NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Homonormative Desires: Identities, Masculinities, and Sexual Hierarchies in Urban China

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Communication Studies

By

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EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

December 2020

Abstract

This dissertation examines how China's involvement in transnational LGBTQ activism, adaptation and innovation of queer media technologies, and the global pink economy have influenced queer men's understandings of selfhood, sexual desires, and the relationships among queer subjects. It is based on extensive fieldwork in Beijing and digital ethnography on China's cyberspaces from 2017 to 2018. I discovered that transnational efforts of activism, technological innovation, and global capital have expanded China's queer spaces on- and offline. They have also facilitated queer people's self-acceptance, and increased opportunities for queer connections. However, I argue that these socioeconomic transformations have also pushed a singular way of being "queer," thus dividing and sexually hierarchizing queer men. As a result, these changes have not necessarily brought queer people autonomy, equality, and justice, as they have engendered remarginalization among already marginalized groups.

My findings reveal that new sexual norms are being coded in and reflected through queer men's everyday practices—from their tactics of identification to expressions of sexual desires. By examining Chinese queer men's communicative and linguistic practices, I demonstrate that they have shifted away from adopting the postsocialist identity of *tongzhi*, or "comrade," as a means of self-identification. Instead, influenced by increasing information on sexualities, growing activism, and consumerist cultures, Chinese queer men in post-2010 China have deployed various communicative tactics to make sense of their sexualities. This change has ostensibly diversified queer male communities, yet it reflects the exclusion, or even hierarchization, among Chinese queer men. For example, some adopt the term "gay" or "*jiyou*" to exclude older or "old-school" men who use *tongzhi*. Thus, many queer men have adopted different terms, and constructed distinct identities, in order to distance themselves from others.

Alongside these practices, by analyzing their discourses of desires and daily performances, I have discovered that Chinese queer men are hierarchized on the basis of factors including body types, sexual roles, race and ethnicity, and class. Today, businesses in the beauty industries are targeting queer men as major consumers, and have been espousing desirable bodies marked by muscularity and fitness. Thus, the desirable bodies in queer spaces are becoming standardized. They also obsess over masculinities, as signified by sexual labels and effeminophobia. In addition, they contest white supremacy by showing Sino/Han-centric desire in a global context. Yet the Sinocentric desire is a double-edged sword, because they re-racialize people of other races or ethnicities, such as black men and Southeast Asians. This reinforces global racial inequality. Moreover, depoliticized as active and valuable consumers, many Chinese queer men view it as their responsibility to seek self-improvement and actualization through consumerist practices, so as to climb the ladder of sexual hierarchies.

This project contributes to transnational queer studies. First, it reveals how transnational socioeconomic forces have been shaping Chinese queer men's understandings of sexuality and ideal queerness. Second, it brings to light the negative effect of many queer efforts that have been deemed progressive, e.g., normalizing sexual desires and hierarchizing queer subjects. Lastly, in understanding the formation of sexual norms, it provides direction for future queer politics in pursuing social justice in non-Western societies.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express gratitude to my committee members. I am particularly indebted to my advisor Janice Radway, who helped me explore my strength as an ethnographer when I was struggling in the early years of graduate school. I appreciate that she rarely told me what to do directly, but instead raised insightful questions that led me to develop awareness of my key problems and to figure out potential solutions. These practices helped me become an independent thinker and scholar. I am also thankful to Paola Zamperini, whose class, titled Sexualities in Ming/Qing China, was an eye-opening experience that totally blew my mind. Through this class, I became fascinated by China's sexual cultures. In the subsequent years working with her, Professor Zamperini showed me how to challenge Western-centric scholarship and reformulate knowledge of non-Western sexualities.

I also value the supervision of Héctor Carrillo, who enabled me to understand the rigor of ethnographic research in in transnational contexts. When I was overwhelmed by my data, he guided me patiently on how to handle ethnographic materials. He also showed me the need to deliberate over the significance of my research and how to communicate it with different academic audiences. I should also express gratefulness to Howard Chiang from UC Davis, who generously agreed to serve on my committee, though we had never met. He challenged my adoption of queer theory as well as pushed me to develop more theoretical contributions to Chinese queer studies. I have also significantly benefitted from other scholars' help at Northwestern, including Robert Hariman, Kate Baldwin, Nick Davis, and Irving Rein.

I could not have survived graduate school without my friends' support, including Catalina Uribe- Rincón, Guangshuo Yang, Philip Fang, Xiaogao Zhou, Lola Wang, Nanxi Zeng, and Menglu Gao. They have always been there listening to me when I was feeling stressed,

helpless, or angry and never hesitated to offer help. They also made me realize my value. My friends in China, including Hao Wang, Xue Mi, and Gailun Zhang, have been emotionally proximate, despite being on the opposite side of the globe physically. I kept bothering them in my midnights, which were their daytimes, and dumped all my emotions onto them. They made my nights in graduate school less lonely and more tolerable.

I have to thank my parents, Chunxiu Zhou and Yong'an Tang, for their love. I have been motivated to see their proud faces throughout the long journey. I enjoyed long video talks with them a few times a week, which were the relaxing moments of the week. Though my father could not it make it to see my graduation, I am certain that he would be delighted to see me become Dr. Zhou if he were here. I am also grateful that my mom has provided me with alternative ideas of gender since I was a kid. Seeing her being an independent woman and the breadwinner of my family was my course of Feminism 101. As a scholar working on gender and sexuality, she, as a role model, has been an inspiration for my career.

Lastly, I am indebted to all my interlocutors in China who generously devoted time to speaking with me about their queer experiences. I also owe all those friends who helped me recruit participants a big thanks. It is them who made this project possible.

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Introduction

On the evening of May 18 2018, I attended a workshop about the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia at the US Embassy in Beijing. This event united several influential scholars and activists as the speakers, as well as a packed audience. These speakers include Cheng Qingsong, an influential queer filmmaker, and the founder of Common Language, a local lesbian NGO. A representative from the American Embassy started by presenting a general history of the LGBTQ movement in the United States, and demonstrated how individuals and organizations have fought for sexual rights since the twentieth century. Following his presentation, Chinese activists shared their personal experiences as sexual minorities and activists in China. I was particularly drawn to a joke from Lily, a Chinese NGO practitioner, "Acceptance of gay people depends on how cute the gay couple is. People tend to support cute gay couples." Everyone laughed at the humor, myself included. Yet this attempt at humor concerned me because it reflected the reality of contemporary queer politics: pursuing sexual rights for certain queer people while marginalizing others, i.e., support for sexual minorities is conditional.

Among limited popular cultural products about LGBTQ topics produced or circulated in China, queer men are often represented as desirable and lovable subjects. Typical examples include the protagonists from the films and TV dramas *The Wedding Banquet, Farewell My Concubine, Happy Together, Lan Yu, Crystal Boys*, and *Addiction*.[1] These attractive men are considered the prototypes of gay men. Apart from these media representations, BL (boys love), a genre originating from Japan that features homoerotic relationships, has gained popularity among

[1] Some of these movies or TV series are produced in Sinophone societies outside of Mainland China, yet they are popular among Chinese queer people across the globe.

Chinese youth. These BL oeuvres span manga, anime, and fiction, often depicting love between two beautiful young boys. In his *Up from Invisibility*, Larry Gross (2001) critiques the increasing representations of sexual minorities on American TV that have reproduced stereotypes. Similarly, Australia-based media scholar Rob Cover (2013, 336) has contended that contemporary mass media only represents queerness through affluence, fitness, aesthetic competence, whiteness, and other narrow depictions. This is also a problem for representations of queer people in Sinophone societies: only certain queer subjects are visible. The marketized media industry often intentionally presents palatable and desirable men as the protagonists to attract viewers, thus reinforcing the stereotypical images of desirable gay men. Because of these stereotypes, I have often heard expressions of jealousy about gay men's intrinsic sexiness from "allies," and witnessed queer men's exclusion of other men whom they considered "ineligible" of being gay.

Although Lily was joking, many people indeed hold such attitudes or expectations of what an ideal queer man *should* be, either in queer communities or among "allies." More worrisome is that this humorous comment reflects the implications of normalizing ideals for queer men, i.e., it promotes a hierarchization of queer men. Queer people face not only external discrimination and oppression from heterosexual communities, but also internal exclusion within queer communities. Most of the extant scholarship and activism has focused on the former, while neglecting the latter. This internal sexual inequality is the subject of my ethnographic research which explores the emergence of new sexual norms, and their implications in urban queer communities in post-2010 China. My ethnographic exploration points out the normalization of Chinese queer men's desires, and illuminates how already marginalized queer people are further marginalized by intersecting factors including age, body types, sexual labels, race, ethnicity, and

geographical origin. The normalization of desires privileges certain queer subjects as superior and desirable while marginalizing others, resulting in sexual hierarchies among Chinese queer men. Neglecting these issues might be engendering more inequity in the process of pursuing social justice, in both academia and activism.

In the field of Chinese queer studies, early scholarship often lumped Chinese homosexuality into a singular category by studying sexual minorities' general lived experiences in a heteronormative society (Y. Li and Wang 1992; Chou 2000). Emerging scholarship has (to a degree) deconstructed the category of Chinese homosexuality, or *tongzhi* (comrade), by delving into the differentiation of queer subjects on the basis of linguistic practices, class status, sexual roles, and geographies. Both Lisa Rofel (2007) and Hongwei Bao (2012) have explored the sexual subjectivities embodied in the use of the terms *tongzhi*, *tongxinglian*, and gay. The division of linguistic practices suggests the shifting relationship among queer people. Moreover, several works have dug into class differentiation among queer subjects (Rofel 2007; Liu 2015; T. Zheng 2015b). In addition, Tiantian Zheng (2015b) sheds light on the gendered relationships between queer men based on their binary sexual labels as 1s (the active role) or 0s (the passive role). Travis Kong (2011) also challenges the category of Chineseness by integrating geographical differences to study distinct queer experiences of Chinese queer men as memba, *tongzhi*, and golden boys.[2] These attempts illuminate that queer men in today's China have become an increasingly heterogeneous group. Moreover, certain queer men are privileged over others.

[2] These are terms used to refer to homosexual men in Hong Kong, Beijing, and London respectively.

Additionally, studies of power imbalance among Chinese queer men have often been based on a certain identity, such as class. Introducing identities is critical to understanding sexual inequality, but other non-identitarian factors, such as body types, should not be overlooked. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand how these factors intersect, and to avoid reducing sexual inequality to other forms of inequality, such as the conflation of class inequality with sexual inequality. The transnational process in post-2010 China, including growing local activism (e.g. events held by Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays China, or PFLAG China), the adaptation and innovation of queer media technology (e.g. dating apps), and the rise of the pink economy (e.g. Bluedbaby),[3] has intensified the hierarchization of Chinese queer men.

Therefore, my dissertation explores how transnationalism in China has contributed to the reorganization of China's queer men's desires. It also examines how multifaceted identities and non-identitarian factors unite to affect queer men's positions in sexual hierarchies, and explores which queer subjects possess the most sexual capital in post-2010 China. Based on discontent with the simplistic conflation of capital and economic capital, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) urged recognitions of more forms of capital, including social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986), each allowing people to exert power and mobilize resources in social interactions. Influenced by this line of theory, Adam Green conceptualizes sexual capital (also called "erotic capital" in his work), which "indexes the degree of power an individual or a group holds within a sexual field on the basis of collective assessments of attractiveness and sex appeal" (2014, 48).

[3] The pink economy refers to a range of businesses, products, and services that target LGBTQ individuals, such as gay/lesbian bars, beauty products, and surrogacy services. It is believed to increase sexual minorities' visibility in Chinese society and fulfill their special needs. The pink economy has also been reported as leading China's LGBTQ politics, as the state leaves little space for overt or contentious activism (Campbell 2017).

According to Green (2008a, 2008b, 2014), at least three intersecting axes determine the degree of desirability or the amount of sexual capital: physical traits (e.g. height, weight, penis size, hair color), affective presentations (e.g. butch, nebbishy, animalistic), eroticized sociocultural styles (e.g. the blue-collar construction worker) (2008b, 29) or external resources (e.g. wealth).

My project utilizes a ground-up approach to uncover axes through which sexual capital is produced. In addition, sexual capital cannot be deemed commensurate with economic, social, and symbolic capital. However, under certain circumstances, sexual capital is interconvertible with other forms of capital. For example, men's financial capacity can be converted into their sexual capital to a degree in China's heterosexual communities (Luo 2017). Based on Catherine Hakim's theorization of a universal and fixed erotic capital (2010, 2011), Green (2012) points out that sexual capital is not a portable property which individuals can transport at will. This means that one's sexual capital is dynamic, and informed by specific social contexts or fields. Therefore, we should not overlook the social structure that produces and reproduces sexual capital. I situate my study of queer men's sexual capital and sexual hierarchies in post-2010 Beijing, a representative Chinese urban space that connects migrants from across China. Moreover, Green argues that it is through the scripts of queer people's sexual desires that we can understand the distribution of sexual capital to queer subjects, and thus the sexual hierarchies. Examining collective desires and assessing queer subjects explicates how sexual desires have overlapped, and thus become normative.

In this study, I pursue several lines of inquiry: first, how have queer male communities in urban China become differentiated and heterogeneous over the past decade, and in what aspects is the internal differentiation reflected? My findings suggest that Chinese queer men today have moved away from a dominant mode of identification using the term *tongzhi*, or "comrade," but

rather have sought linguistic and communicative tactics for identification by taking advantage of an increasing vocabulary of terms. I argue that this shift has ostensibly diversified queer communities. However in reality, this seeming diversity reflects hierarchies engendered among queer men. My second question is, how are the sexual hierarchies among queer men reflected in urban China? My ethnography demonstrates that queer subjects are sexually stratified on the basis of body types, sexual labels, race and ethnicity, age, and class in contemporary China. Among these criteria, body type is the most critical in shaping one's position in sexual hierarchies. "Queer" desires are becoming normative as certain queer subjects who meet normative standards are granted sexual capital in the market. As a result, many queer men who do not meet the expectations are marginalized, alienated, and excluded from a community to which they thought they belonged. The last question is what social, political, and cultural forces contribute to the differentiation and hierarchization of Chinese queer men. I contend that China's political regulation of sexual cultures, and Chinese sexual legacies (such as the modes of identification in various historical periods), have been critical factors. However, the growing transnationalism since 2010 (including the extension and adaptation of queer activism, the appropriation and innovation of queer technologies, and the flow of global capital) has affected the reorganization of Chinese queer men's sexual desires. Although these changes have expanded queer spaces and brought visibility to queer subjects, they have simultaneously engendered division and sexual hierarchies among queer subjects.

Shifting queer ecology in post-2010 China

The Chinese state has never stopped policing queer spaces, both online and offline. This has left China's queer people, organizations, and businesses in a precarious situation. For instance, Zank, which had been the second most popular gay dating app in China, was shut down

during an Internet "cleansing" wave in 2017. Rela, a popular lesbian app, was also abruptly suspended the same year, yet it returned to the market a year later. In spite of all the regulations, Chinese queer individuals and organizations have been creative in making room for survival and development. Around 2010, queer ecology witnessed three noticeable transformations that forged new discourses of sexual desires: growing but non-contentious LGBTQ advocacy; increasing networking on digital media (particularly location-based dating apps) and the expansion of visible queer spaces; the proliferation of a pink economy that targets lucrative LGBTQ consumers. These shifts have expanded queer spaces, changed dating and hookup cultures and the way that queer people interact, transformed queer people's understandings of their sexual orientations, identities, and rights, and reorganized their desires. Because of these socioeconomic shifts, I situate my analysis of queer men's reorganized desires and sexual hierarchies in post-2010 China.

First, LGBTQ advocacy has expanded in China since 2010. Based on this, queer subjects have developed different understandings of their sexualities, such as how to identify themselves in everyday life. The expanding information and resources available have destabilized the group of *tongzhi* into a more heterogeneous community. China did not decriminalize homosexuality until 1997, and did not remove it from classification as a mental illness until 2001. Thus, early Chinese LGBT organizations focused on advocacy in the name of HIV prevention, a tactic that the state tacitly endorsed. During recent years, organizations emerged with more political appeals and alternative agendas, such as familial, social and legal recognition, community building, and same-sex marriage rights. Yet only a handful of China's LGBT organizations are legally registered entities (Hildebrandt 2011). Among the emergent NGOs, PFLAG China is one of the most influential. Founded in Guangzhou in 2008, PFLAG has grown into a nationwide

organization. It has extended its activities into most of China's provinces. These include hotlines for queer people's parents, national conferences, and regional workshops. Shuzhen Huang and Daniel Brouwer (2018) point out that coming out to their families, rather than to the public, is the most profound struggle that Chinese queer people face. Negotiation with family members and seeking familial recognition is considered many queer people's ultimate challenge. Due to the significance of the family in Confucian culture, PFLAG's influence has outshined many peer organizations, including those with longer histories. This has been because it has reached more than queer people themselves, but also their families, friends, and allies (see Figure 1) in local advocacy. The Beijing LGBT Center, which was also founded in 2008, has also been integral in creating communities for sexual minorities in the capital. They recruit volunteers, hold formal lectures and workshops about LGBT topics, and promote casual events for queer people to build their personal networks.

Figure 1: The Eleventh Annual PFLAG China Workshop, on a cruise ship from Shenzhen to Da Nang, Vietnam

These organizations have not only provided information and produced knowledge on sexuality, but they have also enabled queer people to learn about self-acceptance of their "normal" sexualities, pride cultures, equal rights, mental health, etc. But unlike Western

advocacy, although the Chinese advocacy has adopted many terms and ideas from the West, these organizations are less confrontational in challenging the government and the legal system (Moreno-Tabarez et al. 2014). Moreover, some Chinese NGOs have created their own agendas, including prioritizing tactics to cope with familial relationships. With the increasing resources available on and for sexual minorities, queer subjects have absorbed an array of information. Accordingly, they have constructed various understandings of their sexualities and their relationships with other queer people.

Second, the changing queer space is another salient transformation that has influenced how queer people interact and express sexual desires. In the late 1990s, Chinese queer men began surfing the Internet to connect with "similar people." The tools they used included BBSs (bulletin board systems) and chatrooms. The innovation in media technology has expanded queer space, which had previously been known to be parks and public bathrooms. It has also provided more opportunities to interact with other queer people. Queer dating apps did not appear until around 2010, expanding the possibilities for spontaneous interactions via mobile devices. The embeddedness of mobile devices and dating apps in all social contexts, including in schools, shopping malls, and on public transportation, allows queer people to "queer" these spaces and interact with similar people based on geographical proximity. Jack'd from the United States was one of the earliest gay dating apps in China; it became popular among Chinese queer men in 2010. In the following years, Chinese companies designed their own apps, including Blued (2012), Zank (2013) and Aloha (2014). Among these apps, Blued claimed to have the most users worldwide, with more than 40 million by the end of 2019 (Miao and Chan 2020), and its development has been boosted by global investment capital. In spite of fewer users (around 3.5 million as of May 2020), Aloha targets more "desirable" queer men, namely men with more

attractive physical appearances, higher incomes, higher education, etc. Unlike apps such as Grindr, which offers a singular service focused on networking, Chinese gay apps enable users to join chat groups, watch livestreaming shows, play games, and even read LGBTQ related news. Thus, these Chinese apps provide multiple services and create communities to increase users' viscosity on their devices.

Figure 2: The interfaces of Blued and Aloha, pictures retrieved from official websites

Location-aware apps have accelerated the tempo of interactions and increased options for hookups in queer communities. Unlike traditional offline networking, the connections established on apps are often based on photos, demographic information presented in profiles, and short bios. Nevertheless, it has been reported that this new mode of networking does not promote the building of friendships or long-term relationships (Yeo and Fung 2018). Moreover, the apps have been critiqued for prioritizing physical features and promoting judgmental culture, because apps users treat individual bodies as disposable, manipulable, and exchangeable objects (Penney 2014). Human subjects are also often reduced to quantifiable projects, as their values are often determined by the statistics they present on this virtual sexual market, including their height, weight, income, or even penis size. These features also leave queer users more, and

creative, approaches to present themselves that they could not have achieved in physical spaces or in traditional queer cyberspace.

Apart from the proliferation of dating apps, gay bars and/or nightclubs have opened in many Chinese cities. This trend has been facilitated by the growing Chinese middle class, with its stronger consumption capacity (Barton, Chen, and Jin 2013). Gay bars/nightclubs used to be limited to several major Chinese cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, but they have become more prevalent and have appeared in several provincial capitals since 2010. Due to the high consumption costs involved in patronizing these nightscapes, foreigners and overseas Chinese constituted the majority of bar and nightclub clientele in the past (Farrer and Field 2015). However, the expansion of China's middle class has turned more local Chinese into consumers of these spaces. By the time I was conducting fieldwork in 2017, local Chinese had already become the primary patrons of gay bars/nightclubs.

Beijing had four overt gay bars and nightclubs in 2017 and 2018: Destination, Rabbit, Kai Bar, and Anchor. Another popular nightclub, Funky, closed in 2016. Each of these establishments was located around Worker's Stadium (see Figure 3). The district created for the working class in the Mao Era has now become a hub of Beijing's night life. The surrounding neighborhood—Sanlitun—is also home to many foreign embassies and expats. There is also considerable heterogeneity between these bars and clubs. Destination was the only one with a dancing pool in 2017 and 2018, and thus it charged an expensive cover on weekends (from 60 to 120 yuan, approximately 8.5 to 17 US dollars). However, it rarely charged an admission fee on weekdays, which provided opportunities for lower-income groups opportunities to patronize it. The other three bars did not charge a cover, among which Kai Bar was the cheapest, as it often sold counterfeit alcohol to attract queer people with low incomes, such as students. Thus, these

queer spaces were hierarchized based on their class statuses, among which Destination was believed to be the most upscale.

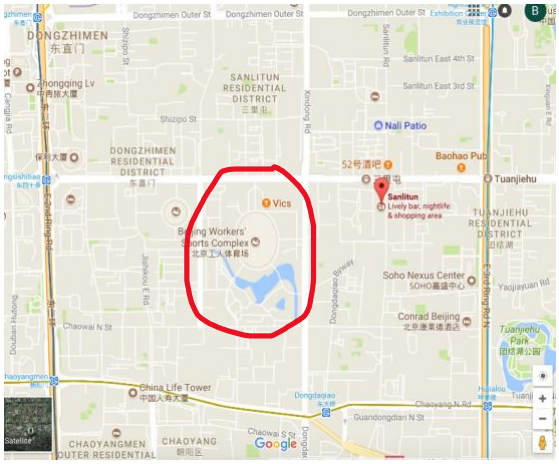

Figure 3: Locations of gay bars/nightclubs around Sanlitun

The third feature of the shifting queer ecology is the booming pink economy, which often intertwines with China's queer politics. Instead of being treated as political subjects, queer people today are often seen as (potential) consumers in the pink economy. Blued's success has been cited as epitomizing the success of China's pink economy. By the end of 2018, it had finished seven rounds of financing. In the most recent round in early 2018, it raised $100 million in a Series D funding round led by a Hong Kong based corporation—CDH Investment (Dowling 2018). In July 2020, Blued became the first LGBTQ social networking company to ring the Nasdaq opening bell (S. Wang 2020). Blued's CEO, Geng Le, claims that due to China's restrictions on LGBT activism, business has become the most powerful force for making queer people visible. Since 2014, Blued/Danlan, The L (a lesbian app), and Community Marketing Inc. have been collaborating to publish reports for the Annual China LGBT Community Survey (Community Marketing 2014), on queer people's consumption habits. Blued's competitor, Zank, has also worked with Tsinghua University to publish its own annual survey reports on Chinese

LGBT people's consumption patterns.[4] Since queer subjects have been depoliticized as non-threatening subjects, a state media outlet, *China Daily*, has even reported on the potential of China's pink economy, and called for more explorations of this field (Shan 2016). The *China Daily* article points out that, as the world's third-largest LGBT market, China's pink economy is valued at $300 billion per annum. Moreover, these surveys emphasize that LGBT people work in industries with higher incomes, have more disposable income, and have more needs for social life than their heterosexual peers (Community Marketing 2014; Zank 2016). Thus, queer people have been essentialized as more valuable consumers, deserving of market attention. Under this context, various businesses have launched products or services targeting queer people, such as gay tourism and surrogacy consulting. Industries such as fitness centers, fashion products, and beauty products have also shifted attention to queer people and promoted the ideas of self-care, personal choice, and responsibility to queer people in order to maximize pink market profits. Due to variegated consumption patterns, queer subjects are further divided amidst the age of the pink economy.

