capitalize on transnational mobility to gain sexual rights and freedom, and Jun’s network of gay and bisexual men. Upon coming to power in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) declared homosexuality a form of bourgeois Western decadence inconsistent with the new socialist values (Honig 2003); as a term, it was erased from public discourse (Evans 1997; Sang 2003). During the Cultural Revolution (between 1966 and 1976), homoerotic behaviors were severely punished (Kang 2022), and between 1979 and 1997, the Chinese government regularly used the law of hooliganism to arrest men accused of engaging in homosexual behavior (Worth et al. 2019).

Socialist China was therefore one of the world's largest closets, where an estimated seventy million nonheterosexuals lived lives characterized by secrecy, social isolation, and heterosexual passing (Li and Wang 1992; He 2001; Wan 2001). Marrying a straight person used to be the only option for the majority of gay men and lesbians (Li 2002); Liu and Zhu (2020) estimated that 90 percent of nonheterosexual men in China were married to women. Gay activist Wan Yanhai (2001) observed that until the 1980s, all lesbians and gay men were compelled to lead double lives. He conducted an informal survey in Beijing in 1993 and concluded that over 90 percent of lesbians and gay men in mainland China have lived as heterosexuals or bisexuals.

The stories of Caihong, Zhenzhu, Chang, and Jun show newly earned autonomy and acceptance and a growing determination to pursue a non-normative lifestyle. Among the 187 respondents interviewed for this book, 155 (83 percent) are either fully or selectively open with straight friends and colleagues, and 103 (55 percent) are fully or selectively open with family members; only 10 (5 percent) remain completely closeted to heterosexual people. All but 8 (4 percent) oppose marrying a heterosexual person. Seventy-six (41 percent) are in a dating or cohabiting relationship with a same-sex partner, and 8 (4 percent) are in a same-sex marriage.

Even taking into account that my sample is not random and that those who have chosen a normative life trajectory are less likely to participate in the research, these figures are not negligible. The changes they represent are impressive. These trends toward growing visibility and autonomy are consistent with data from a 2015 national survey of 18,088 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (United Nations Development Program 2016).

The UNDP survey shows that the percentage of LGBTI people marrying a straight person is rapidly decreasing. While 53.4 percent of LGBTI respondents born in the 1960s or earlier are married, the corresponding percentages for those born in the 1970s and 1980s are 42.7 percent and 13.5 percent, respectively. Although the majority of the earlier cohorts marry heterosexually (like Jun), new nonnormative marriage arrangements are increasingly practiced by younger cohorts. These include nominal marriage between a gay man and a lesbian, to give the impression that both parties are heterosexual (like Zhenzhu) (Engebretsen 2013; Kam 2013; Choi and Luo 2016), and same-sex marriage registered abroad (like Chang). According to the survey, nominal marriage is practiced by 13.2 percent of married LGBTI individuals

and same-sex marriage by 2.6 percent. The survey also indicates that over half of those canvassed are either fully open or selectively open about their sexual orientation in family and school settings. Furthermore, only 1.2 percent agree that homosexuality is abnormal and that homosexual tendencies should be corrected. This suggests a high level of rejection of societal stigmatization of homosexuality as abnormal.

These figures reflecting progress, however, may mask significant variations across social classes, gender, and rural-urban divides. Caihong's experience is different from that of her working-class counterpart Zhenzhu. Chang's transnational life trajectory and Jun's rural experience create different options and imaginaries for what a nonnormative lifestyle can look like and what is accessible. This reminds us that, even if there is noticeable change and progress, it is uneven across groups. I unravel this unevenness by first analyzing LGBTQ+ people's shared challenges, such as coming to terms with their sexual orientation, making decisions about whether to come out to parents, and resisting marriage pressure, in each chapter. I then illustrate the experiences of respondents across gender, class, age, rural-urban background, and HIV/AIDS status, whenever data are available. I further draw on the insights of intersectionality¹ by analyzing the mutual constitution of different structures of inequality and the ways in which multiple identities intersect to generate compounded disadvantages as well as advantages (chapter 3).

This analytical strategy uncovers the heterogeneity of experiences among LGBTQ+ people. It exemplifies how intersecting structures of inequality shape the pressures different groups face. This is crucial, as China's Gini coefficient,² an indicator of income inequalities, shows rapidly growing inequalities. Its Gini coefficient was estimated at 0.28 in 1981, but increased to 0.49 in 2007 (Li et al. 2013; Whyte 2014) and remained at 0.47 in 2021 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2022). The main drivers of growing income inequalities include regional differences and rural and urban disparities (Jain-Chandra et al. 2018). By linking resource inequalities to capacities for resisting the claims and demands of heterosexual norms, this approach highlights variations in the effectiveness of resistance while ensuring that the predicaments of the most disadvantaged are recognized and given a voice.

While my respondents' life stories showcase progress and heterogeneity, they also illuminate how they oppose heterosexual hegemony. This opposition, however, can feel limited and partial. Although some LGBTQ+ people challenge social stigmatization by joining collective actions, they remain

behind the invisible line drawn by the state (e.g., Caihong). As this book argues, their limitations need to be contextualized within China's restrictive political context. Although the Chinese government decriminalized and de-pathologized homosexuality in 1997 and 2001 respectively, it has not granted equal marriage and parental rights to LGBTQ+ people. The country also has no legislation prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Homosexuality continues to be stigmatized, with some national surveys showing that over 70 percent of the population considers it immoral (Wang et al. 2024). Since 2016, the Chinese state has increased censorship of homosexual content in the media and intensified its crackdown on LGBTQ+ civic organizations (Dian 2024). When even minor forms of dissent can carry the grave consequences of forced disappearance and prolonged imprisonment (Zheng 2015), the activism of Caihong and others like her is far from trivial. In a society that continues to stigmatize homosexuality and lacks protections against discrimination (Hildebrandt 2012; Wang 2023), the pursuit of same-sex pleasure and intimacy, while private, individual, and often clandestine, is clearly oppositional.

Having said that, this is not to deny that their opposition also appears partial. It challenges certain norms of heterosexuality while embracing or reproducing others. For example, nominal marriage gives LGBTQ+ people such as Zhenzhu spaces to continue their relationships. It parodies the performative nature of heterosexual marriage and undermines its moral authority. However, it may also reinforce the hegemony of heterosexuality if the choice of nominal marital partners follows the logic of heterosexual marriage (Gui and Meng 2023), or if such marriages subject lalas to gendered expectations and reproductive pressures characteristic of heterosexual marriage (Engebretsen 2013; Kam 2013; Choi and Luo 2016). While creating a family outside of heterosexual marriage and procreation, Chang and his partner embrace monogamy and middle-class domesticity. According to Duggan (2002), their actions reflect the normalization of heterosexual norms in the homo world (homonormativity) rather than a challenge to these norms. Even though Jun refuses a normative lifestyle, he insists on remaining in the closet and leading a double life.

The book contends that the partial nature of these forms of resistance needs to be analyzed in relation to power, which is not singular. It does not come from one source, take a single form, or operate in one direction. It is diffuse and operates through the political, economic, and cultural. It often creates

paradoxical effects. It co-opts while it represses. While censoring homosexual content, the Chinese state allows token “diversity” in consumer culture. As it cracks down on some LGBTQ+ civic organizations, it permits others to continue operating if they focus on public health, HIV/AIDS prevention, and family harmony. As such, the state co-opts LGBTQ+ organizing into its public health and social stability projects. Although the state has become increasingly hostile toward the LGBTQ+ community in recent years, its economic reforms since the late 1970s have increased their autonomy and access to alternative identities and lifestyles. These reforms reduced individuals’ and families’ reliance on the state (Davis and Harrell 1993). Its opening-up policies connect Chinese LGBTQ+ communities with regional and global queer movements, identity categories, and rights claims (Rofel 2007; Kam 2013). Increased internal and international migration weakens direct parental oversight of adult children’s sexuality, allowing many LGBTQ+ people to escape constraining familial and social environments and gain autonomy to pursue nonnormative lifestyles (Liu 2019; Kam 2020; Choi 2022; Martin 2022; Luo et al. 2023; Yang 2024). The state’s modernization project also ushers in a process of individualization, which fundamentally changes intergenerational power dynamics in the Chinese family. Compared to earlier generations, those born in the 1970s and after appear to have more leeway to assert individual desires over familial obligations. Yet the Chinese path to individualization is different from that of the West: a democratic welfare state based on notions of citizenship has not emerged in China to replace the family as a safety net for individuals (Yan 2010). Instead, intergenerational relationships within the Chinese family have been reworked to retain their central role in providing care and support, particularly for younger generations (Yan 2021).

These macro forces work in complex ways to repress and produce specific forms of desire. It is within the complex workings of power, such as the shifting state governance of homosexuality (chapter 1) and the impact of economic reforms on migration, intergenerational relationships, and marriage (chapter 2), that the limited and partial nature of queer resistance becomes legible. In the next section, I illustrate the contentious and complex workings of queer resistance, situating the discussion within broader debates about what counts as resistance, how to study it, and what insights about power research on resistance can offer. This is followed by a discussion of how this book contributes to research on changing nonnormative sexuality and Chinese society. The chapter then presents the organization of the book.

As Hollander and Einwohner (2004) show, while scholars identify resistance in a wide range of behaviors and settings, it generally includes two core components: action and opposition. Actions counted as resistance include large-scale, collective, and organized actions such as protests, social movements, rebellions, and revolutions. Since the 1980s, scholars have extended the concept to individual and everyday behaviors. For example, Scott (1985) argues that the gossip and jokes of Malaysian peasants constitute a form of resistance as they undermine the symbolic domination of landlords. Ong (1987) interprets incidents of spirit possession among young Malay women working in export-oriented factories as resistance against capitalist discipline and patriarchal authority. She argues that when women experienced spirit possession, they screamed, fainted, or became uncontrollable. These disrupted the assembly line, halted production, and challenged managerial authority. Similarly, Pun (2005) suggests that episodes of screaming in dormitories by female factory workers in South China represent everyday resistance, as they express suffering under exploitation and break the silence of domination. For both Ong and Pun, such acts are hidden scripts of resistance.

In other words, the concept of resistance has been expanded to cover oppositional actions encompassing a wide range of everyday behaviors, including but not limited to questioning, objecting, and challenging, opposing, sabotaging, and fighting, as well as refusing cooperation, rejecting domination, disrupting, defying, countering, and subverting. The target of opposition can be an individual (e.g., a parent), an organization (e.g., the government), or a norm (e.g., related to heterosexuality). Oppositional acts vary in intensity, visibility, and intentionality. For example, questioning has a lower intensity than fighting, with many other acts falling in between. Compared with disruption and open defiance, sabotage and refusing cooperation are often much less visible to the target of resistance. Some acts (e.g., questioning or fighting) can be impulsive or reactive, while others, such as refusing cooperation (e.g., through contracting a nominal marriage) and sabotaging matchmaking meetings arranged by parents, may have a clear goal and require strategic planning.

The extension of the concept of resistance to everyday acts, however, has proven contentious. Tilly (1991: 601), for example, argues that many minor acts considered by scholars to be everyday resistance may just be attempts “of pursuing personal agendas by maneuvering among obstacles put in place

by other people.” Rubin (1996) criticizes that studies of everyday resistance often disregard questions of “consciousness, intent, collectivity, and explicit engagement of broad structures of power” (238). He argues that the term should be reserved for “actions that have some degree of consciousness and collectivity about them, as well as some explicit attention to broad structures of domination” (239). On the one hand, he acknowledges that everyday resistance holds the potential to illuminate how ordinary people can, in some instances, become significant historical actors and contribute to the broader transformation of power by chipping “away gradually at structures of power, shape the course of historical change, constitute crucial nurturing grounds for other forms of political action, and remake local power relations in ways that affect process of domination” (243).

On the other hand, he laments that instead of illuminating the potential of everyday resistance, existing research often exaggerates its historical and political effects and insufficiently acknowledges its limited scope and contradictory effects in relation to power. He faults scholars of everyday resistance for taking the link between individual and collective resistance for granted and sidestepping questions about the contexts and pathways through which everyday acts may nurture political consciousness and organizational capacities for larger political actions. Gupta (2001), on the other hand, argues that the petty acts scholars interpret as everyday resistance might simply reflect the desperation of powerless people and their survival strategies or may be exaggerated by the powerful to justify their routine repression of the powerless.

I do not agree that resistance should be limited to actions that are collective and have explicit goals of opposing broad structures of domination. Kennedy and Davis (1993) show how, between the 1930s and early 1960s, working-class lesbians in Buffalo, New York, carved out bars, networks, and cultural practices that sustained a community under conditions of stigma, social discrimination, and police brutality. When butches (lesbian women who embrace a masculine role) adopted masculine clothing, behavior, or self-presentation, they did not typically have a clear feminist or political consciousness about dismantling patriarchy or altering gender structures. Their actions were strategies for survival, recognition, and desire within the local bar world and working-class lesbian community. However, their everyday practices of masculinity *de facto* contested mainstream gender norms. As Kennedy and Davis (1993) argue, their practices had broader political consequences: the alternative culture, identities, and networks they created laid the groundwork for later collective movements. The bar culture, dress codes,

and mutual support systems they built provided a repertoire of practices and solidarities that later feminist and gay liberation movements drew upon.

Similarly, one may regard Zhenzhu, Chang, and Jun's refusal to submit to parental and societal pressure to marry heterosexually, their formation of families and procreation outside heterosexual models, and their creation of alternative spaces for queer sociability as pursuits of personal agendas. However, through these practices, they contribute to the emergence of alternative identities, communities, and cultures that stand in opposition to compulsory heterosexuality. These alternative spaces and communities may harbor latent political potential and form "part of the continuity of struggle" with open and collective confrontation at its end (Tilly 1991: 601).

Having said that, I concur with Rubin (1996) that studies of everyday resistance need to (1) contextualize it and carefully differentiate practices that reproduce power and those that change power; and (2) specify the pathways through which small acts may add up to engender broader changes (245). These two insights are incorporated into my analysis throughout the book. I introduce the concept of partial resistance, referring to forms of dissent that are limited in scope, challenging certain norms while upholding others, or limited in depth, operating through constrained, cautious, or ambivalent practices rather than radical rupture. Using this concept, I examine how, in their collective efforts to challenge social stigmatization of and legal discrimination against homosexuality (He 2001; Wan 2001; Huang 2023; Ren and Gui 2024), LGBTQ+ organizations strategize against the complex workings and evolution of state control. In their everyday efforts to resist societal labeling of homosexuality as abnormal, immoral, or pathological, LGBTQ+ people draw on neoliberal discourses of *suzhi* (human quality) and *youxiu* (being outstanding) to assert the legitimacy of their desires (chapters 3 and 4), thereby reproducing citizenship hierarchies based on class and regional credentials. In their pursuit of nonheterosexual intimacy, LGBTQ+ people challenge heterosexuality but also borrow its ideals, such as monogamy, class homophily, and gender hypergamy (chapter 5).

I also map how everyday resistance and collective community efforts are linked. For example, while coming to terms with one's sexual orientation is an individual journey, this journey is enmeshed with the broader process of individualization. While adopting a suitable identity label is an individual choice, people draw on indigenous, regional, and global categories. When LGBTQ+ people critically engage with these categories, they often indigenize or subvert them. They contribute to the diversification and vibrancy

of an alternative cultural landscape and counterpublic (Fraser 1990). While coming out to parents may be an individual decision, LGBTQ+ people draw on others' experiences and learn skills online to increase the likelihood of parental acceptance. They also share their own experiences, hoping to help others. When LGBTQ+ people come out to their parents, it is an individual assertion of the legitimacy of nonnormative desire and resistance against parental pressure to conform to heteronormativity. When they share their coming-out experiences online, they participate in a collective effort to challenge social stigmatization and discrimination. As chapter 7 shows, nominal marriage is no longer just an individual practice but an alternative, albeit contentious, repertoire of resistance. LGBTQ+ communities have created numerous platforms with millions of subscribers for debating the desirability of this form of marriage, for helping other LGBTQ+ people search for suitable nominal partners, and for discussing how such marriages should be conducted to minimize risk and achieve goals.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) argues that the most interesting insights to emerge from studies of resistance are "a greater sense of the complexity of the nature and forms of domination" (41). The forms of resistance enacted by LGBTQ+ people reveal much about changes in the Chinese regime and about the key agent that enforces authoritarian cultural traditions: the Chinese family. The findings align with Foucault's insight that power is not always or essentially repressive; it also produces forms of pleasure. As Rofel (2007) points out, economic reforms engineered by the Communist Party-state since the late 1970s legitimate a specific form of queer desire, which is at once neoliberal and cultural. The everyday resistance uncovered in this book further illustrates how LGBTQ+ people are caught up in new webs of political, economic, social, and familial authority and domination. The multiple dimensions of state governance create recurrent dilemmas for LGBTQ+ activists—whether to survive and become part of the state's tool kit of control or to continue resisting at the risk of exclusion, marginalization, or even imprisonment and disappearance.

The effects of power are often contradictory. Market reforms have increased sexual freedom (Pan 2006; Farrer 2002). At the same time, they have also increased precarity in employment and care, as well as competition over housing and education. This has created new economic foundations for intergenerational interdependency (Whyte 2004), giving parents leverage to control and influence their adult children's marriage and sexual matters (Choi and Luo 2016; Lai and Choi 2021). Even though digital capitalism has

greatly facilitated access to potential sex partners, many gay men feel trapped in commodified and intensely competitive gay dating apps. They lament that these apps create standards of desirability that are out of reach for many (see chapter 5).

The Chinese family does not only make claims; it also provides crucial economic and emotional support. While respondents continue to allude to certain elements of the filial norms and appreciate the love and care their parents give them, this same love and care shape (and limit) the options they pursue, resulting in many refraining from mounting outright resistance against their parents. The Chinese family as an institution has also undergone major transformations. As I argue in chapter 2, a new intergenerational contract has emerged to redefine parent–adult child relationships. For many respondents, economic interdependence, emotional bonding, and care, rather than filial obligations, bind them to their parents and shape the forms of their resistance. As chapter 6 illustrates, whether to come out to parents is closely tied to self-care and care about and for parents’ feelings. The increased significance of emotional bonding relative to filial obligation in shaping parent–adult child relationships (Liu 2023) reflects the modernization of Chinese family life. It also produces new forms of power and sway. Taken together, these observations highlight how transformations in the Chinese family both draw on cultural legacies and generate new dynamics of intimacy, obligation, and power. They invite us to reconsider the usefulness of prominent theoretical frameworks for modernization and the transformation of intimacy (Giddens 1992) for making sense of these changes. In the next section, I examine the strengths and limitations of dominant Western theories of sexuality and queer resistance. I also discuss how this book contributes to sexuality and queer studies, and the emergent literature on LGBTQ+ people in China.

REVISITING EXISTING THEORIES

Modernity and Changing Sexuality

Theories of modernity have shaped our thinking about the transformation of sexuality. For example, Giddens (1992) argues that increased self-reflexivity and autonomy resulting from detraditionalization have created space for new forms of sexuality that are less constrained by traditional norms but instead center on individual identity and choice. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) aver that economic and work flexibilization, educational opportunities and

mobility, the rise of the welfare state, technological advancement, and shifts in cultural values have led to accelerated detraditionalization and individualization, which in turn dilute the influence and structure of the conventional family. This contributes to the democratization of intimacy and sexuality. These theories pioneer our understanding of how seemingly individual and biological sexual desires and identities are in fact shaped by broader societal and historical processes.

At the same time, scholars criticize modernization theorists for overstating the extent of such transformation. Gross (2005), for example, argues that while formal norms (e.g., those regulative of gender roles) may erode, emotional ideals and cultural understandings related to love, commitment, and emotional closeness have persisted. This gives rise to the coexistence of modernity (e.g., same-sex unions) and tradition (same-sex marriage that continues to aspire to be monogamous). Jamieson (1999) suggests that, rather than being “pure relationships” based on choice and equality as claimed by Giddens, many intimate real-world relationships are structured by gender inequalities. My data are consistent with Gross’s argument, which shows that instead of traditional institutions being “swept away” as claimed by Giddens (1992), institutions such as the family are being reworked. Familial norms centering on filial piety are no longer rigid principles guiding action; they now serve as “normative raw material” (Scott 1985: 309) and “tool kits” that individuals mobilize to forge “lines of action” (Swidler 1986: 273) and to legitimize decision-making (see chapters 4 to 6).

Smart and Shipman (2004) caution against the assumption implicit in dominant modernization theories of the universality of Western individualism. Even though Yan (2018) builds his theory of neo-familism on Giddens’s (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995, 2002) theory of individualization, he acknowledges the emergence of a specific Chinese path. According to him, the Chinese path to individualization has in major ways been shaped by the state, which created the conditions for individuals to make choices while simultaneously constraining those choices through policies and institutions, and infusing them with cultural and ideological content. This produces a model distinct from the West, which dis-embedded individuals from traditional structures such as kinship and family and re-embedded them within markets and the welfare state.

The Party-state in socialist China attempted to replace the family with the Party as the core anchor of individual loyalty and dependence, for example through collectivization between 1953 and the early 1980s. The

state introduced marketization and privatization in the late 1970s to address numerous problems, including long-term economic underdevelopment arising from collectivization. It has since retreated from core welfare provision, leaving the family as the last safety net, while maintaining a tight political grip on society.

This different path to individualization creates very different contexts for understanding the negotiation of nonnormative sexuality. For example, scholars in the West have paid scant attention to parental roles in the formation of queer identity (Cass 1979). As this book will illustrate, this omission limits the applicability of prominent theories of sexual identity formation in the Chinese context. While scholars of homosexuality in the West emphasize the so-called chosen family (Weston 1991) or family of choice (Weeks et al. 2001), scholars of LGBTQ+ lives in post-socialist China consistently observe the importance of the family of origin, particularly parental roles. These are not simply different research foci between the West and China; they suggest the need for incorporating fully the role of the family of origin in shaping identity in different life stages.

Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) are also criticized for paying insufficient attention to class variations within a national context. Empirical studies on gay men and lesbian women in Western countries show the persistence of social class in shaping their identity negotiation (Skeggs 1997), life chances (McDermott 2011), community participation, and intimate relationship negotiation. For example, Heaphy (2011) argues that class and sexual identities are mutually constitutive. Although the gay men he interviewed did not identify themselves through their social class position, he shows that their lived experiences suggested the influence of social class, as evidenced in their economic resources, the areas they lived in, and the tolerance (or lack thereof) of their neighbors toward them.

Binnie (2011) and Taylor (2007) argue that commercial queer spaces are often designed with middle-class aesthetics in mind, excluding working-class sexual minority members who do not have the appropriate habitus or capital. Chasin (2000) and Hennessy (2017) highlight the conquest of consumerism over gay spaces, identities, lifestyles, and movements. Kennedy and Davis (1993) document how class shaped the ways working-class and middle-class lesbian women in Buffalo expressed their identities and constructed community, with the former adopting a more public and confrontational approach than the latter. Finally, Carrillo (2020) shows that class molds sexuality in the context of Mexican queer migration to the United States. He demonstrates

that unequal economic resources and cultural capital determined the motivation to migrate, the ability to integrate into gay communities post-migration, and relationships with American partners, with working-class gay men finding themselves disadvantaged on all counts.

Echoing these empirical studies, this book affirms the salience of class in shaping the challenges, capacities, forms, and outcomes of LGBTQ+ resistance. It advances this line of inquiry. Unlike existing research, which tends to focus on either members of a single gender category (e.g., gay men) or a single class background (e.g., working class), this book adopts a broader comparative approach. In so doing, it illustrates how multiple structures of power may mutually constitute each other and produce compounding disadvantages and advantages.

Queer Scholarship

What is emancipation? Whose life experiences count? These questions loomed over the writing of this book. For many Western queer scholars, “true” sexual emancipation can only be achieved by continuously publicizing and centering queer sexuality in politics and public life. From Berlant and Warner (1998) to Duggan (2002), the privatization of sexual lives and intimacy is viewed as a retreat from the collective mobilization that took place against the hegemony of heterosexual culture. It is also viewed as a defeat instigated by neoliberalism.

These positions reflect the specific historical and political contexts in which the work was produced, namely the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was a period following the post-gay liberation movements, when many Western countries enacted anti-discrimination legislation based on sexual orientation and began to implement laws granting equal marriage and parental rights, and homosexuality became “normalized” and “institutionalized” (Seidman et al. 1999:9).

These scholars draw attention to the fragility and ephemerality of queer public culture and warn against the rise of right-wing conservative ideologies that may reverse the hard-won gains of past struggles. They call for continuous challenging of public norms and institutional structures, not only to safeguard “a safe zone for queer sex” but to open up new possibilities for identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex. These possibilities appear when “the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” (Berlant and Warner 1998:548). Their prognosis is that the

hegemony of heterosexuality is propped up by history, politics, and the public sphere. To dismantle it would therefore require the construction of a queer counterpublic through sustained political mobilization and engagement—an effort that, in turn, necessitates queer subjects' resistance to the lure of domesticity and privatized intimacy. In this context, privacy comes to signify retreat and abandonment, while coupledness and family appear as betrayals of the utopian queer cause of emancipation.

Turning to China, the Maoist period (1949–1976) is marked by a history in which sexuality was made an integral part of the nationalist developmental project, tightly regulated and mobilized, culminating with the implementation of the one-child policy in 1980 (Honig 2003; Greenhalgh 2003). Within this context, it is not surprising that ordinary people regard the privatization and depoliticization of sexuality and reproduction as an escape from state encroachment. The rise of privacy is therefore seen by sexual minorities not as a retreat from citizenship rights but rather as an assertion of them. Political participation, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), was often experienced as coerced collaboration with an authoritarian state rather than as resistance against it. When memories of the Cultural Revolution remain vivid, coupledness and family, despite their imperfections and failings, can appear to offer a sanctuary from state terror. In a polity where a single political party dominates and civil society is severely constrained, the adaptation and improvisation of strategies of resistance, even if they lack the radicalism celebrated by Western queer scholars, cannot simply be dismissed as parasitic or fugitive. In a culture where the family has for centuries shaped all aspects of individual life and continues to support individuals in the wake of economic neoliberalization and the state's retreat from welfare provision, the determination to pursue a nonnormative lifestyle and the struggle for sexual self-expression within the family are not “trivial” but constitute significant forms of resistance.

These different contexts show that there is no straightforward answer to what counts as emancipation or resistance, or to which strategies should be prioritized for progressive change. China's LGBTQ+ communities have long debated the political imperative and cultural appropriateness of the Western coming-out model (Chou 2000; Liu and Ding 2005; Huang and Brouwer 2018; Choi 2025), and whether nominal marriage constitutes resistance or accommodation. I return to these debates in the chapters that follow.

The challenge is to unpack the often ambiguous meanings of actions in context without falling into moral relativism, for example by denying

that protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is critical to safeguarding human dignity. While depriving LGBTQ+ people access to marriage and parenthood relegates them to second-class citizenship, it is also crucial to show how a citizenship framework grounded in marriage and reproduction is limiting and exclusionary, reinforcing the very heteronormative framework queer politics sought to challenge (Richardson 2017).

Scholarship on Sexuality in China

Since the early 2000s, an emergent literature has documented the lives of gay men (Rofel 1999b; Wei 2007; Cummings 2022; Gong and Liu 2022; Luo et al. 2023; Kong 2023) and lalas (Engebretsen 2013; Kam 2013; Liu 2019, Lo 2020), same-sex marriage rights claims (Liu and Zhu 2020), queer activism (Huang 2017; Bao 2018), and queer communities, culture, and media (Wu and Ward 2020; Miller 2023; Miao and Chan 2021). This body of work corrects the heterosexual bias in research on Chinese society and brings to the fore the lives, struggles, and resilience of LGBTQ+ people of different genders, cohorts, localities, and social classes (Ho et al. 2018; Suen et al. 2022).

This scholarship has concentrated on the role of the family of origin, offering insights into the distinctive coming-out model and marriage practices of Chinese LGBTQ+ people (Chou 2001; Choi and Luo 2016; Huang and Brouwer 2018; Song et al. 2021, 2022). However, this research, including my earlier work, has stressed the repressive aspects of family, showing how parents impose heteronormative expectations of marriage and procreation on their adult children and pressure them into heterosexual unions. Many respondents acknowledged that their parents simultaneously gave them pressure and support. As an institution, the Chinese family can be both constraining and enabling, a complexity often insufficiently addressed in existing studies. Overemphasizing the repressive role of the family may obscure important distinctions between paternalistic and authoritarian aspects of parental roles, as well as among different forms of paternalistic practice. The life stories of my respondents reveal a shifting balance between authoritarianism and paternalism within the family. Parents often feel an immense sense of responsibility for their children's success and happiness yet possess diminishing authority and unequal resources to enforce compliance. Their actions highlight the contradictions and ironies of parental care. When

parents pressured their adult children to marry, they often did so believing that marriage would ensure future security, without realizing that this protective intention became a persistent source of stress for their children.

Emphasizing the family as guardian of heterosexual norms also risks obscuring changes in parental attitudes, including divergences in values, resources, and aspirations across children's life courses (Friedman 2024). Caihong, Zhenzhu, and Chang's experiences show that parents can reprioritize their children's happiness over conformity to tradition. By focusing on changing parent-child dynamics through life story interviews, I seek to unpack these nuances and trace patterns of transformation over time. In doing so, the book articulates cultural specificity without falling into cultural essentialism that assumes cultures as static. By attending to internal heterogeneity and the uneven pace of change, it sheds light on the convergence between China and its Western counterparts, without upholding the West as a universal standard, and thus avoiding the pitfalls of Western-centrism.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Following this introduction, chapter 1 examines changing state governance of homosexuality and evolving public opinion toward LGBTQ+ people. Chapter 2 explores the effects of economic reforms on migration, intergenerational relationships within the Chinese family, and heterosexual marriage. Chapters 3 to 6 form the substantive core of the book, each with a distinct focus.

Chapter 3 traces the history of collective mobilization, emergent divisions within the community, and how LGBTQ+ civic organizations recalibrate their strategies in response to shifting state policies and intensified repression since 2016. While serving as a space for solidarity against heterosexual hegemony, the community has become increasingly heterogeneous, with new hierarchies of desirability that mirror persistent and emerging inequalities in post-socialist China. These create double obstacles for marginalized groups, both outside and within LGBTQ+ communities.

Chapter 4 illustrates how LGBTQ+ people's refusal to be defined by stigmatized social labels and their journey of coming to terms with sexual orientation are entwined with broader processes of social transformation. While affirming nonnormative desires, they challenge and rework filial piety and develop a model of Chinese selfhood distinct from Western frameworks

centered on citizenship rights for state support and protection. The Chinese model of individualization re-embeds the self within kinship structures and relational ethics of affect and care. The chapter also emphasizes how queer self-formation unfolds through time, space, and mobility, which critically mediate the challenges and possibilities of adolescence and young adulthood. These findings contest linear, universal models of queer identity development, highlighting instead its culturally situated, relational, and historically contingent nature.

Chapter 5 examines LGBTQ+ sexual and romantic relationships, moving beyond the binary of transformation versus assimilation. It emphasizes how cultural and structural factors, such as gender norms, class dynamics, and digital technologies, shape both the possibilities and limits of queer intimacy. While some heterosexual ideals are resisted, others, such as monogamy, persist, showing the entanglement of queer and heterosexual practices. Dating apps expand access to partners but also intensify competition and commodify intimacy, reinforcing inequalities. Ultimately, queer intimacy emerges not as a straightforward path to emancipation but as a site where broader structural forces are resisted, negotiated, and often reproduced.

Chapter 6 engages with national and global debates on coming out by reorientating the focus from the public and the romantic to the family of origin and highlighting the role of care in disclosure. It challenges the assumption that nondisclosure signals repression, showing instead that it can be a tactical, ethical, and caring choice. Coming out is often motivated by care for oneself, one's relationships, and one's parents, and involves careful preparation. This understanding of coming out as a careful and caring process is reflected in the concept of *pu dian*. The chapter also responds to calls for greater attention to the structural conditions shaping disclosure, analyzing how birth cohort, hukou status, class, and gender influence decisions, strategies, and outcomes. It shows that coming out is rarely a one-off act but an extended project across the life course. These findings challenge individualistic conceptions of disclosure by foregrounding structural inequalities, and move beyond the fixed "closet" imagery by emphasizing temporality.

Chapter 7 analyzes three practices: seeking divorce from a mixed-orientation marriage and conducting nominal and same-sex marriages. It situates these practices within global debates about equal marriage rights, highlighting the challenges LGBTQ+ people in China share with their Western counterparts and the distinctive dynamics that arise in the Chinese context. For most respondents, sexual autonomy takes precedence over

fulfilling traditional marital roles. Many reject mixed-orientation marriages and, if already in one, often seek divorce. Some turn to nominal marriages with other sexual minorities to resist heteronormative pressures, while others rely on career success and financial independence for security. Same-sex marriage, for those who pursue it, represents both a rejection of heterosexual norms and a pathway to social status, family legitimacy, migration rights, and broader freedoms. Meanwhile, some respondents and their parents have capitalized on the delaying (and gradual decline) of heterosexual marriage to legitimate cohabitation and singlehood. Rather than treating cohabitation as a “trying-out phase” before marriage, both cohabitation and singlehood are viewed as viable long-term alternatives to betrothal.

Chapter 8 summarizes the major findings of the book and reflects on how changes in state, social, and familial power, as well as their divergences, may shape the future of queer collective resistance. It also brings together the threads of queer everyday resistance by identifying three broad strategies: transnational futurity, heterosexual performativity, and exploitation of the cracks in institutionalized heterosexuality. These strategies are presented as ideal types that illustrate how global influences are mediated by local cultural norms and national patterns of class inequalities in shaping the terrains of everyday resistance. The chapter concludes with reflections on this book’s contributions to modernization theories of the transformation of sexuality, queer scholarship, and research on LGBTQ+ people in China.

The appendix outlines the four research methods employed: focused life story interviews, a questionnaire survey, ethnographic observation, and archival and internet research. It describes respondents’ sociodemographic profiles and addresses the challenges of conducting fieldwork on sensitive topics in an authoritarian setting, including measures to ensure respondent confidentiality.

State Governance and Public Opinions

TO UNDERSTAND HOW STATE POWER shapes the forms and scope of queer resistance, it is important to differentiate political authoritarianism from an authoritarian cultural legacy. The former refers to a system of governance, while the latter concerns historically rooted cultural norms. In this chapter, I address the dynamics of the former, leaving the latter for chapter 2, where I examine its manifestation in the institutions of family and marriage.

Power in an authoritarian political system is concentrated in a single authority, which suppresses dissent and relies on a mix of coercion, patronage, and ideology to maintain control. Authoritarianism is not necessarily totalitarian, which seeks to control nearly every aspect of public and private life (e.g., during the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1976). Authoritarian governments may focus primarily on limiting political freedoms and ensuring regime survival. They may also create what Tsou (1986) calls “a zone of indifference,” which political power does not seek to penetrate or control because certain practices are considered irrelevant to regime survival (xxiv). According to Tsou, a zone of indifference differs from a “sphere of immunities,” where state power cannot penetrate because of traditionally recognized customs (e.g., in traditional societies) or institutionalized rights (e.g., in democracies). The freedom people may enjoy in a zone of indifference is precarious: It is not protected by formal rights but depends on the passive tolerance of the state. Even when rights are formalized, an authoritarian regime may routinely violate them because there is no counterpower to hold it accountable. The fate of people in a zone of indifference may therefore oscillate between liberalization and tightening control, a pattern of governance characteristic to authoritarian regimes as they seek to resolve recurrent crises of legitimacy and stability.

These insights are tremendously helpful in understanding the shifting governance of homosexuality and the limits it has imposed on queer resistance in post-socialist China. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the Chinese state moved away from the intense politicization of private life. It has, however, continued to maintain a tight grip on issues deemed threats to public health, morality, and order. Yet the Chinese state is a vast institution, with its different units often pursuing contradictory agendas. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, while state ideological apparatuses circulated harsh rhetoric condemning homosexuality and the police regularly harassed gay men, health bureaus sought to work with LGBTQ+ civic organizations to find practical solutions to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The Chinese state also operates on the global stage and juggles conflicting aspirations. While it seeks international recognition, it remains wary that human rights claims (including those related to homosexuality) and democratic aspirations may threaten its political monopoly. This has resulted in attempts to strike a balance between an open-door economic policy and political self-confinement, for example by building the Great Firewall to insulate the Chinese public from the global internet and by intensifying online censorship. At the same time, as this chapter will illustrate, the Chinese state is adaptive, often co-opting certain LGBTQ+ agendas to increase public support while confining expressions of queer desire within depoliticized spaces. This allows it to satisfy demands for greater sexual freedom while simultaneously atomizing queer organizing and removing its threat to state power. Yet state power also produces contradictory and unintended effects; rhetoric and practices that were initially ceremonial or decorative can be appropriated by society and turned into claims against the state. State strategies can also prove ineffective, creating widening gaps between state and society.

Alongside examining how the state reconfigures the legal and institutional landscape of homosexuality, this chapter also addresses shifting public opinions toward homosexuality. If the state governs homosexuality through coercion, institutionalization, and co-optation, society exercises its power over LGBTQ+ people through everyday norms, moral sentiments, and informal sanctions. In the sections that follow, I first provide a chronological overview of the Chinese state's shifting modes of governance towards LGBTQ+ people. I then present evidence from secondary surveys on the public's separation of morality from citizenship rights. These findings lead to a discussion of the complex ways political and social power over LGBTQ+ people may have overlapped and diverged.

SHIFTING GOVERNANCE

Policies in the Socialist Era (1949–1978)

State treatment of homosexuality in socialist China differed between the periods 1949–1965 and 1966–1976. The first period was marked by official silence, while the second, during the Cultural Revolution, was characterized by intensified political persecution that, unintentionally, increased public visibility and created opportunities for freer sexual exploration.

When the CPC took power in 1949, it inherited the term “homosexual love” (*tongxinglian*) from Republican China (1912–1949), in particular the intellectual elite who reconfigured male same-sex relationships as a source of national shame and weakness amid a national crisis and pathologized, denounced, and stigmatized them (Dikötter 1995; Kang 2009). When self-proclaimed experts debated the causes of homosexuality, discussing whether it was acquired or inherited and pondering on how it could be controlled, prevented, or cured, the underlying assumption was that homosexuality was a perversion. This represented a shift from “non-pathological connotations” of homosexuality in the premodern context; traditional Chinese medical literature, unlike its Western counterparts, did not single out any single sex act or object of desire as pathological (Chiang 2010).

Homosexuality all but disappeared from official discourse between 1950 and 1970, and journals of women and youth organizations made no mention of it either (Evans 1997). Sang (2003) found one publication on homosexuality, but it was categorized as a perversion. When a preliminary classification of mental disorders was proposed at the first National Conference on Psychiatry in 1958, homosexuality was described as a form of sexual deviation, a subtype of the psychopathic personality (*bingtai rengen*).

Homosexuality became more visible in the public domain during the Cultural Revolution, when private life was closely scrutinized and intensively politicized. Men who were accused of homosexuality were interrogated and denounced in public by the Red Guards for their putative debauchery (Kang 2022); Kang’s male interviewees recounted arrests, beatings, parading, forced confessions of sexual activities, and announcements concerning operatic performers sentenced to six years in prison for sodomy.

Honig (2003) argues that while sexuality outside the (heterosexual) marital context was harshly punished during the Cultural Revolution, the Sent Down Movement afforded young people the opportunity to experiment and explore sex free of parental control, including same-sex desires.¹

A Shanghaiese man interviewed by Kang (2022) recalled how as a cadre he was sent down to the countryside, where he had an intimate relationship with a peasant man. His colleague reported him to the Party, and he was investigated. He was not persecuted, however, because the investigating team thought he was sufficiently handsome to find women willing to satisfy his sexual needs. The team's judgment reflected their belief that homoerotic behavior was situational sexual deviance resulting from a lack of access to the opposite sex rather than a discrete sexual orientation. To protect himself from future persecution, the man in question quickly married a woman. Even under the threat of further arrest and persecution, he continued to pursue same-sex relations with students sent down to the countryside.

A self-identifying lesbian told Honig that she had relationships with women when she was sent down to Hubei, and a woman interviewed by Li Yinhe recalled how she learned about lesbianism on a state farm, where she witnessed two sent-down women watching each other bathe, sleeping under a single mosquito net, and attracting gossip. The stories of these men and women attest to the unintended consequences of state actions, as persecution made homosexuality more visible in the public domain, and the Sent Down Movement created opportunities for sexual exploration, giving urban youths a chance to satisfy their homoerotic desires (Honig 2003).

Policies in the Post-Socialist Era

Criminalization and Pathologization (1979–1996). After the Cultural Revolution ended, the CPC moved to grant social groups and individuals a greater degree of autonomy (Tsou 1986). At the same time, beginning in the late 1970s, it undertook a series of economic reforms and opened up to the Western world. This reform era is conventionally regarded as a liberal period. However, the reality was far more complex. While the Chinese state granted people greater freedom to pursue various forms of sexual desire (Rofel 2007), it simultaneously criminalized and pathologized homosexuality. The first version of the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* categorized homosexuality as a sexual disorder (Wu 2003: 128). The first Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (1979) included a new crime, "hooliganism." The police used this law to arrest men accused of having sex with other men (Worth et al. 2019). This law not only punished men accused of same-sex behavior but also made them vulnerable to blackmail. Li (2009) documents a case involving a public security station in a small northern city;

the police based there blackmailed a group of men who regularly gathered at a public cruising spot, demanding 3000 yuan (approximately 412 US dollars) from each in exchange for their release.

The law of hooliganism was rarely used against women accused of having same-sex relationships, and when it was, the official reason was their involvement in prostitution (Ruan and Matsumura 1991). Fang (1995) documents an instance of a woman's father in Anhui Province (eastern China) launching a legal complaint to the county public security, charging the same-sex partner of his daughter with hooliganism. The case was sent to the district public security bureau, the provincial public security bureau, and the national public security bureau. The latter ruled that it could not be accepted and heard, nor was it appropriate to administer punishment under the rubric of hooligan behavior. Sang (2003) points out that same-sex relationships between women were traditionally perceived as harmless to the social order. The court's judgment that women in same-sex relationships could not be found guilty of hooliganism echoed the historical tendency to trivialize lesbianism.

This has been a mixed blessing: On the one hand, it makes it difficult for women, particularly feminine types such as Caihong and Zhenzhu (in the introduction), to persuade their parents that their affection for other women is authentic, and on the other hand, it spares women accused of having same-sex relationships from criminal and administrative penalties, unlike gay men in the 1980s and 1990s. Any man accused of having sex with other men was arrested, charged with hooliganism, and usually sent to a labor camp for reeducation or detained for fifteen days. After that, the police would ask his family or the leaders of his work unit to take him back. His same-sex sexual activities were thus exposed, bringing shame to his family. His work unit might punish him further by reducing his salary, demoting him to a less desirable department and/or location (e.g., from an urban to a rural area), blocking future promotion, or firing him. For CPC members, detention might trigger expulsion from the party and removal from public office. Some of the men Li (2022) interviewed reported that their careers never recovered.

Men were fearful of administrative penalties because the work unit provided lifetime employment and extensive socioeconomic welfare (e.g., housing, health care, education for their children, and pensions), ensuring that the work units were an effective means of political control; they also enabled the CPC to regulate the sexual practices and morality of the urban population. Leaders of work units found marriage partners for their members, pressured them into marrying politically compatible people, allocated

marital homes, intervened in marital disputes, and later enforced the one-child policy. People seeking divorce had to obtain the approval of their supervisors before proceeding with their applications (Liu 2007).

After the economic reforms, the term “work units” continued to be used, mostly referring to employment in state-owned or majority state-owned enterprises, as well as publicly funded institutions such as public hospitals. However, their power to control and regulate personal life was reduced dramatically (Davis and Harrell 1993). Privatization and the pressure to remain competitive with the private sector led to mass layoffs (*xiagang*) of workers in state enterprises. By the end of 1999, the government reported that more than 24.4 million (20.7 percent of those at risk and 13.2 percent of the urban labor force) had been sacked (Appleton et al. 2002). Between 1995 and 2001, the figure exceeded 35 million (Dong and Xu 2009).

The state also curtailed welfare provision to its workers to lessen the “burden of responsibility” (Yu et al. 2022:769). These reforms marked the end of the work unit system. Although state enterprises have remained an arm of governmental political and moral control, they are no longer the only economic option, and their role as welfare providers has diminished. Workers in post-socialist China are without a safety net but are less fearful of violating their leaders’ and colleagues’ moral sensibilities. Rural migrant gay men working in state sectors can now ignore their superiors’ uninvited matchmaking efforts, thus maintaining a boundary between work and private life (Pang and Siu 2023).

After the economic reforms, the sexual lives of the Chinese people were only a matter of concern to the state when they were perceived to threaten social stability and public health. For example, after coming to power in 1949, the CPC made concerted efforts to eradicate prostitution and reeducate prostitutes, who were viewed as victims of pimps, panderers, and brothel owners. However, the HIV/AIDS pandemic prompted the state to change its rhetoric and policy. The first HIV/AIDS case was reported in China in 1985. In 1986, the State Council proclaimed that it would “sternly uproot prostitution and stop the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STI).” Prostitutes were reconfigured as victimizers and “criminals” (*weifa fanzui fenzi*); they were accused of spreading disease and penalized accordingly (*congzhong chufa*). In an amendment to the Criminal Law in 1997, a new clause targeting prostitutes stipulated that those knowingly infected with sexually transmitted diseases who sold or bought sex would be prosecuted and subjected to jail sentences, criminal detention, or public surveillance for

a maximum of five years (Choi 2011). The state also relied on campaign-style policing (*yanda yundong*) to curb prostitution. This was characterized by large waves of arrests, swift trials without due process, heavy official publicity, public parading, mass sentencing rallies, and public displays of crime scenes. Figures reflect attempts to gain greater control of prostitution after the onset of the AIDS crisis: In 1982, 11,500 arrests were made, while in the first six months of 2000, the figure was 297,361. Prostitution, however, continued virtually unabated, simply going underground. In 2003, various sources put the number of female sex workers in China between four and ten million (Choi and Holroyd 2007). It should be noted that government officials are major patrons of the sex industry, and many local governments encourage its development to attract investment.

As the state imposed harsher penalties and intensified the crackdown, it allowed local health bureaus to work with international scholars and funding agencies such as the United Nations (UN) to explore harm reduction policies and improve sex workers' knowledge of safe sex practices (Kaufman 2020). These policies often worked against each other, with the crackdown severely undermining the effectiveness of harm reduction policies. The coexistence of inconsistent and seemingly contradictory policies reflected the state's increasing inability and reduced willingness to intervene in the sexual lives of its citizens. It also reflected its juggling of competing agendas and a shift from ideological supremacy to a pragmatic approach to governance (e.g., searching for practical solutions to problems). This approach has also defined the state's reaction to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the issue of homosexuality.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic brought homosexuality to public attention. The number of reported HIV infections in China increased at an average rate of 30 percent per year between 1995 and 2000. A report published jointly by the Chinese Ministry of Health, the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2004 estimated that 650,000 people were living with HIV in China, and among them 75,000 had developed AIDS (Choi and David 2007). Gay men were the second highest infected group after intravenous drug users (Zhou 2007). The gay activist Wan Yanhai (2001:51) reports that from the late 1980s onward, the state criticized "homosexuality as a form of degeneracy found among Westerners and those Chinese influenced by the West." Around 1988, the police in Hangzhou arrested more than sixty men, accusing them of having sex with other men and charging them with hooliganism. At the same time, the pandemic prompted some state public health personnel to persuade

the police to allow them to invite men in public cruising spots to talk about their circumstances without the fear of arrest (Zhang 1994:633). The HIV/AIDS pandemic provided scholars with a legitimate entry point to study and discuss homosexuality, dramatically increasing its visibility: “Seminars, discussions, salons, psychological counseling hotlines and clinics, radio programs, and magazine articles have all helped to improve the understanding of homosexuality, both among sexual minority members and the general public” (Wan 2001:51).