Political restrictions on LGBTQ activism have pushed the marriage of the pink economy and queer politics in China. Many organizations have created double or multiple identities as both a business and an advocacy group. For example, the influential Blued is actually only one business of its mother corporation—Blue City. This corporation has two other businesses: Danlan and Bluedbaby. Danlan is framed as an NGO engaging in HIV prevention in China, which the government has found to be an important partner in public health, while Bluedbaby is

[4] I use LGBT, GLBT, and LGBTQ interchangeably in this dissertation. When I use LGBT or GLBT, it is because this was the term used by a person included in a report, or an organization's official translation.

a new business launched in 2017 that offers surrogacy service.[5] Blue City's multiple identities allow it to balance its relationship with the government, the market, and investors. On many occasions, Geng Le has indicated that China's queer politics should be based on business, an easier approach that renders Chinese queer people visible to society, and fulfills their needs as sexual minorities, as opposed to the contentious activism that is bound to fail in China.

Figure 4: An information session on Bluedbaby's surrogacy service

Another example is Destination. Established in 2004, Destination was initially a gay nightclub in Beijing. In order to create space for survival and thriving, Destination has also participated in HIV prevention projects and used an entire floor as a testing center. This eased its relationship with the local government. Moreover, in around 2017, it framed itself as a multicultural center by utilizing its third floor as an art gallery to promote queer culture. Thus, many businesses have claimed to, and have been believed to be, the linchpin of China's queer politics. These practices have also convinced queer people that they are engaging in queer politics as customers and/or consumers.

[5] Surrogacy has yet to be legalized in China, and Bluedbaby connects clients with organizations overseas that offer surrogacy services. This has become a promising industry that targets both heterosexual and queer people. The cost of surrogacy is prohibitively high such that only upper or upper-middle-class people can afford it.

Each of these transformations has influenced queer people's understanding of their sexual identities, their relationship with heteronormative society, and with other queer people. Queer communities in today's China can hardly be united as a single community due to the growing internal factions. People living in urban areas like Beijing are more affected by these changes, because they have more access to these physical resources, and have developed more lived experiences enabled by these shifts. Alongside these transformations brought about by global capital, technological innovation, transnational activism, and state regulation, queer men's desires have been reproduced and reorganized.

Homonormative desire

The transformation in same-sex desires, which I define as homonormative desire, is becoming increasingly normative. This is resulting in an uneven distribution of sexual capital and the emergence of sexual hierarchies among Chinese queer men. Homonormativity as a concept has been contested and redeveloped. There are two major modes of conceptualization: homonormativity as a neoliberal politics that assimilates, de-politicizes, and objectifies queer subjects, and homonormativity as a cultural norm that privileges and values only certain queer subjects in everyday practices. Both approaches suggest the outcome of homonormativity as limited and weakened queerness, but they contend different modes of producing norms and reflections of norms at the macro and the micro levels respectively. My adoption of this concept focuses on the latter, but synthesizes the two to illuminate how sexual norms are produced at both the structural and micro levels.

Lisa Duggan's conceptualization is probably the most cited and recognized one. According to Duggan, homonormativity is a new sexual politics that "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the

possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2002, 179). These neoliberal policies prioritize rights and equality as the major pursuits of sexual minorities so as to be assimilated into the "normal" society. One typical political appeal is to normalize queer people through same-sex marriage (Warner 1999b, 1999a). In addition, sexual minorities are targeted to be depoliticized subjects—consumers. Gay marketing practices draw boundaries between respectable (marketable) and less respectable members of the LGBTQ communities (Sender 2004, 15). These neoliberal practices narrow the understanding of queerness and rights, and also conflate equality with economic choice (David M Halperin and Traub 2009). These attempts end up domesticating and objectifying queer people. Moreover, queer people's access to the public sphere is limited after being depoliticized as mere consumers. Drawing on Duggan's theorization, Jasbir Puar (2006) points out that homonationalism epitomizes one type of homonormativity which demarcates the gay-friendly and inclusive United States and the "terrorist" and exclusive Middle East, at the level of nation-states. These scholars theorize homonormativity, and illuminate the emergent or crystallized sexual norms from a macropolitical and policy-making perspective. However, their theories have been critiqued as presenting homonormativity as a homogenous and global external entity. They have also been accused of being a product of an all-encompassing structure of neoliberalism which exerts normative power on sexual minorities everywhere (B. Brown 2012, 1066-1067). This perspective overlooks how homonormative policies and practices are produced in specific sociocultural contexts, particularly beyond the Western metropolitan milieu.

In fact, homonormativity is not only reflected at the macro level as specific political policies or economic activities. Before Duggan, Halberstam (1998, 9) mentioned that both

heteronormative and homonormative cultures exclude female masculinity, and pathologize it as a sign of misidentification and maladjustment. Thus, for Halberstam, homonormativity is a cultural code that emerges in queer communities, only accepting those subjects who show normative masculinity/femininity as community members while marginalizing others whose affective presentations are incongruent with their cisgender. Yet Halberstam's use of homonormativity has received less attention. Building on this use, Susan Stryker reconceptualizes homonormativity as more than a neoliberal practice in its macropolitical manifestations, but a micropolitical operation that "aligns gay interests with dominant constructions of knowledge and power that disqualify the very modes of knowing threatening to disrupt the smooth functioning of normative space and that displace modes of embodiment calling into question the basis of authority from which normative voices speak" (2008, 155). She critiques how transgender theory and practice has been marginalized and displaced in contemporary homonormative GLBT activism that, albeit based on "orientation queer," largely conforms to gender norms. Thus, queerness is narrowed to only applying to stereotypical affluent, fit, abled, and white adult gays or lesbians (Cover 2013). Queer people who do not meet these criteria are likely to experience shame (Judith Halberstam 2005b) in an era when queer politics have been promoting a mandatory culture of pride and happiness (Lovelock 2019). Therefore, homonormativity is not necessarily a product of neoliberalism after the 1980s, as early queer communities and movements had already witnessed the emergence of oppressive sexual norms at a micropolitical level. These studies allow for an understanding of how homosexual norms permeate daily lives.

In order to explicate the emergence of sexual norms and their implications in queer communities, I argue that homonormativity is a sexual politics and culture that operate at both the structural and micro levels to privilege and/or normalize some individual features, sexual

practices, and erotic desires, while marginalizing others. This either reproduces existing oppression or forges new sexual inequality among queer people. Homonormative desire is an invisible disciplinary tool that normalizes the beings of certain queer subjects as acceptable, palatable, or desirable. Furthermore, homonormativity is not merely a replica of heteronormativity in queer communities, nor does it always uphold or reinforce heteronormativity. Instead, queer people and organizations may contest heteronormativity while fashioning new sexual norms that lead to remarginalization in their respective queer communities. As David Halperin (1995, 32) points out, techniques of normalization can include ways of dressing, physical exercise, desiring, attitudes and behavior. Rob Cover (2013, 336) adds that there may be other factors in the process of normalization, including "racial and ethnic norms, gender conformity, economic affluence, body types, and age." For each society, we should be attentive to the specific contexts that fashion sexual norms, beyond a homogeneous global production. For example, is the role of race and ethnicity similar in the productions of normative sexual desires and practices between China and the United States? My use of homonormativity centers on the daily practices for exploring the emergence of sexual norms in urban queer male communities, and for elucidating remarginalization among Chinese queer men. Moreover, I situate my exploration of homonormative desires in a specific context which has witnessed technological, political, and economic shift.

However, transnationalizing China is not immune to neoliberalism. Due to the stable and powerful role of the state in control of marketization and modernization, the idea of a neoliberal China has been challenged (Nonini 2008). I am also cautious of suggesting that China has been neoliberalized. My occasional use of neoliberalism only points out the flow of the neoliberal governmentality, manifested as the economic rationality, into China's public cultures over the

past decades. According to this rationality, moral subjects are configured as entrepreneurial subjects, and their autonomy is measured by their capacity for self-care (W. Brown 2003; Rofel 2007, 16). Based on ethnographic studies of BDSM practices in the Bay Area, Margot Weiss (2011, 18) argues that neoliberal rationality is central to contemporary sexual cultures that valorize "free choice, individual agency, and personal responsibility." However, the overemphasis on personal choice in a private setting belies its relationship with the public configuration, which sometimes reinforces forms of inequality (19). My findings demonstrate that this rationality has also been pervasive in Chinese queer cultures, and has been adopted by many Chinese queer men to justify their sexual desires. It even normalizes sexual hierarchies through rhetoric such as "personal preference," "chemistry," or even "*yuanfen*," which means destiny. The production of desires is normalized and disguised as a private matter. Therefore, my use of neoliberalism throughout this dissertation refers to the rationality that has been introduced into China; it is not a statement that China's is being neoliberalized.

Therefore, my conceptualization of homonormativity is more aligned with Halberstam's and Stryker's uses which examine the emergence of sexual norms as cultural codes embedded in their everyday practices. However, my conceptualization also aims to understand transnational forces' effect on the emergence of normative desires. The connection between everyday expressions of normative desires and transnational cultural flows suggests that the normalization of desires should be considered a public matter; it is not merely a personal expression or choice. Thus, it does not entirely break with its conventional definition, because this neoliberal rationality is one hidden drive, as a byproduct of China's transnationalism, that promotes the normalization of desires in urban queer communities.

Methods and analysis

My project focuses on emergent homonormative desires and their implied hierarchies of queer people. Therefore, I use an ethnographic approach, with extensive fieldwork conducted in Beijing from 2017 to 2018, to scrutinize how these norms have taken shape and manifested in urban China. I chose Beijing as the site because its development over the past two decades reflects the trajectory of China's involvement in transnationalism. Specifically, it has triggered a rapid transformation of queer communities, such as the neighborhood of Sanlitun, home to Beijing's gay nightlife. Several major queer companies, including Blued and Aloha, are also located in Beijing. In addition, as China's political center, Beijing's queer culture is also under strict political regulation. Moreover, Beijing has also witnessed several centuries of homoerotic histories in spaces. These include Liyuan, a former Peking Opera theatre where same-sex behaviors were prevalent between male patrons and men impersonating women (Vitiello 2011). Therefore, Beijing is an ideal site which enables me to understand the reorganization of queer desires in a city at the forefront of China's transnationalism, and is also entangled with the political cultures and sexual legacies. My study includes seventy recorded interviews with men who are attracted to men, fifteen months of digital ethnography, nine months of physical participant observation, and collections of visual and textual materials.

Interviews

From 2017 to 2018, I conducted seventy recorded interviews in Beijing. I recruited interviewees through online posts on WeChat and Douban, as well as snowball sampling. My interviewees' ages ranged from 18 to 48. Most of them had grown up in post-Reform China and had life experiences that diverged from earlier queer generations. Their educational backgrounds

ranged from high school dropouts to PhDs, but the majority held bachelor's degrees. The average duration of my interviews was approximately ninety minutes.

The first part of my interview identified a variety of terms that Chinese queer men use to refer to "men who are interested in men". I asked them to interpret each term, discuss preferences in usage, and specify in which contexts they use each term. Then, I explored Chinese gay men's desired sexual subjects and examined their criteria for evaluating their ideal partners. I explored which characteristics they prioritize in defining ideal men, and their rationales for such choices. Important indexes included body types, age, class, race, ethnicity, education, geographical origin, and affective presentations.

After inquiring about ideal partners, I showed video clips and photos of popular men to my interviewees, including nine Destination performers and fifteen of Aloha's "annual best performers." I collected these materials during my preliminary ethnography. For this part, I asked participants to evaluate these men's sexual attractiveness and identify which one(s) they preferred. Their detailed evaluations supplement my analysis of the ideal masculinities in specific sexual fields based on concrete examples. Notably, I did not show photos and videos at the beginning of my interviews. This was because I wanted to avoid leading their answers to my questions on sexual desires.

During the final section of my interviews, I asked participants to evaluate their own sexual attractiveness. After an overall evaluation, I asked study participants to analyze their own sexual desirability on the basis of their identities, physical traits, affective presentations, and external resources. Then, I explored strategies that they had employed, or planned to take advantage of, to increase sexual capital. These interviews enable my work to demonstrate how

individuals present and (struggle to) build sexual capital in both online and offline environments, thereby constructing what they perceive to be desirable.

Participant observation off- and online

My second approach was to conduct participant observation in both physical and digital queer spaces. I chose Destination and Aloha as my primary fieldsites. Both of the spaces are perceived as being "fancier" than their peers, in both online and offline interactions. More importantly, these fancier spaces are supposed to connect more desirable men. In a city with over twenty million residents, Destination is the only gay nightclub that offers a spacious dancing pool. Its four-story building also houses several bars and an art gallery. Thus, this space attracted a large crowd of patrons every weekend. In terms of Aloha, Chinese queer men believe that it attracts men of better appearance, education, and income than Blued. Although Blued has far more users than Aloha, my interlocutors believe that Blued sacrifices quality to expand its user base, and thus does not include the most desirable queer men. Therefore, the popular men in Destination and on Aloha reflect the most desirable sexual subjects off- and online respectively.

I frequented Destination weekly from June to September 2017, and from March to September 2018, particularly over the weekends, or on weekdays when events were held. I analyzed masculinities embodied by popular performers, and compared the men in posters designed to attract customers. In addition, I attended events including the gay dating game—*Feitongwurao* and visited Destination's topless dark room whenever it was open. These events allowed me to experience the libido flow in the most sexually explicit way, and thus understand queer men's desires in this particular space.

My participant observation on Aloha lasted longer than my physical ethnography, including 15 months of observations from June 2017 to September 2018. This is because digital

ethnography is not limited by geographical location. On this app, I examined the most popular men promoted by the platform, such as the fifteen "Annual Best Performers." I compared the more and less popular queer men, as determined by follower counts, and collected 200 profiles of users with over 10,000 followers. This involved examining their profile photos, statistics (height, weight, income, penis size), personal biographies (including interests, educational background, and profession), and other materials that they had posted on their profiles. It also included observations of virtual interactions within live-streaming shows on this app. In these interactions, I scrutinized how queer men identified themselves and other people, and how they expressed sexual desires. I also collected materials from other social media, including WeChat groups, Douban, and Weibo, such as gay chat groups that offered open access. These observations enabled me to investigate queer men's expressions of desire in mainstream media platforms.

Collecting historical, textual, and visual materials

I have also collected various materials to supplement my interviews and observations. This included archival research at the Capital Library to collect data on Beijing's socioeconomic development over the past decades. I also garnered materials from Destination about the performers and events, and Aloha's websites and social media about their live performances, popular users, and events from recent years. These materials helped me understand the transformation of popular subjects in these spaces. In addition, I collected anecdotes and online recounts about queer lives in urban areas, particularly those relevant to romance or sex, to elucidate how desires unfold in textual materials.

Data Analysis

Over the course of my fieldwork, I hired two research assistants, both undergrads in Beijing, to transcribe my interview audio. After reading all of my transcripts, field notes, and other visual materials multiple times, I used the qualitative materials analysis software NVivo to code all of my data. I coded my transcripts under categories including modes of identification, general sexual preferences, body types, sexual labels, race, ethnicity, and geographical origin, class, age and generation, personal evaluations, and self-technologies. In order to avoid decontextualized or ahistorical analysis, I shifted between "'narrow and deep' analysis of individual lives and 'broad and shallow' analyses of patterns across individuals" (Carrillo 2018, 15). I also created a codebook with one or two pages of summaries for each interview to guide my understanding of the holistic story behind each person and the context of their answers.

Chapter outline and intervention

Recent socioeconomic transformations have facilitated the expansion of queer space, and have increased queer men's opportunities to interact with others. However, my findings suggest that this does not mean that queer men have gained freedom, autonomy, and equality. Instead, these changes have also normalized queer desires and exacerbated the hierarchization of sexual subjects. The internal sexual hierarchies have become a pressing issue facing Chinese queer men, in addition to discrimination from heterosexual communities. These new sexual norms are coded in queer men's everyday practices, from their tactics of identification to expressions of sexual desires.

My dissertation is structured in five chapters. By examining Chinese queer men's linguistic and communicative practices, Chapter One demonstrates that they have shifted away from adopting the postsocialist identity of *tongzhi*, or "comrade," for self-identification. This was

a linguistic tactic that Chinese queer people adopted in the 1990s and early 2000s. Instead, queer men in post-2010 China have deployed various linguistic tactics for self-identification. This indicates that Chinese queer men have developed understandings of their sexualities and their relationship with heteronormative society. This chapter illuminates five modes of identification by adopting terms, either extant terms or neologisms, through which Chinese queer men fashion subjectivities. These proliferating modes of self-identification have ostensibly diversified the communities, but in fact reveal the internal hierarchization within Chinese queer communities. This is because many queer men have deployed tactics to distance themselves from other queer men. For example, some adopt the term "gay" or "*jiyou*" to exclude older, or "old-school," men who use the term *tongzhi*. Thus, their communicative practices shed light on the remarginalization of Chinese queer men.

Chapters Two to Four highlight how sexual norms have remarginalized queer men on the basis of body types, sexual labels, race, ethnicity, and geography. Chapter Two demonstrates that unlike the Chinese heterosexual market, which prioritizes class, Chinese queer men over-eroticize bodies, and perceive body type as the vital criterion in evaluating sexual desirability. This is partly because same-sex partners' rights are not accepted by the state. Thus, many queer people do not see the potential for long-term financial benefit in same-sex relationships. My analysis of popular bodies in Destination and on Aloha demonstrates the visualization and standardization of bodies among Chinese queer men. Bodies are no longer supposed to be hidden; rather they are expected to be on display. Destination, as a transnational queer space, promotes a tough and stoic masculine image embodied in pumped-up muscles, derived from the hypermasculine types of the West. Meanwhile, Aloha embraces the softer masculinities epitomized by "thin muscles," as a hybrid product of Western and traditional East Asian

masculinities. Moreover, bodies have become measurable and quantifiable projects, particularly on digital platforms where queer users often present themselves through statistics, including weight, height, income, and sexual labels. Chinese queer men exclude short and overweight men, and set criteria such as ranges for height or BMI (body mass index). Thus, bodies are also demarcated as normal/desirable or abnormal/undesirable objects through the standardization of sexual desires.

Chapter Three examines the discourse of "there are more 0s than 1s," and explores why this statement is a widely held "sexual truth" among Chinese queer men. It also investigates the implications of gay men holding this belief. In urban queer communities; "1" generally refers to the active and insertive role, similar to the term "top" in the English-speaking queer community, while "0" refers to the passive and receptive role in a same-sex relationship, similar to "bottom." My findings demonstrate that the statement "there are more 0s than 1s" cannot be validated from a statistical angle because Chinese queer men have variable understandings of sexual labels. Moreover, these labels are unstable. Instead, this belief is produced by unequal thresholds for being a 1 or a 0; there is a higher threshold for qualifying as a 1, determined by sexual potency and skills, sexual aesthetics, physical features, and personality, while anyone can be a 0. Moreover, "0.5s" (the versatile) are often lumped into the category of 0 rather than 1. Thus, this higher threshold for 1 excludes many men's possibility of self-identifying as a 1, or being deemed a 1. This belief results in unequal sexual capital between queer men, as men embodying traditional masculinity or self-identifying as a 1 are deemed more desirable than those who self-identify as, or are perceived as, 0s. I argue that in the statement, 1 is not necessarily the penetrator, but an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. The "shortage" of 1s can also be understood as the belief that the Chinese queer community is experiencing a masculinity

shortage or crisis. This creates a hierarchy of men's desirability, based on their sex labels and embodied masculinity.

Chapter Four reveals that instead of embracing the superiority and desirability of white masculinity, Chinese queer men reveal Sino/Han-centric desires. This is reflected in the fact that most of them express exclusive desire for (Han) Chinese, particularly in their romantic desires. This "Chinese" in their desires refers to ethnically Chinese who speak Chinese, understand Chinese culture, and "look" Chinese. Nevertheless, this contestation of white masculinity does not suggest that they are pursuing a more equitable global racial order. Instead, the Sino/Han-centric desire reinforces global racial inequality by creating new discourses of sexual racism. On a global scale, Chinese queer men exclude black men and Muslims. At a regional level, they deconstruct the category of Asian by recategorizing "other Asians." For example, South Asians are categorized under black people rather than Asians, and thus as an undesirable racial category. At the local level, Chinese queer men deconstruct the idea of a Chinese identity by indicating varying desires toward Chinese of different geographic origins. They create two contradictory discourses on men from Southern and Northern China: masculine and desirable Northern men versus feminine and thus undesirable Southern men; hypermasculine Northern men versus perfectly masculine Southern men. This tension between the two discourses suggests the space for renegotiation of Chinese masculinities.

The last chapter investigates queer men's personal evaluations in contemporary Chinese queer communities, and the technologies they adopt to improve sexual capital so as to climb the sexual hierarchies. Based on Foucault's "technologies of the self," this chapter illuminates that Chinese queer men adopt corporeal, online self-presentational, cultural, and economic technologies to increase their sexual capital. Among them, corporeal technology is considered

the most efficient approach for pursuing upward sexual mobility, including working out, applying cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery. The transformation of personal image does not necessarily involve literal physical change, as some queer men resort to refining self-presentational skills online, such as manipulating personal statistics (height, weight, etc.) or photoshopping pictures, to create a better self in an era when queer networking is reliant on social media. Despite the fact that Chinese queer men consider class a less important factor, some believe that improving economic status will win them sexual opportunities. In addition, some queer men are convinced that external beauty is tied to internal beauty. This means that becoming more cultured, by means of reading or developing talents, will manifest in the persona and thereby be reflected in one's looks. In spite of the proliferation of technologies, I argue that these promises of self-improvement are built on the cruel optimism that traps many in the fantasy of the unachievable. As a result, after an enormous investment of money, energy, and emotions, many queer men live in continual anxiety, disappointment, pain, and trauma because they fail to live up to the fantasy or to maintain an ideal state necessary for success on the sexual market.

This project contests the monolithic way of understanding Chinese homosexuality through the term *tongzhi* by illuminating the proliferating modes of identification in urban queer communities, and the differentiation within queer communities in a transnationalizing China. Moreover, this work reveals that the process of transnationalism does not necessarily bring about sexual liberation. Rather, it has contributed to the hierarchization of queer subjects, as manifested in the production of queer men's normative desires and uneven distribution of sexual capital to queer subjects. This project also highlights that these sexual inequalities have been produced and organized in a different manner than in the West, such as the distinct discourse of sexual racism and divergent categorizations of race and ethnicity. In addition, my dissertation reconceptualizes

homonormativity as a sexual politics and culture that operates in both the macro- and micropolitical levels that asks for research under particular sociopolitical contexts. This retheorization expands its geographical applicability to societies less affected by an all-encompassing structure of neoliberalism to comprehend the sexual remarginalization of sexual minorities. In the end, this exploration and analysis raise both scholarly and societal awareness of the constructions of sexual hierarchies. These are less visible than other hierarchies, and they call for more academic attention and activism to reach these remarginalized groups in China, and other societies in the Global South.

Chapter One: Beyond *Tongzhi* and Constructing Tactical Sexual Identities

When I was chatting in a WeChat group with several queer friends in 2018, one of them started joking about us as *tongxinglian huanzhe* (homosexual patient). Although the word *tongxinglian*, which can be translated as homosexual or same-sex obsession, is an "official" term included in Chinese dictionaries that refers to people who are attracted to the same sex, it was not often used by Chinese queer people due to its medicalized and pathologized connotations. My friend did not only adopt this supposed negative term, but also added a *huanzhe* (patient) to double the negativity of this expression rooted in medical discourse. Interestingly, this use did not cause any discomfort among us, but triggered the affective reaction of being amused, because this ironical use empowered us to satirize the medical knowledge that defines homosexuality as a disease that needs to be cured. Throughout my fieldwork in Beijing, I noticed increasing uses of this supposedly abandoned term in their everyday life. Moreover, China's PFLAG includes *tongxinglian* in its Chinese organization name rather than other more neutral terms. They have also been promoting the re-adoption of this term that queer people tried to distance from. Why did some Chinese queer people and organizations decide to readopt this historically stigmatized term? What other terms are used in urban China for identification? How are their uses different? This chapter aims to map Chinese queer men's communicative practices in order to understand various modes of identification online and offline in post-2010 China, and illuminate varied understanding of their sexualities, their relationships with the heteronormative society and with other queer people.

Over the past two decades (2000s, 2010s), scholarship on same-sex eroticism in China has proliferated. It tends to address a particular image of the Chinese same-sex subject with a unique name: *tongzhi*, or "comrade." *Tongzhi* was granted this queer meaning in the late 1980s,

and it has evolved into an academic term since 2000. However, my ethnography suggests that the dominance of this term has waned alongside the proliferating uses of more terms for identification. Thus, it is time to revisit the relevance of *tongzhi* and explore Chinese queer people's alternative modes of identification. This ethnographic study demonstrates four tactics Chinese queer men use to identify themselves and others through linguistic practices. This transformation sheds light on the fact that Chinese queer men, not limited by the single mode of identification through *tongzhi*, have developed different understandings of their sexualities, and distinctive relationships with both other queer men and the heteronormative society.