The HIV/AIDS pandemic and the Chinese government’s close cooperation with global agencies such as the UN and the WHO probably contributed to the decriminalization and destigmatization of homosexuality in the late 1990s. The WHO successfully negotiated with the Chinese Ministry of Public Health for sex education for gay men to be included as part of the country’s medium-term plan on AIDS in the early 1990s (Wan 2001). The government involved civic organizations in its response to AIDS in 1997 in what was labeled Health 7, helping them prepare work plans so they might receive an AUD 2 million supplemental grant to a USD 100 hundred million World Bank Project in China on Disease Prevention. The Australian grant was supposed to facilitate NGO participation in HIV/AIDS programs. Building on the model of Health 7, the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) supported civic organizations in China through the World Bank’s Basic Health Services Project (Health 8), launched in 1998. The participation of nongovernmental organizations in the AIDS response is mandated by numerous international agreements among global agencies. Both UNAIDS and the UN General Assembly recognize the crucial role of civil society in addressing the pandemic, with UNAIDS including NGO representatives. Similarly, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (hereafter the Global Fund) requires civil society involvement in its governance board, the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM), and proposal submission and implementation. Additionally, UNAIDS promotes the greater involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS (GIPA) principle, advocating for the increased participation of those directly affected in response efforts (Kaufman 2020).

Involving gay men living with HIV/AIDS in response efforts would be a challenge if homosexuality were still criminalized and pathologized. Furthermore, homosexuality has increasingly been recognized as a human rights issue globally. In its 1994 decision *Toonen v. Australia*, the UN Human Rights Committee declared that laws criminalizing consensual

same-sex acts violate international human rights law (Pretsell and Jones 2024). In sum, the association of homosexuality with HIV/AIDS initially prompted the state to intensify criminal persecution of men accused of homosexual behavior, but it later served as a catalyst for a major shift in state policy toward decriminalization and de-pathologization.

Decriminalization and De-Pathologization from 1997. The crime of hooliganism was excised from the Revised Criminal Law of 1997, a move generally hailed as a step toward the decriminalization of homosexuality (Jeffreys 2006). After persistent campaigns by tongzhi activists, both men and women, since the mid-1990s (Wan 2001; He 2001), the Ministry of Health in 2001 removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in the third edition of the *Chinese Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders* (*Zhongguo Renmin Tongzhi Xiehui* 2006). Together, these measures lifted the legal threat and moral barrier to collective organization. The state's increased engagement of LGBTQ+ civic organizations in delivering the goal of HIV/AIDS containment gave them a stable source of funding, while the lessening of state sanctions coincided with the advent of information communication technologies, further facilitating a sexual awakening and community organization (Wan 2001; He 2001; Engebretsen 2013; Kam 2013).

The internet became widely accessible in China in the late 1990s (Webster 2019). It allowed gay men and lesbians unprecedented access to Western and regional cultural products relating to homosexuality, as well as nascent forms of identity categories and methods of community organization. Many of my respondents recall accessing gay pornography as they explored their sexual orientation; the movie *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which depicted the story of two White men, was also frequently referred to in their narratives. Movies such as *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and *Lan Yu* (2001), both directed by Hong Kong filmmakers and featuring Hong Kong actors, were fondly remembered. Gay men living in Shanghai hailed the song “Embrace” (1999) by Taiwanese rock band Mayday as empowering them to pursue their desires. The iconic Hong Kong actor and singer Leslie Cheung's highly publicized coming out in 1997 gave many gay men and lesbians the opportunity to begin conversations about homosexuality with their parents, as did Taiwan's pride parades.

As a result of language accessibility and cultural proximity, queer cultural categories and organizational experiences in Taiwan and Hong Kong were important reference points for early activists in China. The Lala Camp, a

three-day event that began in 2007 in southern China, is an example. It provided a platform for local lesbian community organizers and academics to engage with their Taiwanese, Hong Kong, and North American counterparts and spurred the formation of the Chinese Lala Alliance (CLA, *Huaren Lala Lianmeng*) in Shanghai in 2008. It continued annually until it was disbanded in 2018, shortly after the Chinese government began to tighten its control over civil society, including LGBTQ+ organizations (Kam 2013).

Liberal Backtracking Since 2016. The conventional understanding of this period is that the Chinese state has backtracked on its liberalization toward homosexuality since 1997. However, the evidence suggests that this shift is not simply one-dimensional. Rather, it reflects a complex mixture of increased protection of individual rights alongside intensified crackdowns on collective action and freedom of expression. These dual actions reflect a mode of governance that is at once paternalistic and authoritarian. With respect to improvements in individual rights, Article 37 of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law was extended in 2016 to cover domestic violence between individuals who were not de jure family members, a move seen by LGBTQ+ organizations as holding the potential to extend legal protection against domestic violence to sexual minorities. The amendment of the Civil Law in 2017 allowed for mutual guardianship (*yi ding jian hu*) as a legal means of protection. The notary public offices in big cities such as Nanjing, Changsha, Chengdu, and Guangzhou have since approved guardianship agreements for same-sex couples in areas such as power of attorney and inheritance rights. In 2020, a Beijing court ruled in favor of a transgender woman (surname Gao), upholding her right to employment. Gao was fired by Beijing Dangdang Information Technology Co. Ltd. after taking time off to recover from gender reassignment surgery. The court's ruling was interpreted as an attempt on the part of the state to uphold anti-discrimination protection for transgender people. In 2022, following a policy revision by the National Health Commission, the legal age for gender reassignment surgery was lowered from twenty to eighteen. Also, genital reconstruction was no longer one of the two necessary conditions (the other condition was genital removal) for changing gender markers on national IDs and other legal documents (Ren and Pan 2021).

Just as the state moved to grant more rights for individuals, it enacted new laws to curtail the collective organizational capacity of the LGBTQ+ community and increase censorship (Zheng 2015).² In 2016, it rolled out the Foreign NGO Management Law, which requires foreign NGOs operating in

China to register with and be supervised by the Ministry of Public Security. The passing of this law cut off funding for many LGBTQ+ civic organizations reliant on international sources (Hildebrandt 2012). Many international NGOs had ceased operating in China, and for those that remained, sponsoring and working with LGBTQ+ civic organizations became too politically risky (Ren and Gui 2024). In 2016, China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) banned television programs featuring homosexual relationships (ChinaFile 2018). In 2017, the China Netcasting Services Association, a state-controlled industry association, issued guidelines prohibiting the depiction of homosexuality on video and live streaming sites (Longarino 2020).

On January 9, 2019, the Guangzhou Civil Affairs Bureau published a list of illegal organizations (*feifa zuzhi*) that were to be banned from the city; the list included two LGBTQ+ civic organizations. Rela, an Instagram-like social platform for lesbian and bisexual female users, was removed from Chinese app stores first in 2017, then again in 2020, leading to speculations regarding a government crackdown. In August 2020, the organizers of Shanghai Pride announced its disbanding in a letter entitled "The End of the Rainbow." Established in 2009, Shanghai Pride was the first and largest such festival in China. From a small community advocating for the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, it developed into a monthlong annual celebration featuring exhibitions, film screenings, discussion forums, job fairs, road races, and cultural performances. In November 2021, the civic organization LGBT Rights Advocacy China was compelled to shut down under government pressure. In June 2023, the Beijing LGBT Center announced it was ceasing operations under the pretext of "force majeure," a phrase widely understood as signaling government shutdown. Founded in 2008, the Center was one of China's largest and oldest LGBTQ+ civic organizations and served as a space where young queer activists were nurtured and empowered (Wang 2023).

My conversations with activists in China and abroad indicate that one of the biggest challenges they face is the state's tactic of pressuring family members to secure compliance. Public security personnel routinely hint that activists should monitor their behavior or risk having their parents or siblings targeted. True to their word, officials have visited some activists' parents or invited them to "have tea." This exemplifies the Chinese state's repertoire of control strategies that exploit the centrality of family in Chinese life, which may be described as "repression with Chinese characteristics." It also extends to students overseas and members of the Chinese diaspora. Even if these

individuals choose not to return to China (e.g., Caihong in the introduction), they must remain mindful of their actions to avoid implicating parents, siblings, or other relatives.

In the 1990s and 2000s, universities were a haven for LGBTQ+ talks, film screenings, and other activities. From 2018, these events had to go underground and take place behind closed doors; otherwise, they were banned outright (Longarino 2020; Chen 2019).

More significantly, the government has intensified its control over the social media presence of LGBTQ+ civic organizations. On July 6, 2021, nearly twenty WeChat accounts belonging to university LGBTQ+ and gender studies groups were shut down. Online spaces have always been an integral part of LGBTQ+ advocacy, with many organizations setting up and using official accounts to raise awareness, educate the public, recruit volunteers and members, and promote their work. However, as the state began tightening its control over civil society, many of these organizations' public accounts were removed by online platforms. For example, on August 22, 2023, the public accounts of TransBrotherhood China, the Beijing Lesbian Centre, and the Beijing branch of Trueself (formerly PFLAG, see chapter 3), along with other community accounts such as Beijing Lala Salon, Wandouhuang, Transtory, Outstanding Partners, Ace, and the Flying Cat Brotherhood, were banned on WeChat (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Stringent COVID-19 lockdowns between 2020 and 2022 forced the closure of many coffee shops and bookstores (Wang 2023). This made it even more difficult for LGBTQ+ civic organizations to secure suitable venues for public events. Kam and my respondents concur that “commercial unprofitability” has meant most lesbian bars are short-lived ventures, leaving the community to rely on ad hoc parties and gatherings in ordinary bars, coffee shops, and bookstores. Tightening political control also prompted LGBTQ+-friendly commercial venues to adopt a low profile by, for example, moving rainbow flags from their front doors or shop windows to less conspicuous locations (Kam 2013:31).

These crackdowns have pushed LGBTQ+ organizations and networks into the shadows and forced them to adapt. One response has been to leverage the state's growing judicial regulation of private life to advance LGBTQ+ rights. As a result, legal activism has emerged as a new strategy for some LGBTQ+ civic organizations, as well as for the queer community more broadly, in adjusting to changing modes of state governance (see chapter 3 for further elaboration).

Just as state governance does not operate through a single mode of domination and control, social power over homosexuality is likewise multifaceted. As this section will show, the Chinese public has increasingly separated morality from rights: the former concerns social norms, cultural values, and ethical judgments, while the latter relates to institutionalized entitlements embodied in the notion of citizenship. As Tsou (1986) argues, during the Mao era the notion of citizenship did not exist. It was the concept of the masses that defined the relationship between the Party-state and the people, who were expected to follow the Party's lead and serve its agendas. After the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader from 1978 to the early 1990s, "supported proposals for revising the state constitution to enable the people to enjoy full rights of citizenship and to improve the system of people's congresses at all levels. But Deng was also one of the strongest advocates of the elimination of the so-called 'four great freedoms,' the removal of 'Democracy Wall,' and the suppression of 'illegal' journals and 'illegal organizations' through the use of 'Socialist laws' and the socialist legal system" (308).

This shows that even when the CPC began cautiously introducing legal and institutional notions of citizenship, it placed citizenship under the primacy of the Party. The 1982 Constitution reaffirmed the Chinese people's rights to education, labor, speech, and religious belief, but stressed that these rights were conditional on not harming the hegemony of the Party-state. CPC leaders have interpreted citizenship in ways that differ from its Western connotation of institutionally guaranteed civil, political, and social rights (Marshall 1950). For example, Xi Jinping, China's current leader, interprets "good citizenship" as synonymous with being patriotic, moral, law-abiding, family-oriented, and supportive of Party leadership. While the Chinese state began cautiously introducing civic themes into Moral Education (*deyu*) and Ideological and Political Education (*sixiangzhengzhijiaoyu*) in the 1980s and 1990s, it firmly controlled their direction and substantive content to ensure alignment with its vision and political agenda (Law 2006). Shortly after Xi came to power in 2013, the CPC formally prohibited universities and journalists from discussing the so-called seven unmentionables: universal values, press freedom, civil society, citizens' rights, the Party's historical aberrations, the privileged capitalist class, and judicial independence. However, as this section will show, even under such restrictive conditions, some elements

of the Western understanding of citizenship appear to have taken root among the Chinese public, who have increasingly separated morality from citizenship and have shown respect for the rights of others, including those with whom they morally disagree.

Since the 2000s, five major national surveys have tracked changing public attitudes toward homosexuality. The Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), the Chinese Social Survey (CSS), and the Chinese Private Life Survey (CPLS) measure moral judgments of homosexuality; the Sexuality Survey of China (SSC), conducted by sociologist Pan Siuming, and the UNDP Survey (cited in the introduction) focus on the general public's attitudes toward the citizenship rights of sexual minority members. Divergences in the findings suggest that while most Chinese people continue to express moral disapproval of homosexuality, an increasing number have come to recognize sexual minorities' equal citizenship rights.

In 2021, 75.1 percent of respondents surveyed for the CGSS considered homosexuality morally wrong; the corresponding figure in 2010 was 87.8 percent. In 2015, nearly 80 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that "homosexuality is a private business, other people should not condemn it"; the corresponding figure for 2005 was 87.7 percent. Similarly, data from the CSS between 2015 and 2021 show that the percentage of respondents that "accept[s] homosexual people" increased only slightly, from 11.3 percent to 18.2 percent.

Analyzing these surveys, scholars show that the public's moral judgment of homosexuality varies by gender, age, educational level, urban residence, and marital status (Lin and Wang 2021; Yu et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2024). Women, younger people, individuals with a higher level of education, urban residents, and singletons are less likely to consider homosexuality immoral. However, even with variations, the overall picture is that the majority of Chinese people have continued to view homosexuality as morally unacceptable.

At the same time, attitudes toward the citizenship rights of sexual minorities show a different trend. A 2015 national survey by Pan Siuming revealed that most Chinese people supported equal rights for homosexuals, with support for the statement "homosexuals should be completely equal to others" rising from 47.5 percent in 2000 to 62.8 percent. Notably, the share of respondents who strongly supported granting homosexuals equal rights rose from 8.7 percent in 2006 to 29.4 percent, an increase of more than 300 percent (Pan 2017). In the UNDP survey cited in the introduction, of the 10,366 heterosexual respondents, only 4.1 percent agree that homosexuality

is abnormal and that “homosexual tendencies should be corrected.” The fact that the mean age of respondents in the UNDP survey is 22.7, with 77 percent born in the 1990s, points to a rejection among the younger generation of the pathologization of homosexuality. Perhaps for this reason, 86.7 percent of heterosexual respondents agree that the rights of sexual minority members should be protected. More than 70 percent support granting sexual minorities full access to all social services. Additionally, more than 90 percent believe that sexual minorities should have access to social aid, have “the right to list their same-sex partner as their insurance policy beneficiary,” and have “the equal right to use public reemployment services.” Around 85 percent support legalizing same-sex marriage (United Nations Development Program 2016).

It is clear, therefore, that the majority of Chinese people do not believe their moral attitude toward homosexuality should justify depriving sexual minorities of citizenship rights. Perry (2008) argues that the Chinese notion of citizenship prioritizes role obligation over rights claims and is fundamentally different from the Western view, which emphasizes universal human rights and the rule of law. The statistics presented here indicate the need to distinguish between the Chinese state and the people. While the state has continued to interpret citizenship in ways that differ drastically from its Western connotation, the Chinese people have increasingly endorsed the idea of universal citizenship rights, even for those who contravene their moral sensibilities.

What has driven such a change? The principal factors seem to be the separation of the private from the public and, relatedly, the reemergence of notions of a private life (*si sheng huo*) and personal matters (*si shi*). The socialist state treated intimacy as a political domain, tightly overseeing and regulating it. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the Party-state led the way, retreating from direct intervention in the private lives of the Chinese people, except when they are perceived to threaten public health, order, and social stability. Boundaries between the public and the private have reappeared. For example, Yan (2003) shows that since the 1990s, peasant families have remodeled their houses to make them “less accessible to the public.” By the end of the 1990s, many villagers had little knowledge of their neighbors’ affairs: “The seventh family (on the street) does not know the eighth family’s affairs” (126, 128). Within peasant families, young couples asked to have their own bedrooms to protect their privacy. Urbanization and migration also accelerated the privatization of personal lives, creating “a society of strangers” that attended to their own businesses (Yan 2009; 2011:20).

The dismantling of the work unit system in urban areas and the rise of private housing have also facilitated the separation of public and private. For people living in housing provided by their work units, neighbors were colleagues, often with long-term familiarity, which blurred public and private lives. The post-reform shift to private housing, despite its many problems, has the advantage of helping to separate public and private lives, both geographically and socially.

The redrawing of public and private boundaries allows the Western notion of citizenship to begin to take hold. In this framework, citizenship rights firmly belong to the public sphere, encompassing law and political community, and are universal entitlements independent of private morality or conducts in private lives. As I demonstrate in chapter 6, the public distinction between public and private life, morality, and citizenship rights have helped LGBTQ+ people gain acceptance among schoolmates, friends, and colleagues when they come out.

CONCLUSION

This chapter traces changes in modes of state governance and public opinion toward homosexuality in post-socialist China. It shows that on the unshakable bottom line of safeguarding its monopoly on power, the Chinese state has subtly fine-tuned its technologies of governance since the end of the Cultural Revolution. It has shifted from the totalitarian repression of homosexuality to its recent marginalization through tightened censorship and the atomization of LGBTQ+ people by stifling collective advocacy.

In socialist China, the state regularly mobilized the state–family–public alliance to compel individuals to conform. For example, when a person was accused of homosexual activities, the state not only arrested and detained them but also informed their family and work unit, subjecting the individual to legal and administrative penalties as well as to a loss of honor and reputation in the eyes of the public. In other words, political power leveraged social power to meet its goals.

However, in post-socialist China, as the political and the social have gradually diverged in their understanding of what is permissible, evidenced by the public's growing endorsement of the citizenship rights of LGBTQ+ people despite their continued moral disapproval of homosexuality, gaps have opened for LGBTQ+ people to challenge dominant norms. The next chapter



FIGURE 2. A public sign in China promoting the “Core Socialist Values” for the nation (*guojia*), society (*shehui*), and citizens (*gongmin*) to achieve. Photo by author.

further illustrates how social powers, including those related to the institutions of family and marriage, have changed in ways that may loosen the state–society alliance in enforcing the primacy of institutionalized heterosexuality and the marginalization of nonnormative sexuality, thus opening up yet another gap for queer resistance.

Changing Social Landscapes

AT THE THIRTEENTH NATIONAL WOMEN'S Congress in 2023, Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, told CPC officials that they “must actively foster a new type of marriage and childbearing culture” and “strengthen guidance for young people on their views of marriage and love, childbearing, and family” (*New York Times* 2023). However, he did not elaborate on what this new type of marriage and childbearing culture entailed, why the state must strengthen guidance for young people, or how such guidance should be implemented. To approach these questions, we must examine the looming population crisis that China is currently facing.

According to the United Nations, by 2023, 204 million people, about 14 percent of China's population, were aged sixty-five or older; this percentage is projected to more than double by 2050, reaching 390 million, or 31 percent of the total population. The oldest group, those aged eighty or above and most likely to need long-term care, will grow even more rapidly, from roughly 35 million, or 2 percent of the population, in 2023 to a projected 132 million, or 10 percent, in 2050 (United Nations 2024). Key indicators from the Seventh National Population Census, released on May 12, 2021, by the Chinese government, confirm this trend. The census revealed what scholars have described as an “aging tsunami” (Tu et al. 2022:1159). Between 2010 and 2020, the share of the population aged sixty and above and sixty-five and above increased by 5.44 percent and 4.6 percent, respectively. The challenge of an aging population for elderly care is particularly pronounced in rural China, which has experienced mass emigration of its working-age population to cities for work since the 1980s (Choi and Peng 2016).

The drivers of this demographic shift lie in both increasing life expectancy and persistently low fertility. Life expectancy rose from around forty-four

years in 1960 to over seventy-eight years by 2020. Using census data from 1982 to 2010 and the 1 percent population sample survey data from 1995 to 2015, Yang, Jiang, and Sánchez Barricarte (2022) show that “the adjusted TFR (total fertility rate) has fallen below 1.5, and the first-order fertility rate dropped to 0.9 in 2015” (1). Fertility rates for women aged forty-five to forty-nine declined from 5.37 in 1982 to 1.62 in 2015. This figure is well below the replacement level of approximately 2.1 children per woman needed to maintain population size. Social scientists and demographers largely agree that declining fertility rates are partly associated with the one-child policy, implemented between 1979 and 2015. In 2016, the state replaced the one-child policy with a universal two-child policy, arguing that it would benefit economic development, advance the China Dream, and strengthen families’ role in providing eldercare (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2015). However, the two-child policy fell short of official expectations of boosting fertility (Alpermann and Zhan 2019). In May 2021, the state announced a universal three-child policy and accompanying measures (Xinhua News Agency 2021).

Persistently declining fertility rates after the end of the one-child policy have prompted scholars to argue that this trend is also linked to shifts in the “traditional norm of universal marriage and childbearing” (Yang et al. 2022:2). As Davis and Friedman (2014) note, unlike in most Western societies, marriage in China has remained the gateway to childbirth. Thus, as the norm of universal marriage shifts toward later and fewer marriages, childbearing rates inevitably decline as well.

This chapter argues that it is within this context of population crises, marked not only by a looming care burden but also by a shrinking working-age population essential to realizing the China Dream, that the Chinese leader urged officials to cultivate a “new marriage and childbearing culture.” On the surface, these broader demographic concerns primarily relate to the institution of heterosexual family and marriage. In reality, however, the options available to LGBTQ+ people are closely entwined with these shifts. On the one hand, they open space for strategies of resistance, such as delaying or refusing marriage; on the other, they create new political uncertainties: As the state works to consolidate the institution of heterosexuality, will it further tighten control over the expression of nonnormative sexuality?

In the sections that follow, I first examine how growing internal and international migration has provided LGBTQ+ people with unprecedented space and time to explore their identities and gain access to LGBTQ+

communities during adolescence and young adulthood. At the same time, migration thrusts LGBTQ+ people into highly competitive or unfamiliar environments where they may encounter exclusion, marginalization, and loneliness. The chapter then turns to the continued centrality of parents in the lives of adult Chinese people, as well as ongoing efforts to reinterpret the norm of filial piety and negotiate a new intergenerational contract that balances individual autonomy and familial obligations. From this analysis emerges a complex picture of the uncharted terrain that both adult children and their parents must navigate.

The chapter then addresses how changing trends in heterosexual marriage, including rising ages of first marriage and increasing divorce rates, have created new opportunities for queer resistance to marriage pressures. At the same time, the growing resistance of highly educated urban women toward the rigid age norms for marriage and the aggravated difficulties poor men face in securing marital partners have in different ways shaped lalas from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds and rural-to-urban migrant gay men's negotiations with their parents as they pursue nonnormative lifestyles.

MIGRATION AND THE GRADIENT OF RESISTANCE OPTIONS

Since the 1980s, rural China has witnessed what is arguably the largest population movement in its history. According to the 2021 population census, a staggering 295 million peasants have left their rural homes in search of better economic opportunities in urban centers. What began as a slow stream of mostly married men seeking temporary or seasonal work to supplement farm incomes has evolved into a norm deeply embedded in rural life. Today, men and women, both single and married, see migrating to cities for wage work not as a personal choice but as an expected and almost inevitable part of life.

This rural-to-urban labor migration was both enabled and constrained by the country's post-1978 economic reforms. On the one hand, the de-collectivization of agriculture in 1978 boosted rural productivity but reduced labor demand, releasing surplus workers who sought opportunities in township and village enterprises and later in cities. The establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and coastal development policies in the 1980s and 1990s produced concentrated demand for cheap labor, drawing millions of rural migrants into manufacturing, construction, and (later) service sector jobs as part of a vast "floating population." Partial hukou relaxation and

reform beginning in the mid-1980s allowed rural residents to temporarily stay in cities or offered limited settlement opportunities in small and medium-sized cities, further expanding mobility. On the other hand, restrictions on most rural-to-urban migrant workers' full access to state-sponsored education, health care, and housing have continued to relegate them to second-class citizenship. Economic reforms have also exacerbated regional inequalities, particularly between coastal and inland areas, sustaining large-scale rural-to-urban and west-to-east population flows.

Existing research on rural-to-urban labor migration has focused on the tension between the demand for a vast, mobile labor force essential to China's economic boom and the institutional exclusion of this workforce from full citizenship in the cities they helped build (Lee 1998; Pun 2005). Scholars also examine the impacts of migration on rural communities (Murphy 2002), gender relationships (Choi and Peng 2016), migrant children (Lan 2014; Ling 2020), and the well-being of left-behind children (Murphy 2020; Tong et al. 2015). More recently, studies have explored how rural-to-urban migration has reshaped sexual identity, practices, and subjectivity (Liu 2019; Gong and Liu 2022; Luo et al. 2023). Even when rural-to-urban migrants' primary motivation is unrelated to sexual orientation, migration often has a profound impact on their ability to pursue a nonnormative lifestyle. This exemplifies the overlap between labor and sexual migration, a concept Carrillo (2004: 58) defines as a geographical "relocation that is motivated, directly or indirectly, by the sexuality of those who migrate."

As chapters 3 to 7 will show, rural-to-urban migration creates opportunities for LGBTQ+ people from rural origins to gain financial independence and explore their sexuality more freely. At the same time, their second-class citizenship status in urban areas and their low-paid, low-status jobs with long hours make participation in urban LGBTQ+ communities, which are often centered on economic success, leisure, and cosmopolitan lifestyles, largely out of reach.

Compared to rural-to-urban migrants who move for work, those who migrate for higher education, whether from rural to urban areas or from small cities to larger cities with better universities, can generally take fuller advantage of the freedoms conferred by geographical mobility. Over forty million students were enrolled in higher education in China in 2023. An estimated 60 to 70 percent of undergraduates study in a different city or province from their hukou. In provinces with fewer top-tier universities (e.g., central and western provinces), a higher proportion of students must migrate for

perceived better-quality education. Students also migrate if admitted to key national universities (Project 211 and 985 schools), which are mostly located in major urban centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. As chapter 4 will illustrate in greater detail, these internal student migrants appreciate and take advantage of the time away from their families of origin to participate in urban LGBTQ+ communities. Migration in late adolescence and young adulthood thus plays a critical role in sexual identity formation. The higher qualifications of internal educational migrants also enable them to secure white-collar jobs with better salaries. These material conditions facilitate the maintenance of long-term intimate relationships and the building of families outside heterosexual models.

Evidently, there exists a gradient in the capacity of different groups to capitalize on the freedoms and opportunities conferred by geographical mobility, with queer international student migrants occupying the peak of this gradient due to their economic and cultural resources (Kam 2020; Choi 2022; Martin 2022; Yang 2024; Zheng 2025). China has one of the largest diasporic communities globally. Figures from the United Nations show that around ten million Chinese lived, worked, or studied outside China in 2017, nearly doubling from 4,229,860 in 1990 (United Nations 2017; Li et al. 2019). Education has become one of the primary channels through which Chinese citizens migrate internationally, particularly to developed countries or regions such as Japan (Liu-Farrer 2009), Europe, Australia, and North America. In 2023, approximately 277,000 Chinese students were studying in the United States, accounting for 25 percent of its international student population (Open Doors 2024). Students with Chinese citizenship also represented the largest group of international students in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Prokopenko et al. 2020). In the first six months of 2017 alone, around 170,000 Chinese students enrolled in Australian educational institutions (Australia Department of Education and Training 2017).

Most international educational migration is strongly supported and at least partially financed by parents. To help their children, many of them only children, succeed in China's highly stratified and intensely competitive society, many parents regard studying abroad as a way to avoid the grueling *gao-kao* (literally "high exam"), which determines university admission (Howlett 2021). Parents often believe that studying abroad gives their children an advantage in the job market and is a desirable goal in itself (Kipnis 2011; Fong 2011). Chinese parents generally assume that universities in English-speaking countries provide higher-quality education and better personal development

opportunities (Hansen and Thøgersen 2015). Parental motivations increasingly extend beyond instrumental concerns to include the avoidance of risks such as pollution, food contamination, and gender discrimination (Martin 2022), as well as the pursuit of happiness (Beck and Nyíri 2022).

Chinese parents invest heavily in terms of time, energy, and financial resources to facilitate their children's international educational migration. For example, to enhance their children's chances of entering top universities abroad, some mothers quit their jobs to help cultivate their children's transnational cultural capital (e.g., better English language skills and a cosmopolitan worldview) from a young age (Choi et al. 2024). They also help them prepare for the many exams required by overseas institutions. Some even accompany their children abroad, becoming "accompanying mothers" (*peidu mama*) (Huang and Yeoh 2005; Zhu 2019). While children may initially appreciate this support, it can later become constraining. Yet the investment and emotional connections parents, especially mothers, cultivate through this long process of support also make later outright rejection of parental demands or claims difficult, as will be illustrated throughout the book. As chapter 3 will also show, many of these students, especially younger generations and women, have brought back new knowledge and categories to local queer communities (Huang 2017). They have also sought to fill the gap created by the Chinese government's recent crackdown and censorship, contributing to the emergence of diasporic queer activism.

THE CHANGING FAMILY

The Traditional Family

As illustrated in the introduction, most of my respondents reject heterosexual marriage and procreation. Their determination and ability to do so are particularly intriguing when one considers that China has a Confucian cultural legacy that emphasizes obedience to authority and conventionality at the expense of personal freedom (Hwang 2012); it is a society where not marrying and procreating to continue the family bloodline used to be considered the most extreme form of unfilial behavior.

Authoritarian culture emphasizes individual obedience and submission to authority, the obligatory fulfillment of role expectations in different domains of life, and the promotion of conventionality rather than uniqueness (Gabennesch 1972; Yang 1993). Traditional Chinese society revered

individual sacrifice for the good of the family and obedience to the authorities (the political sphere), parents (the familial sphere), and elders (the sphere of public life) (Yan 2021). This doctrine was codified in Confucian classics such as the *Book of Rites (Liji)* (Confucius 1885), which specifies the nature of authority and the five cardinal relationships: “Kindness on the part of the father and filial duty on that of the son; gentleness on the part of the elder brother and obedience on that of the younger brother; righteousness on the part of the husband and submission on that of the wife; kindness on the part of elders and deference on that of juniors; and benevolence on the part of the ruler and loyalty on that of the minister.”

These codes established a paternalistic and authoritarian social order. The father, the emperor, and the elderly were not only granted power but were also expected to act with kindness and benevolence. They were given authority but also responsibility. They were expected to simultaneously discipline and protect, to control and to care. Within this social order, family played a central role. Three of the five cardinal relationships were familial (father–son, husband–wife, and brothers). The mother–child bond was not mentioned because traditional Chinese families were patrilineal, patriarchal, and patrilocal. Patrilineality refers to the line of descent that is traced through men in the family, patriarchy refers to the domination of men over women, and patrilocality refers to the notion that the woman would leave her natal home to move in with her husband’s family upon marriage. Authority rested with the (male) head of the household, and children were expected to give him undivided loyalty (Wolf 1972). The daughter’s role was also not discussed, as she was considered a temporary family member, leaving home after marriage and transferring her allegiance to the marital family (Stacey 1983; Davis and Harrell 1993).

Practice, however, frequently deviated from normative stipulations. Despite their marginalization and subordination, Chinese women in the Sung dynasty (960–1279) found ways to exert their power and authority within the marital family (Ebrey 1993). Wolf (1972) shows that women constructed uterine families, excluding the husband as a means of countering their isolation in the marital home and ensuring security during old age. Topley (1978) describes how women’s employment in the local silk industry facilitated two forms of marriage resistance in the Canton Delta in southern China: the *pu-lo-chia*, where wives refused to cohabit with their husbands, and the *tzu-shu nu*, where women refused to marry, taking spinsterhood vows. These examples suggest that even in conservative eras of Chinese

history, women found creative strategies of tacit resistance, leading to multiple discrepancies between practice and the official model of the Chinese family (Hsu 1971).

In ancient China, the ethos of filial piety was embodied in the phrase *xiao shun*; *xiao*, to serve and take care of one's parents (e.g., in old age), and *shun*, to listen and obey (even in matters of marriage and reproduction) (Whyte 2004). Traditional Chinese society defined men's obligation toward their family by procreating descendants to continue the familial bloodline. This obligation was conveyed through the common saying "There are three kinds of unfilial piety; not bearing offspring is the greatest [*buxiao yousan wuhou weida*]." A Chinese man was also expected to bring honor to his ancestors (*guangzongyaozu*) by conforming to moral codes and achieving personal success (Louie 2002; Song and Hird 2013). These normative expectations were incorporated into laws that imposed penalties when they were violated (Han and Ren 2024). Despite strict moral dicta and legal stipulations, the practice of filial piety frequently deviated from the ethical ideal. For example, elites and commoners practiced ritual rites (such as a period of mourning for a deceased parent) differently for material reasons (Kutcher 1999).

Scholars generally agree that same-sex relationships historically were considered compatible with Confucian gender and family roles. As long as homoerotic expressions did not challenge the social order and disrupt the fulfillment of traditional roles, they were tolerated. Hinsch (1990) records many incidents of wealthy, powerful, and high-status men opening their homes to and providing references for young and poor men in exchange for sexual services. They kept male slaves, visited male prostitutes, and patronized cross-dressing opera actors. In most cases, these men were heterosexually and polygamously married, and in some, same-sex partners attained the same status as a concubine (Hinsch 1990; Volpp 1994; Sommer 2002). Sommer (1997:142) argues that the chief purpose of laws against sodomy introduced in the late Ming dynasty and continued into the Qing dynasty was to prevent men from being penetrated and upsetting "the proper hierarchy of gender, in which masculinity was defined by the penetrant role in intercourse, corresponding to the husband/father role in society." In other words, these laws were to reinforce the expression of male masculinity and role fulfillment rather than eliminate homoeroticism. Sang (2003) echoes this gendered logic by arguing that homoeroticism between women was marginalized and trivialized in dynastic China and ignored in legal codes because it was never considered a threat to the patriarchal social order.

The family has continued to play a central role in post-socialist China. Data collected through surveys and ethnographic studies has revealed a continued discursive adherence to the norm of filial piety (Barbalet 2025; Whyte 2003; 2004; Deutsch 2006). However, economic reforms fundamentally altered the relationship between the state and the Chinese family, the structure of the family, and the internal dynamics among family members.

Unlike during the socialist era, when families were largely “suplicants” to the state and depended on state handouts of key resources for their members’ survival (Davis 1993:50), under the economic reforms, the Chinese family and its members were given more freedom and choices in making a living within the reformed economy. At the same time, they were increasingly expected to take responsibility for the welfare of their members. This shift was particularly stark for urbanites, who had previously enjoyed “state-funded and guaranteed welfare” during the socialist era (Lee 2019:59). For rural peasants, the abolition of the People’s Commune and the work-point system in the early 1980s also dramatically reduced officials’ economic leverage and administrative tools for controlling the private lives of the peasantry (Greenhalgh 1993). The de-collectivization of economic production not only increased peasant household income but also led to “the rise of the private family and the private lives of individuals within the family” (Yan 2003:15).

These economic and political changes have led to shifting family structures. As Unger (1993) shows, by the early 1980s, two-thirds of all urban households in China were nuclear in composition, consisting only of parents and their children. This contrasted with the cultural ideal of large extended families including three or more generations. The 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010 censuses show that the proportion of one-couple households rose rapidly, while that of two-generation standard nuclear households declined. Nevertheless, extended-family households still constituted a relatively large proportion (Hu and Peng 2015). The general trend of decrease in household size, however, cannot be simplistically interpreted as a decline in intergenerational interdependence. Peng (2024, 2025) shows that young Chinese couples rely heavily on their parents for childcare support in the post-socialist era. Reflecting this phenomenon, Shen et al. (2021:453) note that “by 2010, people below the age of five and in their late 20s and early 60s were more likely to live in three-generation households than in nuclear households compared with their counterparts in 1982, likely due to the needs of childcare.” The

crucial role of grandparental childcare support is also highly relevant for queer parents, such as Zhenzhu in the introduction (see also Wei and Wang 2024). Household size, which measures the number of people living in the same housing unit, is only one indicator of family life. With increased migration, family members may not live in the same household but may continue to maintain close relationships (Zheng 2025).

Beyond these structural indicators, family change is also evident in shifting internal dynamics. Yan (2018; 2021) identifies major transformations that culminate in what he terms “neo-familism.” The concept affirms the continued centrality of the family in post-socialist China but highlights the replacement of traditional familial norms and practices by new sets of understandings. He observes four major shifts in familial dynamics: (1) a shift from emphasizing filial piety and the care of the older generation to concentrating resources on facilitating the success and happiness of the younger generation, which he terms “descending familism”; (2) an emotional turn that replaces obligation with affection and mutuality as the primary binding mechanism of familial solidarity; (3) a focus on material success and consumption; and (4) increased tension between individual and family interests. These changes have occurred within the broader context of the growing individualization of Chinese society (Yan 2009; 2010; 2016; 2018; 2021).

Past studies and the life stories of my respondents support Yan’s observation of the rise of neo-familism. In their study of rural-to-urban migrant men, Choi and Peng (2016) highlight the discrepancies between rhetoric and practices of filial piety. Despite vowing to care for their parents in their old age, few migrant men did so, except when their parents were critically ill or extremely old. They also reinterpreted the norm of filial piety to justify prioritizing their children’s welfare over that of their parent’s. Additionally, migrant men freely selected different elements of the filial norm to fit their circumstances. For instance, when they could not provide care for their parents and thus failed to fulfill the *xiao* component, they emphasized their obedience to parental advice and the *shun* component. Conversely, many of my respondents focus on their parents’ health and feelings (*xiao*) over *shun* because they are reluctant to follow parental advice to marry a heterosexual person. Some challenge the supreme status of filial piety as a guiding moral code, replacing it with the value of equality.

Most respondents born in the 1980s or 1990s say they would not sacrifice personal happiness to satisfy their parents’ wishes. They emphasize intergenerational emotional intimacy, familial love, and mutual understanding

(*hu xiang liang jie*) over filial piety. Although the majority refuse to yield to pressure to marry a heterosexual person, they are reluctant to directly resist parental order and work to avoid open conflict with their parents because they are emotionally close to them and dread hurting their feelings. Some understand the pressure their parents face in a society that still generally regards marriage and procreation as normative (Ji and Yeung 2014). Some feel guilty about depriving their parents of the joy of grandparenting and subjecting them to adverse comments and gossip. Most respondents feel indebted to their parents for providing various forms of support. Around 66 percent of my respondents are singletons who benefited from undivided parental material investment and emotional support.

Their parents funded their university and postgraduate education, contributed to property purchases, financed expensive overseas trips to register same-sex marriages and/or access assisted reproductive technologies, and filled unmet childcare gaps. This reliance on parents reflects more than pragmatic calculation; it signals trust and appreciation. Over time, many parents of my respondents have softened their opposition or reduced their ambivalence toward their children's nonnormative lifestyles. Instead of children coming out to their parents, some parents have come in to support their children's pursuit of sexual freedom (see chapter 7).

These contexts help us understand why my respondents want both individual desire and family harmony. They are no longer willing to sacrifice one for the other. To achieve this goal, they devise nonconfrontational strategies, such as selective coming out and/or nominal marriage. While these strategies may reflect constraints, they also stem from care about parents' feelings (see chapter 6).

Yet it is important to note that not every LGBTQ+ individual resists parental pressure to marry and procreate heterosexually. By its very nature, resistance is relational, shaped by the interplay between those who impose and enforce norms and those who refuse or reject them. Whether resistance occurs, what form it takes, which strategies are adopted, and how effective they are depends on parental values, attitudes, and resources, which, as my respondents reveal, are increasingly heterogeneous. While some parents continue to prioritize their adult children's fulfillment of marital duties and the continuation of the family line, others place greater emphasis on their children's happiness. Even when parents share similar expectations, they may differ in the resources and authority available to enforce compliance or support their children in pursuing a nonnormative lifestyle. Variations in

parental expectations and enforcement capacity occur across birth cohorts, rural and urban areas, social class, gender, and familial roles. One example of such variation can be seen in the role of grandparents: While many help care for my respondents due to parental work commitments or divorce, few assert strong claims for role fulfillment. In narratives about parental pressure to marry, my respondents refer primarily to their parents, while grandparents play only a marginal role. Not coming out to grandparents is typically justified on the grounds of their advanced age or fragile health. Just as shifts in family structure and internal dynamics shape the possibilities and limits of queer resistance, so, too, do changing marriage patterns and expectations. I turn to these in the next section.

SHIFTS IN HETEROSEXUAL MARRIAGES

Marriage, long regarded as the cornerstone of family life in China, is undergoing profound transformation. This in turn has created space for LGBTQ+ people to resist marriage pressures. The 2010 Chinese Census reported that 94 percent of men and 98 percent of women were married by the time they were thirty-four years old (United Nations, 2012). This suggests that marriage has remained virtually universal. However, this does not mean that China is a global outlier exempt from deinstitutionalization (Cherlin 2004), understood as the weakening of traditional authorities (e.g., parents) and social norms that shape the choice of marital partners as well as partners' roles and obligations within marriage.

The Marriage Law enacted in 1950 by the CPC abolished arranged and forced marriages, giving women and men the freedom to choose their spouse. The percentage of parents who determined mate choice dropped from 60 to 70 percent in the pre-1949 period to under 10 percent in the 1970s and 1980s (Xu and Whyte 1990:709). Pooled data from the 2010, 2012, and 2014 China Family Panel Studies reveal that the proportion of self-initiated marriages increased from 15 percent to 50 percent from the 1980s to 2014 (Liu and Mu 2023).

These developments mirror the global turn toward “the individualization of marriage choices” and “the generalization of competition” in mate selection (Illouz 2012:51). Under these new conditions, individuals are free to search for a partner to whom they feel emotionally connected and sexually attracted. At the same time, they must compete with one another to

gain access to desirable mates. When traditional norms of hypergamy, which expect women to marry men with higher socioeconomic status and men women of lower status, persist, the new freedom in mate choice becomes enmeshed in class competition for marital partners. This means that those with advantageous attributes can secure access to desirable mates, while those lacking such attributes are excluded. It also means that searching for a suitable marital partner becomes a far more contingent endeavor, with uncertain outcomes. These broad changes underscore the decoupling of premarital intimacy from marriage.

Traditional Chinese society placed a high value on female virginity, with premarital sex being prohibited. During the socialist era, sex outside marriage was regarded as immoral and was roundly condemned. By the 1990s, premarital sex was commonly accepted, at least by young people (Zhou 2007; Honig 2003; Zheng et al. 2011). A study conducted in Shanghai in 1999 revealed that 79 percent of women reported having premarital sex (Paul et al. 2004:1). In a 2000 national survey, 30 percent of women and over 40 percent of men who turned twenty between 1995 and 2000 reported having had premarital sex (Parish et al. 2007). Fincher (2014) posits that although “marriage has remained an important goal for most urban Chinese young people, ‘love relationships’ (*lianai guanxi*) in practice have become increasingly independent of marriage.” Choi and Peng (2016) show that young people have taken advantage of the decoupling of premarital intimacy from marriage to pursue romantic love and sex during their labor migration. While young Chinese continue to seek parental endorsement for their marital partners, there seems to be a tacit understanding between them and their parents that romantic pursuits are permissible before marriage (Lai and Choi 2021). This partly accounts for the sexual freedom that my respondents enjoy after they complete their secondary education (chapter 4).

Further evidence of changes in marriage is indicated by increases in the age of first marriage and in the percentages of unmarried people in their thirties. The average age of first marriage has increased from 25.9 in 1990 to 29.38 in 2020 for men, and from 23.8 to 27.95 for women (Yuwa Population Research 2023). In 2019, 2.96 percent of women and 7.68 percent of men between the ages of thirty-five and thirty-nine were unmarried, representing increases of 76 percent and 60 percent over the figures for 2005, respectively (Yuwa Population Research 2023). These increases may be related to two contrasting gendered trends. First, the persistence of son preference during the one-child policy era (1980–2015) has resulted in a sex imbalance, with the 2020

population census indicating that there were 17.52 million more men than women in the twenty-to-forty age group (Yuwa Population Research 2023). This imbalance in the marriageable population affects poor men from rural areas who lack the economic resources to pay bride prices and cover wedding expenses (Choi and Peng 2016). Lacking desirability and competitiveness in the marriage market, many remain involuntary bachelors throughout their lives (Yang et al. 2023).

Second, in contrast to poor men who are involuntarily excluded from the marriage market, highly educated women in urban areas are delaying marriage well past the socially expected age of twenty-seven. Despite being labeled as “leftover women,” a derogatory term implying that they lack competitiveness in the marriage market, these women do not marry simply for marriage’s sake. Scholars argue that, contrary to popular perception, these women are “not stereotypically stuck or desperate.” They delay marriage in the hope of finding a partner who can offer financial security, romantic love, and egalitarian companionship. The social stigmatization they face highlights the discrepancies between individual aspirations and rigid gendered marital age norms (Fincher 2014; Gaetano 2014:124). However, while women labeled as “leftover women” refuse to rush into marriage simply because they are so described (To 2015), their parents are evidently anxious. Anxiety about their adult offspring’s marriage prospects has led some Chinese parents to establish marriage-matching corners in parks (Zhang and Sun 2014). Yet even there, “parents are not imposing their decisions on their children” but merely screening “candidates” for them (Zhang and Sun 2014:136). This confirms the broad trend toward the individualization of marriage, where parental influence persists but manifests in a far subtler manner than in traditional China.

Another indicator of changes in marriage is the rise in the divorce rate, which increased from 0.96 in 2000 to 3.1 in 2020 (Zhang and Sun 2014:136). The 1950 Marriage Law included provisions to allow greater access to divorce, and the 1980 Marriage Law removed additional barriers. Under this law, divorce can be granted simply because there has been a loss of affection between husband and wife. Judges are also empowered to grant divorces on the fault-based grounds of domestic violence. These legal changes allow women victimized by domestic violence to turn to the courts for recourse. Citing figures provided by the Supreme People’s Court, Li (2022:1) reports that in 2018, the Chinese court system “processed 1.37 million divorce suits, a sixfold increase since the late 1970s.” Women initiated more than 70 percent of divorce suits.

The life stories of my respondents suggest that LGBTQ+ people have capitalized on shifts in heterosexual marriage to gain greater sexual freedom and resist marriage pressures. The increase in age of first marriage for both women and men means that younger cohorts, particularly those born in the 1980s, face parental pressure to marry at a later age compared to earlier generations. A higher age for first marriage is often associated with greater educational attainment and a higher likelihood of achieving financial independence. It also increases the chances that individuals are living away from their parents, whether working in cities or studying and working abroad. All these factors enhance their confidence and resources to resist parental pressure, weaken parental leverage, and make their resistance to heterosexual marriage more sustainable over time.

Rural-to-urban migrant gay men also routinely use the social visibility of involuntary bachelorhood as an excuse to delay marriage. When pressed by their parents to marry, they retort that no woman wants to marry them because they earn a low wage, have limited job prospects, and do not have a marital property-in-waiting. Realizing that many poor rural men in China are currently excluded from the marriage market, parents invariably retreat into silence and pause before exerting further pressure. *Lalas* point to public debates about women's delayed marriage to reassure their parents that it is common nowadays. The social visibility of changing heterosexuality therefore gives LGBTQ+ people more time to find alternatives to marrying a straight person.

I will elaborate in chapter 7 on how the growing acceptance of divorce has reduced barriers for gay men married to heterosexual women to file for divorce. I will also explain how rising divorce rates provide LGBTQ+ people with rhetorical ammunition to resist the pressures to marry. Increasingly, they draw on examples of divorce, whether from people around them or from celebrities, to make a compelling case about the precarity of marital unions. Instead of pursuing marriage, they persuade their parents that economic self-reliance and career success offer better guarantees of old-age security, thereby making singlehood a livable and respectable alternative. Public attention to marital infidelity, such as men taking mistresses (Xiao 2011), further helps to demystify marriage as the only secure avenue for women to achieve a decent life. More parents of *lalas* are now convinced that their daughters' same-sex unions are a pragmatic arrangement, as long as these bring their daughters happiness and provide them with grandchildren.