Wah-shan Chou's *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (2000, 8) prompted an era for studying contemporary Chinese homosexuality under the category of *tongzhi*. This is because in the 1990s, the popular adoption of *tongzhi* suggested the existence of a distinct sexual identity and a unique way of identification for Chinese (male) sexual minorities. Though this communist term was initially used to address comrade peers, in 1989 at a film festival in Hong Kong, its meaning was queered and adopted to refer to sexual minorities. This queer meaning and usage of *tongzhi* then traveled to Taiwan and Mainland China in the early 1990s and became a slang term. Moreover, the juxtaposition of communism and queerness granted Chinese queer subjects a particular subjectivity in a historical moment; they could express same-sex desires, and communicate sexual identity through communist discourse, without being identified or policed. Jack Halberstam (2018, 10-11) claims that the emergence of new terminologies signifies the end of the medical/psychiatric domination of sexual discourse in Western societies, as sexual subjects begin to participate in naming their understandings of their own embodiments. The circulation of *tongzhi* in 1990s China suggests a similar cultural milieu, in which medical discourse could no longer dominate sexual discourse in queer people's

everyday lives. Inspired by Chou's work, further scholarship has explored queer topics in China under the category of *tongzhi*. These studies have contributed to the understanding of the lived experiences of sexual minorities in China.

However, this chapter argues that the popularity of adopting *tongzhi* has resulted primarily from Chinese queer people's historical need to create a safe and ambiguous identity so that queer subjects could pass as heterosexuals in the 1990s. The tension between the state and queer communities persists, but queer people have imagined more ways to address their relationships with the state and society over the past two decades. Transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and consumerism have come together to fashion new sexual selfhoods in the new era. Consequently, individuals now employ a broader range of contextual terms to communicate identities. Some are foreign words, such as the word *gay*, which traveled from other parts of the globe; others have local origins, like *jiyou* (gay buddy).[6] Yet, these lexica are not all new. Some, such as *tongxinglian* (homosexual), had formerly been stigmatizing terms. Therefore, it has become necessary to transcend the singular identity *tongzhi* and recognize the kaleidoscope of proliferating terminology. Remaining limited to *tongzhi* and neglecting cultural identities embodied in the practices of other terms at this historical crossroads will inevitably essentialize Chinese queer identity. It will also re-orientalize Chinese queer subjects as something exotic, different and opposite.

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[6] *Jiyou* is often considered a vernacular expression that embodies a local identity. This idea will be complicated in the following section, because this term has some Western origins. Throughout the chapter, I include a direct translation in parentheses if a word is translatable, except for *tongzhi*. Because of the large number of Chinese terms introduced in this chapter, including a direct translation makes it easier for readers who do not speak Chinese to follow. However, this reductionist translation inevitably risks the loss of nuanced meanings.

This chapter sheds light on the proliferation of lexica for naming sexual minorities and how these lexica are used in Chinese queer men's communicative and linguistic practices. Naming provides a sense of self and elucidates the distinction between the self and the other. It is difficult to imagine an individual without a name in contemporary society (Calhoun 1994; Jack Halberstam 2018). By observing the daily interaction of online communities and interviewing queer men about their uses of different terms, I address several questions: how do newly adopted terms and reinterpretations of old terms contest the legitimacy of considering *tongzhi* the only queer (male) subject in China? In what contexts are these terms used? What kind of sexual identity(ies) are constructed when queer men deploy various terms? How are the newly constructed identities different from the former dominant identity, *tongzhi*?

My findings demonstrate that the term *tongzhi* no longer occupies the dominant position in popular use today, as it did in the 1990s. Nowadays, a declining number of people identify themselves with this post-socialist identity. Instead, the proliferation of terms suggests more possibilities for identification in Chinese queer communities. As linguistic anthropologists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall suggest (2004), identity is not fixed in any category, but forged in actions and practices. The semiotic process of linguistic and communicative practice is a central practice that formulates identities. In this study, I do not suggest that each term refers to a particular identity; instead, it is Chinese queer men's constant and reiterated uses of terms that give rise to various identities. Therefore, rooted in cultural studies, my analysis focuses on how Chinese queer men interpret different terms and appropriate various linguistic signs to construct identities, rather than examining the denoted and fixed identities embodied in these lexica. This paradigm obviates the essentialization of identities embodied in language and communicative signs.

This chapter begins with the singular, ambiguous, post-socialist identity, and then analyzes the different groups of identities constructed over the past two decades. The trajectory of the transformation substantiates the mutability, instability, fragmentation, and fluidity of post-modern identities, as many social theorists (S. Hall 1990; Giddens 1991; Calhoun 1994; Grossberg 1996; S. Hall 1997a) have proposed. These post-structuralist features of identities have prompted backlash in academia and debate over whether and how scholars should use the concept of identity. Identity allows us to sort out ourselves and others, individually and collectively (Jenkins 2008). However, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) point out that the usage of identity is heterogeneous and leads to distinctive understandings of identity. They suggest there are strong and weak conceptions of identity: the former emphasizes sameness across time and person, while the latter focuses on differences through qualifiers like negotiation, contingency and multiplicity, based on "clichéd constructivism" (2000, 10-11). Furthermore, they argue that the heterogeneity of usage reveals that the word of identity is overburdened and may be replaced by more relevant concepts, including identification, self-understanding, and commonality. Identification and categorization, building on Brubaker and Cooper's critique, invite scholars to consider sexual subjects as agents who do the identifying. "Self- and other-identification are fundamentally situational and contextual" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 14). In this project, adopting a term does not mean the subject adopts a permanent identity, as queer men may switch means of identification in different contexts.

Even though I find focusing on the contingent process useful, identification is not merely a process without a product—it produces identity. Chinese queer people have indeed mobilized available linguistic symbols to construct identities through communication practices in different

contexts. In order to distinguish these unstable identities from totalitarian identities, I conceptualize tactical identities to shed light on the particularities of such identities.

The creation of tactical identity builds on Manuel Castells' differentiation of identities and Michel de Certeau's theory of tactics. Castells (2010) proposes three distinct ways and origins of identity constructions; they justify the practice of seeing and defining identity from different angles: legitimizing identity, resistance identity, and project identity. Legitimizing identity is introduced by dominant institutions to reinforce their social domination and is thus an external categorization; resistance identity is initiated by social actors, particularly marginalized groups, for resistance and survival, leading to communes and communities; project identity is also created by social actors as they aim to transform and overturn the entire social structure (Castells 2010, 8). This taxonomy is insightful because it recuperates the flaws of a general perception of identity, yet none informs Chinese queer men's identity practices. The construction of new identities is engendered by social actors themselves, but they do not aim to transform the entire social structure; this is limited by China's political environment and opportunity structure. Neither does the construction of new identities lead to the formation of intelligible communities. Chinese grassroots politics have been theorized by political scientist Kevin O'Brien (1996, 2013) as rightful resistance, in which social actors express appeals through approved channels and appropriate resources following a regime's policies under the pressure of the authoritarian state. Even so, Castells' differentiation of identities informs the possibility of specifying the conception of identity.

In line with China's grassroots activism, Chinese queer people's constructions of identities often take place within the boundary of the legal system; they do not attempt to cross the border and threaten the state's stability. Michel de Certeau (1988) theorizes tactics vis-à-vis

strategies. Unlike strategies that are often employed by the powerful who create a place for resistance external to the dominant structure, tactics are the weapons of the weak. Their resistance transpires within "the enemy's field of vision and within enemy territory" (37cited von Bülow). The lack of an external locus pushes weak social actors to appropriate any resources available to them. In this dissertation, I consider tactical identity a product through which Chinese queer people take advantage of linguistic resources and communicative signs for survival and resistance; yet they do not strive to subvert the authority of the state. Many queer men, particularly the activists in my study, wish to contest heteronormativity, an abstract concept. However, in the state's eyes, this is not threatening, so long as they do not form visible political communities and allies in China.

Tactical identities that Chinese queer men construct have the following features. First, queer men formulate tactical identities in order to resist external categorization such as that of sodomites or pathologized homosexuals. They also refuse to be lumped into the general category of *tongzhi*, to which they cannot connect. Second, tactical identity is contingent and situational. This means queer men may adopt different identities as a response to a situation, and are able to switch between identities, as opposed to having a strong identity tied to the subject. Third, what makes tactical identity switchable is the invisibility of these identities. This is because the formation of these identities is based on the process of identification and the way queer men make sense of themselves and others. Fourth, the invisibility of such mutable identities makes it impossible to consider them analytical primitives which precede the subjects. These features differentiate tactical identities in queer communities from strong conceptions of identities.

After elaborating on Chinese queer men's discontent with *tongzhi*, this chapter identifies five tactics concerning the shifting paths of identification by grouping similar uses of various

terms. The five tactics are characterized by their legibility versus ambiguity, and neutrality/positivity versus antagonism. It provides for: 1) building legible and neutral identities through foreign or more specified words, such as *gay,* and *nantong* (male *tongzhi* or male homosexual); 2) creating legible but antagonistic identities by reinterpreting vernacular and stigmatized terms, including *tongxinglian* (homosexual), *jilao* (fag), *si gay* (dead gay); 3) constructing ambiguous, neutral and modern identities through the invention and reproduction of terms like *jiyou* (gay buddy), *tonglei* (same species), *tongxing* (same sex), *wande* (bent), *quanzi* (circle), *caihong* (rainbow), which are distanced from post-socialist ambiguity; 4) formulating ambiguous but antagonistic identities through seemingly irrelevant words such as *saobi* (whore) and *ji* (hen). Each tactic displays queer men's perceptions on where to position their sexualities in the heteronormative society and in relation to other queer people. Unlike the first four tactics, the last one is 5) expressing discontent with current terms by avoiding specific terminology.

Based on analysis of Filipino gay men's swardspeak in New York,[7] anthropologist Martin Manalansan IV (2003, 46) argues that the various vernacular languages and codes that they coined reflected their "articulations of selfhood, immigrant experiences, and the gay world at large." My aim is not to provide a laundry list of words, but rather to show that, through various linguistic practices for identification, queer men are searching for new selfhood that is not generalized in a singular category. These practices also help them establish connections to more peculiar communities and create different relationships with the heteronormative society. This change not only suggests variation within Chinese queer men, but also distinct positions—namely a hierarchy. Thus, this is the fifth feature of tactical identity: the proliferating modes of

[7] Swardspeak refers to the vernacular language and code that gay men use in the Philippines or in the diaspora (Manalansan IV 2003, 46).

identification build on distinction, exclusion, and even hierarchization, which the following chapters explore.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the adoption of "queer" men to present or signify men who are interested in the same sex is a strategic and convenient choice. Rather than choosing a word that is frequently adopted in lay use to represent "authentic" Chinese homosexuality, I have selected one that is mentioned less often.[8] My consistent use of "queer men" does not aim to register a particular Chinese sexual subject, nor do I intend to use it to replace vernacular expressions more common in the Chinese queer community. The choice of "queer" men is not drawn from lay use, but results from the strategic use of an academic concept. This is because my findings suggest that no term is powerful enough to stabilize the dominant sexual identity. By adopting an academic term, I avoid selecting one that may soon lose its dominance.

A genealogy of *tongzhi* studies and its discontents

Discussion of Chinese terminologies referring to sexual minorities is often the point of departure for works on Chinese homosexuality (Chou 2000; Wong and Zhang 2000; Lim 2006; Kong 2011; Kam 2012; Engebretsen and Schroeder 2015; Hee 2015; T. Zheng 2015b; Bao 2018), because terms used are a reflection of the local features of Chinese homosexuality. Unlike the medical term *homosexual* coined in late 19th century Europe or the identity of *gay* which crystallized in the United States mid-century(Chauncey 1994), the word *tongzhi* is believed to have originated from China's communist history. In addition, its queer use was invented in Hong Kong and its popularity in everyday use derives partly from the necessity to deal with the

[8] Several participants mentioned *ku'er* to me, which is directly translated from "queer," but few people use this word in daily life.

relationship with the state. Thus, this term has epitomized sexual differences between Chinese and Western sexualities.

Since 2000, a series of studies have been conducted or published under the category of *tongzhi*. According to Chou (2000), *tongzhi* was used in the Republican Era and later taken up by both the Nationalist and Communist Parties to refer to revolutionary comrades. However, Wai Siam Hee (2015) demonstrates an earlier origin for *tongzhi* dating back to the late Qing dynasty when political reformers translated it from Russian into Chinese. Furthermore, he points out the différance by tracing the word's transformed meanings: in premodern China, *tongzhi* referred to people with similar interests or pursuits; it then developed into a reference to people with the same political goals in the early Republican era; after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, it was used as a referent, pointing to people with the same beliefs. Its connotation has become ambiguous, since it now refers to either members of the same party or "homosexuals" (Hee 2015, 21-22). The first time *tongzhi* was appropriated by activists to denote those attracted by the same sex was at the First Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 1989 (Chou 2000). The use then travelled to Taiwan and Mainland China. The word gained popularity among Chinese queer people in the 1990s and its appropriation of the revolutionary discourse created an "imagined community" (Wong and Zhang 2000, 249, cited Anderson, 1991) of sexual minorities that were not stigmatized, as they had been with the scientific and medical term *tongxinglian* (homosexual). Minorities were thus less likely to be policed if they used this neologism.

The word's particularity derives from the strategic use of a political slang term by Chinese queer people, which drew the attention of many scholars wanting to explore the specific and special sexual identity it embodied. Chou (2000) and Tiantian Zheng (2015b) both argue that Chinese sexual minorities have created a distinct identity that is less fixed, but more inclusive, as

this word embraces gay, lesbian, and bisexual without distinguishing between them. Travis Kong (2011) claims that *tongzhi* is used in a similar way as *queer* to address all non-conforming genders and sexualities. However, there are some discrepancies within these studies. For example, can *tongzhi* embody non-conforming identities like trans? This remains contested, as no study conducted under the category of *tongzhi* has touched upon issues such as transgender.

It cannot be denied that the term *tongzhi* has contributed to understanding local sexual practices in the context of China's economic and social transformation since the late 1980s. But queer theorist Petrus Liu (2015) points out, insistence on the term's dominance may reinforce oriental exceptionalism and reify non-Western differences. On social media, new terms have emerged over the past decade. Thus, two questions arise: what is the relationship between *tongzhi* and other emerging and adopted words? Is *tongzhi* still the preferred term in general usage? Few studies have tested its relevance in real life contexts to answer these questions. Thus, the relevance of *tongzhi* to the post-2010 Chinese queer communities needs to be reexamined in order to avoid romanticizing Chinese sexual practices.

Tiantian Zheng (2015b) warns against the use of *gay*, *queer* or other translated terms in China because the sexual identities embodied in these Western terms may not be applicable to other cultures. This view reduces differences between Western and non-Western sexual identities to the difference in languages per se. Does the word *gay* maintain its original signification after travelling to non-Western countries? Is *tongzhi* a vernacular identity that is isolated from global cultural flows? China-based sociologist Wei Wei (2007) argues that *tongzhi* does not count as a vernacular identity; rather, it should be seen as "a localized appropriation of the western gay identity" (572). While Zheng's reminder is necessary, she does not investigate the cultural connotations of various terms before jumping to the binary conclusion. In fact, vernacular

identities are not necessarily embodied in native languages, while linguistic practices in foreign languages do not necessarily point to an alien way of identification, because identity is produced through the practice and use of these terms.

In order to complicate sexual identities in a globalizing China, Elisabeth Engebretsen and William Schroeder (2015) proposed using queer/*tongzhi* to reflect different forces of power embedded in native sexual politics. By the same token, Hongwei Bao (2018) suggests translating *tongzhi* as "queer comrade" to capture the two dimensions of meanings of *tongzhi,* and to explore its subversive potential. Furthermore, Bao proposes that "queer comrade" could work as an analytical framework to examine "subject, power, governmentality, social movements and everyday life in China" (4). Their coined academic terms reveal that sexual identities are constructed by multiple and complex sociopolitical forces.

Based on empirical studies, Loretta Wing Wah Ho (2010) and Hongwei Bao (2012) mentioned queer people's use of expressions other than *tongzhi* in everyday life and touch upon the different identities signified. Ho (2010) claims that there is no fixed term to denote "authentic" same-sex identity in popular discourse in China. To justify her argument, she distinguishes several widely-used terms: *tongzhi*, *tongxinglian* (homosexual, or same-sex obsession), *tongxing'ai* (same-sex love), and *gay*. According to her, *tongzhi* implies "earlier" representations of sexual minorities in China. *Tongxinglian* is a popular term in public discourse, and it may be translated as "same-sex obsession" or "homosexual." Similarly, *tongxing'ai*, created by Chinese medical scholar Beichuan Zhang, means "same-sex love" rather than "same-sex obsession," intended to depathologize homosexuality. The use of *tongxing'ai*, however, is limited to specific academic work. Further, Ho suggests that adopting the English word "gay" demonstrates a modern identity regarded as superior over identities signified by other terms

(2010). Her work maps the heterogeneous modes of identification among Chinese queer people and the difficulty of collapsing them into a certain category. More than differences, Bao (2012) pointed out hierarchies embodied in three types of sexual subjects in Shanghai's gay communities: "the transnational and multilingual 'gay,' the young and energetic *tongzhi*, and the older and often married [to a woman] *tongxinglian*" (114). It is particularly insightful for Bao to introduce power relationship between various modes of identification. But it is also crucial to take into account local uses and possible re-appropriation of the English word *gay* and multiple connotations of these terms.

Other terms, such as *jiyou* (gay buddy) or *jilao* (fag), have become popular among Chinese queer people, and terms such as *tongxinglian* (homosexual) have been used in new ways, but have yet to receive sufficient examination. Thus, it is necessary to explore the dynamic of terms used in queer communities, not only through representations, but also in everyday linguistic and communicative practices. More importantly, the altered adoption of words and shifting approaches of naming illuminate distinct sexual identities produced by Chinese queer men's different ways of identification. This new exploration does not essentialize that each term embodies a singular and fixed identity; instead, each term may signal more than one mode of identification, as the cultural meanings of these terms have yet to stabilize.

Cultural Studies—decoding and queering naming

My discontent with *tongzhi* studies does not derive from dissatisfaction with a particular text; instead, it is because the genealogy of the field implies the stability and peculiarity of Chinese sexual identity over the past two decades. Considering *tongzhi* a stable and strong identity ignores the inner differences, complexity, and transformation of queer identities within the context of a globalizing China. In addition, the evolution of *tongzhi* from a term in lay use to

the dominant concept in Chinese queer studies is reliant on its popularity in everyday use in the 1990s. However, few scholars have tested its relevance through everyday use today, as most take for granted its unshakable role and its roots in Chinese queer communities.

My analysis is based on cultural studies which look at meaning production in the process of encoding, circulation, and decoding. According to Stuart Hall, the dominant, literal and original meanings of these lexica may be transformed through decoding. This is because communication is an asymmetrical process; the semiotic meanings produced and received likely differ, affected by "frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure" (S. Hall 2006, 165). Thus, my analysis illuminates the historical dynamics of the adoption of certain terms in order to unpack how sexual identities have been transformed in Chinese queer communities.

This paradigm sheds light on the agency of sexual subjects and their tactics of identification. Instead of inheriting the hegemonic meaning produced years ago, I choose to view queer subjects as active agents and "cultural workers who fashion narratives, stories, objects, and practices from myriad bits and pieces of prior cultural production" (Radway 1988, 362). More importantly, the diverse meanings of many terms and names suggest that Chinese queer subjects are at a crossroads where they are constructing distinct identities and creating disparate tactics of identification. Stuart Hall (1997a) and Lawrence Grossberg (1996) claim that a post-modern identity is an unfixed entity, is never complete, and is always in the process of formation. Hall's identity as a black Caribbean located in the diaspora in the UK pushed him to think about the construction, instability, and complexity of blackness. He argues that an identity, such as the black identity, is not an essence, but a *positioning* within the discourse of history and culture (S. Hall 1990, 226). In order to study the instability of identity, Hall suggests examining language

which is "part of an infinite semiosis of meaning" and "open to the play of the meaning" (1997a, 51). This calls for examining the dynamic meanings of languages. *Tongzhi* is such a linguistic sign whose meaning has been open to reproduction. By the same token, terms such as *tongzhi*, *tongxinglian* (homosexual) or *gay* each have their own histories of how they arrived in China. However, their hegemonic meanings have been contested and reproduced in practice by cultural forces, as Hall suggests that "meaning…keeps on encompassing other, additional or supplementary meanings" (1990, 229). According to Manalansan IV (2003, 48), "self-presentation and biographical experiences are revised, rehashed, and refigured through particular strategic uses of language." Examinations of queer men's uses of various terms enable us to understand their shifting lived experiences in a cosmopolitan context.

In this chapter, I am more attentive to the transformed and diversified connotations of these terms. In "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall (2006) emphasizes the asymmetrical process of communication in terms of cultural production and reception, in which information producers may not always be able to convey the meanings they create to receivers. This is because receivers, situated in different meaning structures, decode information in divergent ways. In other words, despite the circulation of the same communicative signs and languages, people may interpret the meanings differently because what is circulated is not the "literal meaning." In this case, the hegemonic meaning of *tongzhi* created in the 1990s has experienced disruption or disjuncture after several decades of re-adoption in queer communities. Likewise, the pathologized *tongxinglian* (homosexual) and the global *gay* have acquired additional connotations. This is substantiated by my ethnography and signifies the proliferating modes of identification. Thus, the examination of these terminologies in this project relies on 70 interviews of Chinese queer men who offered in-depth, chronological interpretations of their everyday uses

of these terms. Moreover, this analysis is supplemented by participant observation in different online communities to explore how Chinese queer men use these terms in real-life contexts.

Tongzhi: old-school men and ambiguous references

In spite of the fact most queer men do not prioritize the use of *tongzhi* because they have turned to other terms to identify themselves, this does not invalidate the word's relevance. My point is that *tongzhi* should no longer be deemed *the* dominant Chinese queer identity. However, it is still relevant. Among the seventy interviewees, nineteen indicated that *tongzhi* was still the most common term in their everyday lives. Generation and age are critical, as men over 30 are more likely to adopt this word than are men under 30. Before delving into other tactics of identification, this section, as the starting point of analysis, examines why certain queer men choose to stick to *tongzhi*, and in what contexts they use this word.

In line with the origin of its popularity, queer men believe that the use of *tongzhi* allows them to communicate without risk of being identified as different or abnormal. Thus, this slang term, unlike other straightforward expressions like *tongxinglian* (homosexual), ensures the confidentiality of their sexual identity. As one interlocutor Tony (33) mentioned, [9] *tongzhi* was an ideal choice while talking to me in a café. We conducted the interview in the corner of a café and no one sat next to us. However, a café is after all a public space, so he was concerned about exposing his identity to people nearby, though not close to us, had he chosen other terms such as *tongxinglian* (homosexual). Under such a context, *tongzhi* was a safe word choice.

Another common rationale my interviewees provided is that *tongzhi* is a neutral and low-key word. They believe that words such as *tongxinglian* (homosexual) or *jilao* (fag) have

[9] The number in parentheses following participants' names indicates their self-reported age, provided during interviews.

negative and degenerative connotations or images. The implicit reference of this neutral term makes queer subjects illegible and therefore normal. This is because the sexual identity embodied in the use of *tongzhi* blends itself in the shadow of communism and is unlikely to single the user out as a different subject. The neutral and "normal" connotations make queer men feel better about themselves in self-identification. Kongqi (38) revealed that he favors the ambivalence of the term and would never use other straightforward expressions, for fear of exposure. As a man working for a state-owned enterprise and married to a lesbian in a contract marriage,[10] he was consistent in his use of this term in different contexts, and not just under certain circumstances. In addition, the adoption of *tongzhi* does not lead him to feel different from, or inferior to, other people.

Apart from adopting the term in contexts in which they need to protect their identity, Chinese queer men find *tongzhi* an appropriate word for formal occasions. Many institutions working on sexual rights in China also stick to the word *tongzhi*, as they cannot find a better alternative. For example, the Beijing LGBT center is still translated as the Beijing *Tongzhi* Center. Thus, many formal events or grassroots organizations choose to include *tongzhi* in their names. Additionally, *tongzhi* is a useful keyword for online searches because many LGBT websites, including *tongzhi* BBS's, chatrooms and pornographic websites, never changed their names, created years ago. Hence, many queer men consider *tongzhi* the best term for social interaction, both online and in person.

[10] Contract marriage (*xinghun*) is a strategy to deal with heterosexual marriage pressure by faking a marriage between a gay man and a lesbian. Two of my interviewees were in contract marriages. One was considering divorce after years of marital conflict, while the other had just married earlier in the year of the interview and believed it to be an ideal solution to his problem.

However, the ambiguity of *tongzhi*, historically considered necessary for the minority identity, has become a paramount reason it is jettisoned by Chinese queer men. Instead of constructing a general identity with blurred boundaries, many queer men in the new millennium, particularly after 2010, find it necessary to draw borders between identities, so as to locate them in a certain position. The search for self has evolved into a central task for many queer people as a result of the increasing information available on sexualities and identity politics advocacy in Mainland China. Andy (28), who obtained his master's degree from the UK and is working in the finance industry, claimed: "I find this word [*tongzhi*] ambiguous, right? *Tongzhi* is…that…aw…People used the term *tongzhi* in the revolutionary time, like 'Hello, *tongzhi* [comrades]!' Thus, it's better to employ a more straightforward word."

Apart from those with international experience, some queer men working within the system[11] reveal that they do not prioritize the word in daily use, due to its uncertain references. Daimao'er is an example. He is in his early 30s and works for a public institution which is guarded by an armed police force. According to him: "*Tongzhi* is indeed a special word. For work units like ours, the armed policeman guarding the entrance would say to us while we are entering: '*tongzhi*, please show me your entrance pass.'" The *tongzhi* that armed policemen use literally means comrade, without any queer signification. In this regard, after being exposed to the communist connotation of *tongzhi* every day, he considers its ambiguity unfavorable because it may lead to misunderstanding. This also implies that some queer men seek a definitive and explicit means of identification.

[11] Working within the system means working for the government or entities affiliated to the government, including state-owned enterprises and public institutions. Many of these institutions are housed in gated communities.

Apart from dissatisfaction with its ambiguity, more queer men view *tongzhi* as a term that embodies the image of an "old school" gay man, with whom they hope to disassociate and maintain distance. Thus, the use of *tongzhi* suggests the speaker is old-fashioned. The choice of language can signify or be related to class, race, physical attributes, and other factors (Manalansan IV 2003). In this case, the word choice is deemed a signifier of age and generation. Danny (25) told me that *tongzhi* was only used in the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly, another young graduate, Owen (25), held a similar attitude, telling me that "*tongzhi* was only adopted before the 1980s." If they are indeed referring to the queer use of *tongzhi*, then it was not until 1989 that it was first used to refer to sexual minorities (Chou 2000). The point is not whether they are correct, but their implication that *tongzhi* is outdated and does not represent the modern image of a gay man. When asked what kind of image *tongzhi* embodies, Ruyuan, a college student who grew up in Beijing (22) responded "middle-age uncle."[12] Taiwan-born Guangguang (31) indicated that he used *tongzhi* only to communicate with guys over 40, because he believed that this was the older generation's term. The different attitudes toward the adoption of *tongzhi* suggest generational differences, as most people who stick to *tongzhi* are indeed queer men over 30. This difference is not absolute though, as younger men like Vince (28), who had lived in the United States for four years, and Mark (26), an interpreter, both expressed their preference for *tongzhi* over other terms.

Due to the discontent and disconnection with the identity embodied in *tongzhi*, Chinese queer men have devised alternative expressions that they practice in daily life for identification. In spite of the similar uses under certain circumstances (referring to men who are attracted to the

[12] The "uncle" here does not refer to a male relative. In China, people often use "uncle" to address any male of their parents' generation; it may have nothing to do with kinship.

same sex), these terms are not synonymous with *tongzhi*, since the linguistic practices with emerging terms show Chinese queer men's intention to disassociate from the communist past and the presumably non-modern identity. These queer men crave new identities so as to eliminate the communist shadow, and pursue distinct identities that signify happiness, freedom, subversiveness, and modernity.

Tactics of constructing tactical sexual identities

The increasing uses of different terms suggest that the singular post-socialist sexual identity created to ensure anonymity, disassociation, and illegibility is now contested, and the cultural meaning of Chinese queerness has been enriched. The most common term today, according to my interviewees, is *gay*, coming from the word in English. The majority of my interlocutors reveal that *gay* is their preferred word to refer to people who are attracted to the same sex. Moreover, other expressions also compete with *tongzhi*, including *tongxinglian* (homosexual), *jiyou* (gay buddy*) and jilao* (fag), in terms of their popularity. Chinese queer men have adopted other terms, albeit less frequently, to refer to the group, including *tonglei* (same species) which was created by queer men, *shaoshu qunti* (minority), *caihong* (rainbow), *wande* (bent) and *ji* (hen). Apart from these adopted terms, there are many words that they are aware of, including *ku'er* (queer), *boli* (glass), *tuzi* (rabbit), *piaopiao* (wandering men), *eryizi*, *longyang*, *duanxiu*, and *xianggong.*[13] Each of these terms has been used to describe gender-nonconformity or same-sex practice, yet they are rarely used today.

[13] Terms not explained are those that are not translatable, but their historical stories can be found in Bret Hinsch's *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (1990). As these historical terms are just mentioned, but not adopted by queer men in daily use today, I devote little space in this chapter to retelling their stories.

The diversity of these available terms suggests the lack of a unified identity and reveals the fragmentation of sexual identities in Chinese queer communities. At the crossroads of Chinese sexual legacy, its communist past, and global modernity, Chinese queer identities cannot be collapsed into a single category. This chapter illuminates five tactics of identification (see Figure 5), moving away from the singular mode of identification through using *tongzhi*.

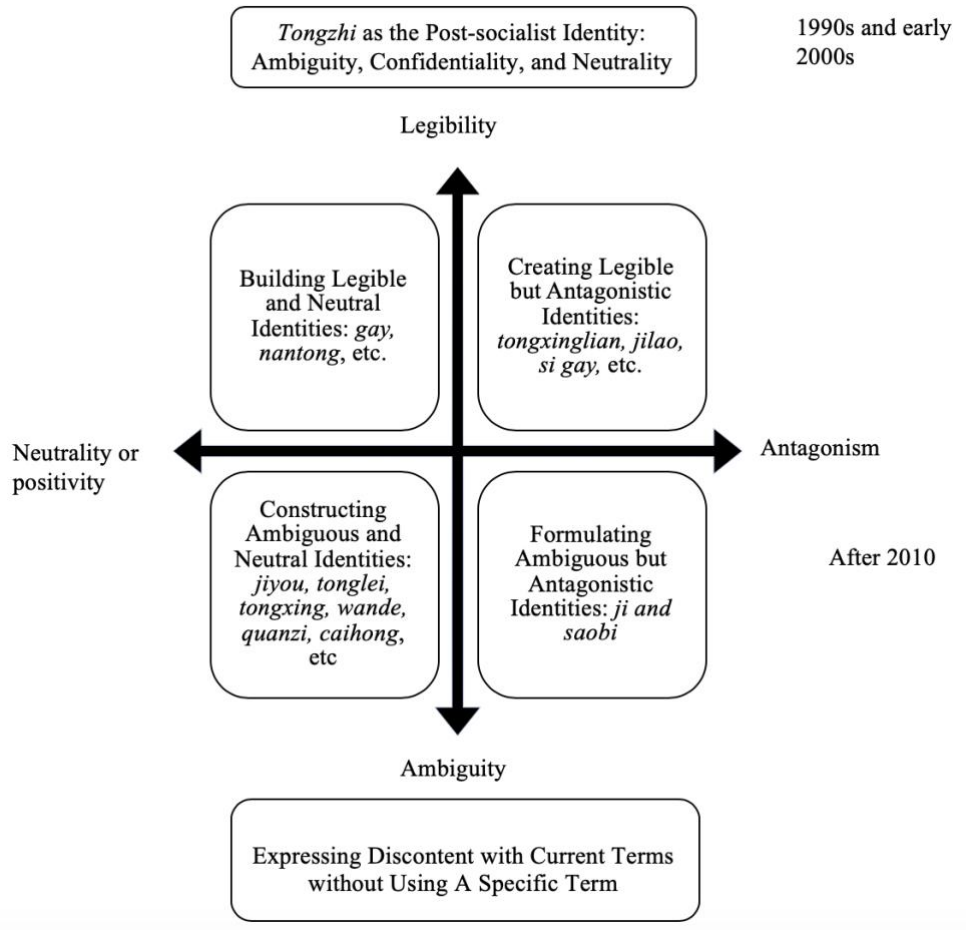

Figure 5: Five tactics of identification in Chinese queer communities after 2010

Building legible and neutral identities

In contrast to the use of *tongzhi* to construct an ambiguous identity, many Chinese queer men demand a legible identity and a clear position in the spectrum of sexuality. Hence, they resort to new terms to signify their sexual identities. Despite the fact that rampant discrimination

against sexual minorities persists in China, many queer men, particularly those of the younger generation, no longer want to live as invisible or "inauthentic" subjects under the shadow of Maoism and communism.

Among the seventy interviewees, forty-two indicated that *gay* was their preferred word to use with both straight and queer people. Their uses of the word show that some queer men yearn for a legible and more stable sexual identity. Apart from the imported word *gay*, Chinese queer men use *nantong*, which can be translated as "male homosexual," or "male *tongzhi*." Despite the state's complicated attitude toward homosexuality,[14] sexual minorities have recently gained more space for living and social interaction in Mainland China. After China decriminalized homosexuality and removed its classification as a mental illness, queer spaces proliferated in urban areas and online. The state has irregularly policed physical spaces such as bathhouses and bars and has shut down many LGBT-related websites and smartphone applications over the past two decades. Yet, many have survived and thrived as influential "rainbow" businesses, such as Blued, Aloha, Destination, etc. Moreover, Chinese queer people have also queered "mainstream" social media, including Weibo, WeChat, Douban, TikTok, to create special groups for queer people or use codes to exchange same-sex desires. Thus, queer men in China have found more

[14] Attitudes toward homosexuality vary according to different state ministries. For example, despite the Chinese Society of Psychiatry's declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder, the State Administrations of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television have censored most media content including explicit expressions of same-sex desires. In 2017, they published a directive to prevent any press from producing content related to sexual perversity, which included homosexuality. Furthermore, attitudes may also be inconsistent within ministries. The Ministry of Education, for instance, has allowed educators to publish a series of textbooks on sexual education, some of which consider homosexuality sexual perversity, while others defend it. Therefore, there is tension regarding homosexuality both between and within ministries.

spaces to reach out to "the same kind." The increasingly available number of queer spaces has spurred the diversification of queer cultures.

In such a context, the direct use of the word *gay* imported from English becomes ideal in everyday communicative processes. Some of its original meanings have remained unchanged in Chinese queer men's interpretation. However, its connotation and use have shifted since it gained footing in China. The adoption of *gay* helps some queer men build a legible, young, and cutting-edge image, whereas others have found the word troublesome in practice. I begin by illustrating why this word has become so popular since it crossed the ocean.

First, Chinese queer men favor its unambiguous reference, because part of its original idea, namely its reference to men who are attracted to men, has travelled and gained a foothold in Chinese queer communities. In spite of the fact that the word *gay* can be deployed to identify lesbians in the West, Chinese queer people tend to use *lala* for "lesbian," to differentiate it from "gay" (Kam 2012; Engebretsen 2014). Thus, *gay* carries a straightforward meaning, unlikely to cause confusion, as does the term *tongzhi*. Xiaoqiang (33), an engineer working in Beijing, stated that *gay* is the word he deploys the most frequently because, "[*Gay*] points to a particular group, *nan* (male) *tongzhi*." Xiaoqiang's interpretation points to a cleavage between *gay* and *tongzhi*, as *tongzhi* includes both male and female *tongzhi*, while *gay* is the specified category of male *tongzhi*. Kongqi (31), a children's book editor, shares this opinion: "*Gay* is a clear-cut word, that is because…probably in my understanding, I think it refers to *nan tongxinglian* (male homosexual). It does not lead people to think of anything else. That is the reason why I like this word." In daily linguistic practices, these queer men call for effective communication in order to reduce misunderstanding, in queer communities in particular. Moreover, their preferred use of

gay reflects the need to build a legible sexual identity. But why do they need such an identity? What image do they think is embodied in this identity?

This comes to the second rationale: *gay* seems to signify an image of sexual subjects with youth, energy and unique personality; thus, their adoption of this word allows them to identify with such an image, and distance themselves from the older image embodied in *tongzhi,* or the stigmatized image associated with *tongxinglian* (homosexual). In this case, *gay* represents a sexual subject with intersectional identities, including younger age and higher class/social status. Ruyuan (22) made a concise statement on his perception of the word *gay*: "young and vigorous." This positive image embodied, according to many queer men, is a result of its popularity among the younger generation. In turn, this reinforces the impression that the term *gay* carries an image distinct from terms older people use. Thus, *gay* has become a popular term to communicate with or among the younger generation. Qishi (30) disclosed his uses of both *tongzhi* and gay, but he deploys the two terms in different situations, and with particular interlocutors:

> In terms of *tongzhi*, I probably use it to communicate with people older than me. Because he may not understand the word *gay*, it's an English thing, right? The older generation or people older than me are more likely to ask "Are you a *tongzhi*?"…*Tongzhi* reminds us of people in their 30s and 40s…*Gay* is a word used more frequently among young people like us, or among teenagers, or those energetic colleges students. Because *gay* is after all an imported word, isn't it? High-class *tongxinglian* prefer to use *gay*.

In this statement, Qishi unconsciously identifies himself with the new image by using *gay*. He did not ask me which term I prefer, as I had asked him, but assumed that I should be identified with the younger image represented. Identification with this newer perception allows them to include people of a similar age group as well as exclude people of other generations. Because identity suggests the subject's position and is always relational, the construction of identities reterritorializes the location of different sexual subjects. According to Grossberg, the difference

embodied in identities is not essential, but is constructed in order to other subjects. This is one of the logics of modern identity—otherness (1996, 93).

Some queer men clarify that the direct deployment of *gay* excludes those men of low *suzhi*, which is translated as quality in Lisa Rofel's work. *Suzhi* works as a metric to divide queer men based on "rural/urban and class lines" (Rofel 2007, 86). In this regard, using a foreign word signifies one's higher class. Fanshu (32), a doctoral student from an elite Chinese university, told me: "The uses of language imply the social hierarchy…For example, a man in the lower class who has never studied English would in no way know the word *gay*. If he knows it, he must have learned the word from others in an indirect way." Therefore, linguistic practices and term selection filter people who would not be considered to be of the same social class as these queer men. Through this communication process, queer men differentiate their identity from other identities that are regarded as inferior.

Gay is not the only term that epitomizes a legible and specific identity in Chinese gay communities. Two men told me that they prefer *nantong* (male homosexual) or *nan tongzhi* (male *tongzhi*) to refer to the group by specifying the gender—*nan*, which means "male." *Nan tongzhi* is the word that Guangguang (31), a man originally from Taiwan, would use, since he sees *tongzhi* as a general category that includes all LGBT. Thus, in order to clarify the referenced group, his tactic is to add the prefix *nan* before *tongzhi*. This creates a clearer picture of the object to which he is referring and works similar to *gay*.

In addition to gendering the general and ambiguous category, some queer men, such as Jason (21), divide identity categories by referencing their potential sex roles. Jason is a college graduate and working on his application to pursue a master's degree in the United States. He said that he tends to use words such as *xiao gay*, which means "little gay," to address only those men

who are interested in men. He explained to me why he uses this word: "*Xiao gay* often points to *shou* (bottom). Yes, that small type of *shou*, they are always *shou.* Because…in my eyes, *shou* should be called *xiao gay*. Yes, that's it."

Jason's elaboration suggests another tactic of differentiation and division of sexual identity based on sex roles. Jason told me that his potent "gaydar" allows him to detect and identify *xiao gay* on the street. He told me that he is rarely wrong when identifying a *xiao gay*, but he did not mention whether he could tell other types of gay men, such who has the traditional male role in a relationship between two men, during our conversation. Jason views *xiao gay* as an independent category of identity, whose difference from other sexual categories is pronounced for him, though he did not elaborate upon how they are different. Sex roles become another criterion that defines one's sexual identity. His specification of identity is drawn on the general category of *gay*, but his use of *xiao gay* implies a further division of identity categories. The use of more specific categories is more prevalent in my observations on WeChat[15] groups for queer men, in which group participants often label each other based on potential sex roles. The increasing number of specific categories and the transformation from *tongzhi* to *xiao gay* suggest that some queer men challenge the use of general terms. Doing so, they include all queer men, and thus construct more legible identities.

Creating legible but antagonistic identities

Chinese queer men do not always rely on "neutral" or "positive" terms to build an intelligible identity. This is because many queer men prefer to "look back" and readopt the typical historically demeaned word (e.g. *tongxinglian*), while others "look forward" to choose a

[15] WeChat is the most popular social media platform in China. Queer people have created many chat groups for particular purposes. I conducted my observations on several groups, but I do not name them, in order to protect users' confidentiality.

negative buzzword (e.g. *jilao*). Thus, the second group of terms used in China illuminates another tactic of identification: creating legible identities by reusing, reinterpreting, and reversing stigmatized meanings of vernacular terms. Doing thus, they reconstruct the images embodied in these terms, including *tongxinglian* (homosexual), *jilao* (fag), and *si gay* (dead gay). Despite similarity with the first tactic in terms of building legibility, the adoption of terms such as *tongxinglian* in daily life highlights an antagonistic identity that contests stigma and discrimination of homosexuality. *Tongxinglian* as a neologism appeared in the 1920s, when avant-garde sexologists introduced it to China by translating it from "homosexual" (Sang 2003). Because of its origin in science and medicine, *tongxinglian* has historically been considered a pathologized subject and this word has rarely been used by queer people themselves.

Many studies have shown that *tongxinglian* was rarely used in Chinese queer communities because it carried pathologized and medicalized notions, and its use was likely to draw discrimination (Chou 2000; T. Zheng 2015b; Bao 2018). This is also evidenced in my research which shows that queer men tend to avoid this word. In tandem with previous research, these queer men offer a series of reasons why *tongxinglian* is not an ideal term, primarily because of its pejorative connotation. Its use could make them victims of homophobia, due to the word's overemphasis on difference from heterosexuals.

What interests me most is that twelve interviewees revealed that *tongxinglian* was among their most frequently used terms, while another twenty-six indicated that they deployed this word occasionally. Constructing a tactical identity by using this term often transpires in local advocacies or playful environments. In fact, Chinese queer men's attitude toward *tongxinglian* has been changing, and these queer men strive to rework words' negative connotations by connecting with their history. This works because they embrace the status of the stigmatized

"outsider." These queer men do not seek to evade social hostility and estrangement by hiding. On the contrary, they choose to confront this historical stigma. With the increasingly available information on LGBT people and more advocacies for queer pride in China over the past decade, many queer men, particularly in cosmopolitan areas, follow scripts of self-acceptance and identification. Adoption of these antagonistic terms signifies their completion of self-acceptance and pride of self, differentiating from those queer people who hide in the closet or could not accept their own sexualities. This transformation has pushed many queer people to rethink their sexuality, their relationships with their families and society, and the values of queer politics.

Rather than live under the shadow of an ambiguous identity or an intelligible, neutral identity, many queer men choose to stand up and confront homophobia by adopting this negative term in public. Laolu (42) is one of them. He had been an accomplished journalist, but quit his job and became an LGBT activist. Before his new career, he had been married to a heterosexual woman for two years. He mentioned to me that self-acceptance had opened a new page in his life. His usage of different terms over time illuminates his shifting attitude toward his "difference":

> In my lifetime, I might have used *tongzhi* more, in terms of total frequency, because I used to be reliant on the word *tongzhi* for communication. At present, however, I use *tongxinglian* more frequently. Over the past several years, I have deployed *tongxinglian* for self-identification, as well as for referencing other people. *Tongzhi* is probably an imported word originating from Taiwan,[16] so people there use it more frequently. Furthermore, it [*tongzhi*] is too dubious. Thus, at this moment, I'm inclined to, and do use *tongxinglian* more often.

This transformation did not take place within a single day. Laolu revealed how his experience in China's PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) had influenced his

[16] Many interviewees believed that the queer use of *tongzhi* originated from Taiwan rather than Hong Kong, because of the prevalent use of *tongzhi* in Taiwan today.

selection of terms. It was in either 2013 or 2014, he could not recall exactly, that he first had direct contact with this institution:

> Probably two years later, I participated in one of their training camps, in which they called on people to use *tongxinglian*. My changing attitude is in tandem with the transformation of the whole community. Today, people are more likely to use the word *tongxinglian*, which has gradually turned into a neutral expression. Its previous medical reference, and the image of *tongxinglian* as merely the research object, have weakened. This is why Prof. Zhang Beichuan did not succeed in mobilizing people to deploy *tongxing'ai* instead, [17] because queer people have undergone better self-acceptance nowadays. Thus, the historically negative term *tongxinglian* has been positivized and neutralized. This is what I feel.

Influenced by a local NGO's advocacy and discursive strategy, Laolu believes that queer subjects should return to the "original" term *tongxinglian*. This is because daily adoption of this word shows that queer people have accomplished self-acceptance and have ultimately developed self-esteem. The increasing number of people using it will eventually subvert its negativity and create a neutral, or even positive, image of the whole community.

In spite of the same preference for the use of *tongxinglian*, not all queer men embrace a positive image as necessary. Instead, many find the stigmatized word fun to "play with," so they incorporate humorous elements into this serious term. Wang Fei (30) is a designer for a private enterprise. Like Laolu, his attitude toward *tongxinglian* has changed over the past five years. Yet, his transformation was less the result of local and formal advocacy than of grassroots queer subculture:

> The first word [after you asked me about my preferred term] that occurred to me was *tongxinglian*. As a matter of fact, I did not like the three characters of *tongxinglian* at first, because I was too ashamed to speak them out. But there was a time when my friend invited me to go to Destination and said "let's go to a *tongxinglian* bar," which I found

[17] The difference between *tongxinglian* and *tongxing'ai* derives from the last character. *Lian* is often understood as "obsession," while *ai* can be translated directly as "love." Thus, *tongxing'ai* means love between people of the same sex, as an outcome of the effort to depathologize homosexuality.

> amusing and fun…Compared with *tongzhi*, the three characters of *tongxinglian* point directly to the referred subject.

Unlike other people who often say "gay bar", Wang Fei replaces it with the serious word *tongxinglian*. However, this did not make it sound serious; instead, the juxtaposition of the serious *tongxinglian* and the less serious "bar" created a tricky but amusing situation, because he was playing with the negativity of *tongxinglian* by integrating humor into the stigmatized term, and using it in a non-traditional way. This is also the case when my friend labeled us as *tongxinglian huanzhe* (homosexual patient), as shown at the outset of the chapter, to which became immediately attached. Through using this stigmatized expression, my friend was able to ridicule the medical knowledge that pathologized homosexuality and express indifference to the violent, vicious, and oppressive external categorization.

The playful style of contention is a crucial part of China's digital culture, which makes political contention humorous and pleasurable, and not easily surveilled (G. Yang 2009a, 2009b). This use could trigger emotional responses such as laughter or joy, rather than loathing or repulsion. Moreover, the playful use of *tongxinglian* does not necessarily aim for neutrality or positivity for the term, so as to dissociate it from its historical stigma. In contrast, the stigma reminds its users they are different. The negative connotation is the origin and basis of the humor. Thus, rather than being rooted in the strategies of serious activism, Wang Fei's attitude shift reflects a less formal, but more grassroots culture by taking advantage of light-hearted emotions and sentiments. This attitude also reflects that these queer men do not seek to eliminate the stigma tied to their identity, as they do not mind facing the stigma. Instead, they live with it.

Some queer men have adopted other stigmatized words such as *jilao* or *si gay*. Both words are derived from a specific character, but have been reworked into another term. *Jilao* developed from *ji*, which is pronounced like "gay" in Cantonese. However, it is rarely used on its

own; instead, *ji* has evolved into several words: *jilao* (fag), *jiyou* (gay buddy), and *gaoji* ("do" gay), each of which has become an internet buzzword. The *lao* in *jilao* is often used to refer to a certain group of men with a demeaning connotation, such as *guilao* (foreign people) or *xiangxialao* (rural men). This character is often used to identify other degenerate groups and is less common for self-identification. *Jiyou* has less of a belittling meaning than *jilao,* because *you* in Chinese means "friend." More importantly, *jiyou* can be deployed to refer to more than queer men, which I discuss in the next section. *Gaoji* is different since it denotes conduct, rather than identity (Wei 2017), few of my participants therefore mentioned it for identification. The origin of *jilao,* thus implies a negative connotation, which is one of the reasons many queer men choose not to use it. Its use is similar to that of the English words "faggot" and "fag." Straight people may use it to deride queer people or their perceived non-straight conduct (Pascoe 2012). It can also be used by queer people for self-deprecation.