Viewed together, this chapter sketches the changing social landscapes in post-socialist China. These changes open new possibilities for queer

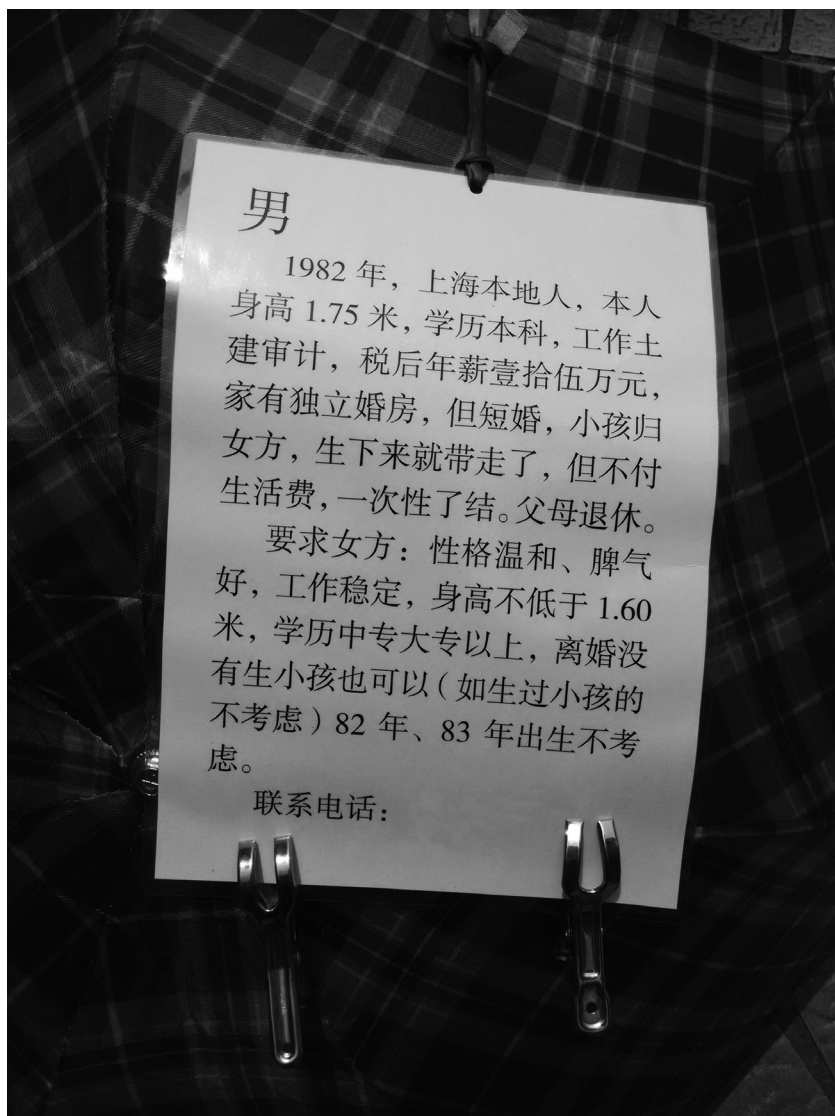


FIGURE 3. A handwritten marriage advertisement displayed on an umbrella by a father at Shanghai's People's Park, detailing his son's age, background, income, desired partner's attributes, and contact number. The contact number has been removed by the author to preserve the man's privacy. Photo by author.



FIGURE 4. Parents gather at Shanghai's People's Park, displaying marriage advertisements for their children on open umbrellas along a shaded walkway. Photo by author.

resistance against heterosexual norms and marriage pressures but also constrain the options and contour the nature of resistance. The implications of these changes for individuals are illustrated in chapters 4 to 7. In the next chapter, I first examine how some lala activists appropriate the state's turn to pronatalist policies in the wake of population crises to campaign for equal parental rights for single women. This chapter also explores the formation of queer communities and the proliferation of identity categories, within which queer activism emerges and evolves.

Solidarity and Hierarchies

I do not mean to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are always necessarily virtuous; some of them, alas, are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian; and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization. Theory should render visible the ways in which social inequality taints deliberation within publics. (Fraser 1990)

IN THIS CHAPTER, I TRACE the formation of the queer community, identify emergent divisions, and illustrate how LGBTQ+ civic organizations have recalibrated their work in response to tightening state control, attesting to the challenges of collective organization and showcasing the resilience of subaltern counterpublics. I also explain how identity categories relate to each other and form discernible hierarchies of power and prestige within the LGBTQ+ community. The proliferation of micro-identity categories suggests not only the local adaptation of global identity categories but also growing heterogeneity and inequalities within the LGBTQ+ community. They reflect group understanding (e.g., who are we/they?) (Brown-Saracino 2015) and social differentiation (e.g., how do I stand in relation to others?) (Bourdieu 1984). Relationships between identity categories illuminate symbolic boundaries (e.g., how are we and others different?) (Lamont and Fournier 1992) and the evaluation and ordering of persons and objects (e.g., who and what is more desirable and prestigious?) within a particular sexual field (e.g., gay dating apps and Shenzhen's gay circles) (Green 1994).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES

In 2009, there were around three hundred LGBTQ+ organizations in China (Rofel 2012). My research team identifies 250 LGBTQ+ organizations,

university student associations, and commercial venues in 2025. These include 117 LGBTQ+ civic organizations, 93 university student associations, 2 high school student associations, and 20 commercial venues (e.g., gay, lesbian or gender-friendly bars, night clubs, saunas, and cafés). Most civic organizations and student associations have public online accounts, though approximately 75 percent were shut down before or during 2020. As a result of the tightening state control of civil society after 2016, some organizations, websites, and networks are no longer operating, but my conversations with activists suggest that many of these have maintained a clandestine and loosely networked existence.

My team also identifies fifteen gay dating apps (Blued, Finka, Aixingliao, XinghunXingyouquan, Jicco, Shaonian Shouce, Lanke, Lanyou Nantongzhi Shejiao Ruanjian, Guigui Jiaoyou, Baiwa, Lanjipai, Xing Nanyou, Manhunt [available in China], Zank, and Feizan). With the exception of Lanjipai, Xing Nanyou, Zank, and Feizan, all remain operational. We identify six lesbian dating apps (LesPark, Jiemeituan, Yezi Yes or No, LESDO, Lala Seeking Friends [*lalajiaoyou*], and The L [formerly Rela 热拉]). Among them, Jiemeituan and LESDO ceased operating. Gay cruising places, usually public toilets in parks or sports grounds, can be found in nearly every Chinese city. We also identify five lesbian online forums (Kulashibao, Les 30+, Les Sky, Jiligualla, and LES SEA) and four gay online forums (Gayba [Baidu Tieba's gay forum], Gay in Near Color, Tongzhizhengyou, and Yigeputonggaydeshenghuo ["An Ordinary Gay's Life"]). These dating apps and online forums have a combined following of approximately fifty-six million users.

Given the current political climate, the number of LGBTQ+ networks and social spaces is likely to be much higher, as many networks are private and commercial venues with low profiles. The figure of fifty-six million is, therefore, likely to be an underestimate. Given that up until the mid-1990s, gay men were still frequently harassed and detained by the police, the existence of so many organizations and social media sites with large online followings, along with a plethora of commercial venues, indicates a sea change in the landscape of queer community organization in post-socialist China (Wan 2001). In view of the general weakness of China's civil society, the resilience of the LGBTQ+ community is remarkable.

As the community continues to flourish, queer identity categories have multiplied. A quick online search returned a multiplicity of identity labels, including broad categories such as *tongxinglianzhe* ("homosexual people"),

tongzhi (“comrades”), gay, lala, les, lesbian, pansexual, bisexual, and queer, as well as micro-categories for intimate relationship roles. For example, the lesbian community employs terms such as T (a tomboy, the masculine partner in a lesbian relationship), P (*po*, literally “woman,” the feminine partner in a lesbian relationship), *zhongxing* (androgynous/gender neutral), *bufen* (undifferentiated), and H (halfway between masculinity and femininity). The gay community has developed micro-identities such as one (the insertive partner in intercourse), zero (the receptive partner in intercourse), zero-point-five (versatile in sexual positioning), *shou* (“take,” meaning the receptive partner in intercourse between gay men), and *gong* (“attack,” meaning the insertive partner in intercourse). Western identity categories such as top (the insertive partner in intercourse) and bottom (the receptive partner in intercourse) are used interchangeably with one and zero, respectively.

Nuances within micro-identity categories are marked by subdivisions. For example, within the T category are subcategories such as iron T, pure T, sissy T, *ye* T (爷T, masculine T), *nai* T (奶T, cute T), long-haired T, and pure P. The active and passive categories used by the gay community are subdivided into age (e.g., young or uncle/mature), temperament (strong or weak), moral quality (caring/uncaring or loyal/disloyal), and gender presentation (sissy or robust).

The flourishing of the LGBTQ+ community and the proliferation of sexual identity categories attest to the increased visibility of nonheterosexual desires, the existence of public (online) spaces for the articulation of sexual identities, and the successful formation of communities based on shared experiences and preferences associated with nonnormative sexuality. They also bear out the growing determination of LGBTQ+ people in China to assert their difference and to develop a counterculture that can resist the normalizing power of heterosexuality.

SOLIDARITY AND COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE

AIDS Education and Rights Advocacy (1990s–2015)

AIDS education and research acted as a springboard for LGBTQ+ community organization. Early efforts were spearheaded by academics and professionals working in research centers and health education institutes under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Health, which simultaneously supported and constrained them. When the ministry felt that the work of

AIDS activists had gone beyond public health education to advocating for the human rights of gay men and sex workers (and gaining too much media attention), it stopped the funding. Activists' relationships with the Public Security Bureau were especially precarious. At times, police officers volunteered to "assist" HIV/AIDS research and prevention efforts by coercing gay men into participating, much to the discomfort of researchers and activists. Occasionally, officers harassed activists and accused them of promoting homosexuality (Wan 2001:57).

According to Wan Yanhai, a renowned AIDS activist, and He Xiaopei, a prominent lesbian activist, international agencies played a significant role in facilitating the development of queer collective organization. Yanhai was invited to speak at the World Health Organization's AIDS Social Research Conference held in Jinan in 1991, where he discussed his work on AIDS education and prevention and called for equality for lesbians and gays. After the Ministry of Public Health cut funding for AIDS hotlines and the activities of Men's World in 1993, activists successfully applied for a grant from the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation. In 1994, with the help of Western human rights activists, Li Jianquan was invited to speak at the World Lesbian and Gay Conference in New York. Li called upon the international community to pay attention to the human rights of China's sexual minorities (Wan 2001:47). Activists were eager to connect with the international community. For example, during the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, activist Wu Chunsheng organized a meeting between foreign delegates and a group of Chinese lesbians (He 2001). When the crime of hooliganism was still in place, gay men and lesbians usually met in private homes, unadvertised gay bars, and corners of restaurants and discos, often at significant risk; Wan Yanhai, Li Jianquan, and Wu Chunsheng were arrested and detained by the police for their activism.

The removal of the crime of hooliganism from the Revised Criminal Law of 1997 changed the landscape of queer community organization. The first tongzhi pager hotline serving both men and women was established in Beijing in 1998, shortly after homosexuality was decriminalized. As one of the founders of the hotline, He Xiaopei, recalled, "women were particularly enthusiastic, signing up to answer the hotline and take part in training discussions" (He and Jolly 2002:481). The first National Women and Men's Tongzhi Conference was held in early 1998, followed in October by the First National Women's Tongzhi Conference. That same year, the first women's tongzhi magazine, *Sky*, was published, and the NGO Pink Space

was established to address issues relating to women and HIV/AIDS and to provide outreach to sex workers, single mothers, women living with HIV/AIDS, and women married to gay men.

In 2001, sociologist Li Yinhe submitted the Chinese Same-Sex Marriage Bill to the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference. She resubmitted the same amendment in 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2012. Many prominent LGBTQ+ civic organizations, including the Beijing LGBT Center, were established in the first decade of the 2000s. PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) was established in 2008 in Guangzhou, the capital of the Guangdong Province in South China, to recruit and empower parents of sexual minorities to promote equal rights for their children. According to the founder of the organization, PFLAG began with a USD 1,500 donation from a friend. By 2018, the organization had ten full-time staff, fifty branches, and more than three thousand volunteers, the majority of whom are the so-called rainbow parents (*caihong fumu*), who work on hotlines answering calls from distressed parents who are struggling to accept their children's sexuality. They attend annual PFLAG meetings, stand on stages where they declare their pride in their children, join sharing sessions, and appear on TV programs and radio talk shows where they talk about how they learned to come to terms with and celebrate their children's sexuality (Wei and Yan 2021).

PFLAG and other civic organizations and networks engaged in a wide range of activities aimed at destigmatizing homosexuality, championed the human rights of sexual and gender minorities, and campaigned for equal marriage and adoption rights. These organizations and networks represented what Fraser calls "subaltern counterpublics," alternative public spheres formed by subordinate groups to generate and circulate discourses and oppose and subvert the dominant ideology (Fraser 1990:67).

LGBTQ+ people revisited their histories and shared stories of suffering and triumphs through online forums and offline camps, salons, lectures, print and digital publications (e.g., *Queer Lala Times*), art, literature, poetry, filmmaking, and songs (Bao 2020). They created and introduced new identity categories that allowed for affirmative interpretations of their experiences, articulated their needs and interests, and imagined a future outside the confines of institutionalized heterosexuality. The internet and transnational mobility facilitated their access to global LGBTQ+ rights claims. Six days after the US Supreme Court's 2015 decision to grant sexual minorities equal marriage rights, two Chinese lala activists, Teresa Xu and

Li Tingting, organized China's first lesbian wedding in the capital city of Beijing (Fu 2015).

Some lala activists also craved an autonomous space to address intersectional inequalities. For example, He Xiaopei founded Pink Space to bring lesbians, the wives of gay men, and women living with HIV together to explore their commonality (Bao and He 2019). Tongyu (同语, "common language"), a lesbian advocacy civic organization founded in 2004, addressed the dual repression lesbians experienced as women and sexual minorities, tackling issues such as parental violence against daughters after their homosexuality was disclosed (Rofel 2012). Les+, a queer women's civic organization launched in 2005, produced a print magazine, organized exhibitions, and oversaw the writing of a play, *The Rabbit Hole* (2012), that explored and imagined a "disruptive and nonheteronormative futurity" for lalas (Huang 2017).

Some activists established a historical archive of lala lives in 2011 and began collecting oral histories of older lesbians. Rela, China's first social networking app for lesbians, was founded in 2012, followed by LESDO in 2014. Zhao Jing and Shi Tou documented the history of lesbian activism in China in the film *We Are Here* (Bao 2020:48). These are efforts to create an identity independent of gay men and to unite feminism and lesbian activism to tackle the dual subjugation of lesbians by the patriarchy, a system based on male domination, and heteronormativity, a system that subordinates nonnormative heterosexual practices and nonheterosexuality.

Recalibrating Resistance Since 2016

Although tightening state censorship and the crackdown on LGBTQ+ civic organizations since 2016 cast a shadow over organized and collective mobilization, it does not mean "the end of the rainbow."¹ LGBTQ+ civic organizations and networks have recalibrated their strategies of resistance, ensuring first and foremost activists' safety and the survival of their organizations and platforms. While some organizations have been forced to shut down, others have downscaled or shifted their goals, for example, from advocacy to service provision. Some organizations whose funding was cut upon the introduction of the law restricting foreign NGOs have explored local sources, becoming government contractors of HIV/AIDS prevention and service work. Others have attempted to conform to dominant state discourses by establishing communication channels with local authorities (Ren and Gui 2024). According to several respondents associated with LGBTQ+

civic organizations, to minimize political risk, they have actively incorporated and translated state directives relating to social harmony into their rhetoric and public engagement work; some have even desexualized their platforms. Major online dating apps such as Blued and Finka removed terms indicating homosexuality from their web pages, and several organizations changed their names (removing homosexuality-related words). For example, PFLAG changed its name to Trueself in 2021. Organizations whose public online accounts were shut down or muted have created accounts overseas. Chinese netizens are no strangers to using VPNs to circumvent the Great Firewall in accessing overseas content, while overseas accounts help the community maintain contact with the overseas queer diaspora.

In April 2018, in the face of omnipresent state online surveillance, Chinese queer netizens successfully organized a large-scale protest against Sina Weibo, one of China's most popular social media platforms, which had announced a ban on all LGBTQ-related discussions. It was forced to reverse its ban two days later. As part of the protest, Weibo users posted pictures of themselves with the hashtag #IAmGay and #IAmLes (Huang 2023).

Before 2016, the only community organization for Chinese sexual and gender minorities outside China was the Chinese Rainbow Network, founded in 1996 to serve Chinese sexual minorities in North America. Since 2016, the queer Chinese diaspora has stepped up their overseas organizational endeavors. VaChina, a United Kingdom-based Chinese female and queer diaspora-led organization focusing on gender and intersectional feminist activism, was founded in 2017; Queer China UK was founded in 2019 to provide LGBTQIA+² individuals of Chinese heritage and their allies with a home; and the Pan-European Rainbow Chinese was founded in 2022 by a group of activists, academics, students, artists, and professionals to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and feminist agendas. United Proud Women, an NGO founded by sexual minority women of Chinese descent in North America, was established in 2022 with the aims of empowering sexual minority women and organizing collective actions for change. Active members of these organizations are mostly highly educated Chinese LGBTQ+ people who are pursuing university or postgraduate education. These organizations leverage the expertise and knowledge of their members, along with advanced technology, to organize online lectures, seminars, and discussion groups on gender and sexuality issues. They also foster community building through book clubs and film screenings. Through active participation in pride parades across different countries and engagement with scholars on gender and sexuality

from various regions, they forge transnational connections while maintaining a firm focus on the specific issues and challenges confronting Chinese LGBTQ+ people.

Activists in China have also explored new forms of resistance in response to the state's judicialization of sexuality and intimacy. The China Marriage Equality Advocacy Network (Ai Cheng Jia), established in 2019, mobilized its members to submit petitions for equal marriage rights to the National People's Congress. While ordinary women have been ambivalent about the state's shift to a pronatalist policy since 2016 (Ren and Pan 2021),³ lesbian activists have seized the opportunity to campaign for single women's access to assisted reproductive technology. With the aid of Advocates for Diverse Family Networks (Duo Yuan Jia Ting Wang Luo), Teresa Xu, a lesbian activist who staged a public wedding shortly after the United States legalized same-sex marriage in 2015, filed a lawsuit against a hospital for refusing to provide her with egg-freezing services in 2019. She argued that the rules on egg freezing in China were sexist. They imposed no conditions on men who wished to freeze their sperm and restricted egg-freezing services to married women able to prove that they were either infertile or undergoing treatment that might make conception difficult. In 2022, a court passed a judgment dismissing Xu's claim (Zhao and Fu 2023). In February 2023, the government of Sichuan Province legalized the registration of children by unmarried women, leading to speculation that it might lift restrictions for single women to access assisted reproductive technology (Master and Yin 2023). This is one of the most publicized cases in which sexual and gender minorities have challenged a system that deprives them of equal rights.

Other examples of legal mobilization include an activist taking a publisher to court in 2020 for publishing homophobic textbooks (Ren and Pan 2021). In the following year, nineteen-year-old Xiaowu filed a civil suit against a Beijing high school for forcing him to leave after he gave a speech concerning discrimination against homosexual people. After his expulsion, Xiaowu posted details of his ordeal online. He received support from netizens and LGBTQ+ organizations (LGBT Rights Advocacy CHINA 2021). The turn to legal mobilization illustrates the community's resilience and provides an example of the "reciprocal adjustment" between power and resistance (Scott 2020:x).

Drawing attention to the above is not to dismiss the formidable challenges presented by tightening state control. Community outreach work has certainly become more problematic. Kai, a twenty-six-year-old ethnic minority woman who has been active in LGBTQ+ civic organizations for nine years,

worries that state repression of LGBTQ+ organizations will widen inequality of access to sexual rights and freedom:

I don't think we are facing the same problem. The community is highly stratified and heterogeneous. At the same time, sexual minority members in my hometown are being harmed and constrained by their class disadvantages. Younger queer people with higher education and coming from affluent families are trending on social media, such as Xiaohongshu [Rednote]. They tend not to view themselves as sexually deviant and have much less difficulty coming out in comparison. While new LGBTQ+ online platforms are being built, some LGBTQ+ people might be pushed into greater isolation. How can we reach out to them? For various reasons, many LGBTQ+ civic organizations have chosen not to conduct outreach and community work anymore because this work does not bring in money and is dangerous [because of the risk of a police crackdown]. Without such work, how do we find isolated peers? LGBTQ+ organizations once served as a bridge between ordinary LGBTQ+ people and broader rights claims.

As someone who has spent most of her adult life volunteering and working for different LGBTQ+ and feminist civic organizations in China, Kai is confident that her activist friends will continue to make their sexuality visible and keep “the goodness inside us” through everyday forms of resistance (e.g., continuous nonnormative sexual exploration). She is, however, deeply concerned about the impact of dwindling community and outreach work on less visible LGBTQ+ populations in small cities, towns, and villages, and those with less educational and cultural capital to participate in online LGBTQ+ spaces.

THE PRODUCTION OF INTERNAL HIERARCHIES

The gay community has degenerated into a space of mutual discrimination. The masculine ones look down upon the effeminate ones; the tall guys look down upon the short guys; those with fit bodies look down upon the chubby ones; young people look down upon older men; users of different dating apps look down upon each other. Blued is mocked as the “cradle of AIDS.” It is considered low; their users are stereotyped as having minimal educational qualifications. (Hang, a twenty-four-year-old gay university student living in Beijing)

Just when the LGBTQ+ community grapples with intensified state repression, it is also confronted with increased stratification that divides the

community. Hang's comments, which are echoed by many respondents, signify a growing unease among some LGBTQ+ people about the emergence of new forms of exclusion and marginalization. In the following section of this chapter, I elaborate on how hierarchies of desirability based on gender embodiment, class background, the rural-urban divide, age, and HIV status have been constructed. These hierarchies both reflect and reproduce broader structures of inequality.

Gender and T-P and Zero-One Hierarchies

Like many others, Chinese society is organized around a binary gender system and rigid role expectations. Male femininity and, to a lesser extent, female masculinity are met with social disapproval. Haoyu, a twenty-five-year-old gay man from a provincial capital in southwest China, recalls how his femininity was the source of his childhood trauma and his parents' worries, and how a casual comment by a market trader ("Your daughter looks like a boy") caused many sleepless nights for his parents. To prevent him from being misidentified as a girl and bolster his masculinity, his parents encouraged Haoyu to play basketball. They also policed how he interacted with his classmates, showing disapproval whenever he expressed feminine traits in his responses to conflict. To avoid being regarded as effeminate, Haoyu tried his best to learn how to talk, walk, and dress masculinely. By the time he entered senior high school, people no longer said "he looks like a girl" or "he's a sissy."

Unlike uniform familial and societal rejections of male femininity, female masculinity is often disciplined by parents but sometimes welcomed in the peer context. Chun, a thirty-three-year-old lala with shaved hair, says that her father criticizes her mother for failing to bring her up like a "proper girl." However, she has enjoyed good relationships with girls and boys. She now has many male and female friends. Because men do not regard her as a woman, they share obscene jokes and talk to her as if she were their buddy. At the same time, women do not see her as a man and feel free around her because they do not need to put on feminine displays. Rather than being stigmatized, Chun feels that her masculinity has expanded her social world and allowed her to navigate both female- and male-dominated environments.

Societal disapproval of male femininity has extended to the gay community; some gay male respondents try to distance themselves from effeminate gay men. The stigmatization of male femininity is further complicated by its association with the micro-identity categories zero, bottom, and *shou*.

Less-masculine gay men are often assumed to be one of these and likely to be paired with a person who self-identifies as a one, top, or *gong*. Because of the association between effeminacy and the zero/bottom/*shou* identity categories, those assuming said identities are construed to be inferior within the community. Ren, a twenty-three-year-old gay man, laments:

I am a zero, and I am ashamed to be a zero. In gay circles, ones feel they are superior to zeros. Maybe there are always more zeros than ones on dating apps, so the zeros feel that they are inferior and that they need to please the ones, but I think zeros and ones should be equal.

Ren is puzzled by the formation of the zero-one hierarchy. He attributes the underlying cause to an imbalance in the supply of and demand for gay men with particular sexual preferences and gender attributes. He uses a market metaphor to describe the gay dating scene, a social space where individuals exchange their desired attributes. If effeminacy has made the zeros less desirable than the ones, what masculine attributes have made the ones more desirable? Most gay respondents agree that the gay community valorizes a version of refined, middle-class, and cosmopolitan masculinity centered on conventional indicators of masculinity such as success (*chenggong*) and cosmopolitan exposure. The ideal gay man is a physically attractive, fit, straight-acting and -looking person who is highly educated, perhaps with qualifications from an esteemed overseas university. He is either a high-flying professional or a successful entrepreneur with a taste for sleek fashion and refined living (Rofel 1999a; Kong 2019). This paragon of gay masculinity reproduces many attributes of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), even as the latter rejects homosexuality.

Because the zero-one relationship is perceived as hierarchical and unequal, some gay men who initially self-identify as zeros change to identify with the one or zero-point-five categories. Haoyu initially played the role of the zero but became the one in his last relationship. Currently, he is a “versatile,” striving to have an egalitarian relationship (a change that I detail in chapter 4). Mingzhe, a thirty-six-year-old gay man living in Shanghai, also changed his identification from zero to zero-point-five to avoid stigmatization. He feels that the zero-one, bottom-top, and *shou-gong* categorical pairings are regulating frameworks imposed on him:

When I joined the gay circle, people asked me whether I was a top or a bottom. I had no idea. They said I was shy and had a gentle personality, so I

must be a bottom, a zero. I thought if everybody said that I was a zero, then I must be a zero; if I was a zero, then I should be at the bottom during sex acts. So when my boyfriend had sex with me, he always wanted to be on top. I felt uncomfortable. I refused to have [anal sex]. I was unhappy. He tried to make love to me, but I did not want to.

Sexual incompatibility led to the breakdown of two relationships. Mingzhe has stayed single since and does not believe he will find somebody compatible with his sexual preference. On dating apps, he identifies as zero-point-five, meaning that he can either be an insertive or a receptive partner in sexual intercourse; the problem, however, is that he is not truly versatile. He dislikes anal sex and avoids it because he finds no pleasure in it. His sexual preference conflicts with the sexual culture of the gay community, which privileges penetration. Needless to say, not all gay men reject the zero-one pairing and the enactment of heterosexual gender scripts. Some who self-identify as zeros embrace it, along with their longing to be cared for and protected by a strong man.

While *lalas* with masculine gender expressions, such as Chun, have no memories of stigmatization of their masculinity when growing up, some are ambivalent about what they perceive to be hardcore female masculinity. Xue, a twenty-year-old lesbian university student, for example, criticizes masculine lesbians as inauthentic:

There are those so-called iron T [*tie* T]. They have super short hair, wear chest binders, wear masculine clothing. I do not understand why, when two women are together, one still needs to perform the traditional male role. I think this is a manifestation of heterosexual hegemony: Why does one of the partners in a homosexual relationship need to imitate the male role in a heterosexual relationship?

Xue equates masculine gender expression with the enactment of heterosexual dating scripts in lesbian relationships, which she believes reproduces the hegemony of heterosexuality in the community. Mei, a thirty-two-year-old lesbian with a university degree and a professional job, self-identifies as T. She feels that some Ts mimic aspects of masculinity that are considered toxic:

At university, I went to les bars to find my kind. But then I realized that the circle was very *luan* [chaotic], and there were divisions between T and P, and some Ts dressed up like men. Although my image has always been masculine, I do not intentionally dress up like a man. I feel that this is low. They [some

Ts] compete to see who is rougher than a man. For them, the rougher you are, the more like men you are, the more attractive you will be to women.

Mei believes that the behaviors of some Ts, such as drinking, fighting, and competing for Ps, have created chaos in the community and led society to view lesbians as “low.” The term “low” is used frequently by my respondents. It refers to lack of human quality (*suzhi*). The *suzhi* discourse first emerged in China in the 1980s as part of the state’s propaganda supporting the one-child policy, whose purported goal was to improve the quality of the citizenry. It has since gained widespread currency (Kipnis 2007). It is used to mark symbolic boundaries in the cultural milieu, legitimize state policies, justify social inequalities between rural and urban populations (Pun 2005), and underpin parental investments in children and parenting strategies (Fong 2004). Mei uses the *suzhi* discourse to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the lesbian community. It simultaneously identifies the excluded (Ts who lack quality, as indicated by their rough masculine image) and criteria of inclusion, for example, not deliberately dressing up or acting like a man (e.g., short hair is acceptable, but spiky hairstyles are too butch and therefore frowned upon).

Denise, a twenty-seven-year-old lala with a postgraduate degree from a Canadian university, feels uneasy about some Ts’ perceived gender inversion and is critical of the supposed heterosexual role enactment in T-P relationships: “Some people hate Ts [because] many les replicate heterosexuality in their relationships. They [the Ts] treat themselves as men and as if they are not les. They behave like men.”

If Ts who are perceived as excessively masculine are rejected, what forms of gender enactment are desired? Echoing Engebretsen’s observations, the lalas in my sample aspire to achieve “balances of masculinity and femininity into a kind of ideal androgyny, to establish desirable and appropriate subjectivity.” To be a good T, one needs to be “strong-willed, courageous, and independent but also embrace softer, feminine characteristics of sympathy and caring abilities” (Engebretsen 2013:53).

While iron Ts or pure Ts are too masculine, pure Ps are perceived as inauthentic and untrustworthy. Self-identifying Ts worry that their pure P lovers will leave them to marry a man. They also suspect that a pure P is indeed straight or is only a lesbian when she is in a relationship with a T. As I illustrate in chapters 5 and 6, lesbians who self-identify as Ps face two challenges. First, they must prove to their T lovers the authenticity of their

lesbian identity and their commitment to a lesbian relationship. Second, they need to persuade their parents that their sexual orientation is authentic and cannot be altered by marrying a heterosexual man.

The broad trend in the LGBTQ+ community seems to be a growing rejection of identity categories that have clear connotations of gender inversion and heterosexual dating scripts that imply power inequalities between partners. In the gay community, gay men like Haoyu and Mingzhe have embraced the versatile zero-point-five identity. Others have subverted the zero-one relationship by disassociating it from domination and subordination. New identity categories such as emperor reception (帝王受, *diwangshou*) and strong reception (强受, *qiangshou*) disentangle the receptive role in sexual intercourse from feminine attributes and subordination, and categories such as gentle attack (温柔攻, *wenrougong*) and weak attack (弱攻, *ruogong*) disentangle the penetrant's role from stereotypical masculine traits like roughness and strength. In the lesbian community, some iron Ts now self-identify as trans men (跨男, *kua nan*). Others have softened their masculine expression, giving rise to categories such as sissy T, nai T (奶T, meaning cute T), and long-haired T. The demand for a balanced mix of masculine and feminine characteristics has prompted the development and growing popularity of the new identity category H (halfway between T and P). The rejection of heterosexual relationship scripts led to the rise of the *bufen* category, marked by fluidity rather than a fixed gender role. These changes reflect LGBTQ+ people's ongoing negotiation of gender and sexuality. As heterosexual dating scripts and normative understandings of gender served as "a source of knowledge" for earlier cohorts of gay men and lesbians to forge same-sex intimacy, they have increasingly become "objects of critique" (Wang 2021:561). The new categories represent efforts to transcend binary gender and sexual imaginaries.

Class, Low Suzhi, and Being Youxiu

Sayer (2005) argues that class matters to us not only because of differences in material wealth and economic security but also because it affects our access to things, relationships, experiences, and practices that influence our chances of living a fulfilling life. At the same time, it shapes how others value and respond to us, thereby impacting our sense of self-worth. My respondents' experiences bear Sayer's observations out. Anchoring genuine gayness with urban, middle-class, and cosmopolitan masculinity means that men lacking

these attributes are marginalized and/or excluded, often by the *suzhi* discourse (Kong 2017). Rural-to-urban queer migrants struggle to fit into urban gay scenes (Gong and Liu 2022; Luo et al. 2023). For example, Xiaoliu, a twenty-one-year-old gay man from Shenzhen, a metropolitan city in southern China where he has resided for more than five years, said:

People in Shenzhen's gay circle are very materialistic. If you drive a BMW or a Mercedes Benz, they are okay. You should never even consider showing off your car if it's made in China. It is all about looks and money. In terms of physical appearance, you cannot be shorter than 175 centimeters, your skin has to be in good condition, and your clothes need to be tasteful [*you pinwei*]; having taste is very important. Even if you are good-looking, if you do not know how to dress up or how to live [*shenghuo*], people will still consider you very low. Nobody will be interested in you, and you cannot act low. You need to know how to have fun, your lifestyle needs to be up to scratch, and you need to know where the good restaurants are and where to shop. If you share a photo of yourself having Japanese cuisine on social media [*pengyouquan*] as compared to sharing a photo of yourself eating a bowl of noodles, people will use the pictures to judge whether they want to go out with you. Those who are popular on the scene are those who know how to style themselves. Their clothing always looks low-key yet stylish, as compared with those who are too showy and gaudy. You cannot wear more than three colors. If you are too gaudy, people will think you are low, and they will despise you. When you enter this circle, you have to be on high alert. You need to stay elegant.

Xiaoliu's perception that the gay community is highly stratified is echoed by other gay men across social classes. Jichong, a thirty-three-year-old gay professional with a university education and a job in Beijing, is critical of what he regards as the commodification of relationships on gay dating apps:

Now I use Aloha [the second-largest gay dating app, renamed Finka in 2020]. It is objectifying. Everybody puts a lot of emphasis on fashion, people like to set their locations at hotels, maybe to flaunt their wealth or express their social status, someone who is important enough to get invited to events hosted at hotels. They like to be photographed with luxury-brand shopping bags, luxury handbags, or casually showing off their watches or the steering wheels of their cars, and then there are the selfies in the gyms. And those who have appearances like porn stars, their photos are all over the apps. These men are creating the dominant standard [of desirability]. Blued, on the other hand, seems to be more sentimental. Their users like to write long essays expressing their emotion, but when you turn to their information pages, you see an entirely different world. It is only about what bodies and faces they want. It is a very twisted world.

Jiehong is in a ten-year same-sex relationship. He says that his main purpose of using dating apps is to get to know more gay men. However, he is dismayed by how conspicuous consumption (e.g., high-end handbags, watches, cars, and hotels) and physical attractiveness have become the dominant criteria to evaluate a person's value on Aloha, which has a primarily middle-class client base. At the same time, he considers users of Blued, who come from more diverse class backgrounds, to be hypocritical. While users of Blued talk about their longing for emotional connections, when it comes to making friends, the only criterion is a person's physical attractiveness. Jiehong feels that dating apps have become purely "hunting grounds" for casual sex and "showrooms" (*zhuangxiu*) to boast about one's success rather than "a space for authentic communication" (*zhishuxiongyi*). He says that on the apps, gay men who meet the mainstream standards of desirability are being idolized and worshipped like celebrities (*minyuan*); those who are not physically attractive, highly educated, successful, and wealthy are marginalized and looked down upon.

While class underpins an individual's position in the hierarchy of desirability, class distinctions, or the lack thereof, are framed within the *suzhi* discourse. Xiaoliu believes that to gain respectability and esteem in the gay community (and avoid appearing low or superficial), one needs to convert one's economic capital (e.g., wealth and income) into cultural capital (e.g., a sophisticated dress sense and refined tastes). Although consumption aesthetics are deeply rooted in material class advantage, one must transcend materiality to gain legitimacy and be regarded as *youxiu* (outstanding, extraordinary).

Youxiu is a recurrent theme in both lesbian and gay narratives. The *youxiu* discourse is closely associated with the *suzhi* discourse. A person of low *suzhi* will never be considered *youxiu*. But it is not enough to be considered *youxiu*, even if one is not considered low. To be considered *youxiu*, one needs to possess an amalgamation of desirable human qualities: (1) innate and nurturing moral fiber and ability, (2) acquired status and success relating to career and educational achievement, (3) consistently coming out on top in competitions, (4) a normative life trajectory accomplished in the right sequence (finishing education, building a career, getting married, and becoming a parent), and (5) being a filial offspring (although what counts as filial is subject to interpretation; see chapter 4). The *youxiu* discourse is therefore a refined version of the *suzhi* discourse, reflecting the intensification of status competition in post-socialist China.

Although indicators of being youxiu in the gay and lesbian communities are closely aligned with markers of a middle-class and urban upbringing and accomplishment, the discourse is also embraced by working-class gay men and lalas, as well as by those of rural origin. While Xiaoliu acknowledges that he is not considered youxiu by other gay men in Shenzhen, he vows that he will become youxiu through hard work, entrepreneurship, and plastic surgery. In the next chapter, I illustrate how being youxiu has become a new aspiration of selfhood, replacing “being normal.”

Space, Time, and Ageism

In addition to gender and class stratification, the LGBTQ+ community is saturated with ageism. Youthfulness is a central marker of desirability; many respondents believe that only those in their late teens and early to mid-twenties are regarded as sexually attractive on dating apps. Those beyond this age bracket are not only considered unattractive but also too old. This makes those in their thirties or above feel that they do not fit in. For example, Ma, a thirty-five-year-old gay man from Shanghai, has lost hope of finding a partner on dating apps because they “are flooded with new, younger faces every day” (新人辈出, *xinrenbeichu*). Meanwhile, young gay men and lalas, while capitalizing on their youthful bodies to maximize attention and the chance of a sexual partnership, are anxious that they may run out of time before they have found “the one.”

Ageism also expresses itself in stereotypes attached to older gay men and the spaces associated with them, such as public cruising spots. The emergence of online gay communities has contributed to the marginalization of public cruising. In a national survey of around five thousand men who had sex with men, the internet (59.32 percent) came out as the venue most frequently used to find a sexual partner, followed by bars (18.7 percent), saunas (14.18 percent), and lastly parks (8.02 percent) (Lau et al. 2013). Public cruising spaces are regarded by millennials (born between the 1980s and 1996) and Generation Zers (born in 1997 or later) as dirty, backward, dangerous, and suitable for only the most undesirable members of the gay community, such as older gay men married to unknowing heterosexual women, poor rural-to-urban migrant workers, and money boys (gay sex workers). For example, when asked if he has ever cruised in public parks, Zimo, a twenty-four-year-old gay man, responded dismissively:

I would not visit these places. I remember visiting the public toilet in People's Park in Guangzhou once; it was a horrifying experience. I was already in my twenties and working in Guangzhou. I was out with a friend. When we took a stroll, we somehow ended up in the park. People said that public toilets in the park were scary [*benkongbude*]. So, I decided to explore it myself. There were all big uncles [*dashu*] in their fifties and sixties. It was scary. If you entered the toilet to pee, they would stare at your genitals. It felt like they could not wait to give you a blowjob. [Interviewer: Did you try (to have sex)?] Never. Impossible. I ran from there. [Interviewer: These men did not know how to use dating apps?] The parks are their meeting points. For example, Lizhi Park in Shenzhen is a meeting point for old tongzhi, and the People's Park in Guangzhou is also a meeting point for old tongzhi. In Shanghai, they meet at Raffles City, People's Square, and People's Park. In Beijing they meet at Chaoyang Park. Perhaps there are fewer old tongzhi in these parks now because some have started to use the internet to meet people. These old tongzhi are not looking for partners; they are looking for sex. They want to have one-time fun. Many are married, perhaps forced into marriage by their family when they were young; now they are old, they go to the parks to look for fun.

Zimo's views concerning public cruising places are echoed by other younger respondents, who jeer when they are asked whether they have ever visited any.⁴ For Zimo, such spaces are from another era; the people who frequent them are remnants of a bygone time when homosexuality was repressed and when gay men stayed in the closet, marrying women en masse because of familial pressure. Zimo's negative perception of older gay men is in line with general stereotypes of older closeted gay men and the discourse of "marriage fraud." Gay men who marry unknowing heterosexual women are often regarded as morally corrupt, but Song et al. (2024) conclude that this distracts attention from cultural and structural factors such as heteronormativity, the family, and the institution of traditional marriage itself (see chapter 6). Although older gay men tend to be stereotyped negatively in the gay community, gay couples with a significant age gap are common. In the lesbian community, older age often comes with an expectation of providing and protecting the younger partner. I illustrate the specific challenges of intimate relationships involving a significant age gap in chapter 5.

The Rural-Urban Binary

Whyte uses the phrase "one country, two societies" to characterize the scale, nature, and consequences of inequality between rural and urban China (Whyte 2010). By two societies, he is referring to the vast gaps in income

and wealth and disparities in access to education and health care between rural and urban residents. The hukou system has deprived rural residents of the welfare urbanites enjoy. Xiaoliu is acutely aware of how the rural-urban divide is reproduced in the gay community:

In China, if you have a local hukou in a big city like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, or Shenzhen, you will have market value [in gay circles]. Local gay men in these cities have a sense of superiority. They are wealthier than migrants because their parents usually have houses and cars. A local hukou means many things. It speaks of your family background. Even if you are lacking in other respects, people will accept you.

As a rural-to-urban migrant, Xiaoliu provides a firsthand account of the implications of the rural-urban divide for his search for love in Shenzhen's gay scene. Our data also indicate that sexual minorities from rural areas often face greater pressure to marry a straight person compared with their urban counterparts (see chapter 7). These observations, however, should not be taken to mean that rural China is uniformly repressive. Rural communities are stereotyped as conservative and heteronormative, and rural-to-urban migrant workers are frowned upon in the gay community partly because of stereotypes that they are backward, lack sexual freedom, and have inauthentic gay subjectivity. However, as Jun's story (see introduction) illustrates, he has been able to explore and express his homoerotic desires without many obstacles. He attributes his ability to do so without raising suspicion among his family and villagers to the general invisibility of homosexuality and the naturalization of homosociability in rural areas.

While rurality does not necessarily imply the lack of sexual freedom, being urban does not necessarily guarantee it, particularly for those from small cities. Respondents from small cities often recall their hometowns as conservative and, at times, suffocating. Wen, a twenty-five-year-old lala growing up in a small city in central China and now living in Shanghai, recounts how the few gay men in her hometown were being singled out for gossip:

I grew up in a small city. There was no LGBT community. There were only a few gay men, and they were seen as weirdos [*qipa*]. I knew I liked girls from an early age, but I kept it to myself. I told no one. I remember when I was in my lower secondary school, once when I was having lunch with my mother, we saw two gay men walking past. I think they must have been the only gay men in our city. They were in the senior year of my school and were pretty famous. My mother said, "Look at those two weirdos, they are perverts [*biantai*]. You must never be like them." (2015 interview)

Wen remembers this episode vividly because it hurt her feelings and scared her. She discovered that she was one of the weirdos that her mother despised. Hua, a twenty-eight-year-old gay man from a small city in southeastern China, has a similar experience. Worse for him, he cannot even migrate to a big city to enjoy more sexual autonomy. While rural-to-urban labor migration by the youth is often encouraged and supported by parents (Choi and Peng 2016), parents in small cities may not see the need for their offspring to migrate. For example, although Hua wants to migrate to have more personal space and the freedom to pursue a nonnormative lifestyle, his parents have repeatedly resisted because they want to keep him close. They are also pleased that Hua has a job in a state enterprise, which, though not lucrative, is at least stable. As a compromise, they proposed to help Hua purchase an apartment in the same city so he could have his own space. He knows, however, that they would then try to push him into marriage. The experiences of Jun and Hua suggest that the rural-urban binary, which constructs rurality as the antithesis of homoeroticism and equates urbanity with greater sexual freedom, does not fully capture the complex relationship between place, locality, sexual identity, culture, and community. Instead, it may reflect stereotypes associated with that binary.

HIV/AIDS Status and the Attribution of Blame

Differences in HIV/AIDS status are another significant source of fragmentation within the LGBTQ+ community. This reflects the broader stigmatization of HIV/AIDS in society, particularly of those perceived to be responsible for their infection. Rural villagers infected with HIV (as a result of blood traders' use of unsterile equipment) generally receive more social sympathy than those who become infected through unprotected sexual encounters or by sharing injection needles. Stigmatization of people living with HIV/AIDS is so widespread that some nurses and doctors feel ashamed about giving them medical care (Li et al. 2007; Li et al. 2016).

Although many LGBTQ+ civic organizations have dedicated their work to combating stigmatization, my data suggest that it remains widespread within the gay community. Gay respondents who suspect they are infected with HIV often panic and feel isolated and powerless. When they are tested at LGBTQ+ civic organizations, they tend to receive medical and emotional support; when they are tested in hospitals or government facilities, they often feel that their privacy is insufficiently respected and

protected, and their status may be exposed. Moreover, doctors and nurses in government facilities regularly overlook the emotional dimension of HIV. When a diagnosis is confirmed, some carriers choose not to disclose their status to their intimate partners, while those who do disclose risk the dissolution of their relationships.

When Xiaotong, a gay man in his thirties, learned he had AIDS and disclosed his status to his boyfriend, the latter first chose to sleep under a different duvet in their shared bed, then moved to a different bedroom, and eventually moved out. Afterward, Xiaotong broke up with him. Xiaotong said that his boyfriend never explained his actions, though he assumed that his HIV-positive status constituted a self-evident and sufficient reason:

Many people [in the gay community] believe that this illness is terrifying and you die immediately if you contract it. There were reports that people living with HIV/AIDS were denied medical procedures by doctors. Many people living with HIV/AIDS are hesitant about receiving treatment because of misinformation concerning the side effects. In gay circles, if you tell your dating partner that you are HIV positive, I am 100 percent sure you will be rejected. You may even be blackmailed, and information about your HIV/AIDS status may be used to attack you. It may affect your work, reputation, and social life. It can destroy a person.

THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF IDENTITY CATEGORIES

Identity categories are relational. The category of homosexual is only understandable and meaningful relative to the category of heterosexual and its normative domination; the category of zero is directly related to the category of one. The same can be said about the category T, which becomes meaningless if the P category is absent. The relationships between categories are often unequal, as implied in the assumed sexual attractiveness of the young versus the unsightliness of the “old,” the assumed liberal orientation of the urban versus the backwardness of the rural, and the moral blameworthiness of those living with HIV/AIDS versus the moral superiority of those who are not.

Identity categories are intersectional, with two or more axes of power, and social structures that constitute their position in the hierarchy. The category of homosexual and its assumed inferiority to the category of heterosexual is entwined with the assumed gender inversion of gay men. It is, therefore, a result of the intersection between a gender structure that exalts masculinity

and devalues femininity and a structure of sexuality that places marital and reproductive heterosexual acts at the top of the socially approved sexual hierarchy (Rubin 2011). This was the case in dynastic China and has remained partly so in post-socialist China. As we have seen, in the former, male penetrants in same-sex sexual intercourse were not considered problematic, as long as their homoerotic liaisons did not interfere with their role fulfillment, but the penetrated carried the stigma of gender inversion. In post-socialist China, the perceived inferiority of the category zero is similarly based on the assumed gender inversion and effeminacy of those who self-identify as such. In dynastic China, where women stayed in the inner quarters and had a domestic role, female masculinity was not uniformly stigmatized (Ebrey 1993). The masculinity of Hua Mulan, a female warrior in Chinese classical literature, is depicted as fulfilling *xiao* (filial piety) to her father and *zhong* (loyalty) to the emperor (Yang 2018). This contrasts with the growing ambivalence toward female masculinity in the lesbian community.

It should also be clear that there are two types of identity categories—the directly and the indirectly articulated. In the LGBTQ+ community, identity categories relating to gender presentation and sexual preferences such as T, P, zero, and one are articulated. By contrast, categories relating to social class are seldom so. Their classification relies on either status symbols (e.g., manners, clothing, consumption patterns, and lifestyles) or indicators of other categories. The articulation or otherwise of class distinction in post-socialist China relies heavily on one's place of origin because of the hukou system.

An urban hukou signals class distinction because a hukou from a metropolis not only implies access to education, medical care, and pensions (all provided by the state) but also signals probable familial property ownership, a key factor in wealth accumulation (mainly because of the rapid increase in property prices in big cities between the 1990s and 2000s) (Zhou et al. 2015). Xiaoliu believes that an urban hukou, a constituent of class distinction, can compensate for the lack of other markers of middle- and upper-class accomplishments. Conversely, urbanites frown on rural residents because they view them as lacking the key markers of membership of the middle or upper class (e.g., wealth, a high income, educational qualifications, metropolitan exposure, refined cultural tastes, and a Westernized lifestyle). Middle-class status and urbanity are mutually constituted; the former implies the latter, and vice versa. By contrast, rurality is construed as lacking *suzhi*, which in turn is associated with being low in the social hierarchy.

On the face of it, age categories are constructed chiefly in relation to chronology, as measured according to the calendar date on which one was born until the date one is asked about one's age. In practice, the construction of young and old is closely associated with class status and gender norms. Although the consensus on gay dating apps is that a person over thirty is old, a man of thirty or above may not be regarded as old if he dresses in a refined, fashionable way. By the same token, a gay man or lesbian in their twenties may be perceived as old because they wear old-fashioned clothes and have mannerisms that are categorized as low. Gender norms also shape the construction of age categories: Women are expected to get married in their mid-twenties, so older women become leftover women (and are therefore old). Finally, the HIV/AIDS category does not derive its meaning from the disease alone; it also implies social class membership. Blued, the gay dating app used by most working-class and rural-to-urban migrant workers, has earned its reputation as the cradle of HIV/AIDS because the disease is stereotyped as a disease of poor gay men.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1990s, LGBTQ+ people in post-socialist China have overcome the odds to unite and create subaltern counterpublics to counter the normalizing power of heterosexuality. In the face of tightening state control and increased censorship, the community has responded with tremendous resourcefulness and creativity. In addition to political pressure, the community faces other forms of fragmentation and division. The proliferation of broad identity categories rallies them around the common goal of resisting the normalizing power of heterosexuality, whereas micro-identity categories often reproduce broader structures of inequality relating to gender embodiment, class background, age, the rural-urban divide, and HIV/AIDS status. Identity categories are often intersectional and mutually constitutive; for example, urbanity is a central criterion of middle-class membership, while class distinction defines urbanity. Conversely, rurality is associated with lower-class status, while association with lower-class status renders rurality inferior.

As solidarity is being forged in the queer subaltern counterpublics, divisions and new forms of exclusion and marginalization emerge. In addition to the hierarchies of desirability, two other major divisions in the community

concerning the meaning of coming out and nominal marriages also emerge. I will elaborate these two divisions in chapters 6 and 7 respectively. Meanwhile, it is sufficient to note that they mirror different views on the goals and strategies of queer politics. On the one hand, many LGBTQ+ people seek to integrate their sexuality into the family. On the other hand, some activists assert that coming out makes homosexuality visible, destigmatizes it, and allows rights claims to be made. These two positions represent, respectively, integrationist and confrontationist approaches to queer identity politics. In the next chapter, I will illustrate how this binary framework of integration or confrontation cannot sufficiently capture the influence of cultural contexts, structural locations, shifting temporality, and spatial variety in the formation and development of individual queer identities (Wang 2015).

2018 LGBT FILM FESTIVAL

2018 LGBT 电影节

G U A N G Z H O U

SAVING FACE 面子
MAY 31ST 5月31日
Consulate General of the U.S.A.
美国驻广州总领事馆

EXTRAVAGANZA 炫目上海滩
JUN 2ND 6月2日
British Consulate-General Guangzhou
英国驻广州总领事馆

THE MAN WHO LOVED YNGVE
JUN 7TH 6月7日
Consulate General of the U.S.A.
美国驻广州总领事馆

CLOSET MONSTER
JUN 8TH 6月8日
Consulate General of Canada
加拿大驻广州总领事馆

BI CHINA 双
JUN 12ND 6月12日
Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
荷兰王国驻广州总领事馆

CALL ME BY YOUR NAME
请以你的名字呼唤我
JUN 14TH 6月14日
Consulate General of the U.S.A.
美国驻广州总领事馆

NORTH SEA TEXAS
JUN 16TH 6月16日
Consulate General of Canada
加拿大驻广州总领事馆

SPARROW
JUN 19TH 6月19日
Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
荷兰王国驻广州总领事馆

THE NETTLE
JUN 19TH 6月19日
Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
荷兰王国驻广州总领事馆

FOUR MOONS
JUN 21ST 6月21日
Consulate General of Mexico
墨西哥驻广州总领事馆

120 BATTEMENTS PAR MINUTE
JUN 25TH 6月25日
Consulate General of Canada
加拿大驻广州总领事馆

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS
JUN 26TH 6月26日
Consulate General of Mexico
墨西哥驻广州总领事馆

AZUL, OSCURO CASI NEGRO
JUN 29TH 6月29日
Consulate General of Canada
加拿大驻广州总领事馆

CATTOLICA
JUL 3RD 7月3日
Consulate General of Canada
加拿大驻广州总领事馆

WOMEN HE'S UNDERESSED
JUL 5TH 7月5日
Consulate General of the U.S.A.
美国驻广州总领事馆

Film Festival Trailer
电影节预告片

FIGURE 5. Poster for the 2018 LGBT Film Festival in Guangzhou, featuring international films screened at various foreign consulates. Photo by author.



FIGURE 6. Poster for the 2015 ShanghaiPRIDE “Coming Out” LGBT Groups Open Day, held at Andaz Xintiandi with free public entry. Photo by author.



FIGURE 7. Promotional banner for LesPark at the 2018 ShanghaiPRIDE. LesPark is a Chinese social and live streaming app for women. Photo by author.



FIGURE 8. Stage setup for the 2018 “Witness the Power of Women” forum at the 2018 ShanghaiPRIDE. The forum celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Chinese network Tongzhi Qinyou Hui (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and highlighted the importance of including women’s voices in the LGBTQ+ movement. Photo by author.



FIGURE 9. Two participants draped in a rainbow flag bearing the ShanghaiPRIDE logo during a public pride event in Shanghai in 2018. Photo by Parker.



FIGURE 10. A stage performance during the 2018 ShanghaiPRIDE, featuring mothers of LGBTQ+ people dressed in traditional Chinese qipao and holding umbrellas as they walked the runway against a digital backdrop of mountains, bamboo, and plum blossoms. The mothers participated in the walk to express their support for their children, blending traditional aesthetics with modern advocacy through their costumes and the stage design. Photo by author.

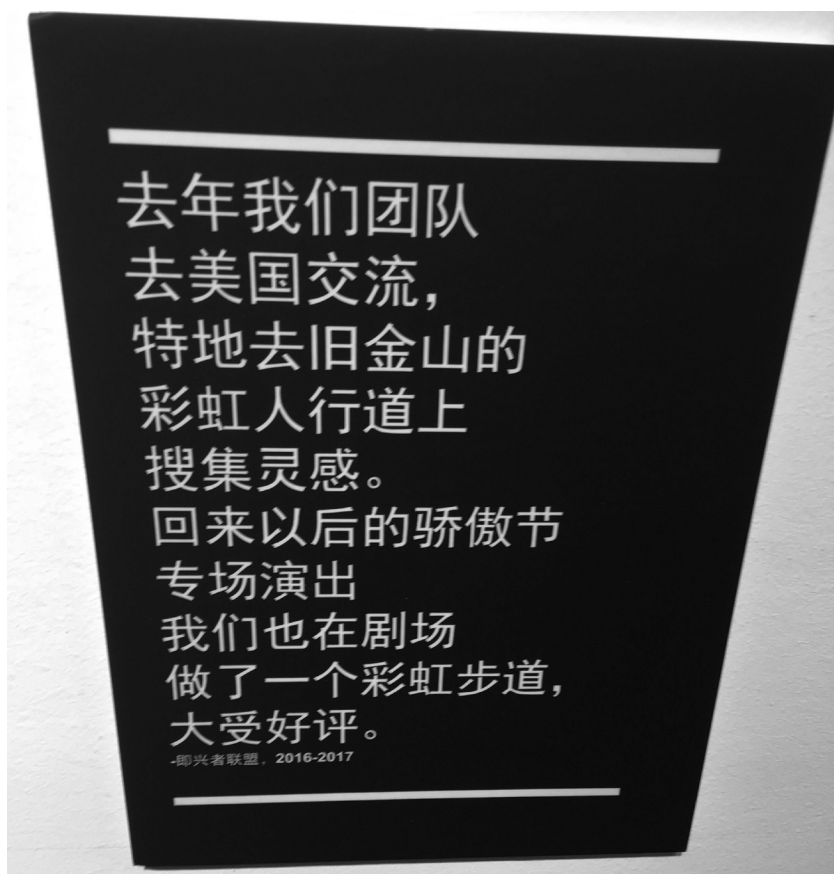


FIGURE 11. A display panel from the Beijing LGBT Center exhibition quoting a statement by the Gay-Straight Alliance (2016–2017) about visiting San Francisco’s rainbow crosswalk and recreating it in a local Pride performance. Photo by author.

New Chinese Queer Personhood

My mother used to buy me very feminine clothes. Even now, despite my rejection, she has continued to buy them. I remember I refused to wear skirts since I was three years old. I have always been insistent about who I am. (Lin, a thirty-six-year-old T, Beijing native, university graduate, interviewed in 2018)

LIN AND HER GIRLFRIEND MING arrive at the interview on a motorcycle. Lin is around 155 centimeters tall, wearing a black-and-white striped jacket, a white T-shirt, black skinny jeans with runners, and, it appears, a chest binder. She holds a black helmet in one hand and Ming's handbag in the other. Her spiky hairstyle makes her stand out from the crowd. Lin explains that since childhood, she has rejected conventional gender role expectations: Rather than wanting a husband, she wanted a wife; rather than dresses, she preferred trousers. She confirmed her homosexuality while surfing the internet after starting university. Lin recalls having no difficulty accepting her sexual orientation because she had always wanted to spend time with girls. Her greatest challenge growing up was resisting her mother's persistent attempts to cultivate her femininity. But having won the battle to express her masculinity, she feels she has also won the battle over her sexuality.

Despite all her efforts, Lin's mother has had little success, as she has always eventually given in. Lin, an only child, is close to her parents. She is already out with her mother and is sure that her mother will have told her father. Lin refused to attend matchmaking meetings her mother arranged for her. Perhaps out of desperation, her mother once made a man wait for her outside her office. Lin was so upset that she refused to even talk to him. It was most embarrassing for her mother, who had to explain herself to the aggrieved gentleman and the intermediary who had introduced him. Thenceforth, her mother stopped arranging matchmaking meetings.

Lin's determination to resist her mother's persistent efforts to cultivate her gender credentials, and her affirmation of her desires, reveal a new form of

personhood that is drastically different from traditional notions. Yan argues that traditional Chinese personhood is characterized by the moralist self's attempts to control individual desires in order to fulfill social roles and earn social recognition, thus making oneself a "proper relational person" (Yan 2017:3). In this notion of relational personhood, individual desires and interests are suppressed to prioritize the needs and feelings of others. Centering individual desires is considered "selfish," whereas overcoming them to fulfill familial obligations (*jiating*), expand human ties (*renqing*), and cultivate public reputation (*mingsheng*) is seen as the highest virtue.

However, as Yan also notes, this notion of personhood is undergoing dramatic change in post-socialist China, with younger generations increasingly asserting the legitimacy of valuing individual desires and interests. In this new moral reasoning, the affirmation of individual desires and interests is no longer viewed as an impediment to the moralist self or the construction of relational personhood but rather as an essential element of both. The moralist self cannot be moral if it is dishonest, and interpersonal relations cannot be authentic if they are insincere.

Rofel (2007) argues that the emergence of a new form of Chinese personhood that legitimates the pursuit of individual desires has been partly shaped by the state's attempts to modernize and marketize the Chinese economy since the 1980s. As will be illustrated in this chapter, this new form of Chinese personhood only partially overlaps with the Western trajectory: Instead of re-embedding the desiring individual within a welfare state, the Chinese desiring individual re-embeds their selfhood within a reformed family structure. Instead of detachment, this new notion of personhood seeks a balance between attachment and autonomy; instead of focusing on rights, it centers on care. It expresses individual desires and interests in ways that also account for the feelings and well-being of family members. For example, Lin has worked to gain her parents' acceptance of her sexuality and her partner. She introduced Ming to her parents, visits them regularly, and involves them in major life decisions, from purchasing and renovating her apartment to changing careers. In doing so, she has turned her parents into her most staunch supporters in her pursuit of a nonnormative lifestyle.

The formation of sexual self-identity among Chinese LGBTQ+ people therefore needs to be understood within these broader contours of individualization. At the same time, the assertion of nonnormative desires follows trajectories that reflect the specific predicaments of belonging to a minoritized and stigmatized category. As Plummer (1975), Weinberg (1979), Cass

(1979), and Troiden (1988) point out, nonnormative sexual self-identity, defined as a perception of oneself as nonheterosexual in relation to romantic or sexual situations, is formed rather than innate. This social constructionist perspective highlights four features in self-concept development: stigma, time, change, and relationships.

The formation of a nonnormative sexual identity is particularly challenging when individuals are socialized to believe that heterosexuality is the only legitimate form of sexuality and when social stigma against other expressions is intense. Regarding time, existing research suggests that nonnormative sexual identity typically develops over a protracted period. Concerning change, major theories observe discernible stages and transitions. For example, Cass (1979) posits a six-stage model: identity confusion (uncertainty about one's sexual orientation), identity comparison (suspecting one might be homosexual), identity tolerance (accepting but merely tolerating one's sexuality), identity acceptance (positively accepting one's sexuality), identity pride (feeling proud and preferring the company of other sexual minorities), and identity integration (being open about one's sexuality and engaging equally with sexual minorities and majorities). Troiden (1989), on the other hand, identifies four main stages: sensitization (feelings of marginality and difference), confusion (inner turmoil and uncertainty), assumption (perceiving and presenting oneself as a sexual minority), and commitment (adopting homosexuality as a way of life). Finally, relationships concern interactions with other sexual minorities and with heterosexual people, particularly regarding anticipated or actual reactions to disclosure.

More recent research notes that dominant stage theories of nonnormative sexual identity formation are based largely on the experiences of white, middle-class, male, urban populations before the 1990s. Therefore, they require continual updating with greater attention to gender, intersectionality, and changing social and cultural contexts (Russell et al. 2023). In this chapter, I respond to this call by examining how gender and sexual identities are entwined and how resistance to rigid gender norms impacts sexual identity formation. I foreground intersectionality by showing how the time taken to transition from identity confusion to acceptance varies across birth cohorts and place of origin, depending on the strength of the pressure to conform to heterosexual norms, the visibility of homosexuality, and the level of stigma against homosexuality across historical periods and locations. I also illustrate how individuals' capacities to avoid stigmatizing environments, through internal or international migration, affect their speed of

accepting their sexuality. Respondents able to migrate to more tolerant environments tend to reach acceptance more quickly. The chapter culminates with a discussion of how cultural contexts, particularly the centrality of filial piety, shape the negotiation of sexual identity.

Considered together, this chapter highlights how sexual identity formation is a relational process of becoming, embedded in historical time and place (Wan 2001). It is multifaceted and hybrid, simultaneously shaped by object choice, gender identity, and class position (Thing 2010). It is entwined with local culture and socioeconomic transformations. These findings challenge a universal, individualistic, and linear stage model of identity formation and suggest that an adequate theory must foreground the cultural, temporal, and structural contexts of identity negotiation.

GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES

Resistance to rigid gender role expectations and triumph over efforts to suppress her masculinity are the two key themes of Lin's story. It resonates with quite a few other *lalas* who self-identified as T, such as Daiyu, a thirty-eight-year-old Beijing native, university graduate, and LGBTQ+ civic organization worker. As she recalls:

The status [of autonomy] I have achieved at home is the outcome of over twenty years of continuous struggle with my parents. For example, when I was young, I wanted a toy gun. My mother initially refused to buy it for me because she considered it inappropriate for a girl. In the end, she bought it for me. When I was young, my mother wanted me to learn piano and ballet. She wanted to nurture my talents, but I did not like these activities. Finally, she sent me to drawing lessons, which I liked.

By “status” at home, Daiyu refers to her autonomy to live a nonnormative lifestyle that her parents have learned to accept. Although she has no plans to ever come out to her parents, she has firmly refused to answer any of their questions about marriage and has rejected all their attempts to intervene. She visits her parents twice a month but has not told them where she and her girlfriend live. While she has disclosed that she lives with a woman, she has not revealed the nature of their relationship. Daiyu considers sexuality a personal matter, maximizing her autonomy by keeping her family of choice and family of origin separate. Daiyu believes that the sexual autonomy she has achieved

is the result of many years of struggle against gender policing and socialization. As she recalls, her mother tried to socialize her into feminine behavior by organizing extracurricular activities considered appropriate for girls, such as ballet. She also sought to control Daiyu's preferences for toys, banning those considered gender-deviant for girls, such as toy guns. However, like Lin's mother, Daiyu's mother often relented in these battles.

Compared to the narratives of accommodating parents who yielded to their daughters' expressions of masculinity, gay men's narratives of gender battles paint a much less liberal picture, often ending in gender self-censorship. The story of Mingzhe (see chapter 3) is illustrative. From a young age, Mingzhe noticed that his preferences differed from those of other boys. Instead of joining neighborhood boys to roam outdoors and catch insects and worms, he loved art and literature. As a result, his mother repeatedly urged him to "behave like a man," which he resented. Rather than playing with other boys, he stayed at home mimicking female actresses. As he recalls:

There was a period when TV was showing a lot of historical dramas, especially ones about the Qing Dynasty. I found the clothing and headpieces worn by the imperial concubines in those dramas very beautiful. In school, I would spend my time drawing their qipaos. After finishing my drawings, I would show them to the girls in my class, and they would say, "That's so weird! Why are you drawing this?" I would also imitate how the concubines walked because they wore platform shoes that made their posture especially upright and dignified. I would imitate them holding a handkerchief and dramatically tossing it around, just for fun. But I never imitated the men practicing martial arts, I wasn't interested in that.

As Mingzhe points out, his behaviors were considered "weird" by his female classmates and neighbors, presumably because they were seen as gender-inappropriate. Although Mingzhe does not recall ever experiencing "extreme" external pressure to stop his feminine play, casual comments seem to have been sufficient to make his younger self aware of predominant societal gender expectations. He remembers trying to "behave more like a boy" after starting middle school, realizing that he needed to look and act masculine in order to make friends, be recognized, and gain status among his peers.

From hating his mother's comment that he should "man up" to trying to behave in more masculine ways, Mingzhe's story attests to the influence of peers on boys' gender identity negotiation. In contrast, women's stories seldom feature negative peer influence; instead, they center around parental

intervention. As I discussed in chapter 3, female masculinity appears far less stigmatized compared with male femininity in Chinese society. This difference may partly explain why Lin and Daiyu's parents eventually gave in. On the other hand, the stigmatization of male femininity has contributed to the presumed inferiority of effeminate gay men and those who assume the zero role in gay communities (see chapter 3).

Lin, Daiyu, and Mingzhe's different experiences of negotiating gender have had distinct effects on their sexual identity formation. While for all three, their gender struggles preceded their sexual awakening, only Lin and Daiyu's struggles formed a solid foundation for asserting their nonnormative sexuality. Mingzhe's gender embodiment, in contrast, has continued to generate ambivalence in his sexual identity negotiation (see chapter 3).

BIRTH COHORT VARIATIONS

In comparison to nonnormative gender expressions, nonnormative sexual orientation is much less visible. This is partly due to the hegemony of heterosexuality and the invisibility of homosexuality. These two factors create confusion and obstacles for self-acceptance. However, as noted in the previous chapters, the dominance of heterosexuality has weakened, homosexuality has become more visible, and social stigmatization against it has declined, particularly among younger, female, urban, and educated people. These changes mean that experiences of identity formation vary greatly across birth cohorts. The stories of Gao, a tongzhi born in 1978 who grew up in Shanghai, and Dong, a gay man born in 1997 who grew up in Beijing, illustrate these variations.

Gao says he started to have feelings for boys in secondary school (around the age of twelve) but only accepted his sexuality when he was around twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old. As he recalls:

When I was in secondary school, I had feelings for boys, but I didn't have the idea that I was a *tongxinglianzhe* [homosexual]. I thought I just liked looking at boys and that I would have girlfriends. What really changed was when the internet became widely accessible in the 2000s. I visited tongzhi websites and confirmed my homosexual identity. I was twenty years old in 2000. Gradually, I made some gay friends. At first, it was confusing; I did not know how to interact with them. I met some men offline—just meeting them, and

that was it. When I was older, around twenty-seven or twenty-eight, I started to have longer same-sex relationships. If I had not accessed the internet, I would never have known so much. I would have gotten married and had children like ordinary men and women. I would have had a life that ordinary people think is normal. After getting in touch with the gay circle, I had many boyfriends, and my life changed. (2018 interview)

Gao is the organizer of a virtual network of gay men who regularly play sports, go hiking, and travel together. He has no plans to come out to his straight friends, colleagues, or parents. Based on Cass (1979), Gao would be considered to have achieved identity acceptance but not pride or integration. His homosexual identity formation would be considered incomplete. Gao, however, disputes this interpretation. He comments that it is “meaningless” to tell old friends and colleagues about his sexuality, as he does not expect them to understand him. He believes his parents, now in their seventies, are too old to imagine that he is gay. He is concerned that disclosure might hurt their feelings and affect their health. When he was younger, Gao asked a few lesbian friends to pretend to be his girlfriends for his parents. Later, he told his parents that because all these relationships had failed, he had decided not to get married. He notes that, perhaps because he is now already forty years old, neither his parents nor his relatives have brought up the issue of marriage in the past couple of years.

In comparison to Gao, Dong transitioned from identity confusion to pride within just one year. Born in 1997, the year homosexuality was decriminalized in China, Dong acted on his sexual desires when he was in Primary Four (around ten years old) and felt proud to be gay one year later. As he recalls:

When I was in Primary Four, I told my classmate that I liked a boy. The news soon spread to everyone in the choir, and I became a laughingstock. This was the first time I realized that liking someone of the same sex was regarded as a strange thing [*qiguai de shiqing*]. I started to reflect on this. I tried to correct myself and failed. I could not imagine myself as heterosexual. In Primary Five, I decided that I should accept myself. I am a competitive person. I always want to be different from others. I like to do things differently. I like to be creative. This identity [as a gay man] provides me with an opportunity to be different, so I gladly accepted my identity. A female classmate gave me a lot of support during this process. She was mature and had read many Japanese comics, including a lot of BL [boys’ love] stories. She educated me. I also surfed the internet. In secondary school, many classmates were already familiar with homosexuality, and they did not regard it as abnormal.

Growing up in an era when homosexuality had gained increased visibility due to decriminalization and the rise of vibrant LGBTQ+ online communities, Dong quickly dispelled the sense of shame he initially felt about his desires. The support he received from a female classmate, who introduced him to BL stories, helped him confront the stigma associated with a minoritized identity. Rather than viewing his difference as a problem, he reconfigured it as a source of creativity and a competitive edge that helped him stand out. The growing visibility of homosexuality also helped reduce social stigmatization among his secondary school classmates, removing further obstacles to his development of self-pride.

PLACE OF ORIGIN AND SOCIAL NETWORK VARIATIONS

However, even though post-socialist China as a whole has moved toward greater visibility of homosexuality and reduced stigmatization, regional variations remain significant factors shaping different trajectories of identity formation. The stories of Song and Kai are illustrative. Born in 1988 and raised in a small city, Song identifies as gay but has remained ambivalent about the implications of a nonnormative lifestyle. He recalls struggling with the double stigma of being homosexual and a hepatitis B carrier, both highly stigmatized at his middle school:

I had feelings for boys when I was in Primary Six, but I only learned about the term *tongxinglian* in the second year of high school. We were taught to marry a woman growing up, right? The TV shows were all about this stuff, to the extent that whenever I had arguments with a female classmate, I wondered if she would become my future wife. I never had the concept of *tongxinglian* until high school when I started surfing the internet. I was born in 1988; by high school, the internet was widely accessible. Still, I was scared of being discovered. Like my dormitory mates, I sneaked out at night to surf the internet, but I never sat with them. They played video games while I watched gay porn. Maybe this made them think I was a loner. The truth was that I had very low self-esteem because I was a *tongxinglian* and a hepatitis B carrier.

Song believes that this double stigma has had a lasting impact on his life trajectory, contributing to his withdrawal from social interactions, his decision to drop out of university, and missed career opportunities. Even now, he remains concerned that his sexuality might cause him to lose respect and status among his peers and in society. As the second son of two workers from

a small city, he also believes that his sexual orientation has reinforced his class disadvantage, for example, by undermining his self-confidence and causing him to let career opportunities slip away.

By contrast, Kai, a twenty-five-year-old ethnic minority woman who identifies as pansexual (I also quote her words in chapter 3), embraces her nonnormative identity. She recalls feeling exhilarated after discovering the lala identity at seventeen while surfing the internet:

I came across blogs, public discussion forums, and lala dating apps. At that time, China still had many active LGBTQ+ organizations, and it was very easy to find information about LGBTQ+ issues. I think this explains why lalas who are ten or more years older than me questioned their sexual identity during puberty, experienced a lot of self-doubt, felt ashamed, and didn't want others to know about their sexuality. But I experienced none of this. It was like heaven; I finally found an identity [lala] that I was very comfortable and happy with.

Born and raised in a large city in northern China, Kai credits her identity formation partly to the freedom her mother, a social worker, has given her. Although her mother may not agree with everything Kai does, she has always respected her decisions. Kai also credits LGBTQ+ civic organizations with helping her embrace her sexuality. She says that before she discovered queer identities and categories, she “was a boring straight woman” preoccupied with whether her posture was feminine enough and whether masturbation would affect her future marriage. She regards her pre-queer self as “the product of stereotypical gender socialization,” which oriented her toward competing with other women. Her activism took her to Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong Province in southern China, where she worked for several LGBTQ+ civic organizations. After moving to Beijing, she became interested in a man and pursued him: “The moment we had sex, I felt that gender disappeared, and I confirmed my pansexuality. Since then, I have had many hookups. My hookup stories are not just about how many people I have slept with. They represent my attempts to resist patriarchy.”

Kai's evolving identity centers on her activism in metropolitan China, the progressive role of LGBTQ+ organizations, and the proliferation of identity categories in online queer spaces since the early 2000s. Coming of age in the early 2010s, she had easy access to LGBTQ+ organizations, which exposed her to polyamory and to ideas about the intersectionality of gender and sexuality. She embraces the view that sexual identity is fluid and changeable.

Her sexual identities are deeply entwined with her feminist consciousness and critique of patriarchy. Kai recalls being sexually harassed on the street in 2017 and reporting it to the police. She also discusses the discrimination and patronizing attitudes she faced from older male colleagues at LGBTQ+ organizations and from donors to these organizations. She regards her hook-ups as a form of resistance against patriarchal control over women's sexuality. At present, she works part-time as a sugar baby.¹ She is enthusiastic about experimenting with both same- and different-sex relationships. Kai is proud to be a member of a sexual minority and vows never to deny it. After the one occasion when she was forced to do so, she fell into despair:

I have never tried to hide my sexual orientation. My family, my colleagues, and the people I met through work all know that I am pansexual. Only once did I try to hide my sexual orientation and identity, because my girlfriend at the time had not yet come out. When I visited her and her family, I claimed to be just her "friend," and I had to pretend to be a straight woman. I even had to fabricate a few fictional dates during dinner with her family. When I left the house and got into a cab, I couldn't stop crying, because at that moment I finally understood what my NGO friends meant when they said they could not be themselves.

For Kai, sex and gender are personal, political, and experimental. Her coming out affirms her authentic self, makes a statement to the world, and provides her with the means to challenge it. Song and Kai's different attitudes toward their sexual orientation attest to the fact that, under the broad trends of growing self-acceptance, considerable heterogeneities remain.

LIFE STAGES AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Flying Below the Radar in Middle School

As Jun's story (in the introduction) and historical records about homoeroticism during the Cultural Revolution (chapter 1) illustrate, even in repressive eras and conservative places, homoeroticism and identity negotiation can still fly below the radar. Theories of sexual identity formation, therefore, need to pay attention to places and spaces. Mingzhe, for example, remembers his middle school as providing a relatively free (albeit secretive) space for exploring his homoerotic desires. The norm of heterosexuality and the taboo against early romance (*zaolian*) meant that teachers tried to segregate the

sexes by consistently arranging for male high school students to sit together, work as a team, and assist each other. Mingzhe was then asked by his homeroom teacher to help a male student with his homework, and he eventually fell in love with him.

Mingzhe's memory of middle school as a time and place of relatively free sexual exploration is echoed by other respondents. While parents and community members had policed the gender displays of most of my respondents since childhood, they paid virtually no attention to expressions of same-sex intimacy during their adolescence. This allowed my respondents to explore their homoerotic feelings without much interference from adults. Their peers also rarely sanctioned their intimacy with people of the same sex. Forming a friendship and spending time with a same-sex friend, even exclusively and intensively (e.g., spending every holiday at a friend's place and sleeping in the same bed) rarely generated suspicion. It was intimacy with people of a different sex (e.g., a boy spending time with a female classmate) that parents and teachers discouraged, because of the fear that early romance would have a detrimental impact on academic performance. An intimate relationship with a friend of a different sex would generate gossip among classmates, whereas one with someone of the same sex was regarded as normal. This explains why several of my respondents recall falling in love with a straight best friend at school without the friend ever knowing.

Some respondents reminisce about watching pornography with classmates and how it made them aware of their homoerotic desires. Several note that after disclosing their romantic feelings for a person of the same sex to a close friend (usually a girl) at school, the reaction was invariably positive. One gay respondent recalls the first time he heard the term homosexuality was in a sex education class. By the 2000s, some younger teachers in cities were more aware of homosexuality and offered tacit support to students who appeared to have a different sexual orientation. Gang, a twenty-three-year-old gay man from Shanghai, remembers his high school as being very liberal toward gender and sexual minorities:

I would say that high schools in Shanghai are quite open-minded; at least the one I attended was. It was a well-established, prestigious school that focused on academic performance. As long as you had good grades, nothing else mattered much. At that time, there were quite a few gay students in my school. Some boys even wore makeup to class. If their makeup was heavy, the teachers might say something, but if it was subtle, they would turn a blind eye. Later on, it seemed that the head of discipline found out I was gay. He gossiped

about it with other teachers, but he never made any comments or judgments to my face.

Gang came out to some close friends in school. His sexuality was an open secret among students and, as he realized later, even among teachers. Having relative autonomy to explore homoerotic feelings in secondary school is not limited to respondents living in large cities; those living in small cities and towns also report this autonomy. Bolin, a thirty-seven-year-old gay man who grew up in a small town in central China, explains how his relationship with a male secondary school classmate (who gave him his first blowjob) went undetected for a considerable period because “nobody would make an issue if two boys who are close eat together in the cafeteria, go to and from class together, and commute to and from school together.” Although Bolin did not then know anything about homosexuality and never considered the other person his “boyfriend,” he reckons that “deep down, there was an unspoken understanding that this relationship was special, different from friendships with other male classmates. But neither he nor I would explicitly say it, and neither of us would break that silence.”

Similarly, Xiaoliu (chapter 3), who grew up in a small city, recalls how the invisibility of homosexuality and sex segregation in sociability meant that he “knew nothing” about the implications of his homoerotic interactions in his adolescence. Paradoxically, this allowed him to enjoy the pleasure of intimate bodily contact with other boys without too many worries: “Back then, I lived in a dormitory where several classmates slept on a shared bed platform. I remember one winter, a male classmate crawled under my blanket. Something disgusting [mutual masturbation] happened. I hadn’t fully confirmed whether I liked boys, but I think he did.”

Despite using the term “disgusting” to describe the event, Xiaoliu felt “slightly excited, even though it was also awkward.” One year later, similar intimate interactions occurred between him and a neighbor. This time, the relationship continued for more than two years and was not just physical:

He was two grades ahead of me. During the holidays and weekends, I would hang out with him. There was some physical contact, such as hugging when we played, but nothing too extreme. Over time, as these interactions became more frequent, I started to feel a sense of being cared for. Maybe I was too young then to understand relationships between boys and girls; I was gradually drawn into a different relationship, one between boys.

Xiaoliu believes that his early ignorance of societal expectations of heterosexuality freed him from feelings of shame and guilt. Once he became aware of society's views of his desires, he was torn between curiosity for the gay world and a fear that participating in it would lead to rejection by his family and ostracism by friends and neighbors.

Early Adulthood and Migration

After graduating from middle school, many respondents engaged in rural-to-urban labor migration, intranational educational migration, or international educational migration. They sought spaces that were more tolerant of homosexuality and that offered greater freedom to pursue homoerotic desires. Jaw-Long, a thirty-year-old rural-to-urban migrant gay man in Shenzhen, for example, recalls how his family had allowed him to travel to other towns and cities from the time he was fourteen. He used these opportunities to visit older gay men he met online. When he turned eighteen, he enlisted in the army. After being discharged, he moved to Shenzhen and began working as a private security guard. He soon met his current boyfriend, and the two moved in together three years ago. He credits labor migration with providing the freedom and economic resources that made their life together possible. Jaw-Long says that since his mother passed away several years ago, there has been little pressure from his family to marry. He is not emotionally close to his father; he calls him a few times a year and visits during the Lunar New Year.

Intranational educational migration also plays a significant role in my respondents' narratives of sexual identity formation. Attending university set them on a path of identity negotiation characterized by paradoxical temporality. On the one hand, their university years were a time when peer pressure to date intensified, as more of their classmates and friends began doing so. Eager to conform to peer norms, sixty respondents dated heterosexual people, and in nearly every case, the failure of these relationships helped confirm their sexual orientation. On the other hand, college was also a time when heterosexual norms were partially suspended. Campuses in the late 1990s and 2000s were generally more tolerant than other social spaces toward homosexuality. Daiyu recalls witnessing a lesbian courtship on her second day at university:

I saw this cool-looking person in a full suit who looked super handsome. But you could tell she was a woman. She was tall, holding a big bouquet of roses,

and stood in the hallway of an all-women dorm. But I don't think the girl she was looking for paid her any attention. Why do I say that? Because after a while, she was still standing there; she never actually went inside. Later that afternoon, I saw the bouquet thrown into the trash bin.

What surprised Daiyu was that “nobody thought much about it or found it particularly shocking, just a little odd.” The normalization of homosexual courtship on campus extended to her friends’ attitudes toward her same-sex relationship. During the four years she and her girlfriend, whom she met at university, were together, nobody made a fuss. Only once, a female classmate asked, out of curiosity, how they had sex. Daiyu explained that one partner could use their hands and the other could use instruments to achieve orgasm.

Following the decriminalization and de-pathologization of homosexuality in 1997, LGBTQ+ student societies flourished at universities in larger cities. Although the LGBTQ+ student association where Caihong (see introduction) was a member was not allowed to register formally, counselors helped it with booking venues for events, recruiting members, disseminating information, and providing other logistic support. The members formed an extensive network, organizing small salons to discuss LGBTQ+ issues, putting on singing contests, designing rainbow masks to sell, and designing and distributing flyers advocating for LGBTQ+ rights for the May 17 International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia. The university also allowed members of the association to participate in a forum organized by the United Nations.

Respondents who were aware of their sexuality in high school remember choosing universities far from home to escape parental scrutiny. Xiaoshen, a forty-one-year-old gay man born in a small city in Hunan Province in southern China, is one such case:

Because I knew about my sexual orientation from a young age, when I was applying for university, I wanted to choose one far from home. My mother has a strong temper, and she's a control freak. I thought the farther from home, the better for me. In the end, I went to a big city in northeastern China and stayed there for seven years, completing both my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Xiaoshen had a six-year relationship with a dormitory mate. They separated shortly after graduation because his boyfriend, an only son, was pressured by his parents to return home. The boyfriend later married a woman.

Wen, a twenty-five-year-old lala with a university degree who works in Shanghai, also recalls her time at university as a turning point in her sexual identity. When she left home, the internet was already widely accessible. She reminisces about how she found her “type” that way, first coming across discussions of lesbianism on a Baidu (search engine) bulletin board (discussion forum):

I saw photos of a good-looking T, I think her name was Yang Yang, from Taiwan. I thought she looked great and wanted the same haircut as her. I searched for her and discovered a community of les. So many les there. It was the first time I heard the term “les.” I began to search the internet using the word “les” and found many discussion forums and online groups. However, deep down, I still couldn’t accept myself.

Wen tried to change her sexual orientation. She spent the entire summer holiday after the first year of university growing her hair long and researching how young women dressed. When the new school year began, she appeared before her classmates as a feminine girl and became one of the most popular students in her year among the boys. A year later, she grew tired of pretending and began to resent mimicking feminine ways of talking and walking. One day, she decided to cut her hair short and be happy with who she was. By her fourth year, Wen had accepted her sexuality. She credits this change of heart to reading works by psychologists such as Sigmund Freud.

In addition to intranational educational migration, the respondents believe that going abroad is a critical stage in their sexual identity negotiation. Leon, a gay man in his twenties from an urban, politically connected family, received his parents’ blessing to study in Taiwan for a semester. After finishing his undergraduate studies, he went abroad for postgraduate education:

I only confirmed my sexual orientation in my third year of university. My family, my education, the environment I grew up in, and the love stories I read in Chinese classics all shaped me. I longed for romantic love like that in the Chinese classics. It never occurred to me that I would be different. But then, in secondary school, in sex education classes, and later on TV, in magazines, and in fashion shows, there were descriptions of the male body. I was attracted to good-looking men. I dreamed of being with them. I could not accept myself. When I started university, I was determined to date a girl to correct my terrible thoughts [about men]. I dated a girl on and off, but what truly changed me was my exchange to Taiwan.

During his exchange, Leon came into contact with pop-rock bands that wrote and performed songs about homosexuality, took courses where homosexuality was discussed, and joined a gay parade for the first time. While abroad for his postgraduate studies, he finally accepted his sexuality after his classmates opened up to him about theirs; he felt safe discussing his own without fear of being exposed or blackmailed. He also met an elderly gay couple who shared their stories with him. He realized that even gay men could have a stable family and enjoy a future together. A business trip to the United States after graduation coincided with the legalization of same-sex marriage, giving him further hope that he would be safe living as a gay man in China.

Despite appreciating the positive changes he has experienced abroad, Leon does not romanticize Western societies, noting their ongoing discrimination against sexual minorities. He also questions the centrality of sexuality in everyday life. He does not confine himself to gay circles, saying that he has as many straight friends as gay ones. He practices selective disclosure rather than full coming out, arguing that this approach is better for his relationship with his parents and for his career in a conservative sector. He has been in a stable same-sex relationship for four years. In 2017, he and his partner met a lesbian couple online and arranged double nominal marriages with them; this considerably reduced the parental pressure he faced. (I discuss these arrangements in greater detail in chapter 7.)

CULTURAL AND CLASS CONTEXTS

A major discrepancy between the experiences of my respondents and dominant theories of homosexual identity development lies in the latter's relative silence on how relationships with the family of origin shape identity formation. As Jun (in the introduction) and Leon both indicate, even those committed to a homosexual lifestyle have no plans to come out because of concerns about how disclosure may affect their parents. In the Chinese context, the greatest challenge of committing to a nonnormative sexual identity arises after individuals complete their education, a milestone widely regarded as the transition to full adulthood and the time to fulfill familial and social expectations of work, marriage, and parenthood in that sequence. Chinese parents often advise their children to focus on their studies and avoid dating while they are still receiving education. However, once their children

have completed their education, parents shift their attention to steering them toward a normative life trajectory that follows a standardized and sequential order of work, marriage, and parenthood. As Xiaoshen illustrates:

When I was at university, my parents advised me not to date. As soon as I graduated, they pushed me to date. Every time I went home, every time they called, they talked about introducing women to me. They even contacted my high school homeroom teacher and asked him to introduce his wife's sister to me! My mother probably scanned all the unmarried women in our neighborhood to see if anyone was suitable for me. It wasn't very pleasant. It was difficult for me to refuse to meet these women, but if I met them, I needed to devise excuses for not wanting to begin a relationship. When I went to Guangdong, my parents mobilized their networks to introduce me to suitable women in Guangdong; when I moved to Beijing, they asked their neighbors and friends to introduce me to suitable women living in Beijing. I was exhausted by all the matchmaking meetings after meeting around thirty women. Sometimes, my parents even asked people they barely knew for introductions.

Although Xiaoshen was annoyed, he was sympathetic. His mother had four miscarriages before giving birth to him. He fully understands generational differences: "For my parents, the most important thing is that I have children. For them, having descendants is the most important issue in life." Understanding his parents' wishes does not, however, mean that he is prepared to sacrifice his happiness. On his father's birthday in 2008, he took his cohabitating boyfriend of four years to visit his parents and came out to them. (I return to the story of his coming out in chapter 6).

Reinterpreting Filial Piety

Regardless of their disclosure status, all but eight of my respondents are committed to a nonnormative lifestyle. While they affirm individual desires and reject self-sacrifice to fulfill parental expectations, they also strive to maintain close relationships with their parents. In other words, they envision a new notion of Chinese personhood in which the desiring individual, the moral self, and the relational person coexist in harmony rather than being hierarchically ordered. To achieve this harmony, they redraw boundaries and reinterpret the cultural norm of filial piety. As Wang (a twenty-five-year-old gay postgraduate male student and an only child) explains:

When I was young, I tended to obey my parents. I did not want to hurt their feelings. However, as I got older, I gradually realized that I could not live life in a way I did not want to. I can't marry a girl just because my parents want me to do so. If I do, nobody will be happy.

Redrawing boundaries between personal aspiration and familial expectations often takes years and is not without its ups and downs. For example, upon learning about his erotic feelings toward other men, Wang tried to correct himself by dating women. Surfing the internet and finding websites where gay men shared their stories, struggles, and triumphs persuaded him that he was not abnormal. His lack of sexual interest in the women he dated reaffirmed the authenticity of his feelings. The positive reactions from his friends after he disclosed his sexuality helped legitimize his goal of pursuing personal happiness.

Qi, a twenty-two-year-old lesbian postgraduate student and an only child, redefines her personal boundaries by challenging the continued relevance of the norm of filial piety: "I think one should be filial [*xiao*] but not obedient [*shun*]. I respect my parents and am grateful for their support, but I am not willing to obey them blindly."

For Qi and many other respondents, acknowledging parental support and expressing gratitude does not mean they must relinquish personal goals and sacrifice their happiness to meet parental expectations. Huifen, a thirty-three-year-old gay man with a professional job in Shanghai, argues that to be filial, one must prioritize self-actualization:

We must first be responsible for ourselves before being responsible to our parents. This is the sequence. If you want to be a responsible person to others, you must first be responsible for yourself. Any person, no matter how important they are to you, is external to you. This is why we need to satisfy our own needs first. What is truly meaningful to our parents is that we are happy.

The traditional understanding of filial piety prioritizes parental needs, subsumes the individual in the familial, and privileges role fulfillment. Huifen's understanding subverts this norm. He does not simply redraw boundaries between the personal and the familial (as Wang does) or separate the care and obedient component of the filial norm (as Qi does), but completely reverses the moral priority of action. He subsumes the familial in the individual and regards the self-actualization of children as a prerequisite for parental happiness. This understanding, however, should not be interpreted

as his lack of concern for his parents' feelings or a renunciation of his cultural roots. It means finding creative strategies to resist parental pressure and maintain harmony. For example, he carefully planned the timing and venue of his disclosure to his family. He also prepared the groundwork by dropping hints and creating a narrative that removed blame before disclosure. By so doing, he aimed to minimize the negative effects of his disclosure on his parents and to maximize the possibility of gaining acceptance. (I discuss similar strategies in greater detail in chapter 6.)

From "Being Normal" to Being Youxiu

In traditional Chinese families, filial piety serves as a central norm regulating intergenerational relationships. In return for parental support, adult children are expected to reciprocate by caring for their parents in old age and obeying parental wishes. When LGBTQ+ people reinterpret the norm of filial piety, how are intergenerational relationships understood? Even as post-socialist China has shifted toward a neo-familial society characterized by descending familism, do parents truly expect nothing from their adult children in return for nurturing and investing in them?

Our data suggest the emergence of a new intergenerational contract—one that shifts from an obligation to provide old-age support and obey parental wishes to a focus on pursuing personal happiness to ease parental worries, striving to be youxiu (outstanding) to honor parents' efforts, and maintaining emotional intimacy with parents. As Huifen believes, parental happiness is dependent on adult children having achieved happiness. With respect to being youxiu, as I discuss in chapter 3, this is a refined suzhi discourse that reflects growing class inequalities and the intensification of status competition. To be youxiu is not to be merely normal or ordinary, but to be extraordinary and stand out. When Engebretsen was conducting fieldwork in Beijing in the early 2000s, she observed that being normal was a common aspiration among the lesbian women she studied (Engebretsen 2013). They rejected or at least were reluctant to accept sexual identity categories such as lesbian or homosexual because they aspired to live "just like everyone else." In contrast, with the exception of those born in the 1970s and from rural China, most of my respondents aspire to be a youxiu tongzhi/gay or les/lala. Instead of being "just like everyone else," they aspire to stand out and to be better than other people. They believe that only by being youxiu can they earn

societal and parental acceptance. As Ping, a twenty-seven-year-old lala with a university degree from the United States, explains:

Either I escape [e.g., by emigrating] from China or I become very youxiu. If you are youxiu, you do not need to care about government policies or how society sees you. You do not need anything from the government. Being gay gives me more pressure to become youxiu. My parents have always wanted me to become very youxiu. They believe that if I am very youxiu, at least other people, like our relatives, will not see my sexuality as a hindrance.

Ping has come out to her parents. While they accept her homosexuality, they are concerned that she may face discrimination, and the family may be looked down upon by their relatives. They tell her, therefore, that she needs to be youxiu through educational achievement and career success. They believe that being youxiu is a ticket for international migration to Western democracies that grant sexual minorities more rights and freedom. They also think that being youxiu will help their daughter find jobs in more liberal sectors in private enterprises, which are considered less conservative in terms of sexual mores. Ping's parents also believe that her being youxiu will compensate for her sexuality and partly restore their family honor, because although their relatives may consider her abnormal (for her sexuality), they will say "At least she is youxiu."

Ping, on the other hand, feels that her sexuality has disappointed her parents and strives to be youxiu to make them proud. Respondents who have not come out to their parents hope that being youxiu will help secure post-disclosure acceptance. Being youxiu is construed as preventive (against discrimination and stigmatization) at the societal level and restorative (helping gain parental and extended family acceptance after disclosure) and facilitative (helping achieve the conditions and confidence to come out to parents) at the familial level.

One might say that being youxiu is a new normative ideal. The culture of striving to be youxiu is an underlying source of motivation for self-improvement. At the same time, it is a cause of stress and disappointment, particularly for respondents from working-class and/or rural backgrounds. The stories of Xiaoliu and Song illustrate this point. Xiaoliu's vision of a good life is finding an "ideal partner" (*lixiang de nageren*), getting married, having children through surrogacy, then persuading his parents to accept his sexuality and eventually finding happiness (*xingfu*). He despairs that he is not youxiu enough to achieve all these goals. After three failed same-sex relationships, Xiaoliu has little hope that he will find the love of his life. To maximize his

chance of success, he changed his identity from zero to one on dating apps. He believes that dating apps have an oversupply of zeros and that by changing his role he will become more popular. However, the change has come at a cost. As he was the one in his relationships, Xiaoliu's ex-boyfriends expected him to provide financial and material support. Xiaoliu now has three jobs to maximize his income, and he plans to improve his appearance by having plastic surgery on his nose. Lacking an urban background and coming from a family with modest means, he is determined to upgrade himself (*tisheng ziji*) and become youxiu. The emotional and health costs have been considerable. Working as a part-time model, running an online shop (as a *daigou* trader, buying shoes from overseas and selling them to Chinese customers online at a higher price for a profit), blogging, and running a studio are making him "very tired, quite tired, extremely tired [*chaolei, tinglei, tebielei*]."

Song's vision of a good life is similar to Xiaoliu's, as are their educational, family, and migratory backgrounds. Like Xiaoliu, Song also holds multiple jobs. Hoping to quickly accumulate the money to arrange a nominal marriage with a lesbian and have a child through surrogacy, he has ventured into high-risk investments. He applied for multiple credit cards, used them to take cash advances, then used the cash to invest in the stock market. Before he realized it, he was deeply in debt. He now works as a freelance insurance agent, a full-time salesperson, and a night-shift delivery worker to repay his debt. Knowing that his goal of becoming youxiu and achieving the "good life" is becoming ever more distant because of his debts, Song complains repeatedly: "I am so irritable, very irritable because of the social environment. I was already short of money, and now I have this credit card debt. It is hopeless. In the past five days, I have only slept for around twelve hours; I am so anxious."