Seven interviewees indicated that *jilao* was their most frequently used word, and another 9 revealed that they deploy the term occasionally. The rationales they provided include its straightforward reference—less serious and more playful. One reason many queer men prefer *jilao* over *tongxinglian* is its origin from a less serious context. However, queer men use the two words similarly, namely, in playful, satirical, and humorous ways:

> In terms of *jilao,* I originally found it somewhat negative. But I feel, first of all, gay men are…they have a little positive spirit! I think [gay men are good at] self-deprecation, yes, and friends often mock each other by saying "you are such a *si* (dead) *jilao*." This is actually a play between friends, so there's no need to mind it. I don't find it to be a negative word. That's it. (Landon, 26)

More than the "bad" word *jilao,* Landon added another character, *si*, which means "dead" to reinforce the negativity of the phrase. It is nevertheless the strengthened negative connotation that makes the phrase playful and humorous, primarily between close friends or people who are

both queer. Landon mentioned that he does not view *jilao* or *si jilao* as unfavorable, because constant uses of the demeaning word shift the connotation of the phrase.

Another difference between *jilao* and *tongxinglian* is the images they embody: queer men regard adopting *jilao* as a mode of representing a younger subject; the word is an Internet buzzword that has circulated and been adopted throughout the younger generations. Fengfeihua (33) works in a state-owned financial enterprise. He told me that he keeps a distance from these "old school" terms, and instead adopts a word that more young people use. His choice of term reflects his intention to be identified with the younger generation, rather than the less desirable and older generation.

Therefore, by frequently using these negative words, queer men subvert their unpleasant meanings, as many activists advocate. This helps them create a positive image for the greater queer community. Some, however, are indifferent to the negativity of these terms and do not bother to change their meaning. They understand that their subjectivity is tethered to history, stigma, discrimination, and darkness. Yet they strive to step out of the darkness by sticking to a negative identity, whether attempting to change it or not. Thus, their attitude or tactic is not to take it seriously, but to play off of its meaning, and live with the stigmatized identity. This does not make them inferior, just different.

Constructing ambiguous and neutral identities

The first two tactics demonstrate that Chinese queer men have moved away from *tongzhi* by constructing concrete and legible identities. Many queer men however did not show any interest in the legibility of sexual identity. Instead, they insisted on the necessity of relying on the ambiguity of terms in communication. They did so for various reasons. However, they do not adopt *tongzhi*, because they want to disassociate themselves from the communist history.

Alternatively, these queer men turn to a pool of terms, including *jiyou* (gay buddy), *tonglei* (same kind), *tongxing* (same sex), *wande* (bent), *quanzi* (circle), *caihong* (rainbow), *saobi* (whore), and *ji* (hen), to construct an identity that either demonstrates an uneasiness about being identified as a different sexual identity, or contests a fixed and strong sexual identity embodied in uses of terms like *gay* or *tongxinglian* (homosexual). The practices of these words blur the boundaries between identities, and thus are not indicative of a particular type of sexual subject. The blurred boundary makes the use of these terms similar to the use of *tongzhi* in terms of their vague references. However, the ambiguity of these terms is built on a sexual modernity different from the communist modernity signified by *tongzhi*.

Among the abovementioned terms, *jiyou* is the most popular. Although both *jiyou* and *jilao* are built off of the same base character *ji*, their connotations differ: *jilao* points to a specific identity, while *jiyou*, another Internet buzzword, is vaguer with regard to its referenced subject. *Jiyou* can be translated as "gay buddy" or "gay friend," but it often refers to more than men who are attracted to the same sex. According to an interview-based study conducted by sociologist Wei Wei (2017, 1677), *jiyou* is often used by close same-sex friends to show emotional intimacy. Its use leaves room for heteromasculine behaviors. Due to the growing body of straight-identified people using the word *jiyou*, it has become an ideal choice for queer men who are uncomfortable deploying a term with a high "risk" of exposing their sexuality. According to Danny (25): "In fact, I adopt *jiyou* the most frequently, because *jiyou*, first of all is…I mean it's not that conspicuous, that being said…my straight male friends can be addressed as my *jiyou*. For example, when I refer to someone as my *jiyou* during a conversation, people will not necessarily suspect that he is gay." The popularity of this term among both straight and queer people creates a gray area in which many queer men find shelter. Thus, the use of *jiyou* does not

often reveal one's sexuality. When I asked Tony (33) to whom he would apply *jiyou*, he replied, "to people like you." He meant that *jiyou* is a term more often used among the younger generation, as he knew I was in my late 20s, and my interviews support the fact that *jiyou* is used more by people under 35.

Apart from *jiyou*, the adoption of other terms has similar implications, but the following analyzed lexica are less common (no more than five participants claimed to use each). Despite the small number of queer men using each word, the pool of these "small" words implies Chinese queer men's demand for ambiguous identities through words other than *tongzhi*. As opposed to the word *zhide* (straight), queer men such as Tyrell (24) like to use *wande* for reference and identification. *Wande* can literally be translated as "bent." This antonym of "straight" suggests a non-straight identity, but it is not as specific as "gay" or *tongxinglian* (homosexual). Moreover, it has multiple meanings often not understood by outsiders, and is often only in a particular context in which *wande* can be comprehended. For example, when Tyrell came out to his friend, he found this was a safe word to reveal his queer identity to show that he is different from straight people. Adoption of this term would be less likely than words like *tongxinglian* (homosexual) to trigger repulsion when he came out. In addition, Daibao (21) created the word *tonglei*, which alluded to "the same kind or species". A similar but more popular term is *quanzi*. It can be understood as a circle which refers to a group of people by territorialization. People often add an attributive before *quanzi* to address a certain group, such as *shejiao quanzi* (social circle). Without the attributive, *quanzi* becomes a vague reference. Hezheyu (38) mentioned to me, "I prefer to use '*quanzi*' in public, because…people don't know what *quanzi* is". Each of these terms is a safer choice to use in public or in contexts when they want to communicate sexuality, but with caution.

Apart from these informal expressions, ambivalent alternatives include some formal words that derive from academia or activism, such as *shaoshu qunti* (minority) or *caihong* (rainbow). As a master's student who often volunteers at a local NGO, Paul (25) said, "I only use *shaoshu qunti*. I don't use other words…All belong to the category of *shaoshu qunti*." He explained that he likes the word because it is neutral, inclusive, and respectful. Roger (26), who has worked in finance since obtaining his master's degree from the United States, also mentioned this word. Roger specified that he often uses this term in more formal and academic contexts, such as events organized by the US embassy. He adds the prefix "*xing*" (sexual) before *shaoshu qunti* (minority), meaning sexual minority. *Caihong* (rainbow) is another term that several queer men were determined to use. However, their uses are often limited to particular events such as a "*caihong* parade" by Guangguang (31) or a "*caihong* marathon" by Fengfeihua (33).

Another discursive tactic is to select part of an extant term to desexualize an expression. For example, Xiaoqiang (32) abandoned the character *lian* in *tongxinglian*, using *tongxing* in our interview. Without *lian*, *tongxing* means "same-sex" or "homo" as an adjective, and loses its original reference to *lian* or "attraction." Therefore, the use of *tongxing* desexualizes the identity, but does not hinder my understanding of his reference, thanks to the contextuality of our conversation on sexuality. Similarly, Qishi (30) occasionally used *TXL*, the initials of the three characters—*tongxinglian*—in the interview, and Tangqianwei (30) deployed *G*, the initial for *gay*, to name the group, out of similar intentions.

Queer men deploy most of these ambiguous terms to protect themselves from being identified, primarily in public. In spite of the fact that I attempted to arrange most of my interviews in the corners of cafes (which was considered semi-public and acceptable by the

Institutional Review Board (IRB),)[18] several interviewees still considered the space public, regardless of how far others sat from us. Thus, for some interlocutors, their uses of these ambiguous terms can be triggered by our conversations being held in "public." In these situations, communicating their identities by using these terms created ambiguous references for self-protection.

The third tactic of identification is epitomized by the adoption of proliferating terms, either self-invented or reproduced based on other terms, in order to create ambiguity (origins of influence). This results from self-protection from exposure, a refusal to divide sexual identity and the self-creation of sexuality. Moreover, Chinese queer men contend that these ambiguous identities constructed also symbolize sexual modernity and cosmopolitanism, which are not embodied in previous vague terms.

Formulating ambiguous but antagonistic identities

In addition to the aforementioned vague terms, queer men also adopt other obscure but negative alternatives like *ji* (hen) and *saobi* (whore) to formulate ambiguous identities. The uses of these terms carry different connotations in self- and other-identification. While using these terms referring to the self, it suggests a playful tactic of self-empowerment to resist both external categorization of a certain sexual identity and the recognition politics by creative a positive image for queer people. This tactic blurs the boundary of sexual identities and challenges the needs to be recognized by the heteronormative society. While being used to identify other

[18] IRB does not allow research in private spaces, for the sake of the safety. It also does not recommend conducting fieldwork on homosexuality in entirely public spaces, out of concerns for confidentiality. Thus, corners in cafes became ideal semi-public locations to ensure safety and confidentiality.

people, these terms can be satirical and playful, but they could also be condescending with internalized homophobia, depending on the contexts.

This *ji* (hen) differs from the *ji* (gay) in *jilao*/*jiyou*, as it refers to an animal—the hen. When *ji* (hen) is used to identify human beings, it often marks them as female prostitutes. *Ya*, another animal (duck) represents male prostitutes in lay use. However, only *ji* (hen) is appropriated in queer communities. The circulation of *ji* (hen) also suggests the affect embodied in its use: satirical, playful and humorous. When asked why he deploys this character, Qishi (30) claimed: "*Ji* is, in fact, often used in mutual mockery between *tongxinglian*, by saying "you are such a *ji*," or "this is indeed a pretentious *ji*." *Ji* represents pretentious *jilao*." In his interpretation, he introduces two other playful terms, *tongxinglian* (homosexual) and *jilao* (fag), yet he emphasizes the personality embodied in *ji* (hen) as pretentious, artificial, and unnatural. I asked him why it should be *ji* (hen), instead of other characters: "Because most of us *jilao* are actually flamboyant and flirty, you know that? Very coquettish. *Ji* includes all these connotations. We have a lot in common with *ji*, such as being flamboyant…'You are such a *ji*' is also the equivalent of 'you are such a bitch.'" The *ji* (hen) Qishi used refers to female prostitutes, as he mentioned, which are implied to be "flamboyant and flirty." Though used to identify others, its use between close friends is more about empowerment by playing with their identities.

Yuanxiaojing (30) explained his rationale for using *ji* (hen) to address men who like other men by suggesting *ji*'s origin is from "whore." Although Qishi classified *ji* (hen) as a type of *jilao* (fag)—a more demeaned group, the adoption of *ji* (hen) is unlikely to expose one's sexual identity, since the meanings of *ji* (hen) exceed this singular reference. Another similarly negative and ambiguous reference word is *saobi* (whore). This term has always been used to demean other queer men without explicitly mentioning their sexualities, particularly to queer men with

effeminate features. This use illustrates many queer men's internalized homophobia against non-masculine queer subjects.

The ambiguity of these terms can cause confusion and misunderstanding. Yet, this is not always the case, because communication's effectiveness in using these words is often contextual. Unlike low context communication in which a message carries explicit and transparent information, information is not explicitly coded in high context communication. Instead, important information is embedded in physical spaces, or internalized by message receivers (E.T. Hall 1976). I had no difficulty understanding my interviewees due to the contexts constructed, in which we discussed their queer experiences. Furthermore, several decades of indirect communication experience through the use of *tongzhi* has facilitated queer people's understanding of ambivalent expressions in queer contexts. Thus, the historical legacy shaping the queer community culture (Singelis and Brown 1995) has contributed to the decoding process of Chinese queer men, and thus reduced misinterpretations.

Expressing discontent with current terms without using a specific term

Communication between different subjects does not have to rely on languages, and non-verbal communication is a crucial tactic of identification, by way of leaving the keyword blank. The lack of language has two implications: first, it suggests queer men's need to radically obscure identities by avoiding specific terminology; second, the absence of terms in communication discloses their discontent with identities embodied in the use of extant terms discussed earlier, and thus their resistance to self-identify.

In the first case, queer men bypass the keyword during communicating, and the other interlocutor(s) can comprehend the information from the context. This is because these queer men fear being heard or eavesdropped upon, regardless of what word they use. Thus, the ideal

way is not to utter it. Daimao'er (early 30s) often asks one's sexual identity indirectly by saying "Are you?" or "Is he?" This omits the key term, as he finds it sensitive to adopt one word to refer to the whole group. In Daimao'er's questions, the avoidance of specific terminology is the sign that represents his preferred means of identification. This constructed identity is neither located in the shadow of a communist subject, nor is it sheltered in some "modern" framework. Instead, he creates a confidential tactical identity through blank space—a radical practice that minimizes the risk of exposure.

The second situation is more intriguing, as my interviewees expressed their discontent with the proliferation of terms. Among the existing or known expressions, they do not perceive any term as accurate enough to reflect their modes of identification. Rather than compromise and use a synonym or create another term, some queer men choose not to use any term while communicating with others. This stance elucidates the limitations of words, and encapsulates their resistance to assimilation into a particular identity. Fredric (26) believes none of the current words captures his understanding of his identity. Like Daimao'er, Fredric often omits the reference word by asking "Is he?" while questioning others' sexuality. Out of curiosity, I tested whether he had forgotten the terms that could be used, so I offered him a list of terms that I had encountered and speculated that he might adopt one of them. However, he insisted that he did not have a preferred term:

> Because I think these words are irrelevant…for example, *gay*, or another word with a particular reference, or the *piaopiao*[19] in the local dialect that you just mentioned, I just don't understand. People also refer to this group as *tuzi* (rabbit),[20] which I don't get either…as I don't get the relationship between the word and the people it references. Thus, I don't really identify myself through any of these words.

[19] *Piaopiao* is a vernacular term that translates to "wandering men." It is used in Chengdu, a city in Southwest China, according to Wei Wei's research.
[20] *Tuzi* is an expression that has been more widely circulated in Northern China, but my research shows that people rarely use it today.

Each term embodies a particular subjectivity to Fredric, but none of them resonate with him. Hence, his choice came as a result of his analysis of most terms known to him. His solution was to bypass it in communication, which became a unique approach to identification, because he refused to label other queer men, and also declined to be classified into any category.

Few participants declared this a possible choice for them, but it does imply a direction of identity construction by way of avoiding specific terminology. This kind of sexual subject has no clear label and cannot be named. The queer future of China may not build on the proliferation of terms associated with sexual identities and diverse modes of identification through using them. The queer tactics could be embodied in this avoidance, or the lack of language, which demonstrates means for queer men to make sense of themselves. It remains unknown whether or not these queer people will settle with identifying themselves through a certain linguistic sign on a certain day, but it is apparent that they have yet to find a comfortable position.

Concluding remarks

The proliferation of identities does not suggest that *tongzhi* is obsolete and should be jettisoned, as my findings show that *tongzhi* remains relevant and circulates among certain groups. However, *tongzhi* should not be seen as *the* sexual subject in China and viewed as a predominant academic concept to collapse all queer people into a singular category. Insistence on the singular term will result in the orientalization of Chinese queerness by asserting its difference from Western sexualities. Moreover, the proliferating tactical identities highlight the instability of sexual knowledge produced in China, which have remained mutant and precarious, particularly over the last decade. In China's queer communities, sexual subjects have explored different tactics to build identity, to communicate identity, and to balance relationships with heteronormative society and other queer people.

After tracing the genealogy of these terms, I find many have Western origins. For example, *tongxinglian* stemmed from the scientific term "homosexual," translated by Chinese sexologists in the 1920s (Sang 2003). *Jilao* and *jiyou* derived from the word "gay," which was appropriated and localized into Cantonese due to a similar pronunciation; it later became popular in Mandarin Chinese as an outcome of glocalization (Robertson 1995; Jung 2011). This means that global cultural products are customized to meet local needs. *Caihong* is a more typical expression that has emanated from Western coalition politics to include multiple queer subjects (Harding 1992). There is also the word *gay*, which has gained footing in China.

In spite of the Western origin of many terms, we cannot jump to the conclusion that their popularity indicates that Chinese sexual identities have been globalized and assimilated into Western identity categories. While discussing how to approach sexual discourses, historian Howard Chiang (2018) argues that we need to "pay attention to how old words take on new meanings (and lives) in a different historical context" (175). Consider the word *gay*. Apart from its legibility in pointing out a sexual identity, 7 interviewees adopted the word out of convenience. Unlike *tongzhi* and *tongxinglian* which consist of two or three characters/syllables, *gay* is just one syllable and is thus easy to pronounce. Efficiency is indeed a component of communication. These queer men do not necessarily have to comprehend its specific reference, as convenience is their primary rationale for adoption.

Furthermore, I am more interested in the implications of the fragmented practices of identity construction. Apart from "differences" symbolized in various identities, this paper illuminates the relational positions of different queer subjects. Difference not only reveals variation, but also relation, rejection and exclusion. Why would so many queer men reject the use of *tongzhi*? As many of them put it, they want to distance themselves from the old-fashioned

post-socialist identity. Age and generation are among the considerations used by Chinese queer men to construct more “desirable” identities. By the same token, queer men abandon the uses of a series of vernacular expressions because they consider these identities to be only adopted by lower-class and vulgar men. Their distinct identities suggest different class positions. Influenced by local and international advocacy, the adoption of antagonistic terms also suggests the completion of self-acceptance and building of self-esteem, which differentiate queer men from those who are hiding in the closet. Therefore, the resistance against a general external categorization and the differentiating modes of identification also indicate the internal hierarchization among Chinese queer men.

But it is impossible to understand how sexual hierarchization has taken shape and works merely through their modes of identification in linguistic practices. There are additional social factors that demarcate and territorialize Chinese queer men, including body types, race and ethnicity, geographical origin, and sex roles. The map of tactical identities illustrates the inner contradiction and segmentation, in terms of their relational positions in Chinese queer communities. The succeeding chapters will delve into the relational positions by exploring how queer desires have been reorganized and sexual hierarchies are manifested.

Chapter Two: Bodies on Display: Materialization and Standardization of Desires

Visualizing bodies: From "topless dark room" to "topless room"

In July 2017, I traveled to the "topless dark room" of Destination for the first time. Topless dark room is a cruising space in Destination where patrons were allowed to enter only if shirtless. In a country where physical queer spaces are limited, the existence of such a "legal" cruising site excites queer men in Beijing. Many queer men consider it a cruising paradise because, compared with traditional sites such as parks or public toilets, it is decent, protected, and located in a middle-class nightclub. Moreover, darkness ensures the anonymity of sexual interactions. WeChat groups for queer men posted the dates when the dark room was open.

The entrance to the topless dark room was next to the entrance to the dancing pool on the first floor. The convergence of the two lines made the first floor extremely crowded after midnight on the night I went. Two guards were standing in front of the entrance, one responsible for ensuring that patrons took off their shirts and the other for ensuring the line was in order. As soon as I stripped off my T-shirt and entered the room, I was overwhelmed by the strong odor of sweat. Though the air conditioner was on, it could not stop people from sweating. The loud music kept going on throughout the time when people were pushing through the crowd. At the corners of the dark room stood men performing oral and anal sex, or just waiting for their targets. The light was dim, showing only vague body shapes and intimate bodily interactions. I sensed a strong circulation of libido, as everyone was so focused on touching others' chests, butts, or penises, aiming to find an ultimate sexual target. In this room, only bodies mattered, but the images of bodies were unclear. People were connected by tactile sensations.

When I returned to Destination in April 2018, I found that the topless dark room had been moved to a bar close to the building entrance on the first floor. The light was brighter than

before. Bartenders were available to offer drinks, but they seemed outsiders to me among the cruisers, constantly interrupting the libido flow. In this new room, a spinning light illuminated my body and face all the time. People were able to scrutinize other patrons more closely than before. Though I could still see people performing oral sex at the corners, I did not see anyone initiating anal sex during this and subsequent visits.

By the summer of 2018, the topless dark room was moved again, this time to a bar on the second floor. I am hesitant to call it "dark room" because it was no longer dark at all. Instead, it was just an enclosed bar with guards standing at the entrance to ensure that people were topless. Furthermore, this bar was not really a protected and anonymous space, because the room had three entrances, two of which were blocked merely by tables that were easy to move. The multiple entrances allowed patrons to sneak in or just peek from outside. This topless room made people particularly self-conscious, since all bodies in the space were under the direct gazes of other patrons as well as patrons outside the room. Moreover, the bright light placed all bodies in comparison with other bodies. Although some patrons still flirted or touched others alongside the movement in this space, most people were just observing others in the room. I rarely saw any bolder actions there.

The transformation from a hidden topless dark room to a bright topless room placed patrons' bodies under closer scrutiny and surveillance. Moreover, it changed the meanings of sexualized bodies. Now they were not only corporeal beings for touching or feeling, but also for display. Many people complained on WeChat groups that the new room was not as exciting as the previous ones. It did not make people feel comfortable or safe, because under the brighter light many people began worrying about exposure of their physical defects. Self-consciousness, ego, and dignity all came together to matter in the new "flesh market." The topless room had

become like the bathhouses promoted and utilized by queer men as cruising sites in Beijing. Dennis Altman claims that cruising sites like gay bathhouses create Whitmanesque democracy and are free from rank, hierarchy, and competition (1982, 84). However, Leo Bersani disputes this utopian idea and instead points out:

> [Gay bath] is (or was) one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable. Your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours, and rejection, generally accompanied by two or three words at most, could be swift and brutal, with none of the civilizing hypocrisies with which we get rid of undesirables in the outside world. (Bersani 1987, 206).

In the lightened topless room that featured visualized bodies, more factors mattered than in the dark one, including looks, clearer images of body shapes, and clues to economic status embodied in patrons' physical features, all of which assigned certain patrons more or less sexual capital and ended up hierarchizing sexual subjects in a place that used to be deemed every person's paradise. The self-conscious environment left people whose bodies were considered less desirable fewer chances to succeed on the market. Moving the location to a bright bar room could have been triggered by the owner's objective to sell more drinks or to avoid trouble. But it inevitably resulted in the fact that bodies in this queer space became increasingly visible beings and thus more measurable for the success of obtaining sexual opportunities. This queer space created a structure or habitus (Bourdieu 1977) that promoted certain types of bodies. Most bodies aspire to be connected to other bodies for various purposes, but only certain men are glad to display their bodies as an approach to increase their sexual capital, while many others are self-conscious about their difference from the normative bodies in this sexual field and face loss or lack of opportunities on the sexual market — as Nick Crossley has argued, "instances where we become aware of our bodies because they dysfunction in some way" (2007, 82). This particularly applies to queer men whose bodies do not meet normative aesthetic standards. My fieldwork

demonstrates that the increasing importance of bodies applies not only in this particular kind of space but also extends to the entire community. This chapter thus examines the somatic relations of queer men and how Chinese queer men's desires are materialized and reflected in normative body types, hierarchizing sexual subjects with various corporeal features. It explores what types of bodies are deemed desirable and undesirable in queer spaces off- and online respectively, as well as in the general context of Beijing.

Bodies that matter

Although scholars such as Merleau-Ponty (2012) have contested "mind-body" dualism and "bodies that matter" (Butler 1993) has been held as a tenet in queer studies, the material body is often missing or partially missing in studies of sexual hierarchies. Many studies are based on identities only, such as those pegged to race, class, and religion, to explore how sexual inequality is reflected in racialized bodies, classed bodies, and bodies that are marked by a particular religious affiliation. However, the body often turns into an abstract concept without real corporeal substance, covered by the overarching concept of identities.

In premodern China, many literary and historical studies show, the body played a relatively less important role in defining masculinity, based on the analysis of representations. It was literary talent and morality that exemplified ideal and superior masculinity (Louie 2002; Song 2004; Wu 2005; Vitiello 2011). Most people portrayed in bedchamber books or sex guidance books produced in premodern eras are well covered by clothes. Bodies were thus rather mysterious even in sexual depictions. In late imperial China, which witnessed a proliferation of homoerotic cultures, the dominant actors who engaged in same-sex relationships in "queer spaces," such as Peking opera theaters, were often libertines whose masculinity and erotic capital derived primarily from their literary talent (Vitiello 2011). Since the late nineteenth century, after

the imperialist invasion, bodies gradually emerged to the surface and gained importance in historical writings, because strong and healthy physicality was promoted as a basic in the pursuit of China's revival. The body itself therefore became an indispensable part of Chinese masculinity. The importance of bodies was reinforced in the Mao era, in which working-class masculinity was embraced as ideal and superior (Louie 2002). However, I found that we have never witnessed such a level of over-eroticization of flesh as in today's society. Eroticized bodies have become the core component determining the value of sexual capital in queer communities.

My examination of the bodies' role in creating sexual hierarchies is inspired by some sociologists' call for a carnal social science (Crossley 1995; Green 2008a), but more importantly it builds on my ground-up ethnographic findings, which demonstrate that Chinese queer men overtly eroticize and fetishize bodies. In the heterosexual market in China, people often prioritize class in matchmaking, because *mendanghudui* — a marriage between members of two families of similar socioeconomic status — is deemed critical for establishing a harmonious family. This does not mean that heterosexual people in China always practice equality; instead, many people do aim to marry up and women's families in particular raise the bar of socioeconomic status and wealth in both urban and rural areas (Pimentel 2000; Zavoretti 2016; Chen 2017; Sun 2020). Yet Chinese queer men often place body type in a pre-eminent position regarding both romantic and erotic markets and give a lower priority to class distinctions. In a country where same-sex relationships are not protected by the law, many queer men do not see long-term financial profit in these relationships. Almost half of my participants indicated that physical features are crucial to determining someone's desirability, particularly for short-term sexual relationships in which corporeal beings are the basis of sex.

This chapter focuses on analyzing the body type(s) Chinese queer men prefer, eroticize, or even fetishize, and the types that are excluded and estranged in their sexual desires in urban China. Body display is omnipresent, in nightclubs, on dating apps, and in other spaces. My analysis of desirable bodies is situated in specific sexual fields. Pierre Bourdieu (1993) contends that our society consists of differentiated entities as semi-autonomous fields, such as the field of cultural production, which have their own rules of operation. These internal rules can be in opposition with the general principles of the external structure, particularly regarding economic and political domination (Benson 1999). Sociologist Adam Green readapts Bourdieu's field theory by coining the concept of sexual field, which "reflect[s] the socially constituted desires of erotic participants in an aggregated form, and they transpose these desires into a socially stratified, institutionalized matrix of relations" (Green 2008b, 28). Sexual currency, or sexual capital, is the governing rule that rewards, stratifies, or marginalizes queer people in sexual fields. In addition, he argues for the exploration of sexual desires in specific sexual fields, which can be as specific as a leather bar or a broader site like a neighborhood or a city. It can also be either a physical or a cyber space.

Post-2010 China has witnessed a remarkable transformation of the queer landscape. Queer people's networking and cruising sites have been moving from underground spaces, such as secluded portions of parks and public toilets, to more institutionalized spaces such as bars, nightclubs, and NGO's spaces. A more salient and consequential change is the appearance and shift to digital queer spaces. Chinese queer men have grown to rely on digital media to network with other queer people. They have also moved from traditional chatrooms or BBS (bulletin board systems) to dating/hookup apps in mobile devices.

Because queer men in my study believe that Destination and Aloha cater to fancier and more desirable men off- and online respectively, I chose to compare popular queer men in the two spaces. The most popular people in Destination and on Aloha represent typical desirable subjects on top of the pyramid of sexual hierarchies. In order to show Chinese queer men's desires toward certain bodies in a larger context, my analysis of desirable bodies is supplemented by interviews with queer men who revealed general desires in the cosmopolitan area of Beijing, a broader sexual field. Their general desires may or may not be consistent with sexual desires anchored in the two observed spaces.

My findings reveal that Destination and Aloha have been witnessing the visualization and muscularization of popular bodies. Bodies are no longer supposed to be hidden but rather are expected to be on display, which has become the new sexual norm for popularity in Chinese queer communities. Destination, as a transnational queer space, promotes a tough and stoic masculine image embodied in pumped-up muscles, which largely derives from the hypermasculine types of the West. Aloha, an app primarily catering to Chinese users, embraces softer masculinities epitomized by "thin muscles,"[21] a hybrid of Western and traditional East Asian masculinities. Regardless of the different muscle sizes desired, both fields promote the necessity of muscularizing bodies. Queer aesthetics in these spaces have become more reliant on visual cultures.

Muscularization of bodies is not a uniform process and preference for muscles does not mean all muscular bodies are desirable. In addition to differentiations regarding size, my interviews reveal that muscle desirability also differs in Chinese queer men's eyes regarding how

[21] "Thin muscles," or *boji*, is a term that my interlocuters frequently used to distinguish from pumped-up muscles. The term specifically emphasizes well-defined body lines of muscles instead of the largeness of muscles.

the muscles are developed. They consider sport-produced muscles natural, organic, and more masculine corporeal beings, while deeming gym-produced muscles unnatural, machinic, and not as masculine. Though both sports and gym workouts are considered masculine activities, my interlocutors relate sport to straight cultures while conflating gym workouts with gay cultures. Moreover, some queer men in my research hold the belief that men who gain muscles through sports have positive personality traits such as perseverance, in comparison to men who take a shortcut to develop muscles at fitness centers. In this way an external masculine feature is believed to be inseparable from internal masculinity. The binary rhetoric and the prioritization of sport-produced muscles evinces the integration of heterosexual norms in their aesthetics and desires.

Moreover, the body is not an abstract being. In today's queer communities, bodies have become measurable, quantifiable, and commensurable projects under precise scrutiny, particularly in digital queer spaces where people often present themselves, in addition to photos, by way of numerical signifiers, including height, weight, sexual roles (e.g., 1/0/0.5),[22] income, and age. Chinese queer men tend to exclude short and fat men and set specific criteria such as a particular scale of height or BMI to evaluate other men's desirability. Sexual desires toward bodies are therefore reflected in a more definitive way and divide bodies into various types as normal/desirable versus abnormal/undesirable based on specific numbers. In my view, the standardization of bodies deserves more attention in queer and feminist inquiry.

[22] Chinese queer men use numbers to signify their sexual roles, similar to the top/bottom/versatile signification used in the West. This will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

Queer spaces and bodies on display

China's contemporary forms of queer spaces, including bars, nightclubs, and dating apps, appeared in urban areas after China had deeper involvement in transnationalism. Unlike the concept of globalization that implies the process of Westernization, China's transnationalism is an "alternative modernity" for Chinese people, cultures, and politics in relation to global capitalism in multiple forms (Nonini and Ong 1997). Though, for example, nightclubs and dating apps are adapted outcomes in China, these appearances of new queer spaces are not merely replicas of those from the West. The transnational approach does not aim to erase the asymmetrical process of globalization in which Western nation-states have stronger presences, but rather engages in the asymmetries to understand how different nation-states get involved in distinct degrees (Liu and Rofel 2010). Queer desires in these spaces are also reorganized and manifested in various forms.

The scenes of gay bars and nightclubs are expanded forms of metropolitan nightlife that caters to queer people particularly. The 1990s saw big cities such as Shanghai and Beijing reemerge as nocturnal metropolises, establishing bars, ballrooms, and nightclubs, which differ from traditional entertainment establishments in China, such as theaters and private clubs (Farrer and Field 2015, 9). These transnational nightclubs play Billboard music, invite international DJs, and attract patrons of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, producing a hybrid of nightlife practices (2015, 10). These nightclubs are also ethnosexual contact zones where people of different races initiate competitions of masculinities on the basis of wealth and social status, among other factors (Farrer 2011; Hoang 2015). In Beijing, the new millennium has seen the increase of gay bars and nightclubs, albeit slowly, expanding the spaces of entertainment,

socializing, and cruising for queer people. Destination epitomizes China's introduction of international gay nightlife in big cities. It lives up to its name as a queer man's mecca in Beijing.

Destination attracts a large crowd of patrons and recruits various performers for the weekends. The performers include men of different races and ethnicities from East Asia and Southwest Asia, as well as from the West, creating a transnational space that displays the bodies of multiple races and interracial desires. During these nights, it ceaselessly plays the music of Western divas and other Billboard music. The audience predominantly looks younger than twenty-five;[23] I rarely saw older queer men there.

The go-go boy performance at Destination has turned into an iconic event, attracting crowds to watch, dance, and spend money in the bar till very late at night. Weekend nights often offer three rounds of performances, with the first one, often a stripping or drag show, starting at midnight. Typically, four performers demystify their bodies by removing their clothes piece by piece and end up with underwear or its equivalent covering their genitals. In the second performance, beginning at 1 or 1:30 a.m., topless performers interact with each other and with patrons through seductive movements. The last round, called the "shower show," starts at 2 or 2:30 a.m. Performers take glass-enclosed showers and enact various moves with sexual innuendo (see Figure 6), such as the imitation of intercourse. Each step goes further in exposing performers' bodies and demonstrate more explicit sexual contact, though genitals are still covered or remain out sight of the audience.

[23] No law enforcement in China specifically regulates patrons in bars and clubs. And no staff checks ID for entrance at Destination.

Figure 6: Shower shows (August 13, 2017)

After performers conclude each round, patrons jump onto the stage. During the summer, many patrons dancing on the stage strip off their T-shirts to display their bodies. Sometimes a few queer men are pushed up to the stage by their friends and forced to stay half-naked. During the event of Destination's 14th anniversary, the stage was full of half-naked bodies that kept moving under the spinning light. My field note observed that "well-dressed patrons could only be audiences off the stage, since the dress code on the stage was shirtless flesh" — as it was in the topless room previously mentioned. Destination provides a prime example of how a prominent transnational space promotes the culture of visualization of bodies, and of connecting or excluding based on bodily features on the sexual market.

Aside from the nightclubs and bars that people patronize only from time to time, Chinese queer men's networking is heavily reliant on cyberspace, including dating apps and queered use of mainstream social media (e.g., WeChat, Douban). These digital apps have been embedded in queer people's lives. Aloha is one of the two most popular gay dating/hookup apps,[24] along with Blued has had more than 40 million users, making it the gay app with the largest number of users

[24] Zank, an app that competed with Blued, was shut down in early 2017 during a round of censorship of social media with "illegal" contents. That left room for Aloha to develop and grow.

worldwide. However, many Chinese queer men in my research perceive Blued as low-end, and find the men on Aloha way more attractive. Thus, I chose Aloha as the digital site for observing and analyzing the bodies of desired queer subjects. I collected and coded the profiles of 200 Aloha users who each had more than 10,000 followers in Beijing.[25] In addition, I observed popular performers' livestreaming shows and live interactions on the platform, noting audiences' comments and judgements on particular bodies.

On Aloha, queer people have many ways to represent themselves, particularly for those who yearn for long-term romantic relationships. On their profiles, users post photos of travelling, universities, pets, cooking, and reading, among other factors. They of course post their own photos. Of the 200 popular users in my sample, more than half posted at least one photo displaying their exposed body in a gym, on a beach, or at home. It was clear that Aloha users who possess exhibitable bodies take full advantage of their physical strength appearance by posting shirtless/briefs-only pictures. A photo that presents an enticing body significantly increases the likelihood of getting attention and followers.

On dating apps, one's public profile is a front stage (Goffman 1956) where users need to manage self-presentations. But they can also deal with impression management in the back stage through private messaging. Requests to exchange more pictures are common on these apps. Unlike with apps such as Blued or Jack'd where a large number of users do not upload face pictures due to concerns about sexual identities being exposed to acquaintances (Chan 2016), the majority of Aloha users have face pictures on their profiles, because the system constantly

[25] Many apps recommend similar people based on a user's swiping history. For my sample, in order to avoid the platform recommending only one type of people to me based on the algorithm's understanding of my supposed preferences, I swiped left for all users, which means I did not like any of them. I also excluded some influencers with inflated followings.

reminds users who do not show their face to upload a real and complete picture to succeed in matching. It has gradually become a norm to upload face pictures, thereby excluding a large number of queer men who feel uncomfortable doing so. Aloha is a location-based application, but only VIP users can view people nearby while other users swipe people "randomly" (based on the algorithm's recommendations). This feature reduces many queer people's concerns about exposure to neighbors. In addition to their "decent" pictures posted on the front stage, users often exchange pictures privately, including more exposed body or penis pictures. Dating apps thus make it easy for queer men to display their bodies publicly or privately.

The proliferation of queer spaces, particularly in cosmopolitan areas, does not always bring about positive outcomes for Chinese queer men. For example, Youyouluming (41) is nostalgic about an early online forum, Boya, where he established deep connections with many other queer men in the early 2000s. Although increasing queer spaces have offered queer men more and faster venues to connect with others, Youyouluming believes that connections built on these new platforms are more superficial. On Boya, people connected with each other on the basis of similar interests, which he believes to be the key reason that he could maintain friendship with people from Boya for approximately two decades. Hezheyu (38), who had just moved to Beijing from a small city in northeast China, expressed his frustrations with the gay culture in this cosmopolitan context. He did not cast blame on a particular space, but rather complained that queer spaces in Beijing facilitated "fast-food" cultures, in which people are more likely to seek hookups than to establish more meaningful relationships, in contrast to the cultures in his hometown.

Based on their experiences, both Youyouluming and Hezheyu emphasized the increasingly important role of bodies in today's Beijing. Traditional queer spaces do not provide

as many available options of men as dating apps do. Thus, in general, men used to have lower expectations regarding looks and body types due to the limited pool, but they were more serious with each person they encountered. On early digital platforms such as forums and chatrooms, queer men did not have the option to represent themselves through photos, and so had to impress people through other means. For example, Haiyang (37), a skilled writer, published various forms of literary works on a gay forum, which drew him many followers. Now, however, photos of bodies have become the central focus. This may be why Haiyang became an avid workout practitioner and then frequently posted body pictures on dating apps and other social media.

The following sections start with a brief overview of masculinities embodied in young celebrities, namely the heterosexual cultures, and then present the specific types of bodies craved and eroticized in Destination and Aloha.

"Wolf warrior" and "little fresh meat" in celebrity cultures

While I was in China in 2017-2018, there were two prevailing masculinities in tension within heterosexual celebrity cultures: "wolf warrior" and "little fresh meat." The image of wolf warrior derives from a 2017 blockbuster action movie named *Wolf Warrior II* which became the highest gross-income Chinese movie in history (Osnos 2018). The movie tells the story of Leng Feng, played by Wu Jing (see Figure 7), a soldier of the Chinese People's Liberation Army who helps evacuate and rescue Chinese and African workers in a fictional African country. It contributes to the construction of the Chinese Dream (Shi and Liu 2019), a political concept and blueprint that Xi Jinping coined and devised for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Z. Wang 2014) and the ambition of global expansion of China's economic, political, and cultural influence (Berry 2018). Leng Feng epitomizes the nationalist masculinity of wolf warrior, "drawing not only on Rambo, but equally on the *wu* [martial arts] model of macho masculinity"

(Berry 2018, 42). Although premodern China placed *wen* (literary talent) masculinity over *wu* masculinity, the macho masculinity has gained a foothold in China's recent pursuit of national rejuvenation. Certain physical features are central to the masculinity of wolf warrior, characterized by his short hair, tan and coarse skin , and slightly muscular body. This type of man is not only loyal as a new national subject, but also has the physical capability to act strongly for his nation, in a way that shoulders responsibility for revitalizing China's glory.

Figure 7: Leng Feng in *Wolf Warrior II* as played by Wu Jing, who also directed the movie

In contrast, another popular group of male celebrities are often labelled as "little fresh meat," reflected in the younger generation of male celebrities such as Cai Xukun, Chris Wu, and Lu Han (see Figure 8). During the past two decades, new masculinities promoted by films, men's magazines, and popular cultures in China have become less aggressive and puissant, and turning softer, more gentle, and diverse in heterosexual contexts (Song and Lee 2010; Song and Hird 2013; Lee and Song 2017; Hu 2018). Unlike the sturdy, rough, and coarse masculinity of wolf warrior, these younger male celebrities appear tender and androgynous, reflected in their faces with makeup and their slim or even skinny bodies. Moreover, these young celebrities rarely display bodies explicitly. As Mark McLelland (2005) states, in Japan the ideal beautiful boys in BL comics differ significantly from the popular hypermasculine types in gay communities. In fact, the male celebrities promoted in popular cultures often cater to the taste of female audiences. This contrast has also taken root between China's heterosexual and queer individuals.

Although Chinese media have never ceased to critique the little fresh meat phenomenon as a sign of China's masculine crisis (T. Zheng 2015a), such criticism has not stopped these celebrities from gaining popularity, particularly among younger women. These celebrities are often apolitical but their perceived weak physicality has been questioned in regard to their value to China's revitalization.

Figure 8: From left, Cai Xukun, Chris Wu, and Lu Han

This contrast reveals the tension between the masculinity promoted by mainstream state cultures and the version fashioned in grassroots youth cultures. Each type has its particular audiences to desire and uphold; neither has crystallized as *the* hegemonic Chinese masculinity. My following analysis will demonstrate that the queer masculinities at Destination and on Aloha are not the normalized products of either wolf warrior masculinity or little fresh meat masculinity, because Destination promotes stoic demeanor and pumped-up muscles that are highly eroticized, while Aloha embraces a hybrid masculinity epitomized by "thin muscles." However, these differences from popularized heterosexual masculinities do not boil down to the conclusion that alternative physicality is progressive, transgressive, and free of norms. Indeed, the two queer spaces are creating new norms that restrain and subjugate certain queer subjects, because desirable queer masculinities in the two spaces are largely marked by their emphasis on

fit, muscular, and exhibitable bodies, which has almost become a prerequisite for being popular and winning attention in these spaces. Thus, queer communities can contest heteronormativity and create homonormativity simultaneously.

Destination: stoic, tough, and muscular masculinities

Destination is promoting stoic and tough masculinities, as reflected in its choice of performers and the patrons who gain the most attention. Located in the heart of Sanlitun, a neighborhood where many foreign embassies and expats reside, Destination brings together performers and patrons of various races and ethnicities dancing along with Billboard music, making it a typical transitional queer space. These popular performers come from China, Japan, and various countries of Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America (see Figure 9). But I have never seen any black performer in my visits or on Destination posters. Almost all of them possess big and well-defined muscles, except for a few drag queens whose bodies are covered under dresses. In addition, a few of them are characterized by their pronounced beards.

Figure 9: Nine of the performers invited to Destination in 2017. They represent men of different races, body sizes, and affective presentations — primarily muscular.

Muscularity symbolizes desirability in this transnational space. The flow of the performances from a stripping show to a shower show allows performers to display their muscularity layer by layer, and to catch audiences' attention and mobilize the circulation of libido. As queer theorist Richard Dyer puts it, "a built body is one that is meant to be seen—it is built to show" (Dyer 1997, 301). This culture of celebrating muscular bodies among gay men derived from Western gay communities' response to the critique of camp culture since the 1950s (Corber 1997). Post-Stonewall gay communities rejected previous feminine images of gay men and instead embraced a hypermasculine image to change the overall representations and perceptions of gay men in mainstream society (Baker 2003). A muscular body is a pronounced feature of such masculinity or hypermasculinity, epitomized by the men in *Tom of Finland*, who are "broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, with massive upper body muscularity: 'big pecs, tight abs, bubble butt,' as the saying goes" (Snaith 2003, 78). Scholars hold divergent attitudes toward the gay macho style as either a subversive parody and oppositional form of gay masculinity (Dyer 1981; Corber 1997) or an identification with hegemonic straight masculinity (Bersani 1987). Dyer and Corber defend gay macho style because it, emerging in the 1950s, not only contested the external stereotyping of gay men but also staged a nonnormative form of desire that differs from the domesticated suburban white middle-class desire. The bodies promoted in Destination are more or less replicated muscular types directly transported from early Hollywood movies, Western pornography, and Instagram.

In 2018, in order to attract more patrons, Destination created a program called *Feitongwurao,* imitating the well-known Chinese dating game show *Feichengwurao* (*If You Are the One*). As the gay version, *Feitongwurao* recruited participants from social media and selected "qualified" people to join the game on certain weekend nights. In this game, four to six suitors

were selected to match four to six contestants, who debuted one by one on the stage of Destination. During the first game night in May 2018, the most popular contestant, based on the number of suitors who chose him, was a man in a sleeveless shirt, displaying noticeable biceps and pectoral muscles. Moreover, he was tall, around 180 cm (5'11"). The features of his tall and muscular body won him favor among queer men and boosted his popularity in the space.

In a show in July, the first contestant turned out to be a man who was turned down by his "heartbeat boy" in May. In the May game, after failing to match the man he chose, this guy was not ready to go off the stage; instead, he claimed to be ready to show his muscles, which triggered screaming in the packed audience. When he came to the stage for the second time in two months, the host urged him to strip off his T-shirt immediately. After the contestant took off his top, the host kept complimenting the irresistible attractiveness of his muscular body and announced that this contestant was his type. These experiences reinforce Dyer's argument that muscles are produced to be on display, both at and without requests.

Indeed, many queer men I interviewed show an obsession with muscles. Yuan Xiaojing (30) and Leo (40) both indicated preference for men with obvious pectoral muscles. Danny (25), a master's student in English translation, is infatuated with Jacob Black's body (Taylor Lautner) in the *Twilight* series. He acclaims Lautner's muscular body as perfect and finds big and tight pectoral muscles central to desirable bodies. He is also attracted to biceps and calf muscles. Danny admitted that he could not resist the temptation of a man who possesses all three types of muscles. I asked him why he is obsessed with muscular men and he answered:

> I'm really into people who work out a lot, because they have healthy lifestyles, at least healthier than mine. I really appreciate the help from my current partner. I was initially attracted to his body. But afterwards, I realized that he didn't go out very often to places such as bars or nightclubs. He's a very healthy person who forces me to go to the gym every day. He also guides me how to work out.

Danny is convinced that that his partner's muscles are outcomes of a healthy lifestyle. Thus, desiring such types of bodies means embracing a healthier lifestyle. I also heard from other interlocutors that defined muscles symbolize one's good characteristics, such as persistence, because people who have no perseverance would never produce such muscular and desirable bodies. This rhetoric adopts a neoliberal rationality of full autonomy in self-transformation: everyone is able to produce muscles through effort and perseverance and should be responsible for their physicality. However, these men did not mention another crucial factor contributing to the development of the growing muscles: economic capacity. Big upper body muscularity is more likely to come as a result of working out at gyms, different from athletic bodies produced through long-term sports. A gym membership fee in China is rather high. Moreover, the growth of muscles in many cases relies on trainers' instructions, but the high cost, particularly in Beijing, is not affordable for most people.

This transnational queer space in Beijing favors a stoic and butch masculinity embodied in muscular bodies. Sexual aesthetics that highlight muscular bodies have emanated from the transnational cultures, brought directly by cross-ocean travelers. However, these cultures' implications are limited, because the aesthetics of desirability promoted by Destination are incongruent with the ones embraced by China's younger generations in heterosexual contexts. Thus, muscular bodies are particular transnational products that win popularity only in certain sexual fields, such as Destination. This queer space has its specific codes for desirable bodies that are distinctive from the hegemonic masculine image in heterosexual contexts. Furthermore, the superior bodies also differ to a degree from these in other queer spaces.

Aloha: thin muscles and softer masculinities

Unlike Destination, which creates a transnational vibe by recruiting international performers and playing Billboard music, Aloha does not really target international people, though it has an English interface. The overwhelming majority of the popular users and performers on this app are Chinese. In addition, Aloha, as well as other location-based dating apps, has gradually been embedded in queer men's everyday life. The erotic structure of Aloha therefore reflects Chinese queer men's everyday desires. More than half of the popular users post pictures displaying their half-naked bodies, but many of these bodies on display differ from the muscular ones promoted in Destination. Many of them indeed show well-defined muscles, but these are, according to my interlocutors' words, "thin muscles," which means the bodies are lean and muscular at the same time. One marked difference is that many popular men on Aloha possess exemplary abdominal muscles but ordinary pectoral and upper body muscles. The difference is not limited to the body or muscle size; instead, it reflects a distinct aesthetic which is forged by different cultures and is perceived to stem from essentialized racial difference. Queer men in my study often conflate pumped-up muscles with Western bodies while perceiving "thin" but perfect muscles as East Asian bodies.

In fact, abdominal muscles are not necessarily outcomes of long-term bodybuilding; rather, people could achieve abs while staying thin. Thus, thin muscles, according to my interlocutors, could be understood as small muscles that are produced either through bodybuilding or staying lean. Roger (26), at the beginning of our conversation, indicated that he was not interested in muscular men at all. After second thought, he clarified that he is just not interested in the muscular type of Euro-American men who have large pectoral muscles. Instead, he prefers men with "thin muscles" with no obvious fat. According to Roger, men with an active

metabolism do not even need to work out in order to have good abs. Xiaoben (26) made it clear that he is not attracted to men with big muscles, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger. Both Roger and Xiaoben conflated pumped-up muscles with Euro-American (white) men and consider this type of body incompatible with Chinese people's aesthetics. Moreover, they racialize bodily differences between Western and Chinese men and prioritize the aesthetics of Chinese bodies.[26]

The "thin muscle" is a hybrid body type neither derived from Western bodybuilding culture nor one that epitomizes Chinese or East Asian soft masculinity. Instead this hybrid corporeal form stems from the confrontations of several types of masculinities at the crossroads of transnational cultural flows. For example, media scholar Sun Jung defines the embodied masculinity of celebrity Bae Yong-Joon in South Korea as a hybrid influenced by Chinese Confucian masculinity, Japanese *bishõnen* (pretty boys) masculinity, and global metrosexual masculinity (Jung 2011, 39). Through analyzing men's magazines, studies show Chinese masculinities are becoming increasingly hybrid as well (Song 2010; Song and Lee 2012).