Xiaoliu and Song will not be able to fully embrace their homosexual identities as long as they struggle to pursue the idealized, nonnormative lifestyle they have projected onto them. Their stories illustrate how the formation of sexual self-identity is intertwined with material conditions and cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I discuss the gendered, spatial, temporal, cultural, and structural contexts of individual sexual identity negotiation in post-socialist China. I illustrate how the formation of nonnormative sexual identities

reflects broader processes of individualization, which have led to the emergence of new notions of Chinese personhood. At the same time, as more sexual minorities accept their nonnormative sexual orientation and commit to a nonnormative lifestyle, variations by gender, cohort, and place of origin remain significant. This is because sexual identities are differently entangled with gender norms and because individuals have grown up in different eras and locales where the dominance of heterosexuality, the visibility of homosexuality, and the stigma surrounding it vary in intensity.

These variations are further shaped by life stage and migration status. Paradoxically, middle school and university represent life phases during which many of my respondents experienced relative autonomy to explore their homoerotic desires. The completion of education marks a turning point in nonnormative identity formation in the Chinese context, as it signifies the transition into full adulthood—an adulthood defined by the sequential expectations of work, marriage, and parenthood. Consequently, this juncture is also when many LGBTQ+ people face a major life decision: whether to enter a heterosexual marriage or to reject marriage and pursue a nonnormative lifestyle. Most now choose the latter.

This decision prompts critical reflection on familial obligations and relationships. Many reinterpret the cultural norm of filial piety to assert the legitimacy of individual desires. It also drives a reconfiguration of the intergenerational contract: Rather than reciprocating parental care by obeying their wishes, my respondents emphasize emotional care (see chapter 6 for a more detailed elaboration) and strive to be *youxiu* to make their parents proud and bring honor to the family. From their perspective, social distinction lies not in being ordinary but in being extraordinary, a belief they see as key to resolving many of the issues associated with their sexuality. However, as *youxiu* becomes the new normative ideal within the LGBTQ+ community, inequalities of opportunity come into sharp relief. These findings highlight the vital role of socioeconomic privilege and disadvantage in shaping the development of dissenting identities that resist the normalizing force of heterosexuality.

Pursuing Love

DONGMEI IS A LONG-HAIRED twenty-seven-year-old lala living in Shanghai. When she heard that her girlfriend of six years, Ai (also living in Shanghai), was dating a man behind her back, she directly confronted her and demanded to meet the man. When she finally met him, she challenged his sincerity toward Ai:

I asked him, “What do you like about Ai?” And he said, “I think she’s very obedient, very understanding, not like other girls.” So I said, “Oh, so what you really like is that she’s easy to control, right?” Then he kept denying it, and I kept pushing him by saying, “If that’s not it, then what exactly do you like about her?” And the conversation kept going on like that. By the end, Ai was kicking me under the table, signaling me not to go too far. That day, I almost burst out that she didn’t like him. I was so close to just laying it all out, but of course, I couldn’t mention our relationship. (2018 interview)

Dongmei felt that she needed to be harsh to the man that Ai was secretly dating or he might not understand. He was embarrassed by the meeting, and he was hardly Dongmei’s match in an argument. The next day, he visited Ai unannounced and insisted that she repeat all she had told him during the previous day’s encounter, as if wanting to be rejected a second time. Dongmei believed the man had prepared a series of counterarguments to win Ai back, so she prepared Ai in advance with responses. After being rejected again, the man complained to the matchmaker and Ai’s mother. According to Dongmei, he instigated some arguments between Ai and her mother. He also told Ai’s colleagues that he and Ai were dating. Furious, Dongmei forced Ai to delete the man’s number from her contact list. She then went to argue with Ai’s mother directly, accusing her of “not caring about her daughter’s

feelings, of desperately wanting to marry her daughter off, sell her off, and kick her out of the house.” After this episode, Ai’s mother stopped arranging matchmaking dates for her. Dongmei and Ai then agreed to look for a nominal husband for Ai, with Dongmei proactively posting recruitments for a suitable candidate. She hopes a nominal marriage will relieve the pressure on Ai to get married.

Fei, a twenty-four-year-old T who grew up in a medium-sized city in northern China, physically fought with the father of her cohabiting girlfriend, Wenjing. After their relationship was exposed, Wenjing’s father forced her to move back home, confiscated her mobile phone, and prohibited her from seeing Fei again. Fei recalls how worried she was that Wenjing might give in to parental pressure, agree to blind dates, and eventually break up with her to marry a man. When Fei was finally able to see Wenjing again, she discovered that Wenjing’s father had secretly followed her. Enraged, she fought with him: “I got really angry because I felt like, why did they [Wenjing’s parents] have to interfere so much in our lives? Did they really have to keep monitoring her nonstop? It felt like there was no space for any freedom at all. I was so upset. So we [she and Wenjing’s father] ended up fighting” (2015 interview).

Fei is too embarrassed to provide details about the fight with Wenjing’s father. She only says that it involved both verbal abuse and physical altercations. Although Fei did not sustain major injuries, the fight frightened Wenjing, who worried her father might hurt Fei because he was physically stronger. She reminded Fei to lock her door at all times. To ensure Fei’s safety, the couple decided that Fei should return to her hometown. Knowing it would be difficult to maintain a long-distance relationship and fearing Wenjing would succumb to parental pressure, Fei decided to come out to her own parents to show Wenjing her commitment. In chapter 6, I detail Fei’s coming out. Despite all the difficulties they faced, Fei and Wenjing have not broken up; if anything, they seem more together than ever.

Dongmei, Ai, Fei, and Wenjing’s experiences illustrate the pressure lesbian couples face and the precarity of LGBTQ+ intimacies under the weight of heterosexual marriage norms. Of the respondents in this study, seventeen had a same-sex partner leave them to marry a straight person. However, unlike older respondents born in the 1970s, many younger respondents are determined to defend their relationships against parental marriage pressures. Lalas who identified as Ts, in particular, are unafraid to directly confront those who interfere in their relationships, including male dates of their lovers or their lovers’ parents. When Engebretsen (2013) and Kam (2013) conducted

their fieldwork among lalas in Beijing and Shanghai in the early 2000s, most of their respondents expressed a desire to fit into a society organized around heterosexual norms, staying in the closet to fulfill their marital roles. By contrast, most of the respondents in the present study prioritize their romantic pursuits, refusing to live in the shadow of heterosexuality. For example, they refuse to be the secret lover of a girlfriend or boyfriend who has married, or intends to marry, a straight person.

On the surface, Dongmei and Fei subvert the ideology of heteronormativity, which proclaims heterosexuality—sexual attraction between differently sexed bodies—as the only natural and acceptable expression of sexuality. In practice, however, they often draw upon heterosexual gender role divisions. For example, both Dongmei and Fei have acted as protectors of their girlfriends, sometimes to the point of being dominating or pushy. Their intimacy practices, that is, the actions taken to build and sustain intimate bonds, resemble the heterosexual masculine dating script of providing, protecting, and initiating romantic gestures (e.g., giving compliments, flowers, and gifts, or displaying signs of affection aligned with traditional ideals of masculinity and chivalry) (Jamieson 1997). Their stories highlight a central tension in same-sex intimacy: While partners may appear to subvert heterosexuality, they often draw on its norms and may end up replicating them.

Scholars such as Jeffrey Weeks and Anthony Giddens are optimistic about the transformative potential of same-sex intimacy. Weeks (1985) highlights the potential of homosexuality in opening up new possibilities for sexual citizenship, that is, the right to live one's sexual life openly and legitimately. Giddens (1992) argues that modern relationships are increasingly based on what he calls the "pure relationship," entered into for its own sake and grounded in emotional and sexual equality, communication, and mutual satisfaction rather than tradition, economic necessity, or reproduction. He posits that same-sex relationships are a pioneering form of pure relationships, providing space to experiment with new and more egalitarian forms of intimacy.

On the other side of the debate, Jamieson, Seidman, and Duggan have noted the reproduction of inequalities in same-sex relationships. Jamieson (1997) critiques Giddens's idealization of pure relationships; regardless of whether they are heterosexual or homosexual, she presents evidence of the continued reproduction of inequalities in intimate relationships and urges a more contextualized analysis. Seidman (2002) argues that homosexuality, once a symbol of radical difference and potential social transformation, is

being reshaped to mirror heterosexual life—what he calls the “heterosexualization of homosexuality,” which privileges stable, middle-class, monogamous lifestyles and marginalizes more radical, public, or nonnormative queer forms of expression. His critique aligns closely with Duggan (2002), who argues that instead of subverting heteronormativity, dominant heteronormative ideals and lifestyles have increasingly been privileged in the LGBTQ+ community, resulting in what she calls “homonormativity.”

Concerns over whether homosexuality is being assimilated and homogenized by heterosexuality date back to the 1970s, when feminist groups in the United States were critical of the butch/femme pairing, construed as “an aping of traditional gender roles” in the lesbian culture. Feminists then advocated for “an androgynous feminist aesthetic and non-gendered social interaction” in lesbian relationships (Levitt and Horne 2002: 26). In the 1990s, scholars reinterpreted butch/femme gender expressions and pairings as subversive: For instance, Halberstam (1998) argues that lesbian masculinity, typically embodied in the butch identity, is gender outlaw and performs a nonnormative masculinity that disrupts the presumed natural link between maleness and masculinity.

Recent studies have stressed the inadequacy of using the transformative versus assimilative binary framework to comprehend homosexual intimacy because it often simultaneously disrupts and reifies heterosexual norms. Some masculine lesbians subvert the connection between sex and gender by wearing groom ensembles in wedding photos. At the same time, by presenting themselves as grooms and their partners as their brides, they conform to the gender role divisions of heterosexual intimacy (Kimport 2012). Eves (2004:487), on the other hand, contends that “femmes linked sex and gender conventionally but challenged the connection between gender and sexual orientation by being attracted to women. . . . Butch accounts disrupted the link between sex and gender, but because they are masculine their attraction to women can be seen as traditional, particularly when it is for feminine women.” At a more general level, butch/femme pairings, sometimes read as imitative of heterosexuality, help establish lesbian visibility and spaces and upset heteronormative assumptions regarding opposite-sex relationships (Kennedy and Davis 1993).

Regarding gay and bisexual men, research suggests that sexual preferences and positions are often mediated by gendered identities and reflect “an essentialist, heterosexual construction of inserting and receiving during a given sexual encounter” (Johns et al. 2012:505). The insertive partner

is often considered more masculine and dominant, while the receptive partner is considered as more effeminate and passive (Kippax and Smith 2001; Johns et al. 2012). Research on gay communities in different societies points to the presence of heteronormative gender hierarchies, where gay men perceived as effeminate are stigmatized and discriminated against (Taywaditep 2002). Studies have identified the continued salience of hegemonic masculinity in gay communities in mainland China and Hong Kong, where gay men are pressured to appear masculine in order to be accepted (Kong 2019). There is, however, a trend toward more diversity and flexibility in sexual role taking and reflexivity in challenging homonormativity in the LGBTQ+ community, with a growing number of gay men and lalas rejecting rigid role divisions, emphasizing flexible role taking, and creating their own relationship scripts to avoid mimicking heterosexuality (Lamont 2017).

This body of literature brings to the fore a central tension in same-sex intimacy: whether and how the doing of gender shapes its emancipatory potential. In this chapter, I address this tension along with two other emerging challenges: how technology has reshaped the doing of intimacy, and how it intersects with class and HIV/AIDS status (Miao and Chan 2023; Carrillo 2020).

CONTESTING HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIP IDEALS

Among my respondents, efforts to challenge rigid gender role divisions in their intimate relationships are discernible. However, the ideals of monogamy and middle-class domesticity have continued to be embraced by the majority. Additionally, traditional emphasis on class/status compatibility is often being reinscribed.

Negotiating Gender Role Divisions

Rigid gender role expectations are increasingly being contested, including among those who desire a straight-acting partner. Lin (chapter 4) has always dated feminine women and taken on the masculine role in her relationships. After her first girlfriend of six years left her to marry a wealthy divorced man, she vowed only to date lalas who are out to their families. She and her current girlfriend Ming are fully out to their families and have sought to integrate

into each other's social circles. Although one may expect things to be fine between them, Lin says they are not happy:

Ming wants me to change to a better-paying job. She wants me to earn more; she thinks I lack ambition. She wants to get married abroad; she wants me to give her a secure future. She wants a lavish and grand wedding ceremony, and she wants to have a child through assisted reproductive technology abroad, so the biggest challenge for me right now is that I must earn more money, enough for her to do whatever she wants. I have tried to meet her expectations because she is so much younger than me, and it is not easy for her to commit to staying with me.

Being the masculine and older partner (by nine years), Lin is expected to contribute a larger financial share to starting a family. Ming does not simply want to have a family; she wants one modeled on a middle-class heterosexual gender script: a partner who provides, a large and lavish wedding banquet, a registered marriage, and a child. Although Lin has a secure job in a state enterprise, her salary is not sufficient to finance Ming's aspirations. Ming therefore pressures Lin to quit her job and find a better-paying one, whereas Lin values the stability and security her current position provides. According to Lin, they argue about this issue almost daily. She believes their problems partly stem from the state's exclusion of sexual minorities from access to marriage and assisted reproductive technology, which raises the costs of achieving them. At the same time, Lin's difficulties are compounded by expectations that Ts protect and provide for their P partners.

Jun De, a twenty-five-year-old gay man who works as a security guard, faced a similar issue with his ex-boyfriend:

I dated someone I really liked, but he always wanted me to be dependable and to take care of him. I thought he was very good-looking, but then we split up because he always wanted to change me. For example, he criticized the way I walked, saying it wasn't manly enough. (2018 interview)

Because Jun De was a one and his ex-boyfriend a zero, his ex-boyfriend projected a gendered role division onto their relationship, such as expecting Jun De to cover their dating expenses. Jun De was uncomfortable with this because he did not earn much as a security guard and disliked being told to "man up" and meet his ex-boyfriend's standard of a straight-acting gay.

Zhi Peng, a twenty-five-year-old gay man with a white-collar job, had the opposite problem. He was a zero in his previous relationship and was expected to play a submissive role:

My ex-partner is a very virtuous person. For example, when we were traveling, he would plan the trip and cook my breakfasts. He is a man who shoulders his responsibilities; he is dependable and very responsible, but at the same time, this is also the problem. He seemed to enact very conservative male and female roles in our relationships. I could feel the inequality. Sometimes when we disagreed, he did not respect my opinions. (2018 interview)

When Zhi Peng met his ex-boyfriend, he was nineteen and his ex-boyfriend was twenty-nine. In the beginning, the age gap suited him, as he felt his boyfriend was taking good care of him and mentoring him. However, as Zhi Peng matured, he no longer wanted to be treated as the lesser partner. After multiple attempts to negotiate a more equitable relationship failed, he ended it. Ming Tao (a thirty-two-year-old gay man, in a same-sex relationship for two-and-a-half years) also refuses to be the subordinate partner:

It is a bumpy process. I was a pure zero in my first relationship, but now I am a one. My first boyfriend had always dated older men, and when he met me, he somehow wanted to be a man, so he was the one and I was the zero. After we split up, I met a few older men. They told me, “Look at you, now you are a zero, but I bet in five years, you will be a one.” Time has proved them right. I do not know how this happened. Sexually I am versatile, depending on the other person, but I guess psychologically I have been looking for a guy who will always need me; a sense of being needed gives me a sense of security, so I have become dependable. When somebody needs you, they will never leave you. With this mentality, when I am in a relationship with somebody, I play the role of a man like in a male/female relationship. (2018 interview)

Ming Tao reverses roles to become the dominant partner because he can. After completing university, he landed a well-paid professional job that enables him to care for his partner financially (e.g., by covering their dating expenses). Additionally, his sense of insecurity prompts him to create dependency by providing care. Haoyu (chapter 4) and his partner have found a different solution to achieving an egalitarian relationship. Because he reads boys’ love novels—which clearly distinguish the roles of ones and zeros—and because he has always been rather feminine, he thought he was a zero when he started dating. He played this role until 2022, when he met his ex-boyfriend, who wanted to be cared for and asked Haoyu to be the one. Their sex life, however, was unsatisfactory because Haoyu could not successfully penetrate his partner. Indeed, he did not feel right in either role. He has only achieved a

satisfactory sex life after meeting his current boyfriend, who has encouraged him to experiment with different sexual positions:

I think when it comes to sex, trust is a really important issue. For me, being a top [equivalent to a one] requires a lot of confidence. If I don't have that confidence, I just can't do it. If I don't have enough trust in the relationship, or if I feel my partner doesn't believe I can be a good top, then I just can't do it. Because not only do I lack confidence, my partner also lacks confidence in me, so it just doesn't work. But with my current boyfriend, I really feel he trusts me. It just works. (2024 interview)

Now Haoyu identifies as versatile. In 2023 he met his partner's family; they later moved in together, and in 2024 he introduced his partner to his own parents.

Lihua, a twenty-seven-year-old lesbian, also rejects traditional gender role divisions and T stereotypes. In high school, she thought she was a T because her peers told her so. She also learned about the gendered images of Ts and Ps in online forums and discussion groups. When she started university, however, she began to reject the gendered script imposed on T-P pairings:

I dislike the gender role expectations that are imposed on me. When my girlfriend is upset, she expects me to coax her. I don't like that. If I do something for her, it is not because I want to be hypermasculine; I don't. It is because I want to be helpful. I embrace being a T but reject the stereotypes and the gender expectations. There are many ways to be a T, so, in a way, my being a T is a form of resistance [against gender stereotypes]. (2018 interview)

For Lihua, being a T involves diverse practices. A T-P relationship does not have to mean gender role divisions, gender hierarchies, and inequality; a T can be both feminine and masculine. Her rejection of rigid gender expectations echoes wider shifts among Ts, some of whom have invented the category of the feminine T (娘T, *niang* T) to subvert the totalizing power of the gender script.

Bao is a thirty-five-year-old native of Shanghai. He has an undergraduate degree and works in the IT sector. For Bao, queer intimacies must transcend heteronormativity:

[Sexual minority] intimacy should not be like that of heterosexuals, which consists of one man and one woman dating, marrying, and having children. Heterosexuals take this path only. Tongzhi can take many alternative paths. For example, when two tongzhis are in a relationship, they can discuss and

choose whether they want to get married, what types of lifestyles to choose and whether they want to have children together. (2018 interview)

Bao and his partner have been together for ten years. They scorn heterosexual dating scripts in every aspect of their relationship and refuse to set an endpoint for it. Bao's perception that heterosexual people only have one path is not entirely accurate, many younger straight men and women question the imperatives of marriage and parenthood. This has led to delayed marriage, increased divorce rates, fertility declines, and the growth of so-called DINK (double income, no kids) families (chapter 2). The point, however, is that for Bao and his partner, the queerness of queer relationships lies in being free from gender displays and in rejecting a future based on marriage and procreation.

Lin, Jun De, and Zhi Peng illustrate the appeal and constraints of heterosexual dating scripts. Ming Tao and Haoyu exemplify the fluidity of sexual roles and how these intersect with gender, age, resources, and power. Although the choice of micro-identity categories (e.g., zeros, ones, Ts, and Ps) are in part shaped by individual gender embodiment and desire, they are negotiated relationally and continually and are closely entwined with power. When LGBTQ+ people date older people with more experience and greater resources than themselves, they are expected to play the feminine role (i.e., being cared for and being subordinate). As the putative "feminine" partner matures and finds their footing financially, they attempt to distinguish care and power; they may still enjoy being cared for yet refuse to be subordinate.¹

Resistance to gendered relationship scripts has taken different forms. Lin has tried to compensate Ming by giving her extra attention but has refused to leave her current job. Ming, on the other hand, has become more assertive, leading to frequent conflicts. Jun De ended his relationship; Zhi Peng attempted to negotiate a more egalitarian partnership but failed. Ming Tao has reversed his role; Haoyu has found an alternative, more egalitarian arrangement; Lihua has diversified and expanded the meaning of her existing role; and Bao and his partner interpret the categories zero and one as referring solely to sexual position-taking, delinking them from care and power. Some strategies of resistance produce more satisfactory outcomes (e.g., Haoyu, Lihua, and Bao) because of their transformative capacity. Others (e.g., Lin, Ming, and Ming Tao) reify gender role expectations in intimate relationships and generate new challenges.

TABLE 1 Duration of last or current relationship, by sexual/gender identity

Duration of last or current relationship	All respondents (<i>N</i> = 187)	Gay men (<i>n</i> = 120)	Lesbian women (<i>n</i> = 40)	Bisexual individuals (<i>n</i> = 14)	Transgender/pansexual/queer/other (<i>n</i> = 13)
Less than 6 months	24	21	0	2	1
7 months to 1 year	7	5	1	1	0
More than 1 year	114	72	28	8	6
No information	42	22	11	3	6

NOTE: Many respondents did not specify the duration of their shorter relationships; the data should not, therefore, be used to construe the average length of relationships. They do, however, indicate that same-sex relationships are not always short-lived.

The Dilemmas of Monogamy

While a considerable number of respondents reject traditional gender role divisions, the majority continue to embrace the ideal of monogamy. This creates dilemmas for gay men and generates conflicts among lalas.

Table 1 shows the duration of previous or current relationships by sexual identity. Of the ninety-eight relationships reported by gay men, 73 percent lasted over a year. The corresponding figures for lalas, bisexuals, and other sexual minority respondents are 97 percent, 73 percent, and 86 percent, respectively. Given the likelihood that respondents may be more likely to report relationships that have lasted longer, these figures may be an overestimation. Notwithstanding this proviso, the data provide a glimpse into the frequency of relatively stable same-sex relationships among LGBTQ+ people in post-socialist China.

Infidelity, the Chinese term for which is *pi tui*, is one of the most widely cited reasons for relationship conflicts and breakups. While most gay men long for a monogamous relationship, the temptation created by dating apps is simply too great: meeting a new partner takes only one click. Furthermore, many gay men in intimate relationships encounter the rarely addressed problem of sexual incompatibility. Sexual interest quickly diminishes, usually after one or two years. Several of the gay male respondents (e.g., Mingzhe and Yuxan) say they do not like anal sex, but their partner wants to have it. Relationships usually end when one partner's seeking of sexual pleasure elsewhere is exposed. It appears that open relationships are not commonly

accepted and practiced, even if one partner proposes it due to sexual incompatibility.

Eason is a thirty-year-old gay man with a PhD who works in the IT sector. He and his cohabiting partner of four years have not had sex since the second year of their relationship. They broke up in 2016 after Eason met someone on a dating app. During their brief breakup, Eason lived with his new boyfriend for two weeks before deciding it was not working. The new partner was six years younger and was, in Eason's words, "not suitable." After that breakup, Eason and his current partner got back together: "I don't think we'll get married. I don't think he is the right person. But he is a good person to live with. Financially we are bound together. We have a history, and with the breakups and getting back together, I realize that it is not that easy to find a suitable person to be with" (2018 interview).

Eason and his boyfriend co-own two properties. He has met his partner's parents, who are accepting. Eason values the stability the relationship provides, though at one point he suggested they see other people, an idea his partner rejected outright. Sexual incompatibility continues to be a factor in Eason's lack of commitment. Among respondents, only three gay couples and two lala couples are in open relationships.

Despite the stereotype that women are generally less interested in sex than men and more eager to pursue monogamous relationships, some lalas who have studied abroad or been active in LGBTQ+ civic organizations have had many partners. Kai (chapters 3 and 4) is deeply influenced by feminist critiques of the patriarchal double standard, which acknowledges men's sexual desires while marginalizing those of women. For Kai, having many sexual partners is a way of challenging this double standard. Respondents who share similar views engage in polyamory as a form of resistance. Their partners, however, are not always on the same page, often demanding monogamous relationships and viewing polyamorous practices as infidelity. At times, this leads to intimate partner violence and breakups.

Reinscribing Class and Status

In their quest to search for the "special one," respondents stress the desire for a balance between autonomy and intimacy, compatibility in values and lifestyles, and emotional mutuality: "I think there should be mutual love, mutual help, and not too much disturbance to each other's lives" (Dan, a twenty-year-old single gay man, university student); "I think an ideal relationship

is when the partners understand each other [*huxianglijie*], help and trust each other, and care about each other [*huxiangbangzhu*, *huxiangxinren*, and *huxiangguanxin*]" (Peng, a thirty-two-year-old gay man, an entrepreneur with a university degree, in a same-sex relationship); "I think a good relationship is when two people have shared topics, common hobbies, and similar values so they are compatible" (Kang, a twenty-two-year-old gay man and university student in a same-sex relationship); and finally, "An ideal relationship is when you are connected, and you give each other companionship, but at the same time you have this distance so that each partner has his own space" (Jiehong, see chapter 3).

As the above quotations show, few middle-class respondents refer to social class and status as significant factors in defining intimate partner desirability. Their narratives appear to support Giddens's proposition concerning the transition to pure relationships based on emotion rather than economics. At the same time, these narratives conflict with the increasingly refined and standardized criteria of desirability that privilege middle-class material success and status accomplishment in LGBTQ+ communities (chapter 3). Furthermore, there are visible discrepancies between relationship ideals and practices, with class and status playing a central role in shaping the dynamics of everyday intimacy work. As Yuxan's story indicates, the traditional emphasis on class and status compatibility in mate choice is reinscribed in some queer intimacies (albeit under different narratives) and is seldom acknowledged explicitly.

As a good-looking and highly educated twenty-four-year-old gay man from a wealthy family, Yuxan is the envy of many and has a sizable social media following. Yet he is melancholic; beneath a facade of self-confidence lies a broken heart and persistent self-doubt. While pursuing his undergraduate degree in North America in the 2010s, Yuxan fell in love with a man eight years his senior:

When we met, I was still an undergraduate student. He had finished his postgraduate education and was working for a big company. His father has status in China because of his profession, and two of his ex-partners graduated from top universities in North America. Perhaps because of his outstanding academic achievements and his family background, I often felt he had this sense of superiority over me. He was older than me, and he had higher educational qualifications than me. He would joke that I was not a good match for him because my educational qualifications were too low and my English was not good enough. He made me feel that I was not good at all, that I was not youxiu, that I had not studied, so I tried to upgrade myself [*tisheng ziji*].

During the two years they were together, Yuxan worked diligently to increase his value in the eyes of his lover. He studied hard to get good grades, he read widely, he went to libraries with his boyfriend, and he studied art history, learning about different painters so that when they visited museums, he would appear knowledgeable. He tried to “upgrade” his taste in food, clothes, art, and music to impress his boyfriend. He traveled to many countries, learned photography, and built a sizable online following, all in the hope that his boyfriend would see him as a worthwhile equal. Despite his efforts, Yuxan ended the relationship because his boyfriend continued to criticize him, making him feel miserable and unworthy.

Yuxan’s ex-boyfriend thought they were not compatible in class and status. On the one hand, he felt inferior to Yuxan, who, coming from a wealthy family, could freely spend money on luxuries such as fine dining and frequent international travel. On the other hand, he felt superior in terms of status. Yuxan says his ex-boyfriend might have unconsciously used this sense of superiority to conceal his class insecurity. In turn, Yuxan tried to convert his economic capital into cultural capital to match his boyfriend’s status. In short, both reinscribed class and status in their doing of intimacy.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF INTIMACY

An examination of the transformative potential of queer intimacy would be incomplete without an exploration of how queer intimate practices are mediated by technology. Technology has created new spaces for communities to flourish, counterpublics to emerge, and collective mobilization to happen. While online platforms serve as spaces to resist heteronormativity and homophobia, they also reify dominant social hierarchies relating to class, gender, age, locality, and HIV/AIDS status (chapter 3). The internet has facilitated LGBTQ+ identity formation by allowing individuals to learn, share information and knowledge, and seek advice, validation, companionship, and support. However, as researchers have shown, online queer communities are not a utopia. Online queer spaces have become a “new closet,” foreclosing “particular heterosexual and queer vocalizations in favor of specific and recognizable notions of queer subjectivities” (Fraser 2010:30).

In this section, I discuss the dual role technology plays in queer intimate practices. Gay dating apps, in particular, have greatly increased the number of potential partners available but have also made it increasingly difficult

to find that “special” relationship. They change the temporality of dating by condensing courtship rituals, such as getting to know a person, assessing their compatibility, expressing interest, and confessing love, into a very short period. In some cases, these rituals are not practiced at all, with people posting only information about their physical and sexual attributes and expecting to have sex the first time they meet. Shan, a twenty-four-year-old university student in Beijing, explains:

When it all started in the 1980s, what was trendy then was midnight radio talk shows which allowed people to call in and make friends. Some gay men would phone in and say they were looking for lifelong brothers; it was a euphemism for same-sex partners. Society then was very conservative, so everybody had to be very careful when sending messages. They arranged meetings, met a few times, felt out, confirmed their mutual feelings, then had sex. When online chat rooms became popular, the desires expressed were intense. Nobody used euphemisms anymore. Everybody was so direct in introducing their age, height, and weight. There were so many people in the chat rooms, the messages were flying around, but it became difficult to find somebody to talk to because everybody was busy sending out messages. Then the tongzhi online forums and QQ [an instant messaging platform] came along. These became popular channels to arrange hookups. Then, WeChat [a messaging, social media, and lifestyle app] comes onto the market, allowing users to locate somebody nearby. Soon after, many different dating apps emerged. (2018 interview)

Shan acknowledges the role of technology in revolutionizing how gay men look for intimate partners. Because of homophobia, gay men have fewer opportunities to approach potential partners in everyday life. Exclusively gay social spaces (e.g., bars and nightclubs) provide a partial solution, but such venues are limited, even in Beijing, Shanghai, or Shenzhen. Many sexual minorities do not enjoy bars or nightclubs because they do not drink or find the music too loud; some worry about being exposed, while others cannot afford the cost. By contrast, online channels such as dating apps offer easy access, instant connectivity, and anonymity; they are interactive and provide privacy, since they can be used in the confines of one’s home. Yet while it is easier to connect with many people on these apps, it has become more difficult to find someone with whom one can genuinely connect.

Ma, a thirty-five-year-old gay man, laments that while technological developments have made hookups more accessible, they have also made finding love (*fazhan ganqing*) more difficult:

Now when people look for a partner, they consider your appearance, whether you have money, whether you have property, whether you live on your own. After they size up all these factors, it is really like a beauty pageant. After they have done all the calculations, even if they choose you, you know that it is a very pragmatic decision. It is not like before, when two people got together because they loved each other, because of love at first sight. Now it is no longer that pure and simple. Now society has made everybody less simple and pure. Millennials and Generation Z are smart; young people are not simple or pure anymore. There is no pure love anymore. (2018 interview)

For Ma, the dating app scene is hyper-competitive, “like a beauty pageant.” Feeling anxious about whether he is attractive enough, he has tried to make himself more appealing. Along the way, he has also lost faith in ever finding “pure love.” Even if he succeeds in finding a partner, he is likely to question the authenticity of their motives: Is it love or just a pragmatic calculation? He began meeting other gay men via Jack’d (a gay dating app launched in 2000), online chat rooms, the gay website *pengyoubieku* (朋友别哭, launched in 1999), BF99 (another gay dating app), and Blued. He had a boyfriend when he was twenty-five, but they separated a year later. His ex-boyfriend quickly found a new lover, which left Ma heartbroken, but it did not stop him from continuing his search for love through dating apps. Although he has become increasingly pessimistic about the possibility of finding “true love,” he is not ready to give up hope, however faint.

The general impression among respondents is that gay dating apps are fast, hassle-free, and easy to use. If someone thinks another person is their type, they will not hesitate to reach out and arrange to have sex. Thirty-three-year-old Hui Fen believes that technological advances have ironically undermined the possibility of deeper exchanges of ideas and feelings:

We are all too liquid [太不沉淀, *taibuchendian*] and too impatient [浮躁, *fuzao*]. Everything changes so fast. Everyone approaches relationships as if they were ordering fast food. Few are interested in cultivating a relationship with their hearts. It is like sharpening a knife for ten years before it becomes a good sword or watering your flowers daily so they will blossom. Relationships need care and patience. But now everybody wants to speed up the harvest by using chemical fertilizers. It is the information age. We receive so much information and get to know so many people, and this is why everybody has become impatient. Before, it was difficult to meet a suitable partner, and when we met one, we treated the relationship with care and dedication because we knew how hard it was to find the right person. Now people feel it is easy, and they believe there are endless opportunities to meet someone

who is both spiritually compatible and sexually attractive. The relationship landscape for tongzhi in China has deteriorated. (2015 interview)

Hui Fen is a professional working in the finance sector in Shanghai. He feels that dating apps have blurred the line between romance and hooking up: Nobody is interested or patient enough to take the time to get to know a potential partner slowly and gradually. In his view, by doing so, gay men foreclose the possibility of developing deeper and more authentic connections. He attributes people's loss of patience in courtship to the illusion of abundant choice created by dating apps. He believes it is one's investment in a relationship that makes a partner "special," whereas nowadays people want to find "the special one" ready-made. He has had two relationships. He met his first partner in an online chat room, but they broke up a year later when his partner had to return to his hometown. He met his second partner through some co-ethnics. This relationship ended after three years when they decided they were not compatible. Hui Fen then began using dating apps, with little success.

Muchen is a tall and good-looking thirty-five-year-old gay man with a postgraduate degree and a professional job. A Beijing native, he lives in an apartment owned by his parents. By any criterion, he would appear to be a desirable partner on the gay dating scene, yet he has not found anyone suitable. He met his first partner through an online group for gay men when he was twenty-four years old (before the advent of dating apps). The relationship lasted for one and a half years and ended when his boyfriend had to leave Beijing and return home to help resolve marital disputes among family members. Six months later, Muchen met his second boyfriend. That relationship lasted five years but ended when his boyfriend had to return to his hometown to care for an elderly family member.

Although Muchen has been using dating apps for over three years, he has not been able to find anyone suitable. Either the person he was fond of was not interested in him or he did not consider those who were interested in him desirable. Determined not to repeat past disappointments, he now wants to find a financially independent Beijing native. He thinks these are reasonable criteria, but they are proving difficult to meet:

You open an app and there are so many profiles, too many that they blind you. It is like going into a supermarket just wanting to buy a bottle of water, but the shelves are full of different drinks, and amid the abundance of choices you feel lost. Although the options for potential partners seem to have greatly

increased, it has become more difficult to really get to know someone. (2018 interview)

If middle-class professionals such as Muchen find it difficult to secure a romantic partner, the challenges faced by working-class respondents like Xiaoliu and Song are even greater. Xiaoliu met his first boyfriend, a university student who was one year younger and from another province, through the dating app Blued in 2015. They were in a cyber romance (*wanglian*) for six months, until his boyfriend asked Xiaoliu to send him money for air tickets so that he could visit him in Shenzhen:

We were supposed to meet on May 25. Two weeks before, I sent him several thousand yuan [1,000 yuan is approximately USD 138] to buy the tickets. Our relationship had gone so well, and he said that he had arguments with his parents and wanted to see me, but he did not have any money. After I sent him the money, he said he bought the tickets. I was so happy that day. I borrowed my uncle's new car to pick him up; I wanted to look my best when I met him. I had a new haircut. His flight was due to arrive at 11 a.m. I arrived at the airport two hours earlier. But he never showed up. I could not get in touch with him. I even begged people at the airport to use the loudspeaker to find him. I waited until dawn the other day. I worried that I might have missed him, but at the same time, I had a vague sense that he might have been a fraud.

The boyfriend contacted him the next day, saying he had arrived in Shenzhen but could not find him. Xiaoliu says he probably already realized he was lying, but he was so naive and serious about the relationship that he lent his boyfriend another 10,000 yuan (approximately USD 1,380). The boyfriend promised to return the money and meet him again, but he disappeared.

Deeply hurt by the experience and eager to forget it, Xiaoliu tried to find another partner through Blued. He arranged to meet his new partner, but the latter never showed up. Xiaoliu believes this was because he had been using fake photos on the app and did not dare meet him face-to-face. Still, the new partner kept asking Xiaoliu to add credits to his mobile phone and video games and to buy him birthday presents. After two failed cyber romances, Xiaoliu met his third boyfriend, a flight attendant, again through Blued. This became his longest relationship (six months). They were happy together, but when Xiaoliu was caught flirting with another person on the app, they broke up. He then met his fourth boyfriend, with whom he was together for

TABLE 2 Venues for meeting current and ex-partners, by sexual/gender identity

Venue where respondents met their previous or current partner(s)	All respondents (N = 187)	Gay men (n = 120)	Lesbian women (n = 40)	Bisexuals (n = 14)	Transgender/pansexual/queer/other (n = 13)
Never had a same-sex relationship	13	9	3	0	1
Everyday life	94	48	31	8	7
Commercial sites	7	3	1	1	2
Dating apps	108	81	14	10	3
NGOs	8	5	2	0	1
No information	10	7	0	0	3

NOTE: Participants who were single reported the venues where they had met their ex-partners, while those in relationships reported where they had met both their current and ex-partners. A single participant could report more than one relationship experience, so the total number of relationships is greater than the number of participants. Ten respondents did not indicate where they had met their same-sex partners.

a month. According to Xiaoliu, this boyfriend was too materialistic, and he could not give him what he wanted. Xiaoliu longs (*texiangwang*) for a relationship (*ganqing*), but at the same time, he feels disillusioned. He no longer wants to seek an intimate partner through Blued, which he considers low, yet he also thinks that he is not youxiu enough to have a chance on middle-class dating apps like Aloha (now Finka).

Song, meanwhile, is active on Blued, which he calls his “living circle” (*shenghuoquan*). He says it is the only space where he can be openly gay. He is, however, disappointed:

I am quite sad about Blued because I could not find a [boy]friend. It is miserable and disappointing. On Blued, even if someone has their eye on you, it is not for friendship but a hookup. I always wonder why so many people are on the app, but I cannot find a person to be with.

Song’s disillusionment with gay dating apps is shared by many gay men. Lalas are less critical of lesbian dating apps. The only two complaints they have are that users are too young to be interesting people and that some discriminate against Ts because they are considered too masculine. Lalas are anyway less dependent on apps. Table 2 shows the social spaces where respondents met their last and/or current partners.

Among the 137 relationships reported by gay men, 60 percent began through dating apps, followed by everyday encounters (35 percent), LGBTQ+ civic organizations (4 percent), and commercial sites (2 percent). Of the 48 relationships reported by lalas, most began in everyday life (65 percent), followed by dating apps (29 percent), LGBTQ+ civic organizations (4 percent), and commercial sites (2 percent). Among respondents who identified as bisexual, the most common social spaces for finding a romantic partner were dating apps (53 percent), followed by everyday life (42 percent) and commercial sites (5.3 percent). Among respondents who identified as “other” in sexual identity, the most common social spaces for meeting a romantic partner were everyday life (54 percent), dating apps (23 percent), commercial sites (15 percent), and civic LGBTQ+ organizations (8 percent). It is worth noting that ten of the respondents who self-identified as “other” identify as women. In conclusion, sexual minority women are less dependent than gay men on dating apps.

The social spaces where one meets a partner carry different expectations. The majority of respondents seek to find “true love” (*zhenai*) or a partner with whom they have “emotional feelings” (*ganqing*) in everyday life or via LGBTQ+ civic organizations and networks. They are ambivalent about the possibility of doing so via dating apps because they regard them (not unjustifiably) as hookup (*yuepao*) platforms.

In all the above social spaces, LGBTQ+ people encounter different risks and are compelled to resist different normative pressures. For instance, in everyday life, they risk falling in love with a straight person. On dating apps, they risk falling in love with someone inauthentic and have to resist the commodification of intimacy. In LGBTQ+ civic organizations, politics can get in the way of personal lives. Yiming, a twenty-two-year-old gay man employed by an HIV/AIDS organization, met two former partners and his current one through work. Meeting partners this way reduces the risk of falling in love with a man who will eventually leave to enter a heterosexual marriage, but it brings other problems. Around 2017, Yiming began having difficulty securing venues to host events advocating for the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS. At the same time, his ex-boyfriend received warnings from the public security (*gong'an*) that if he continued his relationship with Yiming, his employer, which provided HIV/AIDS testing services, would lose government funding. Not wanting to jeopardize his ex-boyfriend's work or the lifeline his organization offered, Yiming ended the relationship.

While intimacy is private and relational, individuals do not enact their relationships in a vacuum. Intimate practices often follow patterns that reflect common relationship scripts and structural inequalities (Simon and Gagnon 1986; 2003; Loa and Choi 2024). Feminist scholars of dating relationships in urban China have long called for an intersectional analysis of how different social structures interact to shape the doing of intimacy (Wang 2017). The experiences of Kexin and Xiaotong illustrate how their structural marginality constrains their pursuit of intimacy.

Kexin is an eighteen-year-old bisexual working-class woman with a history of sexual victimization. Xiaotong (chapter 3) is a gay man living with HIV/AIDS. Kexin identifies as a bisexual woman in the questionnaire but refers to herself as a lala in the interview. She only ever falls in love with women. Her aversion to men is because of her father, who neglected, mistreated, and regularly verbally abused her, and turned a blind eye to her plea for help after his friend's son sexually assaulted her. Kexin's mother left her father after she was born. She moved with her father to various places during her childhood and teens, depending on where he worked and which women he was cohabiting with. Because her father's business failed, ruining him financially, Kexin's education was disrupted; she only completed five years of primary school and three years of vocational school. She started working full-time in a factory immediately upon turning sixteen. She recalls in vivid detail her suicidal thoughts, her ordeal of being sexually harassed when she was a student intern, and the gender discrimination she experienced when she began working in a factory. She characterizes her life as consumed by physical exhaustion and depression. Love for Kexin is a luxury:

I don't think anybody would want to have a relationship with me. I will not have a love relationship [*tanlianai*]; it is too exhausting. I am too tired to take care of other people's feelings. In relationships, we provide each other with either emotional goods or economic goods, or the promise of a future together. But having a future requires money. The problem is money. Imagine if I meet a girl in the factory and we fall in love. Even if we slave ourselves, we might earn 5,000 yuan [approximately USD 685] a month. How much can I save? How long do we need to save enough money to buy a place to live together? How could I develop romantic relationships? Survival is already so tiring; going to work is already so tiring. How do I have the energy to pay attention to my lover after work? Won't I be exhausted? I will be exhausted. I am exhausted. (2024 interview)

Already, by the age of eighteen, Kexin has learned some of the hard facts of life. As a bisexual/lala with limited education, working in a factory that requires overtime work most days of the week, and from a poor family with an unsupportive and abusive father, she is on her own. She believes that with the widening gender wage gap and growing inequalities between rich and poor (coupled with increasing living and housing costs in cities and a lack of parental support), working-class lesbian couples cannot sustain a relationship and build a future together. Kexin's experiences illustrate the triple predicament of lesbians and bisexual women who are multiply disadvantaged because of their gender, class, and sexuality. However, she says at the end of her interview that because she started full-time work early and has achieved financial independence, and because of her abuse, she does not care what her father thinks about her sexuality. She is not concerned about his possible opposition to her sexual pursuits. In that sense, she is free from parental control. My respondents who are emotionally close to and financially dependent on their parents struggle to obtain this freedom. At the same time, being a factory worker, Kexin is surrounded by conservative coworkers who do not take love relationships between women seriously. They regard love interests between women as a form of "sister love" (*guimiqing*) rather than "real romantic love" (*zhendeaqing*). This frustrates her because she craves social recognition for her desires.

Like Kexin, Xiaotong feels that love has avoided him, but for different reasons. As he recalls in chapter 3, he broke up with his boyfriend soon after his HIV diagnosis and disclosure. Since then, Xiaotong has stayed single. He began taking medication in 2011. He says that he is in good health. Based on my observation, I would concur. He looks well and speaks with energy. He invests in the financial market to achieve financial independence, and he has been active on online forums, advising people living with HIV/AIDS and using his own experience to dispel many myths and misinformation about the condition. For example, many people still believe that HIV/AIDS can be transmitted through daily contact. There is also a great deal of misunderstanding about the side effects of treatment, which scares people. For Xiaotong, his biggest challenge is finding a satisfactory relationship:

I live the life of a very normal person. It's just that I need to take medication every morning. Seven years have passed, and I am fine; I do not feel sick at all, except I need to face a very real issue—what if I fall in love again, or if I have casual sex? Everybody has sexual desires. Would I pass it to my partner? I know that in China, many gay men living with HIV/AIDS abstain; they

completely rule out sex. At most, they masturbate. If this is their choice, then fine, but if this is a form of self-punishment or redemption to lessen social stigma, I don't think it makes sense. I just live with this condition; I did not do anything wrong.

Xiaotong feels entitled to an intimate relationship, and he craves one. He believes that if he starts dating someone and discloses that he is living with HIV/AIDS, he is "100 percent sure" he will be rejected. Xiaotong is therefore caught in a double bind: If he reveals his HIV/AIDS status, he risks rejection, blackmail, and exposure; if he conceals it, he cannot live with his conscience. He thinks this predicament has discouraged the majority of gay men living with HIV/AIDS in China from seeking a partner. As he is only thirty-one, he cannot imagine a life without love:

I still want to fall in love. This is a basic human right. Now I can only hope that maybe one day I will meet another person also living with HIV/AIDS, but it is virtually impossible to find such a person, except through online chat rooms for people living with HIV/AIDS. Even then, it is difficult because of social stigma. Most people are deep in the closet.

Xiaotong does not exaggerate the social stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. If LGBTQ+ people in post-socialist China have gradually begun to come out of the closet, this is not the case for those living with HIV/AIDS. Gay men living with the condition inhabit three closets: one imposed by heteronormativity, one by patriarchy, and one by HIV/AIDS stigmatization. In chapter 6, I discuss the first two closets in detail; for now, it suffices to note the existence of this triple predicament.

During the fieldwork for this study, my team came across rumors circulating in a gay network that three respondents were living with HIV/AIDS. None of them mentioned it in their interviews. Without wishing to impinge on their privacy, we did not pursue the matter further, preferring to wait for them to volunteer any further information. In addition to Xiaotong, Yiming and Mingzhe were the only two respondents who spoke about their partner's HIV/AIDS status without being prompted. For Yiming, this is not surprising, as he works for a civic organization dedicated to destigmatizing the condition. Mingzhe told us that a man with whom he had several sexual encounters had been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Although Mingzhe (chapter 4) was willing to continue their relationship, the man severed all ties with him and disappeared, perhaps out of shame or despair.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this chapter demonstrate the limitations of using a binary framework of transformation versus assimilation to assess the emancipatory potential of queer intimacy. While a considerable number of respondents reflexively reject the gendered role divisions characteristic of traditional heterosexual relationship ideals, the majority continue to embrace monogamy and reinscribe class and status distinctions in their practices of intimacy.

Queer intimacy is not only entangled with heterosexuality; it has also been shaped by technological advances, intersecting class and gender inequalities, and HIV/AIDS status. Dating apps have expanded the pool of potential partners, but the commodification of intimacy and the intensification of competition have made it more difficult to find a suitable match. Structural inequalities mean that while everyone desires love, love does not come to everyone equally. Rather than a paradise of individual emancipation, queer intimacy often serves as another arena in which existing inequalities are reproduced.

I have also foregrounded the role of birth cohort in shaping LGBTQ+ intimacy. Younger respondents, especially highly educated urban women, have gained the confidence to assert the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. They are no longer willing to live in the shadow of heterosexuality, nor are they afraid to directly confront male partners of their same-sex lovers or fathers who oppose their relationships and coerce their lovers to end them.

As a whole, these findings demonstrate that ideals and practices of intimacy are culturally and structurally situated; their multivariate dynamics cannot be captured within a binary framework. Rather than asking whether queer intimacy is transformative or assimilative, researchers may consider which aspects of heterosexual relationship scripts are being challenged, and how and by whom. Queer intimacy takes multiple forms, with some practices carrying greater transformative potential than others.

Care and Coming Out to Parents

I don't think I will ever come out to my parents. I feel it would challenge their entire moral system; it would challenge their way of thinking. I will never do it. Nowadays, all the young people are talking about coming out. They want to come out. They are transferring pressure to their families. I think that is wrong. People need to come out when they are in the closet. I don't have a closet anymore. I don't lie to people that I am married to a woman; I don't need to. I don't draw a line for myself and hide behind it. I am an open, respectable, and good person. (Stanley, a thirty-eight-year-old university-educated gay man)

STANLEY REJECTS THE EQUATION OF nondisclosure, as epitomized by the closet, with sexual repression. He questions the moral imperative of coming out and proposes an alternative strategy of resistance to heteronormativity that is centered on care. Although he has not come out to his parents, he disputes the notion that he is closeted, arguing that he has carved an autonomous space to pursue his nonnormative lifestyle: He was previously in a five-year same-sex relationship, has a wide LGBTQ+ network, and has never hidden his sexuality at work. He claims that his decision not to come out to his parents is moral and caring. He refuses to subject them to unnecessary stigma and gossip or to risk hurting their feelings and damaging their health. He is not against coming out but argues it has become a new hegemony that forecloses other possibilities of queer identity expression.

In this chapter, I engage with national and global coming-out debates by bringing to the fore an overlooked dimension of coming out: the centrality of care. The stories of my respondents demonstrate that nondisclosure is not necessarily a sign of repression. It can be a tactical, ethical, and caring choice (Choi 2025). Decisions to come out are often also motivated by care for oneself, one's relationships, and one's parents. It is mostly handled carefully, as indicated in the time individuals invest in preparing and building up

the groundwork before coming out, a process encapsulated in the Chinese concept of *pu dian* (铺垫).

This chapter also responds to calls in the emergent literature for studies on the structural underpinnings of coming out. I show how structural positions shape coming out by comparing birth cohorts, hukou status, class, and gender. I highlight how time and change are central to understanding coming out, which is rarely a one-off event but rather a long-term project unfolding over a considerable period (Jhang 2018). I emphasize the importance of historical and cultural contexts in understanding coming-out discourses and practices, moving beyond the fixed closet imaginary. By elucidating the structural inequalities that underpin coming-out decisions and strategies, I seek to move beyond individualistic conceptions.

In the sections that follow, I outline the major global and national debates on coming out, examine coming out in the context of friendship (even though in China it is primarily a matter of family dynamics), and delineate the centrality of care in decisions regarding whether to come out to parents. I also identify four major coming-out strategies and show how the adoption of a particular strategy is closely entwined with birth cohort, hukou status, class, and gender.

COMING OUT: NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTESTATIONS

In the 1970s, post-Stonewall gay liberation movements framed coming out as a political act to build collective visibility and power. Scholars generally regard coming out as a milestone in identity formation (Cass 1979; Troiden 1988; Weeks 1985). It has also been seen as an essential step in achieving a fully integrated self and a new subjectivity (Cass 1979). The predominant view was therefore that only when sexual minorities publicly disclosed their sexuality could they achieve authentic selfhood and become a visible force challenging the hegemonic and normalizing power of heterosexuality (Mosher 2001).

The coming-out discourse in the United States was deeply entwined with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Queer activists advanced it in response to both the medical establishment's neglect of HIV/AIDS and homophobic proposals to quarantine gay men. They believed that if heterosexual people recognized that gay men were already present in their lives as family members, neighbors, friends, and colleagues, they would be more likely to resist such discriminatory

measures. Gould (2009), for example, traces how ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a grassroots activist organization founded in New York in 1987, and other groups mobilized the coming-out discourse during the pandemic, linking visibility to survival through the slogan “Silence = Death.” This illustrates how the coming-out model was rooted in a specific historical context and crisis. Far from being a universal trajectory, it was historically contingent, emerging as a strategy to destigmatize homosexuality and fight discrimination by bridging individual sexuality with public claims for recognition, rights, and respect (Sandler 2022; Weeks 1998).

However, some scholars criticize the coming-out discourse for equating nondisclosure with sexual oppression, which they view as overly determinative (Gross 1991; McCarthy 1994; Warner 1993). Brown (2000) and Seidman (2002) point out that the closet can function as a place of safety where queer privacy is protected and negotiated. Davis and Needham (2009) argue that the coming-out discourse has become a new hegemony that privileges revelation and stigmatizes silence and reticence as signs of inauthenticity and a premodern mindset. In this way, coming out is increasingly positioned as the only legitimate form of identity expression.

Queer scholars of racial and ethnic minorities, as well as those from non-Western societies, have also criticized the discourse for privileging the experiences of White, middle-class, urban sexual minorities (Huang 2021). Manalansan (1995) contends that it grants primacy to Western modes of communicating sexuality. For Filipino gay men, he argues, sexual identities can be “felt” as well as proclaimed. Snorton (2014) criticizes the discourse for equating authenticity with public declarations of sexual orientation, overlooking the cultural and societal pressures that shape how Black men navigate their identities. For Snorton, nondisclosure or ambivalence is a multidirectional tactic of resistance: against White surveillance, the pathologization of African male sexuality, and the Black community’s stigmatization of gayness. Nondisclosure thus becomes a way of withholding oneself from the White gaze, resisting the demand to confess or perform legible queerness on White liberal terms, while also surviving in African American communities that may lack affirming narratives of queerness due to racism, religious conservatism, and gendered expectations.

Fisher (2003) further contends that the coming-out discourse rests on an imaginary of the closet as a temporally and spatially fixed entity characterized by repression. Instead, she presents it as an active, tactical space where queer immigrants make conscious choices about when, where, and to whom

they disclose their identities. This perspective emphasizes the agency involved in navigating multiple cultural expectations.

Chinese scholars have also challenged the Western (predominantly US) model as culturally inappropriate for family-centered and community-oriented societies. Chou (2000) proposes a *coming home* model, in which one introduces a partner to the family of origin without explicitly naming the nature of the relationship. He suggests this represents a culturally specific strategy for bypassing direct discussions of homosexuality while preserving family harmony. This approach stresses reticence rather than disclosure and reflects a Chinese relational self based on responsibility and expectations, in contrast with the Western independent self that celebrates autonomy. Liu and Ding (2005:30), however, critique this model, arguing that such “reticent poetics” risk silencing and marginalizing nonnormative sexuality.

More recently, Huang and Brouwer (2018:107) propose a third model, “coming with,” which highlights the efforts of some Chinese sexual minorities to be “both out and actively committed to staying within and caring for the family relational network.” The *coming with* model affirms the centrality of family and kinship in queer lives but does not consign “queer sexuality to the heteronormative home space.” Instead, it seeks to engage the home with queer desires, transforming the heteronormative family institution from within (Huang 2021).

These debates highlight how political, historical, and cultural contexts shape the ways coming out is understood and contested. Work on ethnic and racial minorities and in non-Western contexts foregrounds a relational model of coming out, showing that decisions about disclosure and nondisclosure are not simply matters of personal truth but of protecting or negotiating relationships. Despite these contributions, this body of literature has paid only limited attention to the mechanisms through which relationships are maintained and nourished in coming-out decisions and practices. By foregrounding care, I advance our understanding of this complex process and link its dynamics to broader structural inequalities.

CHOICE, RIGHTS, AND COMING OUT IN THE FRIENDSHIP CONTEXT

Among the 187 respondents in the present study, 98 have disclosed their sexuality to some of their heterosexual classmates, friends, and colleagues; 57 are

entirely open to people around them. Only 22 respondents have never disclosed their sexuality to any heterosexual classmates, friends, or colleagues.¹ In 45 cases, classmates were the first to be disclosed to; in 63, friends; and in 35, a family member.²

When respondents disclosed their sexuality to heterosexual classmates, friends, or colleagues, most of them received emotional support and felt accepted. For example, the pattern of communication between them and the person to whom they disclosed did not change. This was because, in most cases, respondents chose to disclose only to people they were emotionally close to and trusted. In nearly all cases, these individuals—though they may not view homosexuality as morally desirable—are understanding of the respondents' sexuality. Importantly, many heterosexual friends have remained their most significant sources of support and companionship, even after respondents entered queer circles and met other LGBTQ+ people. It is also worth noting that respondents such as Yiming (see chapter 5) believe their friends have the right not to be understanding or accepting.

Like a friend I know who works at a government bureau, he just couldn't understand. He really couldn't understand. Later on, I thought, actually, it doesn't matter. If you don't understand me, that's your right. But I won't change because of you; I won't change for you, because I believe I have the right to choose the life I want in the future, and you have the right to reject me.

Yiming frames his decision to come out and his friend's reaction to his coming out as two types of rights, the right to sexual autonomy and the right to freedom of opinion and expression. He distinguishes between freedom of opinion and discrimination: While his friend has the freedom not to accept him, neither can he discriminate against him (e.g., by not giving him access to rights conferred on other citizens). In doing so, Yiming situates coming out to friends within the broader social contract between equal citizens. His understanding of the situation is echoed by other respondents.

As the data indicate, many respondents are selectively open to their heterosexual classmates, friends, and colleagues. This reflects concerns about stigmatization, blackmail, and discrimination. Furthermore, they feel that sexuality is a private matter that is nobody else's business. As such, they challenge the confessional logic underpinning some coming out discourses. They aver that they are not accountable to their heterosexual friends and are not obligated to disclose to them. They also challenge the assumed link

between nondisclosure and staying in the closet, arguing that many people who are not publicly open about their sexuality neither pass as heterosexuals nor lead a double life. Instead of confronting stigmatization openly, many respondents try to move into social circles that are more accepting of homosexuality, for instance, by moving to metropolises (e.g., Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou), to large Chinese cities with a reputation for tolerance or a vibrant queer culture (e.g., Chengdu and Chongqing), or to democratic countries where gay rights are protected. Some try to find work in the private sector, which is believed to be more tolerant of nonnormative lifestyles; others seek jobs in industries reputed to be liberal (e.g., IT, advertising, and the creative arts). While they cannot control who they are, they can choose who they associate with in social settings. Such choice is far more limited in the family context; one can decide how much time to spend with one's parents, but one cannot choose them in the first instance.

CARE AND COMING-OUT DECISIONS IN THE FAMILY CONTEXT

Many respondents learned about their parents' negative views of homosexuality when growing up, and this made coming out difficult later in life. Homosexuality was absent from official discourses, TV programs, and the news before the mid-1980s. Between the late 1980s and 2000, its portrayal was largely negative (Wan 2001). Respondents heard their parents commenting that homosexual people were *biantai* (perverts), *hen e xin* (very disgusting), *bingtai* (pathological/sick), *angzang* (filthy), and *xialiu* (lowly). Homosexuality was once regarded by many older-generation Chinese as sexually abnormal, morally despicable, and socially unacceptable. Although parental attitudes have become more tolerant, as evinced by the now more common view that sexual minorities should have equal citizenship rights (chapter 1), respondents might not have had opportunities to learn about their parents' softened stance toward homosexuality. The impression that their parents regard homosexuality negatively makes coming out a risky endeavor. Knowing that their parents expect them to continue the family bloodline through heterosexual marriage and procreation creates an additional obstacle for gay men. Hua, a twenty-eight-year-old gay man living in a small city (chapters 3 and 4), explains:

My parents always tried to avoid talking about homosexuality, or they would whisper about it in tones of disgust. The cultural value that men need to get married to bear children to continue the patriline [*chuanzongjiedai*] is particularly deep-seated in our hometown, so one day, when I discovered that I had become the type of person whom my parents despised, it was as if a bolt of lightning had struck me. I felt so much angst that I attempted to end my own life.

Upon confirming his sexual orientation, Hua found himself doubly closeted. Knowing that his parents hold negative views about homosexuality, he conceals his sexual orientation. Aware of their expectations for a heterosexual marriage and procreation, he also hides the fact that he does not want to marry a woman. Nearly ten years have passed since Hua confirmed that he is gay, yet he is still waiting for the right moment to come out to his parents.

Deciding Not to Come Out

Fifty-six respondents plan never to come out to their parents. There are three main reasons for this: relationship estrangement, power reversal, and concern for parents' feelings and health (Choi 2025). Kang, a twenty-seven-year-old single gay man with a university education, says that he is not emotionally close to his parents, has little to say to them, and has had limited communication with them since childhood. He believes it is impossible to talk to them about his sexuality or gain their understanding. He does not live with his parents and rarely visits. He lacks the motivation (emotional connection), the means (effective communication), and the circumstances (being together) to come out to them.

Coming out is not an issue for Sing, a twenty-five-year-old single gay man with a secondary education, because of power reversal. He is emotionally close to his parents; he supports them financially and visits them regularly. However, he feels that "there is no need to come out" because he makes the decisions in his family. For him, coming out means one must confess and be held accountable for one's desires and behaviors. Sing jokes that he is the family member with the power to hold others accountable. He does not answer to anyone, so no one can pressure him to do something he does not want to do. Like many of the respondents who were born in the 1990s, Sing challenges the traditional understanding of filial piety. He considers sexuality a personal matter beyond family control:

Every person is an independent entity [*duli de geti*] in society. When your parents do not overstep the mark, they are forever your parents, but when they do, they are no longer your parents. The ancient Chinese saying that filial piety is the first of the one hundred virtues is wrong. They cannot inter-vene in my life, they cannot threaten my way of life, and they cannot restrict my freedom.

Sing regards the parent–adult child relationship as a contract between equal individuals, with clear boundaries regarding privacy, personal matters, and familial responsibility. While he feels obliged to support his parents financially, he does not feel obligated to fulfill their expectations that he will marry and become a father.

Relationship estrangement and power reversal are less important than care for and care about family members' feelings and health as a reason not to come out. Tian, a thirty-three-year-old university-educated gay man, has decided not to come out because he does not want to hurt his mother, grandmother, and aunt, who have recently been grief-stricken over family tragedies. Tian's grandfather had two sons, and each son had a son. His cousin and father passed away, leaving Tian the only male heir of three generations in his extended family (*sandaidanchuan*). While Tian disagrees with the traditional family expectation that men must continue the family bloodline, he nonetheless empathizes with his grandmother, mother, and aunt:

In my family and the culture they come from, they would never be able to reach a consensus with me [concerning his sexuality]. In their consciousness, continuation of the family genes [*jiyinchengchuan*] is very important. In our consciousness, self-actualization [*ziwoshixian*] and being true to the essence of the self are very important. On this issue, the generations will never reach consensus because the expectations of the older generation are the product of many years of growing up in a society where everybody respected the importance of genetic reproduction [*jiyinfanyan*].

A highly successful professional, Tian is financially independent; he owns properties and has substantial savings. He has been with his same-sex partner for six years and has no intention of altering his nonnormative lifestyle. Although he believes self-actualization is far more moral and desirable than genetic continuity, he empathizes with his family. Not wanting to compromise his lifestyle, nor believing that his family would ever change their position on homosexuality, Tian and his partner have decided that, rather than come out, Tian will provide the family with a son through surrogacy in the

United States. Loving children, they have already contacted an agency to help find an egg donor and a surrogate and are preparing the necessary documentation for Tian to obtain a visa to visit the United States. Instead of coming out, Tian will bring home a son for his family. His bringing-home strategy calls to mind Chou's coming-home strategy, in that both bypass open discussion of homosexuality in the family setting (Chou 2000). However, Chou's model emphasizes its potential as a nonconfrontational strategy of resistance without elaborating upon the emotions and feelings that underscore it. By contrast, Tian's narrative is framed around emotion and care. One of the chief motivations of his bringing-home strategy is to comfort family members and help them find solace after their losses.

Forty-one-year-old professional Jia, who has a PhD from a university in the United States (where he currently lives), has also decided never to come out to his parents. The pressure to marry peaked in his mid-thirties because his parents perceived this to be the deadline. His parents forced him to meet a girl in New York that their friend introduced to them. When they came to the United States to visit, they invited the girl to his place to celebrate his thirty-fifth birthday. He jokes that his father tried every way to persuade the girl to stay over: "It felt like he was forcing the girl into my bed!" Despite his annoyance at his parents' "extraordinary" and "ridiculous" behavior, Jia has no plans to tell them he is gay:

My parents are approaching eighty, and I don't know how much they could take if I come out to them. I am not willing to take the risk. Instead, I have tried to show them that I can have a happy life even if I am single. I have tried to make them stop worrying about who is going to support me when I'm old.

Rather than come out, Jia is waiting for his parents to give up on the idea that he will marry. He says the older he has become, the less frequently his parents have raised the marriage issue, perhaps because he has passed the marriageable age. Jia reassures his parents that he will live a happy and secure single life, telling them many marriages end in divorce. He has explained to his parents that singlehood is a common and viable option in the United States and he has sufficient savings to support himself in old age. He further comforts them by explaining that he has friends who will give him company and take care of him, and that his health insurance and the US social security system offer a safety net. Jia thinks that his transnational mobility, which was initially financed by his parents, has enabled him to convince them that he can have a future without being married to a woman.

Deciding to Come Out

The decision to come out is determined by three types of caring relationship: with oneself, with one's intimate partners, and with one's parents. For HIV/AIDS NGO worker Yiming (a gay man born in 1996; chapter 5), coming out is a moral imperative—being true to oneself (“I do not want to pretend to be someone I am not”) and standing up for one's rights. For Han, a twenty-five-year-old gay man who works as a clerk in a small city, coming out is an act of self-care. It is a means to protect himself from being negatively affected by concealment. By coming out to her parents, Cui, a twenty-one-year-old lesbian university undergraduate, sent a signal to her same-sex partner about her commitment to a nonnormative lifestyle and their relationship: “I want to have my own family. I want to have a stable relationship. I want to have children. This was why I told my mother.” Yu (a twenty-five-year-old gay male entrepreneur with a bachelor's degree and a US green card) says he came out to his mother because he did not want her to treat his boyfriend poorly: “I need to fight for my partner's equal rights. If my mother scorns me, if she cannot empathize with me, it is my responsibility to deal with her [negative] feelings. It is not right for me to let my partner to bear this [his mother's rejection].”

Yu sees it as his responsibility to come out to his mother and persuade her to accept his boyfriend so that his boyfriend will not be invisible and ignored by his mother as a “nobody.” His coming out is therefore an act of declaring his boyfriend's status as his intimate partner and fighting for his rightful place within his family of origin. Many of the lesbians who came out to their parents did so to show their partner their commitment to their relationship:

My partner visited my parents. My parents really liked her. After that, she came out to her parents. I think she came out for our relationship. She now lives in Shanghai, but she's moving to Beijing in a month. She has quit her job. (Ping, a twenty-seven-year old lala living in Beijing; chapter 4)

By introducing her girlfriend formally to her parents, Ping declared her love for her and signaled her commitment to their relationship. Her girlfriend's subsequent coming out to her own parents was a similar gesture. Cui, Yu, Ping, and their girlfriends' coming out was therefore an act of care toward their partners.

Wei, a twenty-six-year-old lesbian university graduate and white-collar worker, and Luo, a twenty-eight-year-old gay postgraduate student, came

out to maintain or restore intimacy between themselves and their parents. Because Wei knows her parents love her deeply, she explains that she wants “them to know what type of person I really am. I want to show them the real me.” On the other hand, Luo realized that his concealment had led to a deterioration in his relationship with his mother. As an only child, he used to share everything with her until his sexual orientation was confirmed. To conceal his relationships, he avoided his mother’s calls, and he felt anxious about going home. He then decided to come out to her to share his intimacies and restore their close relationship.

Care for oneself, one’s partner, and one’s parents are not perceived as mutually exclusive or hierarchal. This departs from traditional notions of Chinese selfhood, which Yan believes consists of the desiring individual, relational person, and the moral self (Yan 2017). In traditional Chinese society, the desiring individual was subsumed under the moral self, whose utmost obligation is to preserve the relational person and their capacity to maintain interpersonal, familial, and social harmony, even at the expense of suppressing and sacrificing individual desires. However, for most of my respondents, the moral self fully acknowledges the legitimacy of individual desires. For respondents who have come out or plan to do so, the desiring individual is not a barrier to the relational person but a core element of achieving authentic relational personhood. In other words, instead of a hierarchy of personhood that subsumes the desiring individual under the relational person and the moral self, the new understanding is that the autonomy and freedom of the desiring individual is the foundation of achieving a moral self and relational personhood, where authenticity is valued as highly as harmony. The task, therefore, is to achieve both authenticity and harmony.

CARE(FUL) COMING-OUT STRATEGIES

Because care considerations are central to coming-out decisions, it is not surprising that most respondents who are out or who have planned to come out have taken great care to ease into the moment of explicit communication and cushion the impact. In the majority of cases, coming out to parents is regarded as a big project (*henda de gongcheng*) involving many years of preparation, buildup, and groundwork (as conveyed by the term “pu dian”). At its minimum, pu dian means seeking information, for instance, consulting with friends, attending talks organized by LGBTQ+ civic organizations such as

Trueself, and searching for effective strategies online. It also necessitates careful planning of the time and venue to come out.

The significance of *pu dian* is widely recognized in the LGBTQ+ community. Respondents who did not *pu dian* often express regret or ambivalence. Jiehong (a gay man born in 1985; chapter 3) recalls his mother's shock when he told her he was gay. Jiehong came out to her when he was sick; she had come to look after him. He was driven by a "strong urge" to spill the beans, but he did not consider her possible reaction. On the one hand, he was touched by her visit. On the other hand, he had long resented her for turning everything she did for him into acts that appeared to compensate for her divorcing his father to marry a richer man. In acknowledging his complex feelings, Jiehong admits that he underestimated his mother's response:

Right after I told her I liked men and would never marry a woman, she totally exploded. She started crying and screaming like crazy. She completely lost it; it was like she wasn't herself, like she had gone mad. She started yelling all kinds of horrible things, saying I was a pervert, that I was sick. I have no idea where she got those kinds of ideas from. That whole afternoon was pretty unbearable. She was lying on the couch in my living room, crying and yelling nonstop. I had no idea how to comfort her, because I'd never seen her like that before. Eventually, things calmed down a bit. I told her, "I've been with someone for years now. Why don't I ask him to come over so you can meet him? He's a completely normal person, not at all what you're imagining." She didn't say yes, but she didn't say no either. So I messaged my partner and asked him to come over.

When Jiehong's partner knocked on the door, his mother again became very emotional and screamed for him to leave. In the end, Jiehong had to send him away. Jiehong blames himself for not better preparing to come out:

It was a hard landing [*yingzhuolu*], no preparation at all. Thinking back, I feel like I was kind of an asshole. But anyway, that was how it happened. Later on, when we talked on the phone, my mother would still voice her concerns, although not too directly, more like warning me not to catch any diseases or things like that. She also said some really ridiculous stuff, like, "So which one of you is the woman?" It was laughable. But after a long period of coaxing and chipping away at her resistance, she sort of accepted it. Last year she stayed at our place for about a week—we [he, his partner, and his mother] drank together and had a good time. So, I guess that counts as acceptance. Still, she has her worries. After all, she's never seen anything like this around her, let alone a so-called successful case. Now she just says, "As long as you two are happy, that's all that matters." But at the same time, she'll secretly tell me

things like, “You need to take care of your own finances.” That’s just a very classic mom stance, kind of funny, really.

Jiehong calls his coming out a “hard landing” because he did not prepare for it; this led to his mother’s unexpected and rather extreme negative emotional reaction. He realized only after his coming out that his mother held very negative views about homosexuality (calling it a perversion and saying that Jiehong was sick). She associated homosexuality with HIV/AIDS, did not understand how a homosexual relationship worked, had doubts about the viability and stability of her son’s relationship, and fretted over his future. Jiehong believes that if he had educated his mother before coming out, she might have reacted differently; it might also have lessened the shock and subsequent heartache. Jiehong counts himself lucky. After two years of communication and education, his mother agreed to meet his partner again and enjoyed the time she spent with them. Jiehong says he will never come out to his father; he loves him too much to want to burden him with his non-normative sexuality or risk hurting his feelings. Jiehong’s experience reflects how coming out in the family context can have different meanings. It may be an expression of love or an act of (perhaps subconsciously) revenge or desperation (particularly when preparations are insufficient). Jiehong’s approach demonstrates that coming out is never a one-off event; it is a continual process of deepening understanding and gaining acceptance. *Pu dian* is even possible for people who are outed by their parents unexpectedly, as each subsequent conversation and interaction can be better prepared for.

In addition to seeking out information and choosing the right time and venue, respondents deployed four more *pu dian* strategies: (1) self-advancement to achieve economic independence; (2) accumulating financial capital and migrating to satisfy parents’ expectations, particularly their wish to have grandchildren; (3) day-to-day, long-term educational work to lessen parental prejudices; (4) stepwise coming out to test the waters and seek alliances and support among family members.

Self-Advancement and Capital Accumulation

Many respondents consider becoming academically and professionally *youxu* and economically independent (*jingjiduli*) as necessary capital (*ziben*) for coming out. Some view economic independence as a buffer against negative consequences, such as conflict with parents, the temporary disruption

of familial networks after disclosure, and the withdrawal of financial support. Yu and Song regard success and capital as bargaining chips to achieve acceptance; as the former explains, “We want to use success to prove to other people that we are better, stronger, and more powerful than them, and we can define what is good, and not to be defined by them.”

If you are leading a miserable life as a gay man, when you come out, other people will say, “Look, gays are so useless.” But if you are successful, when you come out, people will say, “It is okay that he is gay, at least he earns a lot of money, at least he is capable and youxiu.” (Song; chapter 4)

Both Yu and Song regard success as the most effective way to counter social stigmatization of homosexuality. They believe that being successful not only shows that sexual minorities are not inferior to heterosexuals; it also gives them the power to challenge heteronormativity and redefine what is honorable and acceptable in society. They also argue that success can compensate for their being different and being gay and will give them more influence in the family and more bargaining power with their parents and extended kin. For Pang, a thirty-two-year-old gay manager with a postgraduate degree, becoming youxiu and accumulating capital before coming out is not about winning a battle with his parents but about assuaging their worries: “Before you come out to your parents, you first need economic independence. You need to show your parents that you can overcome any difficulties in life. Otherwise, after you come out to them, they will be so worried about your future.”

Like many respondents, Pang believes that because his parents love him, they will eventually accept him. He remarks that parents’ negative reactions to disclosure are often driven not by homophobia but by the worry that homosexuality will disrupt their adult children’s life courses, steering them toward social marginalization and isolation. Being successful and economically independent before disclosure demonstrates to his parents that he will be able to look after himself amid persistent social stigmatization and have the means to care for himself in old age, even if he does not have descendants through heterosexual marriage.

Partially Meeting Parental Expectations

Another pu dian strategy is pre- or post-disclosure nominal marriage. Although this is often regarded as an alternative to coming out, some respondents used it as part of the coming out process. After coming out to

his parents, Xiaoshen (chapter 4) suggested that he arrange a nominal marriage with a lesbian to help his parents save face, but they refused. In other instances, parents agreed to construct a facade through nominal marriage to preserve the family's honor (Choi and Luo 2016; Liu and Tan 2020). Lihua (a forty-year-old lesbian from a wealthy business family in Beijing) is a case in point. She says that after coming out to her parents, they agreed that she should arrange a nominal marriage with a White man. Because her parents knew about the nominal nature of the marriage, they did not even bother to meet the nominal husband. The marriage helped her father save face in front of his kin and business associates; it also made her sexuality less objectionable to him. He then paid for her IVF in the United States, and her mother helped look after the child. Lihua believes that partially meeting her parents' expectation of heterosexual marriage (albeit only performatively) and giving them a grandchild (albeit as a divorced woman) alleviated their emotional discomfort and facilitated a smoother coming-out process. Fong (a twenty-two-year-old lesbian from Beijing) thinks that "most Chinese people still think that you need to have children. If you do not have children, your life is incomplete. They do not care if you are homosexual."

Of the eight respondents in our sample who had children through assisted reproductive technology, all say that their parents have accepted their sexuality, welcomed their partners and children into the family, and even begun to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. What is noteworthy about these cases is that parents of lesbians who are only children are as keen as parents of gay men to have grandchildren to continue the family bloodline, thereby subverting the patrilineal principle of the Chinese family.

Educational Work

Before and after coming out, many respondents used *kepu* (everyday and easy-to-understand scientific language) to educate their parents about homosexuality. Some drew on books, pamphlets, zines, audio, and video resources provided by LGBTQ+ civic organizations and academics to try to lessen their parents' prejudices. Many tried to educate their parents during everyday interactions. For example, they might draw their parents' attention to gay and lesbian celebrities when watching TV, share news about legislation that advances LGBTQ+ rights in other countries in online family chat groups, take parents to LGBTQ+-friendly cities and tourist attractions when traveling abroad, or explain to them that young people in their neighborhood who

are perceived as youxiu are gay. Family practices such as daily talks (*tantian*) and conversations (*liaotian*) during mealtimes, when watching TV together, during mother-and-child shopping trips, and on overseas family holidays can become spaces for educational work, as Gang, a twenty-seven-year-old gay man with a postgraduate degree and a professional job, explains:

To prepare for my coming out, I gathered a lot of information. I consulted my friends; I downloaded many articles about homosexuality online and compiled them into a folder. When my parents came to Canada to visit me, I took them to participate in many tongzhi activities. I took them to the rainbow streets. When they saw men holding hands and women kissing each other, I told them that this was normal because Canada was an inclusive society and the rights of sexual minorities were protected.

Gang says that the goal of educational work is to let his parents know that homosexuality is a common phenomenon, that it is legal in many countries, and that LGBTQ+ people are regarded as normal people and are accepted, supported, and granted equal rights. Some respondents drop hints to their parents about their sexuality in everyday conversations. For example, before they come out, they may tell their parents they will never marry or have children (*buhunbuyu*), or they may joke that they fancy people of the same sex, thereby hoping to modulate their parents' expectations and make it easier for them to accept their coming out.

Educational work is not just to prepare parents for the moment of explicit and open communication of one's sexuality; it is a process. After informing his mother about his sexuality, Yiming (see above) persuaded her to attend a camp organized by PFLAG. He describes the event as "super-brainwashing," meaning that it changed his mother's views from rejection to acceptance. According to Yiming, the rainbow mothers of PFLAG, all of whom have accepted their children's sexuality, shared their own experiences with his mother; they listened to her concerns and provided a safe space for her to express herself. After spending a day in the PFLAG camp, his mother not only changed her views but also helped persuade Yiming's father to accept his son's sexuality.

Stepwise Coming Out

Stepwise coming out to family members occurs as a series of discrete stages. Many respondents came out to female relatives, including sisters, aunts, and cousins, before coming out to their parents. They chose female relatives

because it was easier to talk to women about one's secrets and they were generally more empathetic and supportive. They tended to choose same-generation female relatives (e.g., siblings and cousins), reasoning that they might be more likely to accept nonnormative sexuality on account of their youth, higher educational levels, and exposure to queer culture. In some cases, respondents came out to their aunts, hoping to "pilot" or "rehearse" their eventual coming out to their parents, or test (*shitan*) the waters. They also hoped these extended kinswomen would become their allies and help them persuade their parents to accept them at a later stage. One respondent jokingly refers to this strategy as the Maoist revolutionary strategy of *nongcun baowei chengshi* (农村包围城市), meaning "encircling the cities from the countryside," where "cities" represent the parents and "countryside" represents the relatives. By alluding to one of Mao Zedong's key strategies of building revolutionary bases in rural areas and gradually expanding and surrounding urban centers to seize power, this respondent highlights LGBTQ+ people's careful assessment of potential alliances within the extended family, their strategies for cultivating support, and their deliberate choices of whom to come out to first to maximize the chances of gaining parental acceptance.

Twenty-eight respondents came out to their mothers first, and only two to their fathers. The rest came out to both simultaneously, though they directed their communication mainly to the mother. Xiaoshen chose his father's birthday in 2008 to visit his parents and come out to them. He brought along his same-sex partner of five years, Xiaohu:

I asked him [Xiaohu] to wait in our room. When I talked to my mother, my father did not join us. He stayed in the living room. I started to talk to my mother around nine p.m. I told her how I found out that I had feelings only for men. I told her that it was not her fault, and it was not my fault. I told her about my past relationships. I told her about my relationship with Xiaohu. I told her about my struggles, how it was difficult for me to accept myself. I shared with her our plans for our future, how we had saved money for our old age. I also told her perhaps we would have a child through surrogacy or adoption. In fact, we hadn't planned to have children, but I needed to comfort her. She cried a lot. She was feeling so sad. I cried with her. During the process, I sometimes felt that she could understand my struggles and pain, but other times she did not seem to be able to comprehend my situation. She kept asking me why I didn't love women. I left her around three a.m. because I thought she was already too tired and at the edge of collapse.

After this emotional revelation, Xiaoshen returned to his room and slept for about five hours. When he and Xiaohu got up the next morning,

his parents were in the living room. Xiaoshen thinks they had not slept, and that his mother had told his father everything. His parents then invited Xiaoshen and Xiaohu to sit down, whereupon they said that since they—Xiaoshen and Xiaohu—had been together for many years and were determined to stay together, they would try to understand. However, they asked them not to tell anyone outside the family about their relationship.

Although Xiaoshen's father was in a sense the center of his son's coming out (in that it took place on his birthday), his role was largely symbolic. He chose to stay out of the mother-son emotional sharing. Instead, he relied on his wife to tell him about his son. He reappeared when he and his wife sat his son and his partner down and announced that they would try to understand.

Other respondents also preferred to disclose their sexuality to female family members (e.g., mother, sisters, female cousins, and aunts) over their male equivalents (e.g., father, brothers, male cousins, and uncles) in their stepwise coming out for several reasons: First, they are often emotionally closer to their female relatives, and second, they feel more comfortable talking to women. After respondents came out to their mothers, their mothers often helped them come out to their fathers (unless the parents were divorced or had a bad relationship).

Although stepwise coming out may be an effective strategy, it nevertheless reflects generational power hierarchies, differences in values, and the gender divide in emotional and care work in Chinese families, where mothers often serve as bridges of communication. The mother is the person to whom their children turn to share information and elicit emotional support, the person the husband turns to when discussing his expectations of his children. This gives the mother power within the family and earns her trust. At the same time, it can also be a burden. Not only does she have to face the most heart-wrenching moments of revelation, but she also stands at the forefront of any emotional fallout. She may need to keep secrets, persuade her husband to accept their children, and mediate conflicts between father and adult child.

Parents Coming In

While children come out to their parents, some parents try to “come in,” that is, to initiate conversations in order to understand and accept their child's sexuality. Parents may become suspicious over time, perhaps because of how their child dresses or styles their hair or the gender of the friends they bring home or socialize with. Some parents become suspicious upon checking their

child's text messages. They may discover gay pornography under their bed, bump into them when they are with their partners, or find nude photos that have been printed from a home computer. In such situations, some parents choose to confront their offspring. Most, however, attempt to engineer a suitable time and place when they can start a conversation. When parents deliberate when and where to start such a conversation, they also engage in *pu dian*. In chapter 7, I present a case of a mother who comes in to communicate her knowledge of her daughter's sexuality. If LGBTQ+ people's *pu dian* is motivated by care for their parents' feelings, parents' *pu dian* to come in is likewise driven by similar concerns

TYPES OF PARENTAL RESPONSES

Ryan et al. (2010) operationalize family acceptance in the context of coming out along four dimensions: open discussion of nonnormative sexuality, active integration of LGBTQ+ networks into familial networks, active participation in LGBTQ+ associations, and appreciation of nonnormative cultural styles. This reflects the growing salience of LGBTQ+ activism and culture in Western societies but is not directly applicable in the Chinese context. In rural and small-town China, there are no LGBTQ+ civic organizations or visible LGBTQ+ culture. Given the recent state crackdown on LGBTQ+ activism and censorship, the principal manifestation of Chinese parents' acceptance lies in the interpersonal sphere rather than in their responses to public activism or queer culture.

In the Chinese context, I identify four types of parental responses to disclosure: (1) rejection or silence; (2) partial acceptance (verbally acknowledging nonnormative sexuality); (3) major acceptance (allowing nonnormative sexuality to be visible in family life on the basis that it does not need to be changed); and (4) full acceptance (open appreciation and celebration of nonnormative sexuality). These are not mutually exclusive categories but time-bound responses that may shift over time. For example, parents may move from silence or rejection to partial acceptance.

Parents' immediate responses to disclosure vary widely. Some experience severe emotional fallout, while others begin by asking whether homosexuality is curable, whether their son or daughter might be bisexual, or whether it is just a temporary phase. Refusal to accept their children takes many forms, some of which may overlap. These include self-blame and guilt, physical

violence and confinement, verbal condemnation, prohibition and threats, denial of homosexuality, ignoring the disclosure, avoiding further discussion, or remaining silent. Chen (a twenty-four-year-old gay man with a bachelor's degree) came out to his parents at fourteen and again at sixteen. On both occasions, his parents refused to believe that he was homosexual:

I was in the second year of my lower secondary school. I fancied a straight guy, a classmate. I became a nuisance, and he refused to talk to me. One day I broke down and came home crying, threatening to commit suicide. So my parents asked me what had happened and I told them I was a homosexual and I had fallen in love with a guy but that he did not want to talk to me. Perhaps my parents thought I was too young. They refused to believe I was homosexual. They thought my feelings for my classmate were just ones of friendship. Then, when I was boarding in high school, I was very down emotionally because I liked a classmate who did not reciprocate my feelings. So I asked my parents to come to see me and told them about my classmate. They told me I should focus on my studies and not think about things like that. (2018 interview)

Ten years have passed since Chen's first coming out. His parents continue to hope that his nonnormative sexuality is just a phase and that he will eventually revert to being "normal." Of the seventy-nine respondents who came out to their parents, thirty-eight fall into the silence or rejection category.

Nineteen respondents fall into the partial acceptance category, which refers to parents who have come to acknowledge their adult children's sexuality. The first sign of family acceptance is breaking the silence about an adult child's sexuality and discussing it openly. Mingzhe's experience (chapter 3) is illustrative in this regard: While his mother listens to him sympathetically, he feels she has not entirely come to terms with the fact that he is gay.

I was twenty-five and in a terrible emotional state because I had broken up with my second boyfriend. At the same time, my parents were making major sacrifices to help me get married. They planned to sell our flat and buy a larger one in a more remote area so that I would have a large enough flat to get married. I did not want them to make this sacrifice. They were upset; they thought that they were creating the right conditions for me to get married and that I was ungrateful. So, one day we had yet another argument over the flat and we all cried. Then my mother said, "You must be hiding something from us." I replied that I had something to tell them and they had to be prepared. I told them I did not prefer women; I liked men. My words

were like a torch shining a light over many of my mother's quandaries. Even though she still cannot digest the fact [that her son is a tongzhi], she now listens to me when I tell her that I have met a new guy. She says "If you two feel all right together, you should be together [*haohaode zaiyiqi*]." But my father said I made him feel inferior in front of his peers. He is a person who wants to have face [*haomianzi deren*]. (2018 interview)

Major parental acceptance means (1) explicit parental acknowledgment of the adult child's same-sex relationship and queer networks and (2) parental willingness to integrate the adult child's same-sex partner and queer networks into everyday family life. The latter is a milestone of acceptance because the parents have given up hope that their adult children will renounce their nonnormative sexuality and enter into a heterosexual relationship. It also means that sexual minorities no longer face parental pressure to split up with their same-sex partner and marry a straight person. Some parents express acceptance by funding their adult children's same-sex marriage overseas and supporting their pursuit of parenthood through assisted reproductive technology. Other parents incorporate their adult children's partners into everyday family practices (offline and online). Xiaopeng (a twenty-eight-year-old gay professional with a postgraduate degree who's in a same-sex marriage) considers himself to have been accepted by his partner's family because his partner's mother often gives him "likes" on social media and chats with him on WeChat (a Chinese instant messaging and social media app). Also,

They [Xiaopeng's partner's parents] went with us to view a potential property that we wanted to buy. Before the house viewing, we had Chinese dim sum together, just like a family. It is like they have one more son. The atmosphere was harmonious. I think this is proof that they have accepted us.

Everyday family practices offer the opportunity to consolidate family membership, inclusion, and acceptance. Other examples (e.g., including a partner in gift exchanges during festive seasons, birthdays, visits, and rites of passage, and inviting them to join family dinners) also indicate a reconfiguration of family boundaries to include the new nonheterosexual partner and incorporate queer sexuality into the previously heteronormative familial space. Of the respondents who are out to their parents, twenty-three belong to this category.

Finally, full parental acceptance refers to parents' willingness to defend their children's rights in wider society. For Mrs. Zhang, the "rainbow mother"

of Jia Wei, joining PFLAG was a big step forward in her acceptance of her gay son. Jia Wei is a twenty-nine-year-old Shanghai native with a university degree and an LGBTQ+ activist.

When my son told me about this [his sexuality], I told him, “Son, I love you and am obliged to accept you, but please do not expect that I will go out [*zouchuqu*] for you.” At the time, I thought homosexuality was a face-losing thing. I worried that other people will discriminate against him. I told him we should keep it between ourselves and that I would use my love to accept him. (2018 interview)

Jia Wei came out to Mrs. Zhang in 2012. In 2018, she became an active PFLAG volunteer. A retired fifty-six-year-old factory worker, Mrs. Zhang has shared her experience and advocated for LGBTQ+ rights on TV and radio talk shows:

If we as parents do not accept our children, people from the outside will discriminate against them even more. They have to face a lot of pressure in school and at work. Now, my husband and I take part in many PFLAG meetings because we hope our government will allow same-sex marriage, which will give our children the same responsibilities and protection as heterosexuals.

When I interviewed Mrs. Zhang in 2018, she was living with her husband, Jia Wei, and Jia Wei’s husband Zimo. She sponsored Jia Wei and Zimo’s trip to New Zealand, where they were married. I will provide more details about their marriage in chapter 7. Only two respondents have been fully accepted by their parents.

INEQUALITIES AND COMING OUT

As noted, it is essential to examine how structural inequalities shape coming out and its outcomes and to challenge the idea that coming out is chiefly an individual responsibility and commitment. Against the backdrop of China’s rural-urban divide and its hierarchical city system, this section compares age, class, gender, and hukou and citizenship status, which is grouped into four categories: rural hukou, tier 2–4 urban (“other urban”) hukou, tier 1 urban hukou, and overseas citizenship.

TABLE 3 Coming-out status, by birth cohort

Birth cohort	With straight friends/colleagues			With family members			
	Fully open	Selectively open	No disclosure	Fully open	Selectively open	No disclosure	Completely closeted ^a
1970s or before (<i>n</i> = 20)	3	8	7	4	5	11	6
1980s (<i>n</i> = 93)	36	41	11	7	45	39	4
1990s or later (<i>n</i> = 74)	18	49	4	15	27	31	0
Total	57	98	22	26	77	81	10

^a Completely closeted respondents are those who stated that they have not come out to any heterosexual friends, colleagues, or family members.

Birth Cohorts

Table 3 displays the patterns of disclosure according to birth cohort.

Older LGBTQ+ people are generally less likely to have been fully or selectively open when compared with millennials or Generation Zers. However, contrary to the stereotype that most are closeted, the data reveal that the opposite is the case. The reasons why older LGBTQ+ people are less likely to disclose their sexual orientation must also be put into context. First, they grew up in an era when homosexuality was silenced and heavily persecuted; they are therefore more likely to have developed internalized homophobia. Second, they are more likely than millennials and Generation Zers to work in state enterprises; these are more conservative (in terms of sexual mores) than private enterprises (Pang and Siu 2023). Third, they are more likely to be in positions of influence, so disclosure can threaten their status and income. In other words, the opportunity cost and risk of disclosure are greater than for younger birth cohorts. Fourth, their parents are older than those of millennials and Generation Zers, so when they make decisions about disclosure, they have to consider the potential health impact on their possibly already ailing parents. Finally, many think their parents, many of whom are in their seventies or eighties, will not be able to grasp the implications of what they are being told.

TABLE 4 Coming-out status, by hukou

Hukou	With straight friends/colleagues			With family members			
	Fully open	Selectively open	No disclosure	Fully open	Selectively open	No disclosure	Completely closeted ^a
Rural (<i>n</i> = 24)	7	12	3	3	7	13	2
Tier 1 urban (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen) (<i>n</i> = 67)	12	42	8	10	33	24	2
Other urban (<i>n</i> = 92)	34	44	11	12	35	43	6
Citizenship of another region/ country (<i>n</i> = 4)	1	3	0	1	2	1	0
Total	54	101	22	26	77	81	10

^a Completely closeted respondents are those who stated that they have not come out to any heterosexual friends, colleagues, or family members.

Hukou and Citizenship Status

Table 4 presents coming out status by hukou, city tier, and citizenship. As chapter 4 shows, the rural-urban binary cannot fully capture the variations of experiences, as many respondents growing up and living in small cities can also be subject to intense social stigmatization and homophobia, which may shape their coming out decisions.

As table 4 shows, coming-out patterns indeed vary according to hukou and citizenship status. Respondents with overseas citizenship are most likely to be selectively or fully open with straight friends, classmates, or colleagues (100 percent), followed by those with other urban hukou (85 percent), tier 1 urban hukou (81 percent), and rural hukou (79 percent). Respondents with overseas citizenship lead in openness with family members, followed by those with tier 1 urban hukou (64 percent), other urban hukou (51 percent), and rural hukou (42 percent).

Given the small number of cases in the overseas category and the non-representative nature of the sample, the above statistics are not generalizable to the whole population. However, they still give a glimpse of how, among LGBTQ+ respondents who were willing to tell their story for our research, there still exists a gradient in the degree of openness about their sexuality. Overall, they suggest that metropolises and Western democracies are more conducive to disclosure than rural areas and small cities in China.

Class

Table 5 summarizes coming-out decisions and strategies and parental responses according to level and place of education.

As table 5 shows, social class shapes the likelihood, strategies, and outcomes of disclosure. Respondents without a university education are less likely to have already come out to their parents (34 percent) compared with their counterparts with a university education (44 percent). Furthermore, they are more likely to have planned never to come out to their parents (46 percent) compared with their counterparts with an overseas university education (22 percent) or a local university education (29 percent).

The elite, those with an overseas university education, are more likely to use a wider range of strategies to come out than their counterparts with lower education. Among the fifty-five respondents with an overseas education, we counted thirty-nine uses of the strategies identified. Seventy-one percent of the respondents in this category used at least one to come out. Of those without a university education, only thirteen (37 percent) used any of the four strategies to come out. The figures for those with a Chinese university education fell in between (54 percent).

Compared to their counterparts with lower education, respondents with a university education were more likely to have used the strategy of partially meeting parental expectations (e.g., bringing home a grandchild). Of the ten respondents adopting this strategy, four have an overseas degree and six have a Chinese university degree. For those with an overseas degree, studying or living in countries that protect the rights of sexual minorities gives them access to same-sex marriage rights and assisted reproductive technology, which in turn form part of their coming-out strategy, as Donald (thirty-two years of age) explains (see also Choi 2022):

TABLE 5 Coming-out dynamics, by level and place of education

Coming-out dynamics	Education		
	<i>Degree or above^a from overseas (n = 55)</i>	<i>Degree or above^a from China (n = 96)</i>	<i>Secondary school (n = 35)</i>
Decision			
Plans not to come out (n = 56)	12	28	16
Not yet out (n = 51)	17	27	7
Already out (n = 79)	26	41	12
Strategies ^b			
Capital accumulation (n = 30)	12	13	5
Partially meeting parental expectations (n = 10)	4	6	0
Educational work (n = 33)	13	17	3
Stepwise coming out (n = 31)	10	16	5
Parental responses ^c			
Rejection/silence (n = 38)	8	24	6
Partial acceptance (n = 19)	5	11	3
Major acceptance (n = 23)	13	8	2
Full acceptance (n = 2)	1	1	0

NOTE: One informant did not provide complete information on his coming out.

^a This category includes undergraduate students and those with a bachelor's degree or above.

^b For respondents who used more than one strategy, each one was counted.

^c For those whose parents' attitudes differed, both responses were counted.

Why didn't I come out to my parents before I left China? It was because coming out needs the right timing. My parents love me. They worry about me. If I had come out to them while I was still in China, they would have worried about me, given China's environment. Mainstream Chinese society rejects homosexuality. My parents would have worried that I would be discriminated against. They would have wondered if I would ever find a partner. Would I be able to have my own family? Would I be able to have my own children? That was why I decided that I would only come out to my parents after I had solved these three problems. (2018 interview)

Donald came out to his parents after he left China for North America, where he found a partner. They completed their postgraduate studies, secured stable jobs, and bought a home in a cosmopolitan city. Donald then invited his parents over. After they had been staying for a while, he wrote them a letter. Such a strategy of coming out requires resources and forms of capital that are unequally distributed across different social classes (Bourdieu 1986). For respondents from wealthy families, social capital (parental support) can be converted into economic capital to fund transnational migration and overseas university education, which in turn facilitate the acquisition of cultural capital (e.g., a degree from a prestigious university). This in turn can be converted into economic capital in the form of higher salaries and greater opportunities for career advancement. Wealthy LGBTQ+ people can finance overseas trips to marry and have children through assisted reproductive technology. They mobilize the capital their privileged background confers to overcome their predicaments. Class privilege facilitates access to sexual rights otherwise unavailable in China.