The representative examples in Aloha are complicated, as the prevailing types of softer masculinities in queer communities are jointly shaped by China's new masculinities in celebrity cultures, Korean soft masculinity, Japanese *bishõnen* masculinity, and Western muscular masculinity. This is reflected in some popular men's features as being pretty, cute, or even androgynous in facial looks while possessing muscular bodies. These muscular bodies are not pumped-up but instead defined "thin" muscles. These men appear virile enough, but do not look aggressive. Observation of body types suggests that Chinese queer men's desires are under constant negotiation in different sexual fields. A "dissection" of bodies presents that transnational, regional, and local cultural forces are competing to crystalize queer people's

[26] Chapter Four will elaborate on Chinese men's racial preferences and racialized discourse.

desires, because each bodily feature suggests a particular cultural origin, such as the beautiful face's relation to *bishõnen* masculinity and Korean soft masculinity. None of these forces seems to be able to monopolize queer desires on this dating app.

In addition to the "thin" muscles, many popular Aloha users prefer men who, in some people's eyes, can be regarded as skinny. This is particularly reflected in bodies with clear abs but no other muscles. These body types resemble the "little fresh meat" represented on mass media, who are slim and tall. Mr. Qi (26) claimed that being skinny and being muscular are not mutually exclusive, and he personally desired skinny men with clear lines in the chest, arms, and abs. Daimao'er (30s) finds only thin people desirable — "the thinner, the better."

Apart from being a platform for queer men to network, Aloha is widely used for livestreaming for queer men in China, which is a significant difference from such apps as Grindr, which focuses exclusively on networking. Anyone older than 18 is eligible to apply to be a livestreaming host. Their performances do not have to be professional, but merely aim to entertain the audiences. At the end of each year, the platform holds competitions for the most popular performers, as expressed by the number of gifts (virtual tips that can be converted to cash) each performer receives. In 2017, out of the fifteen top performers, eight were cross-dressing performers (see Figure 10). Did these cross-gender performers win because of their sexual desirability? Do Chinese queer men sexually fantasize about all these popular performers?

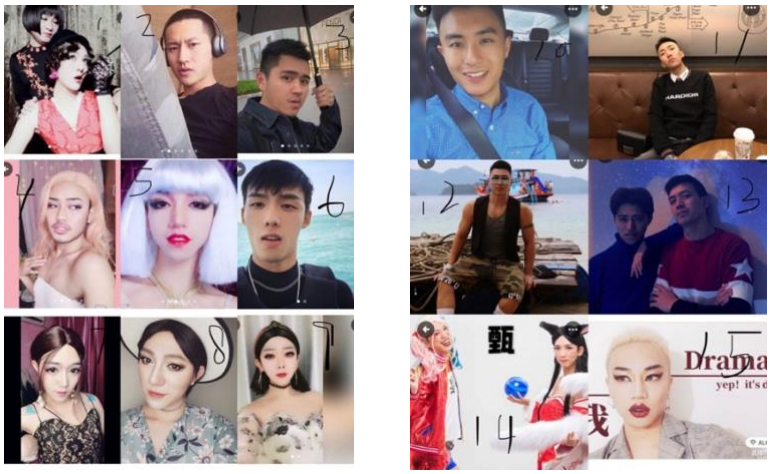

Figure 10: The 15 top performers of Aloha in 2017

Although most of the winners were cross-gender performers,[27] my participants told me that they were not sexually attracted to them at all. Instead, these users consider female-dressed performers amusing or hilarious, which accounts for their popularity among the audiences. Some men nevertheless prefer to watch cisgender performers' shows because of being sexually attracted to them. In contrast with cross-gender performers who make every effort to perform, one cisgender performer called Monster (Number 6 in Figure 10) does not really do much during his "show time." He sits there chatting or playing with his cat. But due to his perceived sexual desirability, he receives many audience gifts regardless of what he does in front of the camera as long as he stays handsome. Like many popular Aloha users, Monster is a tall and lean. Furthermore, he is not characterized by big pectoral muscles but rather by his well-defined abdominal muscles.

Men fantasized about on Aloha are more diverse than these promoted in Destination. A few popular users who do not display their bodies at all nevertheless still gain popularity in this

[27] Cross-gender performing does not make them transgenders, because many of these performers still self-identify as cisgender males.

digital community. However, they still need to remain fit, non-fat, and tall, even if not muscular. In fact, some of my sample participants were clear that they are not into muscles at all. Carr (32) does not like muscular men because he did not have pleasant experiences having sex with muscular men:

> I don't enjoy touching a hard body. I like a body that has the softness a normal body should have. … There is also another important reason. For a rather muscular man, it would be difficult to penetrate his ass, because the muscles make his ass hard. …Visually speaking, I don't care about it. … I seriously don't like the muscular type from Europe or America, not at all. I prefer the average body types of Asian men.

Carr does not fantasize about muscular bodies due to his unpleasant personal sexual experiences. He perceives muscularity as a feature attached to Euro-American (white) bodies that is not compatible with Asian bodies. Moreover, the rhetoric of "hardness" evokes the inhuman and machinic feature of muscular bodies in Carr's eyes. Tangqianwei (30), a man who prefers the receptive position in sex, does not find muscles desirable either. He does not like bears, monkeys (men who are skinny), and muscular men. Instead, he is more attracted to an average body that is neither fat nor skinny. An average body is a humanized corporeality.

In sum, Aloha as a digital sexual field embraces more forms of masculinities than Destination and promotes softer masculinities epitomized by smaller and thinner bodies. This does not mean that Aloha welcomes diversity; following sections will indicate what kind of bodies are often excluded on this platform. This sexual field still promotes fit bodies as the normative code, but it does not embrace the hypermasculine type with pump-up muscles. It promotes bodies that are considered to have "thin muscles," a particular type that many queer men conflate with East Asian and humanized bodies.

Natural versus unnatural muscular bodies

In addition to muscle size, Chinese queer men further categorize ideal men's muscles as natural versus unnatural ones based on the modes of shaping their bodies. This means, even among the alluring muscular bodies, different types of muscles are further hierarchized. The discourse of (un)naturality has often been used in Chinese queer communities to hierarchize men based on their physical features, performances, etc. (Z.B. Zhou 2020). They generally express that muscles gained through sports are considered natural and organic corporeal materials, while gym-produced muscles are deemed unnatural. The natural type of athletic bodies implies intrinsic masculinity that is integrated into one's personality. Fabricated muscles are external to bodies, and thus vulnerable, unstable, and inorganic. A pumped-up muscle, one type of gym-produced body, exemplifies this machinic corporeal being. Thus, the infatuation with natural muscles suggests Chinese queer men's desires for a congruence of external and internal masculinities.

This dichotomy is reflected in the perception that gym-produced bodies are for display, while sports-generated muscles are for health and an internal part of the self that is beneficial for wellbeing. According to Yuan Xiaojing (30),

> Bodybuilding at gym is often used as an approach to find a better partner, to take selfies that can be posted on WeChat, or to show off in hookups. In terms of sports, such as basketball, soccer, and badminton, they aren't just for building a more beautiful body image. Instead, sporting aims at health. It's a hobby, not just an approach of bodybuilding.

In this statement, Yuan Xiaojing reinforces the relationship between sport and internal masculinity. Dave (38) holds a similar idea:

> Muscles gained from purposeful training at fitness centers are not as desirable as muscles developed from long-term sporting. Bodies produced through daily exercises look better and more natural. If [muscular] bodies are produced at gym, these people are just like

> *mingyuan*. I think *mingyuan* is indeed a negative word nowadays, because they often intentionally show off [their bodies].

The word *mingyuan* can be translated as "celebrity" or "socialite" and appeared in my interviews quite often. It was popular around the 1930s in Shanghai, particularly referring to women who active in society and entertainment in the upper class. This word's meaning has become increasingly negative in today's China and has been adopted to attack someone perceived as pretentious or even sexually promiscuous, expanding its use from women to men, particularly queer men. The increasing use of *mingyuan* to belittle muscular men who are fond of gym cultures emasculates their corporeal feature. Because of the belief that gym-produced bodies are to display and show off, this type of muscle cannot be integrated as a part of the organic corporeal being. Moreover, as Yuan Xiaojing claimed, "most gay men work out a lot. In fact, most people at gyms are gay." This statement conflates the bodybuilding culture, a newly emergent cosmopolitan lifestyle, with gay culture, while implying that sport derives from and results in straight cultures. This discourse creates another dichotomy between straight versus gay culture.

Furthermore, many queer men regard the cosmopolitan style of bodybuilding as less masculine or authentic than the lifestyle of exercising through swimming or sporting. Though bodybuilding at gyms may produce muscles in a relatively more efficient fashion, gym-produced muscular bodies are more precarious, as the short-term product needs to be constantly managed and maintained, or otherwise may collapse. Moreover, after conflating gym culture with gay culture and *mingyuan* culture, Yuan Xiaojing and Dave claimed its inferiority. This rhetoric implies the root of sport in straight cultures as less likely to nurture pretentious or negative personalities. The dichotomized perception of (un)natural muscles somehow grows out of

heteronormativity and manifests the internal homophobia of queer men, as they assert the superiority of features engendered in perceived straight cultures.

Furthermore, gym-produced muscles are believed to be "dead" while sport-generated muscles are "alive." I argue that this dichotomy suggests the difference between mere machinic materiality versus humanized materiality. This dyad also suggests that, for Chinese queer men, real or authentic masculinity is reflected not only externally in physical features, but also internally in personality. Youyouluming (41) is man fetishizing young athletes. As vice president of a large company, he has many opportunities to establish connections with athletic men. Although he is into muscular bodies, he prefers athletes to gym trainers. After being asked about the difference, he told me that the distinction is signified as "dead" versus "alive" muscles: gym-produced bodies are "dead," compared with the "alive" athletic bodies. In order to clarify the distinction, he showed me photos of badminton athletes and granted agency to that type of physicality. But I still could not comprehend the exact difference between the two types. Other participants' responses further informed me of the distinction. According to Juno (27), a man who regularly does sports is more likely to develop a positive and optimistic personality. Ruyuan (21) also believes that a man who carries on practicing sports often leaves other people an impression of being vigorous and sunny. All these features would make an athletic man virile both externally and internally. Thus, a long-term process of playing sports would cultivate a muscular and healthy body with a positive and lively personality as the byproduct, while working out in gyms is believed to only yield muscles, inorganic and machinic materials external to ourselves. What's worse, bodybuilding at gyms may engender negative features such as pretentious attitudes, as Yuan Xiaojing and Dave mentioned. Thus, the discourse of "dead" versus "alive" muscles does not really refer to body, but rather to the muscles' relationship with

the self. Sports-produced alive muscles, a type of humanized materiality that consists of both mind and body originating from or rooted in straight cultures, are considered parts of an agentic body that can breathe, feel, and impress others.

It is indisputable that muscular bodies remain at the top of hierarchies among different types of bodies. Analysis of the distinction between natural and unnatural muscular physicality exemplifies the intense scrutiny and disciplines under which contemporary bodies are placed. Even similar body types could be products of divergent or rivalrous cultures. This dichotomy of muscular bodies reveals the integration of heterosexual norms in queer men's aesthetics and understandings of muscularity, embodied in their use of the rhetoric of (un)naturality. Gym-produced muscles are gendered and queered as an unnatural, machinic, and less desirable bodily feature among Chinese queer men. Although bodybuilders at gym have produced hard shields, their masculinity is not authentic or solid enough due to the lack of internal masculinity. That is why the queer community often uses the word *jingang babi*, or "King Kong Barbie," to shame muscular men who are found to be effeminate inside.

No short or fat—standardization of bodies

In addition to the relatively abstract ways of relating musculature to desirability, my findings reveal that bodies today are standardized and commensurable with specific numbers in Chinese queer communities. This shows that queer men's desires are materialized and manifested through concrete statistics, particularly pertinent on dating apps, where queer people present themselves and read other people not only by photos but also on the basis of age, weight, height, income, sexual labels,[28] and other specifics. Numbers mediate queer men's sexual

[28] Chinese queer men use, for example, 1/0/0.5 to refer to their sexual roles. But the signs of sexual roles differ from mathematical numbers. I will elaborate on this point in the next chapter.

preferences and differentiate various types of bodies in digital spaces. The corporeal being has also become a commensurate matter that can be measured meticulously in sexual fields.

In Chinese queer communities, short and fat bodies are often marginalized. Analysis of the physical features of my sample of 200 popular Aloha user's public profiles suggests that fit bodies are pretty similar and queer men do not confer much sexual capital upon alternative bodies. Short and fat bodies are perceived as non-masculine body types. In the following sections, I note that the study of height, a highly gendered matter among both queer and straight people, which has been integrated as a vital part of masculinity, has been understudied and theorized. Moreover, my findings shed light on the fact that some queer men in China today interpret body shape through measuring BMI (body mass index), an international standard that makes bodies numerate. The study of fatness has become a critical topic in feminist scholarship, but it has received less attention in queer studies.

Gendered height: a queer oversight

At Destination, I could not accurately measure people's height in the space, but I was certain that height should not be overlooked in the studies of sexual inequality and deserves more attention as other bodily features do in other subfields, such as fat studies (Cooper 1998; Bell and McNaughton 2007; Chrisler 2012; White 2012). As one of the few scholars who expressed concerns about height-mediated discriminations, Anu Valtonen (2013) argues that we should consider height embedded in everyday activities and explore height-producing practices and height-based agency of individuals, because this physical feature is incorporated and embedded in our daily interactions. My research shows that the body, a supposedly holistic material being, has multiple facets that synergize together in our lived experiences. We should be attentive to more bodily dimensions than we have already been, and understand the social, cultural, and

political implications of height, because this feature causes privileging, marginalizing, or alienating experiences of individuals.

I find the analysis of users' heights on their Aloha profiles fruitful to understand body politics in Chinese queer male communities. Among the 200 users with more than 10,000 followers, 199 users presented heights ranging from 170 cm (5'7") to 195 cm (6'4"); one user profile did not indicate height. These numbers do not necessarily reflect actual size. Because physical features are so key to success on these apps, users often selectively disclose information or deceptively self-present (Birnholtz et al. 2014; Ranzini and Lutz 2017) to attract more attention or followers, which might then be converted into actual sexual opportunities. The average posted height of the 199 popular users was 179.3 cm (about 5'10"). Figure 11 indicates the distribution of the heights of the 199 popular users, from which we can see that more than half of them are taller than 180 cm (5'10") and none of them self-presents as shorter than 170 cm (5'7"). It is apparent that this particular online sexual field has produced a threshold for popular users. However, the average heights of Chinese adult males and females, according to a report published by the National Institute for Nutrition and Health (2015), are 167.1 cm (5'6") and 155.8 cm (5'1") respectively. So every one of the Aloha 199 self-posted as taller than the average man. The national report included adults of various ages, and the average height of the younger generation is likely to be slightly taller than the average, but an important point is that the gendered difference of the average height signifies and results in widespread gendered expectations of men: be tall enough to be a man.

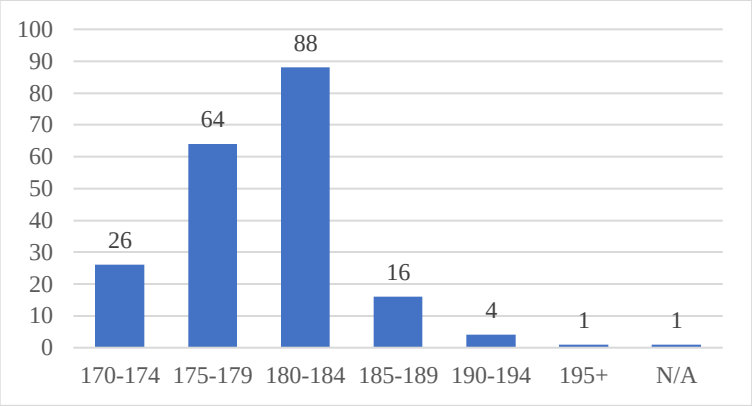

Figure 11: Popular users' heights as posted on Aloha

Many participants in my research told me that the threshold for being a man is 170 cm. A basic gendered expectation of men is that they should be tall or at least taller than women. Men shorter than 170 cm are very likely shorter than some women, which remarkably limits the degree of their masculinity. This gendered norm may enact its discursive and disciplinary power (Butler 1993), fabricating different cultural meanings of various body sizes. In my interviews, Mark (26) revealed that his preferred men should be taller than 173 cm (5'8"); Dabai's (30) and Fanshu's (32) are 175+ cm (between 5'8" and 5'9"); Guangguang prefers men over 178 cm (5'9"). Teacher Wang (48) believes the taller the better. Height is definitely an index that differentiates and stratifies men from short/undesirable to tall/desirable. Some interlocutors talked about their desired height from a relational perspective. For example, Tangqianwei (30) said: "In terms of height, he should be similar to or taller than me. I'm 174 cm, so he should be somewhere between 170 cm to 185 cm, or 188 cm." Hezheyu (38) is 176 cm and prefers men between 170 cm to 185 cm. Hardly anyone showed any interest in men shorter than 170cm or taller than 190cm. Tyrell's (24) desired height of men is between 170 cm to 180 cm, which he believes is a normal height of men, and suggests that men shorter than 160 cm or taller than 190 cm are too extreme. Although men identifying as 1 (top) have lower expectations than men self-labeling as

0 or 0.5, they still expect their ideal partners to be taller than 170 cm. John (39) is one of the very few who find a 165 cm man acceptable. He himself is 165 cm tall.

Their narrations of desirable height register a novel norm that divides "normal" and "deviant" bodies because a normal and desirable man's height should fall into a certain range. Most people are more flexible with regard to men who are taller, but less so for short men. Carr (32) is one participant who showed nonnormative desire in my research due to his sexual interest in feminine affective presentations of men, while most other men showed aversion to feminine presentations. However, Carr's desire is less malleable when it comes to height:

> I really don't like guys who are short, because I think a man should be at least 170 cm tall. I can't stand it if someone is shorter than 170 cm. Although I'm okay with men who are sissy or have other [unpleasant] features, he just can't be too short, hahaha. … I don't like men who are too short. I don't know why, just no feeling at all.

Carr's rationale complicates the understanding of masculinity and urges me to examine different layers of masculinity. His acceptance of the "sissy" or non-virile aspects of men does not suggest that he espouses all sorts of alternative masculinities. Height, a crucial aspect of corporeal being, constantly mediates our gendered presentations, daily practices, and embodiment. It thus creates height-based differentiation and hierarchization of masculinities. Based on critical autoethnography, Anu Valtonen (2013) demonstrates that her small size of body leads her to experience "infantilization" of bodies and displaces her from the category of adulthood, since she has been denied the "capabilities normally attributed to the agency of adulthood, such as autonomy, competence, expertise, and intellect" (208-209).

In a male community, I argue that shortness suggests a prolonged period of boyhood where the subject never reaches and does not show the capabilities to reach mature manhood. In a sexual field, either at a bar or on a dating app, a short male body is considered a desexualized object due to its perceived distance from sexual maturity and its inappropriateness within a

sexual site. Unlike a small female body that is waiting to be lifted or bounced due to her "cuteness" (Valtonen 2013), a short male body is just waiting to be pitied, sympathized with, patted, and then entirely overlooked, because a man is not supposed to be small, in any aspect. On the contrary, a male body taller than 180 cm, as those preferred on Aloha, is considered a mature and agentic body full of capabilities, possibilities, and testosterone. The masculine aura is shining through the mountain-like physicality embodied in the number of 180+ cm postings on online profiles.

In spite of height being a visible, tangible, and vital proportion of body, height rarely gets the attention it deserves in critical body and embodiment studies. On dating apps, it is obvious that queer men have generated normalized expectations of men's height, and have also set a threshold for men to engage their desire. Aloha's filter feature strengthens the exclusion of short men, as many users revealed that they filter out men shorter than 170 cm, pushing short men to an invisible corner of a lively community, no matter how geographically proximate they are on this location-based app. Thus, in a country wherein men's reported average height does not even reach this group's minimum expectations, gendered expectations of the ideal male and desire for height-based masculinity are likely to marginalize a large number of queer men with marked "deviant" and non-masculine bodies.

BMI: A new regulatory tool for desirability

In addition to excluding short and occasionally extremely tall men, Chinese queer men rule out men who are perceived out of shape. It is more of a problem for the younger generation than the older generations in China, because body size has distinct cultural meanings in different historical periods. For instance, as someone born in the 1920s who endured several major famines, my grandma always wanted me to grow more body mass, since she perceived a round

body as a sign of wealth and power. In her memory, only state officials and wealthy businessmen had the privilege to develop a belly. However, this is not the aesthetic standard of the younger generation. Increasing disposable income and improved living conditions during the past three decades have triggered anxiety about being fat. Through scientific discourses (Morgan 2014), public health practitioners have constantly warned against the potential danger of obesity. The difference of intergenerational lived experiences leads to shifting understandings of body size in China.

Unlike height, which has drawn little scholarly attention in academia, fat studies have emerged as a vibrant field across disciplines that investigate the cultural implications of pathologizing fatness (Chernin 1981; Nichter 2000; Bell and McNaughton 2007; Chrisler 2012; Fikkan and Rothblum 2012; White 2012). Many fat studies critique the stigma and discrimination attached to "oversized" bodies from feminist perspectives, because women's bodies have more often been placed under scrutiny and surveillance in daily lives than those of men, thereby enduring more dissatisfaction. However, Kirsten Bell and Darlene McNaughton (2007) point out that previous studies fail to address the problems that overweight men face and caution about overuse of an overarching framework of patriarchy to criticize social constructions of fatness, which may not address the real problem and leads to, in a sense, the invisibility of overweight men. Bell and McNaughton argue that men may endure a lower degree of fat-produced problems than women, but we cannot deny the fact that male bodies are also under scrunity today. The promotion of ideal body types in our daily lives causes anxiety particularly among gay men compared to straight men (McArdle and Hill 2009). Contemporary queer communities prioritize body types over other factors on sexual markets.

While being asked about their desired body types, many interviewees were rather forthright that they are not attracted to fat men. At Destination, I did not see any performer who might be considered fat recruited to perform on stage, though some "bears" may be considered slightly overweight, a type that differs from obese. Thus the question becomes what kind of body would be considered fat? Can we measure "fatness" with objective criteria or is it a subjective perception? A few people mentioned to me the use of BMI as a standardized way to assess whether one is fat or not. BMI is an index that Western public health agencies adopted in the 1980s to evaluate one's health condition based on measuring their body size (Gerbensky-Kerber 2011). It is a relatively new concept in China's public discourse, alongside the proliferation of bodybuilding cultures in urban areas. I had heard the word *tizhilü* (BMI) a few times before, but never learned how to calculate BMI until my interviewees introduced it to me. This index is defined as one's weight (in kilos) divided by the square of their height (in meters). Considering that some of my interlocutors understood body size through BMI, I adopt this approach to analyze all the popular Aloha users' BMI to grasp how their bodies can be interpreted scientifically. Those who may not know how to calculate BMI still have a general idea about overweightness based on the weight and height ratio. Therefore, body type is quantifiable either as a specific number or an approximate range.

The analysis of ideal queer men's bodies on Aloha reveals that, according to the criteria published by WHO (World Health Organization), none of these users' bodies falls into the category of obesity. Figure 12 suggests that 90% of popular queer men's bodies are considered scientifically normal. The medical-based discourse has affected Chinese queer men's perceptions of abnormal bodies through a quantifiable approach.

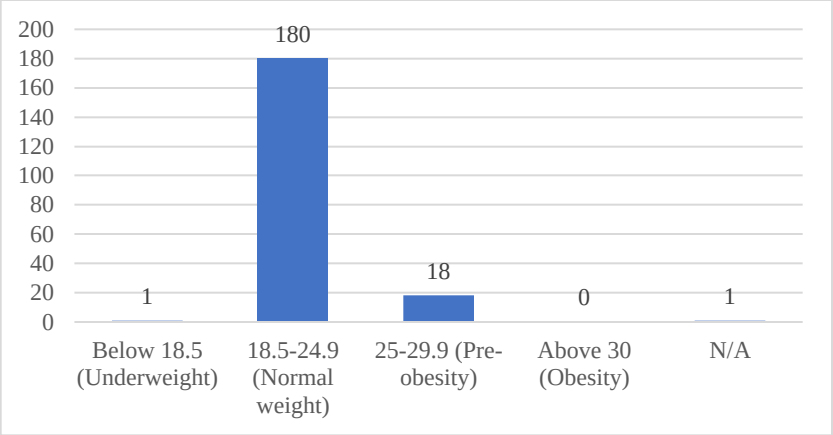

Figure 12: Body Mass Indexes (BMI) of popular users on Aloha based on the weight and height they present on their profiles. According to WHO, a normal adult BMI ranges from 18.5 to 24.9

Among the 10% of these men whose BMIs fall out of the normal range, only one person is considered underweight, and barely so; his BMI, 18.4, almost reaches the normal threshold of 18.5. And 9% are in the stage of pre-obesity. Judging by their photos, many of the men from the pre-obesity box are actually perceived as muscular instead of fat. In fact, scholars have criticized BMI for conflating body fat with muscle mass by calculating all mass as body fat (Gerbensky-Kerber 2011). Big biceps and pectoral muscles, in the public's eyes, are apparently not indexes of fatness. (Note: It is possible that some of these popular men adjusted their posted height/weight and edited uploaded photos, which would confirm that self-representation of a fit and normal body is necessary to gain more attention.)