Working-class respondents (i.e., those with only a secondary and/or vocational education, and most with a blue-collar job) lack the resources to even partially satisfy parental expectations. Xiaojin, Xiaoqi, and Song's frustration reflects their awareness of interclass inequality within the LGBTQ+ community:

I have no future doing what I am doing now. My wages are so low; I feel so inferior. I don't think I will ever accumulate enough capital to come out. (Xiaojin, a twenty-five-year-old gay male security guard with a secondary school education)

If in the future I have money—it is all about money—I can have children through surrogacy. And when I come out to my family, I can say, “I have given you grandchildren.” But of course I am daydreaming. Without money I cannot move an inch. (Xiaoqi, a twenty-seven-year-old gay male clerk with a vocational education)

I desperately need money. I am already thirty years old, and I need to earn half a million to have a nominal marriage and have children through surrogacy so I can face my parents. (Song; chapter 4)

Working-class respondents are doubly disadvantaged: first as members of nonnormative sexual categories, and second by their class status, which does not provide them with the resources needed to partially satisfy parental expectations and prompt parental acceptance upon disclosure. The data

reveal significant differences between classes. Of the twenty-five respondents who gained major or full parental acceptance, thirteen (56 percent) have an overseas university degree; respondents in this educational category only account for 29 percent of the full sample. Parents of respondents with an overseas degree are more likely to regard their adult offspring as *youxiu*. They are also less likely to be concerned about their children's old-age care should they stay single. These respondents are also more likely to have partially met parental expectations of bringing home a grandchild. For example, Donald's mother immediately accepted him and his partner after his disclosure because her worries over whether he would marry and have a family were resolved. Although Donald's father did not immediately accept his son's sexuality, he considered Donald's partner to be an outstanding person. Donald's going abroad therefore helped him create the "right conditions" to come out at the "right time."

Gender

Sex and gender also shape decisions to come out (table 6).

Among the 129 respondents whose assigned sex at birth was male, 46 (36 percent) plan never to come out to their parents. The corresponding figure for those whose assigned sex at birth was female is 10 (17 percent). This is because patriarchal societies like China pressure men to marry and continue the family bloodline, making coming out more challenging. Lals who self-identify as T are far less likely to plan never to come out (3, or 12 percent) compared with those who self-identify as H (3, or 30 percent) or P (4, or 33 percent). Lin's persistent resistance to her mother's attempts to cultivate her gender credentials from childhood allowed her to reject parental interference in her dating and marriage preferences (chapter 4). Many Ts feel that their masculine appearance and behaviors sent signals to their parents, making their sexuality a semi-open secret. This makes coming out more of a formality than a dramatic revelation, facilitating parental acceptance after disclosure.

By contrast, lals who self-identify as H or P face greater difficulties coming out. Zhenzhu (in the introduction) is an example. When she first came out, her parents regarded her same-sex relationship as inauthentic; to them, it was a form of friendship mistaken for love, and later on, just a phase. When they discovered she was still with her girlfriend, they forced her to come home. After failing to persuade her to leave her girlfriend, they blamed her sexuality on her girlfriend's "bad influence" (*huaiyingxiang*) and prohibited

TABLE 6 Coming out dynamics, by assigned sex at birth and micro-identity

	Assigned sex at birth		Micro-identity category					
	Male (<i>n</i> = 129)	Female (<i>n</i> = 58)	1 (<i>n</i> = 29)	0.5 (<i>n</i> = 43)	0 (<i>n</i> = 34)	T (<i>n</i> = 26)	H (<i>n</i> = 10)	P (<i>n</i> = 12)
Coming-out dynamics								
Decision								
Plans not to come out (<i>n</i> = 56)	46	10	7	14	14	3	3	4
Not yet out (<i>n</i> = 51)	33	18	6	14	8	5	5	3
Already out (<i>n</i> = 79)	50	29	16	15	12	18	2	5
Strategies ^a								
Capital accumulation (<i>n</i> = 30)	20	10	2	8	7	4	2	1
Partially meeting parental expectations (<i>n</i> = 10)	7	3	3	2	1	2	0	0
Educational work (<i>n</i> = 33)	21	12	3	9	6	4	3	4
Stepwise coming out (<i>n</i> = 31)	23	8	9	7	4	4	2	2
Parental responses ^b								
Rejection/silence (<i>n</i> = 38)	26	12	8	10	7	6	1	3
Slight acceptance (<i>n</i> = 19)	11	8	3	6	0	6	0	1
Major acceptance (<i>n</i> = 23)	13	10	4	2	4	7	1	1
Full acceptance (<i>n</i> = 2)	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0

NOTE: The total number of cases reported in this table is not 187 because 33 respondents did not provide micro-identity information. One respondent did not provide complete information on disclosure decision.

^a For respondents who used more than one strategy, each one was counted.

^b For those whose parents' attitudes differed, both responses were counted.

her from meeting her. To be with her girlfriend, Zhenzhu arranged a nominal marriage with a gay man:

I came out again to my parents when I was three months pregnant. I thought even if they did not want to accept us, they would have to because I was pregnant. But my mother told me that if I insisted on staying with my girlfriend, she would not help look after my child. However, she later compromised. After all, I am her daughter. She looked after me during my pregnancy and made quilts for my baby. My parents really love her.

Zhenzhu believes that her pregnancy and the birth of her daughter led to her parents' change of heart. Her story illustrates that the impact of gender on sexuality can change over time. Before she was married, her feminine appearance was the principal reason her parents rejected her sexuality, insisting that she enter a heterosexual marriage because she was feminine and was expected to have a life trajectory as a woman and become a wife. Later on, her motherhood, another key aspect of femininity, helped her gain acceptance as a lesbian in a same-sex relationship.

Another example of how parents react differently to T and Ps' coming out is Fei (a twenty-four-year-old T living in Beijing; see chapter 5). When Fei's girlfriend Wenjing (a P) came out, her parents reacted very negatively, culminating in her father keeping her captive and having a physical fight with Fei. But when Fei came out to her parents, their reactions were much less extreme:

I came out to my father first. It was over the phone when I was in [City X]. I told him I didn't like men, and he said, "But most guys end up marrying women," and so on. He just didn't understand. I then used an example to explain it to him. My dad doesn't like wearing dark-colored clothes. Whenever my mom buys him dark-colored clothes, no matter how nice they are, he refuses to wear them. He's really stubborn about it. He'd rather wear something made with poor-quality materials if he thinks it looks good. So I said to him, "You don't like dark-colored clothes, right?" He said, "Yeah, I don't." I said, "If someone bought them for you, would you wear them?" He said, "No." So I said, "Well, I don't like men, so I shouldn't be with men, right?"

Fei says her father thought about her argument and realized it made sense. Fei thinks her father is not as tough or forceful as her mother. He is more easygoing, and he has allowed Fei more freedom. This was why she chose to come out to him first. When Fei came out to her mother, she initially wanted to take her to see a psychiatrist, but very quickly gave up the idea and accepted her:

When I came out to my mother, she said, "There must be something wrong with you"; she wanted to take me to the hospital for a checkup. I had seen stories online about people being sent to psychiatric hospitals by their parents, and where the doctors just blindly diagnosed them as having a mental illness or something, then admitted them for treatment. They were even prescribed a bunch of psychiatric medications. I found it really frightening. I was genuinely scared. So I told my mom, "I'm not going." I was pretty emotional when I said it. I asked her, "What if the doctor really says I have a mental illness, what then? What would you do? Would you lock me up in a psychiatric hospital or something?" My mom could see how afraid I was. She looked a bit stunned, probably because she hadn't thought that far ahead. She just wanted to confirm whether or not I was sick. I think that in her mind, some illnesses can't be seen with the naked eye, and you have to get a checkup to find out. She hadn't really considered what going to the hospital might actually lead to. But when I said that to her, it made her pause and reflect. She hesitated, then said, "I'm not stupid. Why would I blindly listen to what a doctor says? Don't I have my own judgment?" When my dad saw how emotional and scared I was, he tried to talk my mom down. He told her, "This isn't an illness. People have already said this isn't a disease."

Rather than make Fei go to a psychiatrist, Fei's mother met Fei's gay friend's mother, who also said that homosexuality was not an illness. She gave Fei's mother some pamphlets to read. Fei conjectures that her mother had long suspected her sexuality because she used to complain about why Fei brought girls and not boys home. Fei thinks her parents now genuinely hope her relationship will work out. What they care about most is that she has somebody to take care of her and provide her with company in her old age:

My parents definitely want our relationship to work out. Even though, in their eyes, I can't get married or have children, having someone to be with is something they hope for. When I came out to my parents, what worried them most, and what they really couldn't understand, was that I wouldn't have children. When I said I wouldn't get married, my mom couldn't wrap her head around it. In her mind, it meant I'd be alone for the rest of my life. And that was something she just couldn't comprehend; how could someone live alone, without anyone to take care of them, and with no children? She worries about things like, "What if one day you have a headache, or a fever, or get seriously ill and can't even leave the house?" She'd say things like, "There'd be no one to bring you tea or water. What would you do?" These are the kinds of concerns she has. And she also said, "When you're old, even if you have someone by your side, if you don't have children and neither of you can walk anymore, what will happen then?" These are the kinds of worries my parents have.

Fei says that her parents had not considered the possibility of hiring help in one's old age. For this reason, they now support Fei's relationship, regarding her girlfriend as a reliable source of care for their daughter. Although Wenjing's parents initially reacted strongly to her coming out, it does not mean they do not love her. After Fei left City X, Wenjing's parents sold their home and bought a new apartment closer to Wenjing's workplace so she would not have to commute a long distance. Although their sacrifices made Wenjing feel guilty, it nonetheless suggests their love for her, a love perhaps too heavy for Wenjing to bear.

The experiences of Zhenzhu, Fei, and Wenjing illustrate how gender intersects with sexuality in complex ways. While masculine lesbians may be considered weird by wider society because of their gender nonconformity, gender non-confirmative embodiment can, paradoxically, ease their coming out and help them gain parental acceptance after disclosure (Wei et al. 2021). On the other hand, the femininity of lalas who self-identify as H or P has created significant barriers to disclosure and parental acceptance.

Some parents demand that their gay sons conform to gender display as a condition of acceptance. Although Fu's father accepted his sexuality after he came out and even helped him come out to his extended kin, he often jokes that Fu is too feminine (*niang*); he calls him a "human devil" (*renyao*), a derogatory colloquial term best translated as "ladyboy," and teases him that he is *bunanbunu* (hermaphroditic): "My father tries to socialize me, telling me that gays cannot be sissy. Gay men cannot act in ways that let people know that they are gay." Fu's father appears to regard gender transgression as more shameful than homosexuality.

To gain his father's acceptance, Fu strives to avoid improper gender displays when they meet. In dynastic China, male homosexuality was only punished and stigmatized when it violated gender role expectations and the patriarchal social order; rich and powerful men who kept male lovers and visited male prostitutes were not cast aside, unlike men who were sodomized. In chapters 3 and 4, I show how effeminate gay men are disciplined in the home, schools, and queer spaces by parents, teachers, and members of the gay community simultaneously. The treatment effeminate gay men receive after disclosure thus reflects cultural continuity in the stigmatization of male femininity. Fu's father's condition of accepting him after his disclosure is yet more evidence of this cultural continuity.

CONCLUSION

Considerations of care are central to decisions about disclosure (or nondisclosure) and strategies of disclosure. In this chapter, I highlight the radical possibility of a theory of queer resistance oriented toward care by bringing *pu dian* to the fore. The term refers to the preparatory work that precedes and follows disclosure, intended to ease difficult moments of explicit disclosure and cushion its impact. As such, the chapter contributes to the emergent relational model of coming out while advancing it by illustrating the mechanisms through which relationships are maintained before, during, and after disclosure. My theorization underscores the temporal dimension of coming out, a lifelong project with evolving consequences.

I also elaborate on the variation in coming-out strategies and their outcomes across birth cohorts, hukou status, class, and gender. The findings suggest that although individuals decide whether or not to come out, their decisions are constrained by the age, health status, and educational level of their parents, as well as other family circumstances. Moreover, coming-out strategies available to individuals are closely tied to their class resources and gendered expectations. These findings offer a rejoinder to the individualistic framework of outness, which views it primarily as a matter of individual choice and responsibility, and instead suggest a model of coming out that integrates the structural with the relational along temporal lines.

Contesting Marriage

Marriage is a ruined thing. Why do we take it [from heterosexual people]? I don't really get it. If someone wants it [same-sex marriage], then fine, let them have it. But I don't agree with it, nor would I support it. When the two of us talk about these kinds of serious topics, I just say I don't want to get married. I don't care much about the so-called weddings abroad. I just think they're a performance. What does a wedding prove, and to whom? Just to post it on social media or something? So, to me, all of that [registering a marriage abroad and organizing a wedding] is superficial. If I have you in my heart, and you have me in yours, that's the best thing at this stage. (Jiehong, a gay man born in 1985, 2018 interview)

JIEHONG (CHAPTER 6) IS IN A ten-year same-sex relationship. He regards his boyfriend as a very good person and rates their relationship at eight and a half out of ten. He argues that while some people may view forming a family as reaching a destination, the analogy does not resonate with him. Although his relationship appears stable, he is not ready to fully embrace marriage. Being with his partner brings him a sense of ease; having someone nearby feels comforting. Yet he does not feel at home in the apartment they share because it belongs to his boyfriend. Jiehong often wonders whether it is truly the place he wants to return to each day. When asked whether he would like his name added to the property title, he dismisses the idea as ridiculous. He and his partner maintain separate finances, and he treasures his independence. Jiehong does not believe that marriage guarantees love, a view perhaps shaped by his upbringing. His parents divorced when he was twelve. According to him, his mother remarried to pursue a more affluent life, while his father remarried to have someone to look after him. Although he visits both parents during the Lunar New Year, he does not feel at home with either of them.

Growing up with a persistent sense of being an outsider left him longing for a place of his own. He feels most at home when he is alone, in a space

entirely his own. Rather than marrying, he yearns for a relationship that balances personal autonomy and companionship. He aspires to a successful career and financial security, believing these are the true guarantees of his future.

Older Chinese people may regard Jiehong's views on marriage as outlandish. Traditionally, marriage was both a rite of passage and an obligation for men, and it was the only means by which women could be supported. Until the twenty-first century, marriage was considered the sole legitimate route to forming a family, which in turn was regarded as the only path to happiness and care in old age (Davis and Friedman 2014). In 2005, almost all Chinese women between the ages of thirty-five and thirty-nine were married, while fewer than 5 percent of men in the same age range were single (Ji and Yeung 2014). Since then, the percentage of unmarried Chinese has increased significantly, and understandings of heterosexual marriage, along with expectations about how it should be conducted, have begun to shift. The freedom to choose a marital partner and to divorce has been enshrined in law since 1950 (see chapter 2). These legal freedoms enabled Jiehong's parents to divorce and have also led him to challenge the myth that marriage guarantees a secure future. Although other respondents may not share Jiehong's pessimism about marriage, one thing is clear: They are no longer willing to blindly follow tradition and marry for its own sake.

Shifting attitudes toward and practices of heterosexual marriage provide the context for understanding how LGBTQ+ people differently negotiate, resist, and reconfigure marriage in post-socialist China. Before elaborating on the Chinese case, I situate it within the global (Western) debate on same-sex marriage. A comparative perspective allows readers to see both the universality and the specificity of Chinese queer experiences. I begin the Chinese case with an account of how gay men in mixed-orientation marriages with heterosexual partners (Wolkomir 2009; Song et al. 2024) seek divorce. I then illustrate the complexities and controversies surrounding nominal marriage, a form of queer union documented only in mainland China and South Korea (Cho 2009), both societies shaped by Confucian heritage and strong family norms. Next, I examine the rationale and material conditions underlying some respondents' pursuit of same-sex marriage. The discussion then turns to how marriage is entangled with parenthood. This is followed by an examination of how younger LGBTQ+ people, together with their parents, have capitalized on the delaying and gradual decline of heterosexual marriage to legitimate cohabitation and singlehood.

Research on marriage in the context of nonnormative sexuality has largely focused on the rights and dynamics of same-sex marriage. The struggle for legal recognition of same-sex marriage or civil unions has served as a rallying point for LGBTQ+ political mobilization worldwide for several decades (Brandzel 2005). State recognition of same-sex marriage is viewed by some sexual minorities as a fundamental citizenship right because it provides access to key social welfare benefits. Proponents contend that marriage equality not only affirms sexual minorities' citizenship but also helps normalize nonnormative sexuality (Bernstein 2015). They further argue that legal recognition strengthens gay and lesbian relationships by institutionalizing them and creating barriers to dissolution. On the other hand, some members of the LGBTQ+ community argue that same-sex marriage is divisive because it presents the institution as normative and stigmatizes the unmarried (Lannutti 2005). Queer scholars have also criticized same-sex marriage as assimilationist, alleging that it imports the institution of heteronormativity into the LGBTQ+ community (Duggan 2002).

Partly in response to this debate, scholars have empirically examined the effects of same-sex marriage on the mental and physical health of sexual minorities (Buffle 2011), the interactions of same-sex married couples relative to heterosexual norms (Hopkins et al. 2013), the ways access to civil or same-sex marriage rights affects the quality and stability of same-sex unions (Green 2006), and the extent to which the legalization of same-sex marriage shapes parental rights, parenting practices, and parent-child relationships (Kabátek and Perales 2021). Most of these studies confirm the positive effects of equal marriage rights on the well-being of LGBTQ+ couples and their children, although they also show that same-sex and different-sex couples may face similar challenges, including intimate partner violence (Frankland and Brown 2014).

This debate is being reconfigured in China as a result of shifting political contexts. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Chinese LGBTQ+ civic organizations and sympathetic scholars pushed for equal marriage rights (see chapter 1). However, since these organizations were shut down or silenced by the state, collective mobilization toward this goal has chiefly manifested through lesbian weddings shared online to generate public attention. In comparison to equal marriage rights, which have enjoyed support from the majority of LGBTQ+ people (see the later part of this chapter), the

political, ethical, and personal implications of nominal marriage have been hotly contested.

In sum, studies on marriage in the context of nonnormative sexuality have primarily concerned equal marriage rights and their effects, with the state as the main interlocutor. This focus is understandable, as the fight for equal marriage rights has been a central pillar of queer politics in the West since the 1990s. The number of same-sex families continues to grow in the West because many countries have granted sexual minorities equal marriage rights. By mid-2025, thirty-eight jurisdictions worldwide had legalized same-sex unions or marriages. Most of these are in Europe and North America, with three in Asia: Taiwan, Nepal, and Thailand.

Although China has no equal marriage rights, some LGBTQ+ people have traveled abroad to register same-sex marriages, even though these are not recognized by the Chinese government. Yet, as Lin and Ming's story in chapter 5 illustrates, going abroad is not feasible for many due to the costs involved. More importantly, it does not help LGBTQ+ people confront the most pressing issue: parental pressure to enter heterosexual marriages. This explains why the family, rather than the state, has become the first and most pivotal battleground over marriage in China. In the next section, I elaborate on how arduous it can be for LGBTQ+ people to refuse heterosexual marriage and how those who are already in such marriages bring them to an end.

ENDING A MIXED-ORIENTATION MARRIAGE

Tan was born in 1976, the youngest child in a rural family of three children. After graduating from high school, he joined the army, was discharged at twenty-two, got married, and had a daughter. Tan notes that this part of his life mirrors the typical biography of young rural Chinese men of his generation:

I got married in 1998. Getting married then was a normal life trajectory that everyone was supposed to follow. People in our area mostly got married around the age of twenty-two. At that time, there was only a heterosexual culture. My classmates, my buddies in the army, my friends, everybody got married at that age. My parents introduced my wife to me, and we courted for around a year. I did not feel especially excited. I thought my parents and her parents knew each other well and I knew her character well. So, it was okay; it was a conventional Chinese marriage. Then, in the 2000s, when the

internet became more accessible, I started to visit tongzhi online discussion forums and websites. I knew I liked men from a very young age, but then I lived in a heterosexual culture. I thought my liking men was just curiosity. But after visiting the tongzhi forums and websites, I quickly realized I was a *tongxinglianzhe* [a homosexual person].

Tan's experience echoes previous studies on older tongzhi who married heterosexual women (Song et al. 2024). Because of the invisibility of homosexuality and bisexuality in everyday life, these men were not entirely aware of their sexual orientation when they married. The universal practice of heterosexual marriage also led them to consider marriage as an obligatory rite of passage. Gay men's online sharing made Tan realize that he was neither abnormal nor sick, but simply different. It also exposed him to the possibility of a nonnormative lifestyle. Upon confirming his sexual orientation, Tan sought excuses for a divorce, but his initial attempts failed. His parents and in-laws made every effort to mediate between him and his wife. Frustrated by his inability to end his marriage, he quit his job in 2005 and moved to Shanghai to work in his brother's company. In Shanghai, he met his current boyfriend, Tao. In 2006, when he returned home for the Spring Festival, he confessed to his wife that he was a *tongxinglianzhe* and asked for a divorce. To secure her agreement, he consented to see a psychiatrist. Tan said that he was fortunate to meet a psychiatrist who had recently returned from Germany and was therefore more liberal and sympathetic to his case. The psychiatrist helped persuade his wife and his parents that he was normal. His family did not oppose his divorce because by then his mother had died and his stepmother did not have strong opinions on the matter; after all, he was only a stepson. To persuade his in-laws to agree to the divorce, Tan transferred his share of the marital property to his daughter and gave his wife custody.

Tan's initial marriage to a woman illustrates how deeply entrenched heteronormative and familial expectations are in rural China. Divorce was not simply a personal choice but required navigating parents, in-laws, and wider kin obligations. Despite these pressures, Tan ended his marriage. His eventual success involved creative negotiations: appealing to a psychiatrist, leveraging shifting attitudes, and offering property and custody concessions. This highlights how queer individuals exercise agency within oppressive structures. His move to Shanghai, where he met Tao, shows how migration and urban environments create new opportunities for queer intimacy and

identity formation compared to the rural familial setting. However, even after finding a same-sex partner, the queer future remained precarious, with Tan nearly losing his lover to marriage pressures imposed by Tao's parents. Two years after his divorce, Tan was forced to deal with Tao's effort to marry a heterosexual woman. As he recalls:

When he [Tao] came out to his parents, they responded in a very extreme way. They demanded that he quit his job in Shanghai and return home, otherwise they would go on a hunger strike. They even threatened to jump off the roof. In the end, he quit his job and returned home. He even tried to court a girl for half a year. This was because he wanted to have a child. If he wanted to have a child, he could have it with a woman or through surrogacy. But surrogacy in the United States cost around 800,000 yuan [approximately USD 111,300]. We did not have that much money, and it would have taken us many years to save it. So he asked me if he could first get married, then get a divorce after having a child. I told him that this was not realistic. I could not prevent him from trying to execute his plan, because if I did so, he might resent me for the rest of his life. He might feel that he gave up marriage and fatherhood for me. When we had arguments, he might use it against me. So I told him he could try to put his plan into action. He could try to date, kiss, hug and even have sex with a woman, but I have a bottom line. If he married the woman, whether for real or just as a temporary arrangement, I would break up with him. I gave him six months to date a woman. After six months, when his girlfriend asked him to meet her parents, he decided that it was not working because he could not bear to kiss her. How, then, could he marry her? It would be like putting shackles on himself. So he decided to break up with her.

Tan says that Tao never wanted to break up with him. When forced to choose between love and familial obligations, Tao chose the former. The contrast between Tan's and Tao's experiences reflects the conditions faced by different cohorts: Tan grew up in an era and place where heterosexual norms were deeply entrenched, while Tao lived in a time and place that increasingly legitimized individual desires, as Tan eloquently elaborates:

First and foremost, we believe that the individual should prioritize their own life. Only when you've taken care of your own life can you truly take responsibility for your family and friends. If you can't even face yourself honestly, then don't talk about doing things "for your parents," "for your children," or "for anyone else." If you're not being true to yourself, how can you possibly do anything genuine for others?

For Tan and Tao, individual freedom trumps filial role fulfillment and family continuity. The individual, along with his desires and the pursuit of authentic selfhood, stands firmly at the center of decision-making. Tao's parents' extreme threats reflect both their desperation and their lack of other effective means to enforce expectations in an era of growing individualization.

In the end, things turned out relatively well for Tao. After breaking up with the woman he had been dating, he made it very clear to his mother that he would no longer consider marriage. He told her that if he wanted a child in the future, he would find a way to have one, but not through marriage to a woman. According to Tan, Tao's mother has slowly come to accept their relationship. The woman Tao had dated also did not resent the breakup. Quite the contrary, she was happy he ended things and even invited Tan and Tao to attend her wedding.

Tan and Tao's rejection of mixed-orientation marriage aligns with broader community trends and growing awareness of the situation faced by women in such marriages. These women are referred to as *tongqi* (同妻, literally "homo-wives"). In 2012, the suicide of a *tongqi* drew widespread public concern. Since then, *tongqi* have formed advocacy organizations to highlight their experiences, alleging psychological, physical, and emotional abuse at the hands of their husbands. *Tongqi* activists argue that they suffer from sexual deprivation, social isolation, and a lack of support (Liu 2020; Yang et al. 2025).

The majority of my respondents oppose mixed-orientation marriage not only because of personal desires but also on ethical grounds. Many criticize LGBTQ+ individuals who marry unsuspecting heterosexual partners as fraudulent and immoral (*budaode*), arguing that such marriages harm the unknowing spouse. Others condemn the practice without placing blame on gay men, noting that they often enter such marriages under constraints imposed by hegemonic heterosexual norms, familial pressure, and the social stigmatization of homosexuality.

NOMINAL MARRIAGE: COMPROMISE OR RESISTANCE?

Since the first decade of the 2000s, many gay men and lesbians in China have arranged marriages with each other to convey the idea they are heterosexually married and fend off parental and societal pressures (Engelbrechtsen 2009; Kam 2013; Choi and Luo 2016; Huang and Brouwer 2018; Wang 2019). This type of

marriage is referred to as a nominal marriage (形式婚姻, *xingshi hunyin*), a fake marriage (假结婚, *jia jiehun*), a pro forma marriage, a contract marriage, or a formality marriage. The first website for nominal marriages between gay men and lalas (ChinaGayLes.com) was launched in 2005. It has 470,000 members as of 2025 and has facilitated 57,000 successful nominal marriages. The first free website serving the same target audience, Baidu Post Bar (*xingshi hunyin*), was launched in 2006 but is no longer in operation. Three other widely known apps facilitate the arrangement of nominal marriages. The Xingyouquan app (形友圈, formerly hosted by the Xingyou website 形友网) was founded in 2016. It has one hundred thousand registered users and has successfully matched forty thousand nominal marriage pairs as of 2021. Jila Xingqiu (基拉星球, formerly Xinghun Xingqiu 形婚星球) was launched in 2021. It operates across forty or more nominal marriage support groups based in different provinces and facilitates four hundred to five hundred successful matches annually. Tongyu (同遇, formerly Xinghunba 形婚吧) was launched in 2021, with over 250,000 downloads in 2021. However, China's biggest nonprofit LGBTQ+ organization, Trueself (formerly known as PFLAG; chapter 3), opposes the practice; founder Ah Qiang even made a video on the problems of nominal marriage (Bilibili 2021).

Because it is a common practice among gay men and lalas in China, the political and ethical implications of nominal marriages are hotly debated. Thirty-two respondents oppose nominal marriage. At the political level, they argue that nominal marriages, while offering short-term relief from family or social pressure, ultimately reinforce the heteronormative structures that oppress sexual minorities in the first place. They contend that such marriages send the wrong message: that concealment is the only viable strategy, rather than advocating for broader acceptance and social change. Moreover, nominal marriages may perpetuate internalized homophobia by suggesting that heterosexual performativity is the sole path to social acceptance. At the ethical level, they assert that nominal marriage constitutes a form of deception and represents a fragile arrangement. At the very least, if exposed, it can have damaging consequences for parents. In addition, nominal marriage is often impractical and difficult to implement or sustain. Min (a lala born in 1989) considered finding a nominal marriage partner but ultimately decided against it:

I know very few gay men. I only have one gay friend, who I met at university. If I wanted to arrange a nominal marriage, he would be my only potential husband. I think people need to think very carefully before arranging a nominal

marriage. Because marriage is for your family, it is not having a romantic relationship [*tanlianai*]. A nominal marriage can cause many problems.

Min wonders whether her family would endorse her chosen nominal husband and whether her nominal husband's family would consider her a good match for their son. Even then, many issues remain. For example, she worries about her nominal husband taking advantage of her parents' trust and love or refusing to fulfill the obligations of a son-in-law (such as visiting her parents during festive seasons or when they are ill), as well as the care that she, as a nominal daughter-in-law, would be expected to provide for her nominal husband's family.

The practicality of sustaining the facade of marriage is also challenging. Most nominal spouses do not live together (Engebretsen 2013; Kam 2013; Huang and Brouwer 2018; Wang 2019). How, then, do they keep up the facade of marriage when their parents visit them? How do they sustain the lie so they do not get exposed when communicating with their parents and in-laws? How do nominally married couples protect their property and same-sex relationships? If they decide to have a child together, what roles will the nominal parents and grandparents play, and what level of commitment will be expected? If an individual in a nominal marriage has a child outside the nominal marriage, how can they minimize the risk that the nominal partner might seek custody of the child in the future? The complexity of these issues discourages many respondents who may have contemplated such an arrangement.

Despite these challenges, thirty-one respondents are looking for a nominal marriage partner. Ting, a gay man born in 1998, is conscious of the above conundrums, but he is still looking to find someone suitable:

My parents are conservative. I would not dare tell them [about my sexuality]. They gave birth to me at a late age and both are now already in their sixties. I would not dare tell them. I know they will not be angry with me. The scarier thing is that they will be disappointed and depressed, and this will lead to different types of health problems. My mother has a brain tumor, and her blood pressure fluctuates wildly if she carries a burden in her heart and has an accident. So I think it may be a nominal marriage. It is a very good solution. The best-case scenario is that I have a nominal marriage with a lesbian who is also a good friend. Of course, there is the risk of being exposed. (2018 interview)

Ting's mother's conservative attitudes and her poor health make coming out an overly risky endeavor. For Ting, a nominal marriage is both an act of

resistance to heterosexual marriage and a way of satisfying his desire for sexual autonomy and caring for his parents (Choi and Luo 2016). For Zhenzhu and her partner (in the introduction and chapter 6) and Dongmei and Ai (chapter 5), nominal marriage was part of their resistance to the pressure to marry heterosexually. They used it to meet parental expectations without sacrificing their sexual freedom and their intimate relationships. Because of the risk that they may be exploited by a nominal marriage partner, all the respondents who are currently looking for somebody stress the importance of finding an individual who is trustworthy (*kaopu*). Many do not plan to legally register the marriage, to forestall possible property disputes.

Of the eight respondents who had arranged a nominal marriage, only Zhenzhu's was formally registered. She and her nominal husband decided to have a child together through artificial insemination; registering their marriage was intended to secure their future child's household registration. The two also signed a prenuptial agreement stating that after the child was born, the husband's family would take custody, but the family then refused to do so because it was a girl. Zhenzhu's case highlights the risk of nominal marriage partners not sticking to their promises and failing to comply with prenuptial agreements.

The other seven nominal marriages were not formally registered. The nominal couples took wedding photos at ceremonies organized in each other's hometown for the benefit of their parents. Their focus on the performative rather than the legal aspect of marriage signifies its essence: a strategy to help parents save face before members of the extended family. In some cases, parents knew beforehand that the marriage was nominal (e.g., Zhenzhu's parents and her nominal husband's parents). In cases where parents did not know, the respondents came out later, especially those with a biological child (see below). Ultimately, parents were collaborators, wittingly or otherwise.

All the respondents who arranged a nominal marriage did so when they were in a same-sex relationship. Indeed, it was precisely because they were in a committed same-sex relationship that they arranged nominal marriages, signaling to their same-sex partner their commitment to the relationship and to remove any pressure to marry a heterosexual person. In some cases, only one partner of a same-sex couple arranged a nominal marriage (e.g., Zhenzhu and Daniel; see below). One same-sex couple arranged double nominal marriages with another same-sex couple (Tiffany and Beatrix's case, also below). Whether same-sex couples decide to arrange only one nominal marriage for

one of the partners or a double nominal marriage for both partners depends on their circumstances. Zhenzhu was the only one who was exhorted to marry a man; her girlfriend had already come out to her parents. The same applied to Dongmei and Ai (chapter 5).

Even if a same-sex couple wants to arrange a double nominal marriage with another same-sex couple, it is difficult to do. This is because it requires parental endorsement. The son- or daughter-in-law will be approved of only if they are from a comparable socioeconomic background and possess the desired gender credentials and age profile (i.e., the prospective nominal partner must not be too old and the age gap between the betrotheds must not be too wide). In other words, as a strategy of resistance, nominal marriage is subject to the same normative expectations and constraints as heterosexual marriage. For example, a gay man's family would want to find a feminine woman who is considered good wifely and motherly material. A lala's family would demand that the nominal husband be at least a socioeconomic match. The former set of expectations disadvantages lalas with a masculine appearance, who face considerable difficulty in finding a nominal marriage partner. The second set of criteria disadvantages gay men without sufficient economic means and who are marginalized in the nominal marriage market, just as their heterosexual counterparts are often excluded in the heterosexual marriage market and become involuntary bachelors (chapter 2). As the stories of Daniel and his partner Felix and of Tiffany and her partner Beatrix (below) testify, access to nominal marriage presupposes either financial capital or gender credentials or both.

When I met Daniel in 2018, he had just turned forty-one. He had been in an eight-year nominal marriage with a lesbian and a same-sex marriage registered in the United States for two years. Born in a small city in eastern China, Daniel had a vague idea that he preferred boys. Leaving home to attend university in a Chinese metropolis led him to his first boyfriend, who was residing in the same dormitory. The pair soon began a secret relationship that was to last five years. Daniel's partner broke up with him several times, telling him that he was disgusted by their affair; he later married a straight woman and had children with her. This hurt Daniel deeply, and he decided to end his relationship for good. He left China to pursue a PhD in the United States. His secondary school teacher had always encouraged him to go abroad, and Daniel wanted to live in a more open and gay-friendly society so he could be away from his parents and their controlling ways. He moved to the East Coast in 2001 and met his current partner soon after.

Although Daniel's current partner is a second-generation Chinese immigrant, his family pressured him to marry a woman. His father and eldest sister refused to talk to him and ceased contact after he came out to them. Because of his partner's negative experience, Daniel did not come out to his parents. He arranged a nominal marriage with a Chinese lesbian in the United States in 2009; they took a few photos of the event, sent them to their parents, and returned to China to organize two wedding banquets, one in his hometown and one in that of his nominal wife. Daniel went back to the United States, while his nominal wife and her same-sex partner remained in China. The latter couple later came to the United States to have a child via IVF. Not wanting to make things more complicated, Daniel did not give his sperm to his nominal wife; she used a donor bank. After the nominal wife gave birth (in the United States), Daniel and his partner visited and supported her. She, her partner, and their child then returned to China. Daniel kept in touch with them through video calls. He arranged for his parents to communicate with his nominal wife and nominal child on a regular basis through video calls. Daniel told his parents that he and his nominal wife and their child lived in the United States. Over the years, he has used delaying tactics to fend off pressure from his parents to bring his nominal son to visit.

Daniel finds deceiving his parents a challenge. On the one hand, he does not want his parents to invest too much emotion in his nominal child. On the other hand, he feels that he must continue to lie to them until he fathers a child himself. In 2016, Daniel and his partner decided to marry. They had been together for nearly fifteen years and co-owned all their properties. Both were concerned about their old age and felt that a marriage certificate would provide them with more security and the legal means to take care of each other in the event of illness. Also, they wanted to have children through surrogacy. Daniel believes that after he gives his parents a grandchild, they will accept his sexuality.

Tiffany and Beatrix's story is another example of the complexities of nominal marriage. Tiffany is a thirty-seven-year-old lala born in 1981 and holds a postgraduate degree. She lives in Beijing. She came from a well-off but conservative family; her parents and aunt occupy high positions in state enterprises. As an only child, Tiffany has received unconditional financial and other support from her parents. She and Beatrix arranged double nominal marriages with a gay couple in 2012. The gay couple's parents knew their sons were homosexual. Beatrix even organized a wedding banquet with her

nominal husband, who gave her a bride price of 200,000 yuan (approximately USD 27,824). The initial plan was for the four nominal marriage partners to have a child together: Tiffany would use her eggs and the sperm of Beatrix's nominal husband for IVF and Beatrix would carry the embryo.

However, the plan did not come to fruition. Tiffany and Beatrix wanted to raise the child, but their nominal husbands and their families insisted on playing a greater role. This disagreement ended the nominal marriage arrangements. Tiffany and Beatrix then decided to go overseas to pursue postgraduate degrees and have IVF through donated sperm in the United Kingdom. Tiffany sold a flat her parents had gifted her to finance her overseas studies; Beatrix used the bride price she received from her nominal husband for the same purpose. After arriving in the United Kingdom, the pair registered their marriage and started IVF using donated sperm. The first two attempts did not succeed. It was only after they left the country and used an IVF agency in the United States that Beatrix succeeded in conceiving twins. Since their twins were born, their parents have helped to look after them.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: RATIONALES AND MATERIAL CONDITIONS

After their nominal marriages, Daniel, Tiffany, and Beatrix were eventually betrothed to their same-sex partners. They did so while residing abroad. Sixty-four respondents explicitly state their support for the legalization of same-sex marriage in China. Kai (chapters 3 and 4) is representative: "Marriage has a lot of procedural benefits. Plus, same-sex marriage is a right that is worth fighting for. It is also a form of resistance [to heteronormativity]." For Kai, the legalization of same-sex marriage will benefit LGBTQ+ people. She argues that legalization symbolizes equality.

Nine respondents registered their same-sex marriages overseas. This includes Zimo and his husband, Jia Wei. Zimo is a twenty-four-year-old urban-to-urban migrant worker with a lower-secondary school education who holds a blue-collar job. Jia Wei is a thirty-year-old Shanghai-born professional with a university degree. They met at an LGBTQ+ civic organization in Shanghai in 2015. Jia Wei has been an active volunteer and organizer in a large LGBTQ+ civic organization since 2011. In 2012, he came out to his mother, who not only accepted his decision to pursue a nonnormative lifestyle but also helped him come out to his father (see chapter 5). Three months

after Zimo and Jia Wei confirmed their relationship, Zimo moved in with Jia Wei and his parents.

In 2017, using their savings and a gift of 18,000 yuan (approximately USD 2,504) from Jia Wei's parents, Zimo and Jia Wei traveled to New Zealand to register their marriage. For Zimo, marriage represented the culmination of a major life project. Jia Wei, by contrast, had a more pragmatic reason for marrying. He had been uncomfortable with the Chinese government's intensified crackdown on LGBTQ+ civic organizations and was considering migrating to New Zealand on a postgraduate student visa. He knew Zimo would not be able to go overseas with him unless they were married, as Zimo did not meet the educational qualification requirements for student migration. His only route was to migrate as a dependent. In 2019, the two went to New Zealand together. Jia Wei is pursuing a postgraduate degree, with part of the tuition paid by his parents, and Zimo is looking for work. Their long-term plan is to settle down in New Zealand. It is worth noting that Zimo is the only working-class respondent who has managed to enter a same-sex marriage. The other eight respondents in same-sex marriages come from wealthy or at least middle-class families, all with overseas educational qualifications. This suggests that registering a same-sex marriage abroad remains a class privilege.

ENTANGLEMENT OF MARRIAGE WITH PARENTHOOD

Although same-sex marriage is construed as a citizenship right in the LGBTQ+ movement, for seven of the nine respondents in such marriages the chief motivation was to have a biological child. For other respondents who are not in a same-sex marriage but aspire to be in one, the main reason is also to have a biological child. Ming (who was born in 1981, the girlfriend of Lin; see chapters 4 and 5) explains:

I want to live a better life, and I've already set out our long-term future: I want to have children someday. But having kids costs money, and I'll also need to pay the government. If I have a child, my company won't be able to reimburse me for maternity insurance, so we'll have to cover everything ourselves. It'll cost at least 100,000 to 150,000 yuan [approximately USD 13,800 to 20,610]. Anyway, we've been together for four years, and we don't have any savings. I have a little, but she doesn't have a cent. I've been talking to her about this for six months now. I said that I hope she can change jobs. (2018 interview)

As mentioned in chapter 5, Lin is unhappy that Ming has been pushing her to quit her current job and find a higher-paying one so that they can get married overseas and cover the expensive costs of having a child via IVF. Lin sees no merits in Ming's argument. Given that a same-sex marriage registered overseas is not recognized in China, she does not see how it will be meaningfully connected to parenthood. What is more, she is not particularly fond of children. Ming, on the other hand, regards a lavish wedding, a marriage certificate, and a child as a comprehensive package; it would be a testament that her life as a lala is as meaningful as that of a heterosexual woman: "Many people, many of my friends, say that because I am a *tongxinglian* [homosexual], I should not demand too much. Because I am not like normal heterosexual women. But I disagree. I want everything that heterosexually married women have."

As a woman who grew up in a large family and felt she was looked down upon by her more affluent relatives, Ming regards marriage as a means of acquiring social status. Regardless of the legality in China, she believes that a same-sex marriage registered overseas would legitimize her relationship (*mingzhengyanshun*) with Lin in the eyes of their colleagues and family. She believes that the role of wife would allow her to intervene in Lin's financial decisions and seek financial assistance from Lin's parents. Most importantly, she aspires to have a biological child, believing that a child formally seals her status as a successful woman with a "complete" family. The notions that a family is only complete with the arrival of a child and that marriage (regardless of its legal implications) must precede the arrival of a child resonate with several respondents who want to get married. Yiming (chapters 5 and 6) articulates similar notions: "Every time I am with someone, I want to marry him. This is because I think this helps to stabilize the relationship. I also thought about having a child through surrogacy because for me, only marriage and a child make a complete family."

Yiming works for an LGBTQ+ civic organization. He met each of his three ex-partners and his current partner via work. Yiming has come out to his parents (chapter 6), and they have accepted his sexuality. As such, he is not under pressure to marry a heterosexual person. He feels under stress because of the perception that his relationship has no future. His ex- and current partners are divorced men who had been married to heterosexual women. None are interested in the idea of same-sex marriage overseas or having children. All his ex-partners already have a child from their previous marriage. Although Yiming's current partner is not a parent, he does not think he can cover the financial costs of registering a marriage overseas,

not to mention paying for the expenses of having a child through surrogacy. All this depresses Yiming.

Twenty-four-year-old Shui, an ethnic-minority gay man who has migrated from his hometown in rural China to Shenzhen, where he works as a private security guard, also wants to have a biological child. Ideally, he would like to marry a same-sex partner who cares about him. In reality, he thinks that he may marry a woman when he turns thirty. He says that he loves children but cannot afford to have a child through surrogacy, and he has discounted the possibility of finding a lala to have a child together (via a nominal marriage). Shui opines that his minimal educational qualifications and occupational status make him unattractive to lalas looking for a nominal marriage partner.

Among the eight respondents who plan to marry a heterosexual woman, five have a rural background, three self-identify as bisexual, and one as pan-sexual. Seven of them have a university education and are working in cities, and all seven express a desire to have a biological child as the main reason for wanting to marry a straight person. Pao, a widower living in rural China with two adult children, is the only one whose reason for wanting to marry a heterosexual person is not related to having a child. Instead, he wants to marry a heterosexual woman so she can look after him in his old age. The link between rural background, desire for children, and plan to enter a heterosexual marriage with a straight person has led Fang, a twenty-two-year-old postgraduate student in the United States, to proffer that LGBTQ+ people can only achieve equality in China if there is a cultural change that diminishes the centrality of procreation or decouples it from marriage:

I think for LGBT people to achieve equality in China, society must first move away from its obsession with reproduction. Although some people have vowed to stay single, [and] some couples have opted for the DINK [double income, no kids] lifestyle[,] the dominant societal view has remained that everybody must have a kid. If you do not have a kid your life is incomplete. They do not care if you are homosexual or not. All the fuss about getting married, having a “normal” and stable family, is for producing a child. (2018 interview)

Fang believes that if children continue to be regarded as central to Chinese family life, LGBTQ+ people who cannot afford to have children through assisted reproductive technology will consider heterosexual marriage. This invites the question: What are my respondents’ attitudes toward parenthood? Do the majority want to have a biological child? Table 7 shows the distribution of those who wish to have a child, consider

TABLE 7 Attitudes toward parenthood, by sexual/gender identity

Attitude	All respondents (<i>N</i> = 187)	Lesbian women (<i>n</i> = 40)	Gay men (<i>n</i> = 120)	Bisexuals (<i>n</i> = 14)	Transgender/ pansexual/queer/ other non-binary (<i>n</i> = 13)
Already has a child	17	2	10	5	0
Parental aspiration					
Aspires to parenthood	46	7	38	0	1
Conditional	33	9	20	2	2
Rejects parenthood	17	3	14	0	0
Unclear ^a	74	19	38	7	10

^a Most of those whose attitudes are unclear are younger respondents for whom parenthood is a distant issue they have not thought about. This represents a major shift, from regarding parenthood as an obligation to something that is subject to deliberation and choice.

parenthood conditional, are uncertain about their desire to be parents, or reject parenthood altogether.

As table 7 indicates, seventeen respondents have children and forty-six want children. If all the respondents who have children also want children, the total number of respondents desiring a child comes to sixty-three, or one-third of the sample. The remaining two-thirds either view parenthood as conditional, are uncertain, or reject it altogether. These figures cannot be generalized, as our sample is not representative; they do, however, suggest that having children is no longer a taken-for-granted life goal among my respondents. Rather, it is the outcome of extensive reflection, deliberation, and calculation. Furthermore, some respondents, women especially, have decoupled parenthood from marriage. For them, cohabiting relationships are an equally satisfactory arrangement, both in their own right and as a basis for having children.

ALTERNATIVES TO MARRIAGE

Cohabitation

Wen is a twenty-five-year-old university-educated lala (chapter 4). She left her hometown, a small city in central China, to study for a university degree on

the coast. After graduation, she moved to Guangzhou (in eastern China) and then to Shanghai for work. In Shanghai, she met her girlfriend on an online platform, and the two moved in together. Despite having a stable relationship, she never planned to come out to her parents. She considers her family “very conservative.” She did not expect them to ever accept her sexuality, so she and her girlfriend planned to find a nominal husband. However, they soon ruled this out because they knew very few gay men and were not sure whether they would be able to find a suitable person. To her surprise, her mother initiated a conversation about her sexuality during a visit. Wen surmises that because she has a short and spiky hairstyle and wears masculine clothing items, her mother might have had her suspicions. When Wen’s parents visited her in Shanghai in 2017, her mother directly asked if she liked women. Before she could answer, her mother told her that she knew the answer, reassuring her that she would treat her girlfriend as a member of the family. Instead of Wen coming out, her mother came in (to her nonnormative life). When her parents returned home, they took the initiative to come out to other relatives on Wen’s behalf. They then invited Wen’s girlfriend to attend Wen’s cousin’s wedding, using the occasion to formally signal the extended family’s acceptance of Wen’s same-sex relationship.

Wen understands how difficult it must have been for her mother to “come in” to her nonnormative lifestyle and accept her. She grew up in a traditional cadre family where the marital choices of the younger generation were decided upon by a matriarch, Wen’s grandmother. For many years, her mother considered sexual minorities “weirdos.” Wen attributes her mother’s dramatic change of attitude to her aunt’s opposition to her grandmother when the aunt wanted a divorce:

My aunt [her mother’s younger sister] wanted a divorce in 2015. Her son was already at university, and she was unhappy with her husband. Their marriage was sort of arranged by my grandparents. She wanted a divorce so that she could be with her first boyfriend, her first love. I supported my aunt and encouraged her to pursue love. But my grandmother was against the divorce. She said that in the family’s history nobody had ever divorced, and how dare my aunt have a divorce. My grandmother even threatened to commit suicide if my aunt went ahead with the divorce. So, for many months, my family was turned upside down because of this conflict. At the end my aunt went ahead to get a divorce. For one year, my grandmother would not allow her into the house. This is how traditional my family is. But after one year, they accepted my aunt and her new husband. I think this was a breakthrough for my family. They finally realize that it is a new era

and what is really important now is our happiness. They gradually assign less importance to tradition.

Wen's aunt could not marry her first boyfriend because of family opposition. Her mother (Wen's grandmother) considered him of low caliber and a socially inappropriate match for her aunt. Under family pressure, Wen's aunt left her boyfriend and married a man her parents chose for her. After she gave birth and raised a son to adulthood, she considered herself as having fulfilled the expected gender role obligation and decided that the time had come for her to pursue love. Her determination and persistence eventually forced Wen's grandmother to back down. Her action signaled to the family that self-sacrifice to fulfill parental orders is a thing of the past. In the new era, individual happiness reigns. Wen believes that her aunt's divorce "opened a hole in the moral wall surrounding the sacred [heterosexual] family." Specifically, it created an opportunity for Wen's mother to reflect and reconsider her attitude toward Wen's sexuality. Rather than push her daughter into a heterosexual marriage, she now prioritizes Wen's happiness and accepts her same-sex cohabiting partner. Following her mother's change of heart, Wen's father surprised her with an unexpected proposal. He would accept Wen's sexuality on condition that she give him a grandson to continue the family bloodline:

My father is a quiet man. He hardly talks and seldom scolds me. But he has made it very clear to me that his only demand is that I leave a seed [*liugezhong*, a metaphor for descendants] for his family. This is my father's only request. This is because I am his only child. If I have no children, then the bloodline of his family will be disrupted. Of course, I immediately promised my father that I would have children.

Wen's father's proposal is at once unorthodox and traditional. It is unorthodox in that it subverts the traditional concept of patrilineality, in which the line of descent is traced through male members of the family. He also distinguishes procreation from marriage, asking Wen only to have a child without any expectation of marriage. At the same time, it is traditional in its insistence on the continuity of the family bloodline. His proposal reflects the impact of state policy. China's one-child policy, introduced in 1979 and ended in 2015, meant that many urban Chinese families had only one child to carry on the family line, while many rural families had only one son.¹ Even if parents accept their adult child's homosexuality, they may still pressure

them because their only child is their only hope of familial continuity. Wen's willingness to have a child through assisted reproductive technology is not solely driven by her wish to reciprocate her parents' support. It also reflects her own desire to have a "complete family." She believes that family is the most important thing in an individual's life, "the rock that offers stability, helping individuals to overcome adversity and soldier on in times of crises and during setbacks." Wen, like a considerable number of other respondents, understands that family remains the only reliable source of protection in post-socialist China. However, unlike Min and Yiming, Wen does not regard same-sex marriage as a precondition to parenthood. She and her girlfriend have no plans to marry, but they are committed to raising their child together as a cohabiting couple.

Singlehood

Not only have some parents of my respondents accepted their adult children's queer cohabiting relationships but some have also explicitly told them that there is no need to rush into any relationship. In other words, singlehood is, for some parents, more desirable than enduring an unhappy marriage or relationship:

My mother, because of her unhappy marriage, knows that it would be tough if I get married for marriage's sake. She tells me that as long as I am happy, it does not matter whether I marry or not. My cousin also tells me that marriage is a performance for other people's spectacle. It does not matter if I marry. (Huang, a gay man born in 1982, a university graduate, 2018 interview)

Similarly, Kai's mother, a social worker specializing in divorce cases, gives her daughter what she believes to be sound advice, having seen too many marital disputes and tragedies: "[She] tells me that if I do not find a man who would make me happy [*xingfu*], I should not get married for marriage's sake. She wants me to be happy. And when my relatives pressure me to marry, my mother will come to my defense" (2024 interview).

Huang and Kai's mothers prioritize their children's happiness over adherence to tradition. Some respondents, such as Ying, embrace singlehood because of past unhappy relationships. In her mid-thirties, Ying (a university graduate and Beijing native, born in 1985) says that relationships are not a must for her. Her best friend, the friend's husband, and their dog have given her enough love, care, and security:

Marriage is a ritual, a path to family formation, a way for a child to become independent from their parents' family, but I think family is not defined by society. Me and my two friends, we have become family. When I returned from Hangzhou [a Chinese city], I first returned to my place, but it did not feel like home. It felt like a hostel. The next day I visited my friends, and when I sat down on their sofa, I felt like I was home. (2018 interview)

By insisting that family is where one feels at home rather than a set of relationships forged through marriage or procreation, Ying challenges Chinese tradition and patriarchy. For Ying, singlehood does not mean loneliness or lack of protection but an opportunity to explore alternative forms of belonging and care. She has created a family of choice through friendship. Dongyan, a twenty-four-year-old gay man living in Shanghai, embraces singlehood for a different reason. He is too independent and secure to need anyone outside his family:

For me, being in a relationship is like having a piece of candy after a meal. It's just something extra. I say this because I really don't like having my life or daily routine disrupted. For example, let's say I have a habit of making my bed every morning. If my future boyfriend doesn't make his bed, that's not going to work for me. The bed has to be made. That's just how it is. I'm not saying this to be unreasonable; I just believe that certain habits should be followed. Making the bed after waking up is one of those things. So, for me, love doesn't carry huge weight in my life. I am independent. I don't let relationships interfere with my way of being. I'm just extremely used to being alone. For me, family comes first, then kinship, and love is definitely third. Love is just an extra, something supplementary. I always have my own plans. So when people talk about "compromising" in a relationship—bullshit! Who wants to compromise with you? (2018 interview)

Dongyan believes that intimate partners inevitably make demands on each other, throwing life into chaos. His views on relationships are likely shaped by his parents' unconventional outlook and practices. His mother values her career and runs a business venture as successful as his father's. His parents did not prioritize their son's education over their daughter's; she pursued an undergraduate degree in the United States. Dongyan, however, was told to complete his undergraduate studies in China because it would have been too expensive to support two children studying in the United States at the same time. Instead, his parents funded a one-year master's degree in the United States for him after his sister had completed her undergraduate studies. Although both Dongyan and his sister have reached marriageable

age, their parents have never pressured either of them to marry. Rather than relying on their children for old-age support, they have taken out several insurance policies and advised Dongyan and his sister to do the same.

Many respondents' parents exhort them to marry because they worry about support in old age. Wealthier parents, such as Dongyan's, may feel less concerned because they have gifted their children property or taken out multiple insurance policies. Similarly, when adult children attempt to persuade their parents to accept their singlehood, they often emphasize their ability to support themselves (e.g., Jia in chapter 6).

CONCLUSION

This chapter shows both the continuity of marriage pressures and the ways many of my respondents have managed to counter them. Their resistance is informed by global debates and trends in the legalization of same-sex marriage, by the invention of creative strategies enabled through transnational, intranational urban-to-urban, and rural-to-urban mobility, and by the weakening moral and material imperatives of heterosexual marriage. Instead of adult children coming out to their parents, as this chapter shows, some parents have entered into their children's nonnormative lives, while others have supported their resistance to the continued stigmatization of cohabitation and singlehood.

Among these changes, the stickiest point seems to be Chinese society's continued emphasis on procreation. At present, this cultural norm appears to have weakened, with around two-thirds of my respondents regarding parenthood as conditional or uncertain or rejecting it. However, as China grapples with its population crisis, the state has already adopted pronatalist policies and discourses (chapter 2). Looming demographic challenges may increase the marriage pressures LGBTQ+ people face if marriage and procreation remain tightly coupled, restrictions on assisted reproductive technologies for heterosexually married couples remain in place, and access to assisted reproductive technologies overseas remains a privilege only the socioeconomically advantaged can afford. On the other hand, if marriage and procreation are decoupled, if heterosexist and classed restrictions to assisted reproductive technologies are lifted and removed (e.g., through state subsidies), then the looming demographic crises may have minimal impact of the marriage

pressure LGBTQ+ people face. In other words, whether this pressure will ultimately be lessened or intensified in the wake of population crises will depend on many factors.

In the conclusion of this book, I contemplate these factors in shaping the possibilities of queer resistance. I note that queer resistance to the claims and demands of heterosexual norms may align with feminist resistance against heterosexual family and marriage institutions and to procreation.

CONCLUSION

Reflection on Power and Queer Resistance

BASED ON NEARLY TWO HUNDRED life stories collected by my research team and me between 2015 and 2024, this book provides a broad overview of how the lives of LGBTQ+ people in China in the second decade of the twenty-first century unfolded. In view of China's growing inequalities, it compares how LGBTQ+ people with different class positions, gender identities, rural or urban origins, age cohorts, and HIV/AIDS statuses negotiate their common challenges, such as coming to terms with their sexual orientation, resisting the norms of heterosexuality in their intimate practices, deciding whether or not to come out to parents, and resisting pressures to marry heterosexually. Emerging from these rich life stories are the increased visibility of nonnormative sexuality compared with earlier generations, growing heterogeneity of experiences, and diverse, creative strategies of both collective and everyday resistance against the claims and demands of heterosexual norms and institutions.

In this conclusion, I summarize the findings of chapters 1 and 2, which provide a glimpse of how state, social, and familial power have changed in intensity and direction. I then review the findings of chapters 3 to 7 and reflect on the nature and dynamics of queer collective and everyday resistance. Bringing these strands together, I identify three broad categories of strategies—*transnational futurity*, *heteronormative performativity*, and *exploitation of cracks within institutional heterosexuality*—that illustrate how global influences, local cultural traditions, political contexts, and national socioeconomic inequalities intertwine in complex ways to shape the possibilities and limitations of queer everyday resistance. The chapter culminates in a reflection on whether and how the findings contribute to the broader literature on the transformation of sexuality and, more broadly, to studies

of modernization and social transformation, with specific focus on social change in Chinese society.

DIAGNOSTICS OF CHANGING STATE, SOCIAL, AND FAMILIAL POWER

While the focus of this book is resistance, I begin the chapter by outlining the shifting modes of state governance toward homosexuality, changing public attitudes in chapter 1, and the evolving demographic, intimate, and familial landscapes in post-socialist China in chapter 2. This arrangement reflects my sociological training, which links personal troubles to public issues (Mills 1959) and highlights the complex interplay between structure and agency. I believe that social change is possible because of the human capacity to think, act, strategize, resist, and transform social structures, yet these capacities are always situated and are differently enabled or constrained by individuals' and groups' positions within broader hierarchies of inequality.

From a historical perspective, queer resistance presupposes the existence of state coercion, legal discrimination, social stigmatization of homosexuality, and familial pressure to conform to heterosexual norms of marriage and procreation. Resistance emerges only when individuals and communities encounter, experience, or become conscious of these forms of repressive power and are simultaneously entangled with new forms of power, such as those associated with economic reforms, marketization, and digital technologies. To properly understand against what, when, where, by whom, how, and with what effects resistance occurs, we must therefore trace changing forms of power.

Instead of giving the concept of power a transcendental and all-encompassing presence that is devoid of normative meaning (Habermas 1987; Fraser 1989), this book specifies the types of power—state, social, and familial; illustrates how they have either intensified, as in the case of state power, or weakened, as in the case of social and familial power; and shows how they have moved in different directions. For example, as the state has become more authoritarian, public attitudes toward homosexuality and parent–adult child interactions have increasingly been grounded in normative ideals of citizenship rights, mutuality, and care. The question that follows is how variations in the intensity of power across political, social, and familial domains, and the discrepancies created by their divergent trajectories, shape queer resistance.

Chapter 1 discusses the state's gradual withdrawal from direct and intrusive intervention in the private lives of citizens, its changing modes of governance toward homosexuality, and a rising public awareness of individual entitlement to universal citizenship rights, even when those rights deviate from prevailing moral sensibilities. It shows how the Party-state's modes of control over LGBTQ+ people are closely intertwined with its broader agenda to maintain public health and order and secure its monopoly of power. Although LGBTQ+ people have gained greater sexual freedom in the post-socialist era, this is more an unintended consequence of the state's modernization project, which marks sexuality as a "zone of indifference" (Tsou 1986:xxiv) that is irrelevant to its overarching goals and regime power. The state has not hesitated to intensify coercive controls when it perceives LGBTQ+ organizations and collective mobilization as a threat to its political monopoly.

That said, the Chinese state does not rely solely on coercion. It has artfully combined protection with coercion to legitimate its power. It has improved certain individual rights of transgender people, and several regional courts have issued judgments affirming their rights not to be discriminated against, although these fall short of legislative guarantees. State power in post-socialist China is therefore both paternalistic and authoritarian. By allowing the flourishing of a highly commodified queer virtual space and selectively meting out legal judgments against employment discrimination targeting sexual and gender minorities, the state may pacify grievances and diminish support for organized mobilization, which is not only risky but may be regarded by potential nonconformists as unnecessary. Growing class inequalities, combined with China's insertion into the global economy and the growing ease of travel and international migration, may lead more LGBTQ+ people to opt for exit rather than fight, further diminishing support for collective mobilization.

However, the state's influence on queer lives extends far beyond legal positions on homosexuality or the censorship and control of LGBTQ+ civic organizations. As chapter 2 shows, economic reforms, marketization, and opening-up policies engineered by the state have far-reaching impacts on LGBTQ+ lives and condition the possibilities and limitations of resistance.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how economic reforms and marketization lessen individuals' and families' reliance on the state, provide alternative livelihood options in the private sector, and create conditions for increased rural-to-urban labor flows, educational mobility, and transnational mobility.

Reforms to modernize China have engendered a Chinese path to individualization that has led to the partial deinstitutionalization of marriage and to changes in the structure and internal dynamics of the Chinese family, a key guardian of the institutions of heterosexual marriage and procreation. At the same time, the state's retreat from major welfare provision has propelled the family to become the primary safety net for individual survival in an increasingly competitive and unequal society. These changes have produced a reconfiguration of intergenerational relationships defined by interdependence and emotional closeness. Together with the delay, decline, and polarization of access to heterosexual marriage, LGBTQ+ people in post-socialist China have gained new opportunities and resources to resist the institution of heterosexual marriage and procreation while facing nascent and often competing individual, intimate, and familial claims.

Taken together, chapters 1 and 2 show how political, social, and familial powers in post-socialist China have been reconfigured and have moved in different directions. The analysis shows the importance of distinguishing political authoritarianism from authoritarian cultural traditions. A society may be democratic yet sustain authoritarian traditions that emphasize hierarchy, obedience, and collectivism. Conversely, a polity may consolidate and harden authoritarian rule while other spheres of social life become more liberal and democratic. Post-socialist China appears to be a prototype of the latter. As Lee and Zhang (2013) observe, during the early twenty-first century, the Chinese state was effective in depoliticizing, defusing, and absorbing discontent by bargaining with protesters and activists, using legal-bureaucratic procedures, and cultivating client–patron relationships with stakeholders to safeguard its political monopoly, a phase they term “bargain authoritarianism.” It is apparent that the state has since shifted from bargain authoritarianism to what I call “hard paternalistic authoritarianism.” Hard paternalistic authoritarianism is characterized by strict authoritarian controls and the justificatory logic of paternal care, and it often overrides informed citizen preferences. The state has undergone authoritarian consolidation by tightening control over civil society and dissent. Policies such as poverty alleviation, zero-COVID, common prosperity, and family-oriented rhetoric frame restrictions as benevolent and protective. Censorship, surveillance, and ideological control reveal that this is not soft persuasion but hard intervention. At the same time, economic reforms, marketization, and integration into global capitalism have weakened elements of authoritarian cultural traditions. The public increasingly separates morality from citizenship rights, and many Chinese families have

re-created an intergenerational contract that gives the younger generation more leeway and is more democratic in practice.

How might the divergence between an increasingly authoritarian state and gradually more liberal social and familial spheres impact the lives of LGBTQ+ people? My view is that it signals a loosening of the state–public–family alliance in enforcing the norms and practices of heterosexuality, and a further divergence of queer possibilities along class lines. As the regime becomes more authoritarian, Chinese families with the means to support their adult children in pursuing a livable life abroad are more likely to accelerate investment in their children’s transnational mobility as a strategy of exit.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON QUEER RESISTANCE

While resistance presupposes the existence of power, the existence of power does not necessarily result in resistance. Questions of resistance are empirical questions that cannot be derived directly from a study of power. In this book, the nature of queer resistance is inferred inductively from life stories and histories. I confine resistance to a specific class of actions that are oppositional, whether collective and organized or individual and everyday. This methodological approach avoids the problem of attributing the quality of resistance to any acts of the subordinated.

Collective Resistance and Its Future

In her analysis of three types of sexual rights claims in Western democracies (the right to participate, the right to identity, and the right to relationships), Richardson (2017) illustrates how each makes claims to the welfare and democratic state. For example, in struggles for the right to participate in chosen sexual acts on the basis of consent, mobilization called for governments to decriminalize homosexuality and remove higher thresholds for the age of consent. Activists grounded their arguments in the demarcation of the private and the public, contending that sexuality is a private matter and that the rationale for decriminalization rests on respect for privacy and a politic of tolerance. In campaigns for rights to self-definition and identity development, activists challenged discrimination and exclusion, pressured the state to repeal hostile laws, and advocated for legal protections. This formed the basis for introducing anti-discrimination laws based on sexual

orientation and gender identity and for granting minority civil rights. Since the 1980s, movements have increasingly centered on rights within social institutions and public validation of diverse sexual relationships. This has included campaigns for the state to grant equal marriage and parental rights, as well as access to social and legal benefits historically granted to married couples. The basis of these relationship-based rights claims has shifted from privacy and harm minimization toward equal access to citizens' social rights and public recognition.

In short, Western queer politics have often followed a three-stage model, struggling for decriminalization, then for anti-discrimination legislation, and then for equal marriage and parental rights. Collective struggles for sexual citizenship in the West occur in the context of democratically elected governments and independent courts that guarantee and safeguard free speech, assembly, and organization. As Encarnación (2014) aptly notes, democracy provides opportunities for advocacy, including access to courts, parties, and legislatures, as well as a social environment that permits sexual minorities to live openly and honestly, which is critical for advancing societal acceptance.

From the vantage point of this three-stage trajectory, China is only at the first stage. It is unclear whether China will move through the remaining stages and, if so, how. As chapter 3 illustrates, some LGBTQ+ organizations have turned to legal mobilization to fight discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and to seek greater access to assisted reproductive technologies. However, given the shift to hard paternalistic authoritarianism, the scope of legal mobilization is limited and the strategy remains perilous, as evidenced by the large-scale crackdown on human rights lawyers in July 2015.

Within a diminishing space for collective organization, the political efficacy of legal mobilization should not be judged solely by the number of cases or formal rights won but also by its cultural and symbolic effects. Even within narrow institutional constraints, legal mobilization can assert the legitimacy of alternative claims, sustain collective identity during periods of abeyance, raise social awareness of LGBTQ+ rights claims, and seed alternative cultural scripts. As Johnson (2005) notes, a central element of resistance in authoritarian states is the construction of free spaces and the creation of oppositional speech acts that redefine what is possible. The merit of legal mobilization should therefore be assessed not only in relation to explicitly stated goals, such as winning court cases, but also in terms of its efficacy in constructing and sustaining codes of opposition that may nurture future organized resistance when political opportunities arise.

As noted in the preface and in chapter 2, the future and nature of collective queer resistance are intimately tied to how the state responds to looming demographic crises of population aging and declining fertility. If the state were to grant LGBTQ+ people partial access to marriage and parental rights and to make assisted reproductive technologies available to single people, it might advance individual freedom while creating new dilemmas for the LGBTQ+ community, including the risk of further marginalizing those who refuse or resist marriage and procreation. Conversely, if the state were to return to intrusive and direct interventions in private life in an attempt to resolve demographic crises, for example through administrative means that enforce heterosexual marriage and curb reproductive autonomy, it might threaten the limited freedom LGBTQ+ people now enjoy in commodified and depoliticized online spaces, while simultaneously creating openings for broader alliances that bring together heterosexual and homosexual people. Such a scenario could facilitate alliances between LGBTQ+ communities and straight women who reject restrictive gender and family norms, and could encourage closer collaboration between feminists and LGBTQ+ activists who emphasize the right to define one's intimate life and control one's body without state, religious, or familial coercion. These possibilities are speculative at the time of writing, but they raise pertinent questions for the future of collective queer resistance.

Terrains of Everyday Resistance

Chapters 4 to 7 document everyday resistance in the domains of identity formation, intimate life, decisions about disclosure, and marriage practices, respectively.

Chapter 4 shows the important role of gender norms, the hegemony of heterosexuality, information technology, migration, and the family of origin in shaping identity development among LGBTQ+ people. These factors often produce paradoxical and temporal effects, prompting LGBTQ+ people to explore, experiment with, and experience their nonnormative sexual identity with ambivalence or affirmation. For example, while the hegemony of heterosexuality is the root cause of stigmatization and discrimination, it has also, paradoxically, rendered homosexuality invisible in rural communities and for those who grew up before the 2000s, which allowed some to explore their sexuality without adult suspicion and intervention. Mobility directly increases exposure to affirmative identity categories and indirectly increases

individuals' material and temporal resources for cultivating a positive identity. At the same time, rural-to-urban migrant gay men and *lalas* express despair that their low socioeconomic status renders them low in the hierarchy of desirability in urban LGBTQ+ communities. Instead of affirming their nonnormative identities, many feel ambivalent about the uncertainties their identities may bring.

Chapter 5 paints a picture of partial resistance and queer intimate ambivalence. While LGBTQ+ people, especially young *lalas* who self-identify as T, are unafraid to confront societal and familial intervention in their intimate lives, some continue to draw on heterosexual gendered scripts in their practice of intimacy. Even though these scripts are increasingly reflected upon and challenged within LGBTQ+ communities, other heterosexual ideals, including monogamy and middle-class domesticity, remain influential. Moreover, discourses of *youxiu* and markers of class and status are inscribed and intensified at every stage of intimacy, from partner selection to relationship formation and everyday maintenance. Rather than promises of love and happiness, many gay men and *lalas* experience alienation and exclusion in queer dating scenes, often because of class position, gender embodiment, rural origin, age, or HIV/AIDS status. Although respondents affirm that digital technologies have greatly expanded access to potential partners, many gay men lament that these platforms primarily facilitate hookups rather than committed intimate relationships. In sum, instead of serving as a site of emancipation, queer intimacy becomes another arena where existing inequalities are contested and reproduced, and where the pursuit of love remains elusive.

Chapter 6 examines why some LGBTQ+ people question the universality of the coming-out discourse and dispute the equation of nondisclosure with sexual self-repression. It shows that nondisclosure is often a tactical choice grounded in an ethics of care. At the same time, care is also central to decisions to come out, and strategies of coming out are often developed carefully. Responding to calls to contextualize the meanings and strategies of coming out within familial contexts, the chapter compares decisions to come out, strategies used, and outcomes by age cohort, *hukou* status, level and place of education, and gender and sexual identity categories. It identifies four types of careful preparatory work and strategies before and during coming out: self-advancement, partially satisfying parental expectations, educational work, and stepwise disclosure. It also differentiates four levels of parental acceptance: rejection or silence, partial, major, and full acceptance.

Together, these findings illustrate the complexity of the coming-out process, the heterogeneity of circumstances and resources, the creativity and diversity of strategies, and the uncertainty of outcomes. They challenge the validity and political efficacy of a monolithic and universalistic coming-out model as a pathway to livable queer lives.

Chapter 7 expands global debates on same-sex marriage rights and practices by illustrating the marriage practices of Chinese LGBTQ+ people. The chapter first shows increasing efforts by LGBTQ+ people in mixed-orientation marriages to seek divorce. It then analyzes debates surrounding nominal marriage, its emergence as an alternative collective strategy to resist familial pressure to marry heterosexually, and the practices used to minimize risk. This is followed by a discussion of objections to and the appeals of same-sex marriage and of how access to such recognition in China is closely tied to socioeconomic privilege. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how LGBTQ+ people and their parents have increasingly accepted cohabitation and singlehood as long-term alternatives to marriage. Together, these findings show the influence of global debates on queer thinking and practices of marriage, while also illustrating how this influence is mediated by local societal and, most importantly, familial norms and exigencies.

Three Broad Strategies of Everyday Resistance

Bringing together findings from chapters 4 to 7, I identify three broad strategies of everyday queer resistance: transnational futurity, heteronormative performativity, and exploitation of cracks in institutional heterosexuality. These categories are descriptive, offering a synthetic summary rather than a formal theory of how family and gender norms intertwine with material inequalities to shape the possibilities and limits of queer resistance. They should be read as ideal types that highlight tendencies among LGBTQ+ people with different material resources and gender embodiments. In practice, a gay man or lala may combine these strategies at different life stages.

Transnational Futurity. By “transnational futurity,” I refer to how LGBTQ+ people in middle- and upper-middle-class families enlist parental support to secure alternatives to heterosexual marriage through transnational mobility. This is the clearest example of the spatialization of resistance, since the geographical distance created by migration is viewed as an effective shield against parental imposition of heterosexual norms. In my sample, this strategy is

directly relevant to fifty-four respondents with overseas education, and it has broader significance given China's rapidly growing international student population.

Transnational futurity highlights class privilege and a new intergenerational contract in urban families. As noted earlier, this new contract is based on parental investment in exchange for adult offspring's achieving excellence (*youxiu*) and a bright future, rather than on the older contract of investment in exchange for old-age care (Ikels 1993). With this new contract, parents fund international migration as a strategy to help children seize global opportunities and achieve upward mobility. Children's well-being is prioritized, and parental investment helps avoid risks associated with the competitive examination system, gendered workplace discrimination, and the authoritarian political environment (Fong 2011; Martin 2022; Choi et al. 2024).

In many cases, parents are not fully aware of their children's sexual orientation when sending them abroad, and respondents use parental aspirations to facilitate their migration. For example, Yuxan, a twenty-four-year-old gay man who has not come out to his family, recalls that his parents began preparing him for overseas study in middle school by enrolling him in international schools in China. Realizing in high school that he was attracted to men, he used the opportunity to go abroad to access overseas Chinese gay communities. He avoided applying to universities in conservative US states and chose metropolitan areas with vibrant Chinese gay diasporas. Once abroad, he began same-sex dating and relationships.

Where parents are aware of their children's sexual orientation, they sometimes hope international migration will provide greater sexual rights and freedom. For example, Fu, a twenty-eight-year-old gay man living in New York, was urged by his father to leave China after coming out. According to Fu, his father thought that Chinese society would not tolerate deviance and that he would enjoy more rights and freedom in a Western country. His father also preferred to avoid potential trouble for the extended family. After Fu married his same-sex partner in the United States and prepared to have a child through surrogacy, his father came out on his behalf to the extended family.

Transnational mobility can expand access to affirmative identity categories, equip individuals with resources to adopt desired coming-out strategies that may facilitate parental acceptance, and provide access to greater sexual freedom, equal marriage and parental rights, and assisted reproductive technologies. This strategy captures advantages related to parental wealth, yet it is not without precarity. Xiaotong's experience adds a sober note. While his

parents hoped that migration would secure a better future for him, and he capitalized on parental support to pursue a nonnormative lifestyle abroad, the strategy ultimately hinged on overcoming barriers embedded in migration regimes and border enforcement in his destination country. To gain citizenship in his destination country, he needed to pass a medical examination that included HIV testing. After failing the test, he stayed on a tourist visa and was forced to return to China once the visa was revoked. Finally, while leaving China may provide LGBTQ+ people with access to greater formal rights in the West, it may also place them in new hierarchies of desirability, where their statuses as migrants, ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities intersectionally disadvantage them.

Heteronormative Performativity. This strategy refers to how LGBTQ+ people in families with fewer financial resources (e.g., peasant and working-class families, as well as some middle-class families) feign heterosexuality through two practices: arranging a nominal marriage and staging repeated failures in the heterosexual dating and marriage markets. Often, these practices are combined with internal migration, which provides the geographic distance needed to implement them.

Whether nominal marriage is a form of resistance or a compromise that reifies heterosexuality remains a heated debate among LGBTQ+ communities and organizations. In my sample, proponents and opponents are roughly equal, each around thirty respondents. While Trueself, China's largest LGBTQ+ civic organization, opposes nominal marriage, prominent feminist activist He Xiaopei has documented the journeys of lalas and gay men in nominal marriages with empathy and humor. Respondents' experiences suggest that the critique of nominal marriage as mere compromise is not substantiated, whereas the critique that it can reify heterosexuality has partial validity. Nominal marriage is often undertaken to defend a same-sex relationship, and respondents who engage in it frequently plan to come out to their parents eventually. At the same time, the norms governing nominal partner selection and everyday interactions between the couple and their respective families can reproduce hypergamous heterosexual marriage norms and gendered division of labor. These norms disadvantage gay men without socioeconomic resources and lesbians who lack the feminine credentials deemed desirable for wifely and motherly roles in the nominal marriage market.

The difficulty of finding a suitable nominal spouse, the complexities of maintaining a nominal marriage, and the controversies surrounding the

practice have propelled many respondents to feign heterosexual dating instead. Some bring a fake girlfriend or boyfriend to meet parents, later announcing that the relationship has failed and that they will remain single. Once they reach forty, parents often relent. This practice attests to the normative biography in Chinese culture, with ages twenty-seven and thirty set as deadlines for marriage and parenthood for women and men respectively. It functions as a strategy of buying time and waiting out pressure until parents and senior relatives feel embarrassed to inquire intrusively and begin to accord greater autonomy.

Among several working-class men and rural-to-urban migrants, parental pressure diminished when their mothers passed away, since patriarchal norms disproportionately assign mothers the responsibility for ensuring their sons marry and procreate. After their mother's death, fathers seldom exert sustained pressure, aside from occasional remarks. Although seemingly insubstantial, feigning heterosexual dating has enabled singlehood and same-sex cohabitation to become genuine alternatives to heterosexual marriage for many respondents.

Exploitation of Cracks in Institutional Heterosexuality. This strategy is often employed by parents across social classes to defend the singlehood or same-sex partnership of their sexually nonnormative children, by pointing to the shortcomings of heterosexual marriage, the rise of divorce, and the trend toward delayed marriage. For example, Wen's mother uses her sister's divorce to argue that marriage no longer guarantees happiness and to persuade relatives to accept first Wen's singlehood and then her same-sex relationship. Parents and siblings who are themselves divorced or in unhappy marriages often use personal experience to legitimate a sexual-minority family member's decision to remain single. These strategies illustrate the continuity of the Chinese family as a cooperative entity whose members work together to meet goals (Johnson 1993). In many cases, the goal of familial cooperation has shifted from the survival and flourishing of the family as a unit (Yan 2018) to the happiness and success of the youngest generation.

CONCLUSION

Viewed collectively, these findings show the vital importance of local political contexts in shaping organized and everyday queer resistance. They also

address a gap in the literature regarding the role of the family of origin. Even in outstanding historical work on queer lives, such as Kennedy and Davis's (1993) study of working-class lesbians in the United States, the emphasis falls on romantic relationships, friendship, and communities, with limited attention to families of origin. An exception is research on sexual minorities in authoritarian or non-Western contexts, for example studies of sexual-minority youth in Turkey (Ozyegin 2015), which foreground the origin family. As the findings in chapters 4 through 7 show, the family of origin plays a key role in shaping queer identity, intimacy, coming-out and marriage practices, and resistance in relation to these aspects.

While the findings do not invalidate broad modernization claims about the transformation of sexuality, since homosexuality and LGBTQ+ lives in post-socialist China have indeed changed significantly in the course of the modernization project, they challenge the strong version of detraditionalization and a singular model of individualization. In post-socialist China, the family has not been swept away. Rather, it has been reworked to retain central roles, shaped by a model of individualization engineered by the Chinese state, which differs from processes in Western welfare states. These findings caution against wholesale generalization from Western models to non-Western contexts and suggest a more nuanced analysis that specifies when and which aspects of different countries' experiences converge or diverge.

However, Western models remain useful points of reference, particularly the three components of sexual citizenship: the right to participate, the right to identity, and the right to relationships. These pertain to universal humanistic ideals of autonomy, freedom, and dignity. Yet the domains in which these rights should be pursued and the strategies through which they can be achieved need to be grounded in local contexts. Likewise, normative claims, political strategies, and evaluative criteria championed by Western queer scholars and activists may not be straightforwardly applicable to the Chinese context, even if the rights claims are normatively desirable at a higher level of abstraction.

Much Western scholarship has focused on a subset of Western countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, whose trajectories, strategies, normative claims, and evaluative criteria reflect the specific predicaments of their LGBTQ+ communities. For example, while the coming-out model had earlier roots in gay liberation, its prominence in defining gay politics was greatly intensified by the HIV/AIDS crises in the United

States during the 1980s and 1990s. Even if visibility is desirable and critical in combating stigmatization, the politics of coming out, along with its concrete strategies and imperatives, must be grounded in local political and social contexts. Rather than regarding nondisclosure simplistically as a lack of courage or solidarity, this book shows that a care lens rooted in familial and social contexts provides a more comprehensive understanding of decision-making and strategic action.

As a whole, these findings contribute to the broader literature on the transformation of sexuality by cautioning against overgeneralization from macro theories. By situating changes in queer lives in post-socialist China within historical legacies and rapid socioeconomic transformations ushered in by reforms and integration into global capitalism, the analysis attends to global influences without assuming uniform trajectories of change. It highlights local inventions, for example nominal marriage and the assertion of nondisclosure as care, and the contestation of global, predominantly Western, influences in debates about coming out and same-sex marriage. It destabilizes a simple West–East dichotomy by challenging assumptions of cultural uniformity within each region while bringing temporal transformations to the fore.

The book responds to calls to attend more closely to the intersection of sexuality with other axes of inequality. Each substantive chapter shows how inequalities of class, gender, age cohort, rural or urban origin, and HIV/AIDS status shape the possibilities of adopting specific strategies of resistance. In addition to unraveling internal heterogeneity, this approach ensures that the experiences of the most marginalized members of the LGBTQ+ community are recorded and their voices heard.

With respect to nonnormative sexuality in Chinese society, the book strives to avoid cultural essentialism that treats Confucianism and the Chinese family as unchanging artifacts. While recognizing Confucian legacies, it shows how discourses and practices of filial piety, a core component of Confucianism, are continually reworked, recalibrated, and appropriated by LGBTQ+ people to legitimate nonnormative life projects. This contrasts with many studies in China, including my earlier work, that pay insufficient attention to changing intergenerational relationships and growing heterogeneity in parental aspirations and resources. As the book illustrates, Chinese parents are not merely custodians of tradition. They are strategic actors who work to maximize family well-being, however defined. Some parents have

become tacit allies of individualized projects of self-actualization. At the same time, families are rarely equal internally. Power and role expectations are differentiated by the gender of adult children and of parents.

Family members often hold different ideas and attitudes toward homosexuality. Gendered division of care and emotional labor frequently results in female family members displaying greater sensitivity toward homosexual relatives' nonnormative sexuality and becoming first points of contact in coming-out situations. Respondents often approach mothers, sisters, aunts, or nieces first and rely on these women to build alliances that facilitate acceptance by other family members. Fathers, by contrast, often play less active roles in identity negotiation and disclosure or are more hostile, particularly toward effeminate gay men and feminine lesbians. These gender differences reflect the disproportionate emotional burden that a child's homosexuality places on Chinese mothers, who are expected to manage uncertain impacts on family relationships and harmony.

For a book that aims to sketch transformations spanning four decades among a population that is increasingly stratified by class, gender, regional origin, and cohort, and diversified in identity, many stories have been condensed or omitted, and many more remain uncollected and unheard. Although I use the term "LGBTQ+ people," most respondents self-identify as gay or lesbian, and the data include only thirteen bisexual respondents, two trans men, and six who self-identify as queer. Their stories are used to illustrate thematic arguments where appropriate, but this cannot capture the depth of their specific experiences. Another project will be needed to reach these populations and to understand their resistance and activism, which have begun to emerge online.

The voices of family members and friends of LGBTQ+ people are also limited in this study. Although I interviewed parents and wives of gay men at events organized by Trueself during Shanghai Pride in 2018 and conducted in-depth interviews with the parents of a gay couple in Shanghai, much more needs to be done to capture their voices directly. Finally, despite best efforts, LGBTQ+ people from rural China and from less advantaged class positions are underrepresented in the sample. This reflects their lower visibility and greater stigmatization in rural areas and among lower social classes. Some of these obstacles have been addressed in the book, but many more require further study. Given the intensification of state control over organized LGBTQ+ groups and the growing number of Chinese queer students abroad, queer diasporic communities and their activism warrant sustained

attention. Transnational queer activism is mentioned in passing in chapter 3. Clearly, more work is needed to understand the limitations and potential of this form of resistance. The end of a research project is often the beginning of another. I hope the findings of this book, as well as its limitations, inspire future research.

APPENDIX

Method, Data, and Research Ethics

This appendix provides a brief description of the data collection methods, the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents, and the research ethics of studying and writing about groups stigmatized by society.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Life Story Interviews

I developed an interview guide that opened with: “Everybody has a story to tell. Can you share your story with me, particularly in relation to your sexual orientation?” There were only two criteria for recruitment: participants had to be aged eighteen or above and self-identify as homosexual, bisexual, transgender, queer, pansexual, or nonbinary.

All interviews were conducted in a one-to-one format and lasted between one and five hours. All interviews were audio recorded. Each interview included detailed information on the process of sexual identity formation, familial negotiations, sexual and intimate relationships, educational trajectories, employment and migration histories, friendships, and community participation. Full verbatim transcripts were prepared for each interview and were manually checked by a research assistant to ensure accuracy.

Questionnaire Survey

After each life story interview, respondents were invited to complete a short questionnaire. This complementary survey collected information on respondents’ assigned sex at birth, gender and sexual identities, hukou status, place of origin, only-child status, educational level, employment status, monthly income, occupation, financial support given to or received from parents, overall financial situation,

and marital or partnership status. This quantitative data was cross-checked against the life story interviews for internal consistency. We also manually coded each respondent's coming-out status and their parents' level of acceptance. All survey data was initially organized in Excel, then exported to SPSS for analysis.

Ethnographic Observations

In addition to interviews and surveys, my research team and I conducted ethnographic observations by visiting gay and lesbian bars, as well as major LGBTQ NGOs, in China and Shanghai between 2016 and 2018. For example, we visited the Beijing LGBT Center (Beijing *tongzhibizhongxin* 北京同志中心) and interviewed two of its staff members in May 2018.

I also attended events organized during Shanghai Pride in 2016 and 2018. Shanghai Pride had been the largest annual pride event in mainland China since 2009. However, in 2020, the organizers announced that all upcoming events would be cancelled. Through these experiences, I witnessed firsthand how the LGBTQ+ community, particularly its civic organizations, came under increased scrutiny and pressure from the government.

Archival and Internet Research

To understand changing state policies toward homosexuality, my research team and I conducted both archival and internet research. In terms of archival work, we systematically reviewed a sample of articles from *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, to grasp how homosexuality was represented in official discourse between 1979 and 2019. This search yielded very few relevant articles, underscoring the general silence on homosexuality in state media throughout the post-socialist period.

We also conducted extensive internet searches, gathering reports on state policies and updates from LGBTQ+ civic organizations. English-language newspapers such as the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, and the *South China Morning Post* regularly cover LGBTQ+ issues in China. Between the late 1980s and 2000, academic research on homosexuality in China primarily focused on HIV/AIDS and public health. Scholarly work on other aspects of LGBTQ+ people's lives only began to emerge in the mid-1990s. The UNDP survey conducted in 2015 remains a major reference point.

Since the first decade of the 2000s, further insights have been drawn from a combination of sources, including official websites of LGBTQ+ organizations, Shanghai Pride documentation, blog posts on major social media platforms, human rights reports, and informal conversations with long-term activists. These sources have enabled me to piece together a broader picture of LGBTQ+ history and collective mobilization.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Table A1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents. As the table shows, the mean age of my respondents was 28.7, ranging from eighteen to forty-three at the time of interview. In terms of birth cohorts, 11 percent of the respondents were born in the 1970s or earlier, 50 percent in the 1980s, and 40 percent in the 1990s or later. Regarding gender, 30 percent self-identified as women, 69 percent as men, and 1 percent as trans men. In terms of sexual identity, 21.4 percent self-identified as lesbian, 64.2 percent as gay/tongzhi, 7.5 percent as bisexual, and 7 percent as queer, pansexual, or nonbinary. Notably, all respondents who self-identified as queer, pansexual, or nonbinary were either women or trans men.

Over two-thirds of the respondents were only children. With respect to hukou status, approximately 13 percent held rural hukou and 85 percent urban hukou. Regarding educational background, about 19 percent did not have a university education, 51.3 percent held a university degree obtained in China, and around 30 percent had a university degree obtained abroad.

Among those without a university education, all had completed secondary school, and some also held vocational school certificates. Nearly 20 percent of respondents were university students, 6.4 percent were blue-collar workers, around 60 percent were white-collar workers, and around 3 percent were entrepreneurs or self-employed. Among those in full-time employment, 55 percent earned a monthly income of 10,000 yuan (approximately USD 1,370) or above.

In terms of regional origin, 16 percent of respondents were from North China, 32.1 percent from East China, 16.6 percent from Southwest China, 3.7 percent from South Central China, and 9.6 percent from Northeast China; 1.6 percent held non-Chinese citizenship (e.g., US citizenship). The regional distribution of respondents is broadly comparable with that of the general population.

RESEARCH ETHICS

In this section, I will address the ethics of conducting research in authoritarian settings. First and foremost, it requires heightened sensitivity to informant safety, political risks, and data protection. Ethical protocols were strictly followed in this study to ensure the integrity of the research and the protection of all participants.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to their involvement. To acknowledge their time and contributions, a small financial compensation of 100 Chinese yuan (approximately USD 13.80) was provided to each informant after completion of the life story interview and questionnaire.

TABLE A1 Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (mean age = 29.5)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Birth cohort		
1970s or before	20	10.7
1980s	93	49.7
1990s or later	74	39.6
Gender		
Trans men	2	1.00
Women	56	30.0
Men	129	69.0
Sexual identity		
Lesbian	40	21.4
Gay	120	64.2
Bisexual	14	7.5
Transgender/queer/pansexual/other	13	7.0
Only-child status		
Only child	124	66.3
Has siblings	52	27.8
No information	11	5.9
Hukou status		
Rural	24	12.8
Tier 1 urban (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen)	67	35.8
Other urban	92	49.2
Citizenship in another region/country	4	2.1
Educational level		
Secondary school	35	18.7
Bachelor's degree or above from within China	96	51.3
Bachelor's degree or above from overseas	56	29.9
Occupation		
Student	36	19.2
Blue collar	12	6.4
White collar	112	59.9
Entrepreneur	3	1.6
Self-employed	2	1.1
Other/not available	22	11.8

TABLE A1 (continued)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Monthly income (RMB) of the full-time employed ($n = 128$)		
≤ 2000	0	0
2001–4999	18	14.1
5000–9999	34	26.6
10,000–14,999	20	15.6
15,000–19,999	15	11.7
≥ 20,000	38	29.7
Not available	3	2.3
Region of origin		
North China 华北	30	16.0
East China 华东	60	32.1
Southwestern China 西南	31	16.6
Northwestern China 西北	7	3.7
South Central China 中南	38	20.3
Northeast China 东北	18	9.6
Outside mainland China	3	1.6

To protect informants' confidentiality, all possible steps were taken to anonymize data. Respondents were reminded at the beginning and throughout the interview not to disclose identifying information. Tape recorders were not used during discussions involving politically sensitive topics. In terms of data handling, original audio recordings were deleted after full verbatim transcripts were prepared.

During the reporting stage, pseudonyms were used, and all identifiable information, including the names of schools, universities, occupational sectors, destination countries (for migrants), hometowns, and parental occupations, was removed or replaced with generic descriptors. To protect the civic organizations I visited in 2018, I initially refrained from publishing any articles based on my interviews with them. I am now writing about these organizations because they have ceased operations since 2020. These measures collectively reflect a commitment to ethical research practice in contexts where breaches of confidentiality could have serious repercussions for participants.

NOTES

PREFACE

1. The term “China Dream” (中国梦, *Zhongguo Meng*) was introduced by Xi Jinping in 2012 shortly after he became General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It centers on the party-state’s broad agenda of restoring China to strength, prosperity, and global influence after the “century of humiliation” (1839–1949). It emphasizes national strength, economic prosperity through sustained growth and a “moderately prosperous society” (*xiaokang shehui*), social harmony grounded in Chinese traditions and socialist values, military modernization, and individual well-being framed as inseparable from national aspirations.

INTRODUCTION

1. Intersectionality as an analytical perspective and methodological approach originated from feminist resistance to the universalization of white middle-class women’s experiences in activism and scholarship, which some feminists argue excluded the experiences of Black women (Hull et al. 1982; Collins 1990). The concept highlights how simultaneous positions within multiple structures of power can multiply and disadvantage members of particular social categories, such as Black working-class women (Crenshaw 1991). Although there are different methodological approaches to intersectional analysis, which are beyond the scope of this book (McCall 2005), the framework is credited with drawing attention to inequalities both within and between categories, showing how different structures of inequality are co-constituted in complex ways, and giving voice to those who are multiply marginalized.

2. The Gini coefficient is a number that shows how fairly income or wealth is shared in a society. A score of 0 means everyone has the same, while a score of 1 means one person has everything and everyone else has nothing. Countries like

Sweden, Germany, and Japan usually score below 0.35, but China's score is much higher, showing a bigger gap between rich and poor.

CHAPTER 1

1. The Sent Down Movement was part of the Party's campaign of rustification, colloquially known as the Down to the Countryside or Up to the Mountains, Down to the Villages Movement. The goal was for young Chinese growing up in cities to relocate to rural areas, work and live among the peasantry, and discard their bourgeois notions. More than sixteen million young Chinese were estimated to have relocated.

2. Curtailing the mobilizing capacity of LGBTQ+ NGOs was part of the state's broader campaign against civil society, which began when Xi Jinping, the current president of China, took power in 2012. In March 2015, the Chinese government arrested the Feminist Five, who had planned to distribute anti-sexual harassment stickers on the subway. That same year, the government launched a major crackdown on human rights lawyers, activists, and legal advocates, with more than two hundred individuals detained, questioned, or prosecuted.

CHAPTER 3

1. This was the subject of the open letter from the organizers of Shanghai Pride announcing the end of their work on the event.

2. *I* denotes "intersex" and *A* refers to "asexual."

3. In 2016, China replaced its one-child policy with a universal two-child policy; in 2021, this was replaced by a three-child policy.

4. This view contrasts with earlier scholarly research on gay public cruising in the West, which tends to view such spaces as sites of identity production, community formation, and resistance against heteronormativity (Brown-Saracino 2015; Iveson 2008; Turner 2003). Qian (2017) cautions against the relevance of such a politically optimistic view in the Chinese context. He shows that while visiting the park may be regarded as a form of coming out, gay men's "discursive and embodied practices of self-disciplining" in these parks constitutes a form of "self-enclosure of the closet" and contributes to the continued invisibility and oppression against sexual minority members by society (2017:772).

CHAPTER 4

1. A sugar dating app facilitates quasi-romantic relationships between two financially unequal partners, in which sex, companionship, intimacy, or other forms of

attention are exchanged for personal benefits such as monetary rewards, gifts, access to elite networks, and/or mentorship.

CHAPTER 5

1. This issue has been addressed by scholars of heterosexual relationships in urban China; Xiyang Wang, *Gender, Dating and Violence in Urban China* (Routledge, 2017).

CHAPTER 6

1. The figures do not add up to 187 because 10 respondents did not provide the necessary information.

2. The figures do not add up to 187 because 48 respondents did not specify the first person to whom they disclosed their sexuality.

CHAPTER 7

1. Not all Chinese couples conformed to the one-child policy. In rural areas, the hands of birth planning cadres were tied by de-collectivization, the abolishment of the work point system, and a rise in peasant household incomes. The reforms took away both the economic incentives cadres used to elicit compliance and the administrative tools to impose penalties for violations of the one childbirth quota. Resistance by peasants put local cadres on the defensive and forced them to make considerable compromises on collecting fines. By the mid-1980s, rural families and ethnic minorities were permitted by the government to have two or three children, especially if the first child was a girl. Gradually, a variety of exceptions were created for urban families to have a second child, for example, if the first child died or was born with a nonhereditary disability (Greenhalgh 1993).

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