The data of the popular users' BMI reflects queer users' desires on Aloha particularly. What about queer men's expectations of body sizes in the more general context of Beijing? In my interviews, I heard the abstract statement "neither too thin nor too fat" very often, so I followed by asking whether they can specify "thinness" and "fatness." I understand that aesthetics cannot be reduced to commensurable numbers and I did not intend to forcefully impose a scientific standard on their aesthetics. Indeed, many people refused to or could not offer

a definite range. Those who did provide more concrete answers roughly mapped a boundary between perceived normality and deviancy of bodies in their desires. Tyrell (24) gave an example that a man of 175 cm (between 5'8" and 5'9") should weigh between 60 to 75 kg (132 to 165 pounds), and thus a normal man's BMI falls between 19.6 and 24.5.[29] This is roughly congruent with WHO'S normal range. Many people offered a range proximate to the standardized one. However, some queer men set a lower threshold for overweightness, because they consider the "normal" size defined by WHO as abnormal. For example, Youyouluming (41) made it clear that he is not be interested in any man of 175 cm tall who weighs more than 65 kg (143 pounds), which makes his expected BMI lower than 21.2. Ruyuan (21) provided an even lower range of BMI — between 18 to 20 — as his ideal type. Daimao'er (30s) does not even like men who are strong, because a strong body is equivalent to a fat body to him. Instead, he prefers the slim or skinny type.

My findings substantiate Bell and McNaughton's point that fatness should not be overlooked among men because men are apparently not immune to body oppression, particularly in queer communities. Mr. Wang (27) brought up the difference of perceived fatness between the general public and queer communities in China, as queer communities set a stricter criterion:

> I don't have a specific idea how to determine whether a body is fat. For example, I believe that I'm fat myself, but many people don't believe so. I think being fat should mean that the general public [straight people] perceives you as fat. Gay men nevertheless set stricter and more specific expectations of body size. Some people perceived as fat by gay men are actually okay in the eyes of the general public. I'm more in line with the general public.

Mr. Wang's answer implies that bodies are under more careful scrutiny in gay communities than in straight communities. I find his statement true because straight men in China often offset their

[29] These BMI numbers are calculated by me, instead of being provided by my interviewees.

non-perfect bodies with other capitals, such as economic capital, on dating and marriage markets. Queer men, however, generally do not prioritize class in desires and instead put body type in a more pivotal position. This difference leads to stricter expectations and more intense disciplines of bodies. Mr. Wang showed that he does not mind some extra meat on the bones, but has absolutely no interest in fat men: “Though many fat people are really cute, I just don’t like them. It’s fine to be friends with them, but I’m not sexually attracted to them.”

The discourse of fatness as well as thinness is also rooted in health, morality, and masculinity. Historically, overt thinness is always considered a sign of unhealthiness and disease, particularly for men. However, overweight being perceived as unhealthy has been a relatively novel phenomenon in China since the late twentieth century, triggered by the significant improvement of living conditions, which makes fatness available to more people. The design and introduction of BMI primarily aims to caution people of the potential of obesity. According to a report published by the State Council Information Office (2015), overweight adults account for more than 30% of the total population. This report points out that overweightness may increase the possibility of chronic conditions and diseases, including high blood pressure and diabetics. But this report does not clarify how to measure and determine overweightness. Xiaoqiang (32) mentioned that his aversion to fat men derives from the fact that fat people generally snore a lot, which may affect his sleeping quality. Constant snoring is categorized as a sleeping disorder in contemporary medical knowledge. Given all the potential risks embodied by overweight men, they are unlikely to be perceived masculine, as masculine bodies should be impenetrable by anything unhealthy (Dyer 1997). Thus, both thin and fat bodies are weak, pale, and non-masculine beings, though in different ways. Furthermore, the softness of fat bodies contradicts

the expectation of male firmness;[30] instead, a fat body represents a feminized material that cannot resist infiltration by external factors such as diseases and/or works as an incubator of diseases.

In addition to pathologized discourse on fatness, people demoralize overweight groups by considering their bodies failed products, resulting from irresponsibility in taking care of themselves. This discourse neglects other factors that may lead to fatness, such as genetic factors or economic status. In line with other fat studies (Gerbensky-Kerber 2011; White 2012), participants in my study framed weight as an outcome of personal choice or effort, reflecting moral success or failure, since self-disciplined people are believed to be able to manage their body well. Daimao'er (30) acknowledged that he has bias against fat men and could never imagine having an intimate relationship with a fat man. He explained that body types "probably reflect a person's lifestyle, including the degree of diligence and self-discipline. I have held this thought in my mind for a long time." The booming bodybuilding cultures in China during the past two decades have facilitated the pollination and circulation of such neoliberal and optimistic discourse that everyone is able to and ought to be responsible for their bodies. Thus, a fat body is considered a failure of willpower and actions, incompatible with ideal masculinity.

Chinese queer men's general interest in men whose BMI falls into the lower end of the scale does not mean that overweight men have no market at all. A few interviewees, albeit not many, indicate interests in or preferences for men who might be considered overweight by the scale. Paul (26) revealed that his ideal type is "small bear," which means he should have some body fat but cannot look really obese. Kongqi's (38) ideal type is sturdy men, whom he aspires

[30] This firmness differs from the hardness mentioned previously. Firmness means that the body has durability, while hardness refers to a type of machinic inflexibility of body.

to conquer. Their described types are similar to the category of bear used in Western contexts (Hennen 2008), as Paul adopted the word *xiong* (bear) to exemplify his fantasized men.

The third Friday of every month at Destination is promoted as "the bear and baboon night." In Chinese queer communities, baboon is a category that falls between the average and the bear. Yet the "bear and baboon night" promotion does not mean that all men with large bodies are welcome to the space on that night. Based on the illustration on Destination's poster (see Figure 13), the bears and baboons bodies must have a particular shaping. All the cartoon figures illustrated possess clear body lines and muscles; waists are smaller than chests. On Zhihu, a Chinese question-and-answer website, a user distinguishes bears from "pigs," another category in China's queer communities, by saying "bears possess strong bodies, give people a sense of security, embody masculinity, and could be gentle and cute, while pigs own a lot of body fat, look nasty and pervert, and are sexually turn-offs." This distinction further divides people who might be scientifically termed overweight, as not all the overweight people are the same. The subcultural categories remarginalize certain types of overweight men who are not marked by their muscle masses but rather by their body fatness. Furthermore, the use of "pig" in Chinese often conveys a derogatory meaning and its use in queer communities desexualizes individuals.

Figure 13: An illustration on Destination's poster that promotes "the bear and baboon night"

It has become clearer that Chinese queer communities have meticulously scrutinized bodies in both virtual and physical sexual fields, and prioritize men whose height exceeds the

national average and whose weight or body type is considered normal by scientific tools. This phenomenon is more salient in digital queer communities, because media technologies have enabled and facilitated the understanding and evaluation of bodies through quantifiable approaches. Bodies in queer spaces are thus slyly and unnoticeably marked as normal/desirable versus deviant/undesirable. Our bodies, as the desiring machines, respond to erotic structures of these spaces when bodies meet or fail to meet respective erotic expectations, and generate different affective responses accordingly, including pride and entitlement, or embarrassment and shame. Some of my participants told me that they no longer go to Destination because they do not find that their bodies fit in and they want to avoid being shamed by other queer men. The "scientific" analysis demonstrates a more precise mechanism of privileging and marginalizing on the basis of body types. Thus, contemporary bodies are both measurable beings that can be presented by numbers as well as incommensurable assemblages relying on abstract interpretations.

Materialization and standardization of desires

This chapter demonstrates that male bodies are on display across urban queer spaces in today's China and body types have become a focal point where Chinese queer men project desire. Various body types can be converted into different amounts of erotic capital. My analysis shed light on the materialization of desires into certain body types in two major Chinese queer spaces and in Beijing at large. The increasingly important status of body types in queer male communities is remarkably influenced by queer people's shifting modes of networking and interaction, moving toward online. These forms of mediated networking often rely on online self-presentations that place the body, either as an abstract or a quantifiable being, in a priority position. Additionally, this new approach of networking often aims at and leads to short-term

sexual relationships, because, in a country without legal protections for same-sex relationships, people tend to consider same-sex relationships transient, temporary, and unstable. Bodies, as the basis of material sex, thus become a determinative factor in sexual desirability as well as a divisive factor that hierarchizes sexual subjects.

In Destination, normative bodies are becoming increasingly homogenous, as most popular patrons and performers are characterized by big muscles. The hardness of their muscles makes their bodies like impenetrable shields to protect from being polluted by non-masculine elements. Patrons without normative corporeal features may generate intense bodily reactions in these queer spaces due to their incompatibility with the desire structures anchored there. On Aloha, a space primarily catering to Chinese queer men that allows queer people to better maneuver their self-presentations, users embrace relatively more varied types of masculinities. The softer masculinities desired on Aloha demonstrate the hybridization and the conflict of various cultural ideals in crystalizing aesthetic standards. But the softer masculinities do not necessarily result from the pursuit of gender equity or embracing effeminacy. Instead, the promotion of softer masculinities aims at the expansion of the boundary of masculinity. Femininity is embraced only in occasional cases, such as in the livestreaming shows where cross-gender performers gain popularity. But their popularity stems from amusement and entertaining performance rather than sexual desirability. Few queer men actually espouse femininity sexually in these spaces. Furthermore, though a muscular body is favored across spaces, Chinese queer men particularize the approaches of producing muscles and prioritize an approach that they consider naturally masculine and thus more desirable.

Apart from abstract understandings of the desirable body, today's sexual bodies have become projects under meticulous (mathematical) scrutiny. A desirable male physique should be

tall, tall enough to be clearly masculine, based on gendered expectations for men. It should also fall into the category of being “normal” and “healthy,” reflected as a fit body. A fat and/or short body is placed at the lower end of the scale of desirability. Weight and height should be taken into account in combination, because these physical features have become markers of ideal or subordinate masculinities. The body is (de)sexualized not only through its shape but also through its quantifiable size, making it an increasingly measurable and malleable project for display. The last chapter will specifically investigate how Chinese queer men forge and transform their bodily image to increase erotic capital in the sexual market.

Chapter Three: The Myth of "More 0s than 1s": Masculine Obsession and Anxiety

One day in November 2017, two months after I finished my preliminary research, Buliu, one of my interviewees, messaged me on WeChat and asked why there are more 0s than 1s in China. 1 generally refers to the active and insertive role, while 0 means passive and receptive. 0.5 can be understood as versatile.[31] I was stunned upon being asked the question, because I could not offer Buliu a concise and persuasive answer at that moment, despite the omnipresence of "more 0s than 1s" on various online chat groups and in my interviews. Like the top/bottom/versatile in English-speaking society (Underwood 2003; Hoppe 2011), and active/passive/versatile in the French (Hocquenghem 1993) and Spanish-speaking world (Carrillo 2002), the Chinese queer community has developed its particular language of communication based on numerical labels—1/0/0.5. However, these symbols carry different connotations. I happened to be at a conference in Dallas and had limited Internet access that day, which I used as an excuse to talk later. Yet I never responded directly to his question, since I had yet to develop an answer. This question has been haunting me ever since.

Why are there more 0s than 1s in the Chinese queer community? After searching the question on Baidu,[32] I found many answers across various online forums. Some believe that queer men can obtain more sexual pleasure from being penetrated, so it is natural that more people like to identify as 0. Some argue that queer men have more estrogen in their bodies, which makes them feminine, and therefore they self-identify as 0. Furthermore, they highlight this phenomenon as the symbol of a crisis in Chinese queer communities that everyone should be

[31] The connotations of these labels are contested, because they refer to more than sexual positions, which will be elaborated upon below. In many situations, Chinese queer people deploy Chinese characters such as *gong*/*shou* to replace the numbers as sexual labels.
[32] Google has been blocked by China, so Baidu is the primary search engine that people rely on.

prepared to face, like the problem of gender imbalance in the population at large. They offer a variety of explanations to this "sexual truth" (Foucault 1990), but few contest the claim. Before answering this seemingly statistical question, we need to delve into several other inquiries in order to produce a satisfactory answer: is it true that the number of 0s surpasses 1s in China? How can we define 0 and 1? Why do Chinese queer men believe that there are more 0s than 1s? What would be the consequences of queer men holding such a belief on a large scale?

This chapter unpacks the discursive production of "more 0s than 1s" as a sexual truth and examines how this sexual truth has been internalized in and in turn impacted on Chinese queer men's sexual desires. I argue that "more 0s than 1s" cannot be treated as an ontological phenomenon or mathematical statement. Furthermore, it cannot even be treated as a valid statement. Instead, "more 0s than 1s" is a discourse produced as a result of heteromasculinity being embedded in Chinese queer communities; it acquires authority and eventually becomes an accepted truth. Interpellated with the heteronormative ideology, which demarcates 0 and 1, "more 0 than 1" gradually becomes a "commonsense" that is naturalized as "the way things are" (Gramsci 1971; Sender 2004, 4). Several quantitative studies conducted in China have shown inconsistent or divergent results for the proportions of the different roles (Tao et al. 2004; L. Zheng, Hart, and Zheng 2012, 2015). Studies conducted in the United States show similar results (Bailey et al. 1997; Moskowitz and Roloff 2017). Methodology, geographical focus, and generational difference have each influenced these distinct findings. Moreover, my ethnography suggests the instability of queer men's sexual labels and roles over time. Some transform from 1 to 0, some from 0 to 1, some self-identify as 0.3-0.4 but predict they could become 0.6-0.7

soon,[33] and some self-label as 0, but prefer the role of 1 during sex. Because of this dynamic, it is often impossible to categorize each individual in a certain box. Additionally, varying definitions of 1/0/0.5 lead to another difficulty in exploration, because Chinese queer men have different perceptions and understandings of these numerical labels. Some men consider these labels to be sexual positions, while others view them as gendered roles or sexual roles.[34] Sexual position refers specifically to their preferred practices in sexual intercourse, including the penetrating and penetrated roles, or those not interested in penetration. Gendered role refers to the role that queer people assign to themselves, oftentimes based on binary gendered roles, as either the male or female role in a relationship. Sexual role is used to show to whom they are sexually attracted, but not drawing upon dichotomized roles and rules, such as the role of 0.5, which does not fit into either gendered role and not end with a certain sexual position. Instead, sexual role is a more complicated label, referring to a subject's multiplicity, including his multiple sexual positions preferred or disconcerting experiences between gendered role and sexual position. Therefore, my ethnographical work invalidates the statement of "more 0s than 1s" as a general "truth". That it is widely upheld however, is undisputable.

This prevalent "sexual truth," as a discourse, has the power to regulate social practices in new ways (S. Hall 1997b, 31)—influencing their sexual desires and producing sexual hierarchies in Chinese queer communities. The supposed lower "supply" of 1s triggers higher desirability for 1s in mating markets. It may not be the microeconomic model of supply and demand that determines the sexual capital of 1s and 0s, but one implication of such a belief is that 1s turned

[33] Many queer men in China specify a numerical label between 0 and 1 for self-identification, and locate themselves at a point along the spectrum.
[34] Because the numerical labels carry distinct connotations, I use sexual label to refer to a certain label if it does not reference a specific use.

out more popular and desirable among my participants, and in queer communities online. Apart from those 0s who show affection for 1s, as we would expect, many 1s, or people who self-identify between 0.5 and 1, express preference for 1s. However, few 0s or men who identify as 0.5s display interest in 0s. This contrast prompts an inquiry: why do 1s carry more sexual capital and why are they considered more sexually attractive? Why are 0s considered less desirable and more vulnerable in the mating market? What does it mean that 1s are attracted to other 1s?

Inspired by Buliu's direct interrogation, I bring to light the myth of "more 0s than 1s" by illuminating the asymmetrical definitions and perceptions of 1/0. The two labels are more than the sexual positions of the penetrative and the penetrated roles; they are intertwined with masculinity, capability, and potency. In other words, there is a higher threshold to qualify as a 1, while anyone can be 0. In self-labelling, many queer men internalize the criteria, which leads some to be reluctant or afraid to self-label as 1. Moreover, although Chinese queer people show fluidity and complexity in exploring their own sexual labels, they tend to use simplified and stereotypical criteria to speculate those of other people. Even though many queer men self-label as 1s or 0.5s, many of them are not accepted as 1s or 0.5s by other queer men due to their "failure" to meet certain expectations. According to these criteria, it is natural that more men fall into the category of 0. Thus, "more 0s than 1s" is a statement based more on other-identifications or public perceptions of people in the community, than on an investigation of the outcome of self-labeling among queer men.

Instead of considering "more 0s than 1s" a strictly binary and gendered phenomenon, I examine the epistemology through the lens of masculinity studies (Kimmel 1987; Gilmore 1990; Louie 2002; R.W. Connell 2005; R. W. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This offers a nuanced framework to study the relationship between different male subjects. The 1 in the statement of

"more 0s than 1s" does not necessarily represent real or specific sexual subjects; rather, 1 embodies the hegemonic masculinity favored and promoted in Chinese queer communities. By introducing Gramsci's term "hegemony", hegemonic masculinity refers to a certain type of men in an authoritative and dominant position (Donaldson 1993; R. W. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Beasley 2008), as opposed to subordinate and marginalized masculinities (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985). In this study, domination does not point to every social dimension, because the hegemonic ideology of superior 1s only applies to their superiority in sexual desires, and enfranchises subjects with sexual power. Furthermore, I argue that this omnipresent myth demonstrates the obsession with and anxiety over masculinity in Chinese queer communities. This results in widespread sexual discrimination against queer men who are not qualified to be masculine. Thus, this myth perpetuates a sexual hierarchy in which men who self-label as or are considered 1s enjoy sexual privileges. Meanwhile, men who are considered non-masculine, including those who self-identify as non-1 or lacking masculine features, are in a vulnerable position.

However, this does not indicate that the sexual hierarchy is too rigid to break. At the end of the chapter, I provide two cases of resistance to hegemonic masculinity through alternative desires: sexual experiences with and desires for non-masculine subjects, and confrontation of sexual labels by performing non-normative gender and sexuality. Although their resistances are not typical in Chinese queer communities, it is pivotal to show how Chinese queer subjects devise strategies to contest the hegemonic ideology of masculinity obsession. This may be a harbinger of a future queer China.

The epistemology of the 1/0 binary

Although I believe that "more 0s than 1s" cannot be answered as an ontological question through statistics, I start by engaging with extant quantitative work in order to demonstrate the arbitrary of this statement. This analysis is followed by examining Tiantian Zheng's anthropological exploration of 1/0, one of the few available inquiries of Chinese homosexual taxonomy from the perspective of cultural studies. Zheng's exploration delves into the sexual taxonomy beyond sexual positions and acts. Her ethnography conducted in Dalian before 2010 helps understand how this dichotomized classification affected queer practices. My findings nevertheless show this system is not just binary and elucidates the complexity of sexually labelling.

The majority of the studies touching upon sexual labels in Chinese queer communities have been undertaken by psychologists and public health scholars. Scholars in both fields consider 1/0/0.5 to be sexual positions or acts, rather than identities. Yet, participants do not necessarily comply with the researchers' definition. Moreover, these studies view these labels as fixed rather than dynamic. Psychologists examine personality traits attached to people practicing different sexual positions (L. Zheng, Hart, and Zheng 2012) and their respective cognitive styles (L. Zheng, Hart, and Zheng 2015). Public health scholars and practitioners usually explore the risks of HIV infection for people with distinctive preferred positions in intercourse (Tao et al. 2004; C. Zhou et al. 2013). All of these studies have been based on medium-size surveys of between 114 and 509 participants, and all recruitment has relied on random sampling. However, their findings have displayed inconsistent proportions for various sexual categories. Some studies have shown that the percentage of 0s is higher than that of 1s, 34.5% (0) versus 27.2% (1) (L. Zheng, Hart, and Zheng 2012), and 48.4% (0) versus 19.8% (1) (L. Zheng, Hart, and Zheng

2015). The rest of the participants self-identify as 0.5 (versatile). In the other two studies, the number of 1 participants far exceeded that of the 0s: 21.1% (1) versus 11.4% (0) (Tao et al. 2004), 22.5% (1) versus 12.5% (0) (C. Zhou et al. 2013). These surveys did not intend to investigate or test the proportion of 1s and 0s among Chinese queer men, yet the divergent numbers produced by random sampling do suggest the difficulty of answering whether there are "more 0s than 1s."

The disparity in survey results could be the result of disciplinary differences between psychology and public health, the different geographical focuses of national and local surveys, different understandings of 1/0 before and after 2010, or disparate understandings of 1/0 among different individuals. In addition, the statement of "more 0s than 1s" leaves no space for the category of 0.5, but these surveys indeed display a large portion of people who self-label as 0.5 or claim to enjoy both positions. Where along the binary spectrum should these queer men fall? Should we specify their preference by creating a scale as did sexologist Alfred Kinsey? However, his scale is primarily used to test homosexual and heterosexual dispositions. Moreover, how did these participants understand 1 and 0 before they picked a self-label during interviews or on a questionnaire? Participants might have distinct interpretations of the label they chose. If we consider these factors, the survey results could be different. My intention in introducing these surveys is to show that the popular perception of "more 0s than 1s" cannot be unpacked with a large-scale investigation until we unravel the multiple cultural meanings of sexual labels, and the underlying incongruity of popular perceptions of these categories. Therefore, it is imperative to shift to another angle to understand this phenomenon.

Apart from these disparate scientific studies, Tiantian Zheng's book *Tongzhi Living* (2015b) also offers insight into China's 1/0 system. Based on an ethnography conducted in

Dalian, a city in Northeastern China, Zheng argues that the 1/0 system is rooted in heteronormativity, and therefore defines 1/0 as gendered roles. According to her study, new members of the queer community usually need to find suitable gendered roles which facilitate their socialization. The powerful gender ideology leads to gendered expectations of 1 and 0 respectively, like husbands and wives. Consequently, this gendered role disciplines queer men's behavior accordingly. For example, 1s are more masculine, rational, aggressive, and financially independent and supportive, while 0s are more feminine, emotional, submissive, and financially dependent (82). Though 1s and 0s are rigidly gendered, 0s often perform agency through appropriating their femininity to exploit 1s, economically for example. She also mentions that 1s and 0s sometimes challenge heteronormative gender norms by not conforming to traditional gender codes, but her book does not elaborate on this point. It does however enrich academic understanding of 1/0 as not only sexual positions, but also gendered roles. It also reveals the power imbalance between the two groups of men. However, as sociologist Wei Wei (2016) points out, it overemphasizes the gendered and binary division between 1 and 0 through a heterosexual model. Consequently, Zheng overlooks all other sexual possibilities for Chinese queer men and their queerness. Moreover, the 1/0 system in her study is static without leaving much space for queer men to flow from one role to another. That Zheng's findings differ from mine may be the result of when she conducted her study (before 2010), the site (a Northeastern city), as well as her outsider identity as a straight woman, upon which she does not provide adequate reflection. She nevertheless does direct us to explore the role system through cultural interpretation.

Overall, studies of 1/0 in various disciplines do not evaluate the validity of "more 0s than 1s" and could not offer us a definitive answer. But they suggest the impossibility of answering it

as a statistical question before illustrating the cultural complexity of sexual labels. I argue that 1/0 is neither a mere gendered role nor simply a sexual position. Chinese queer men offer variegated interpretations of the 1/0 system and how they position themselves along the spectrum. Furthermore, one's position/role/identity may be dynamic if the temporality of the focus is expanded. In addition, the power imbalance is not rooted in the gendered inequality between 1s and 0s, as a duplication of the inequality between men and women in heteronormative societies. 1s indeed are privileged in many aspects, such as sexual desirability. The hierarchy of sexual power derives partly from the widespread promotion of the myth "more 0s than 1s," which has taken root in many queer men's mindset, and the asymmetrical perceptions of 1/0. This mythical belief results in unfair evaluations of the desirability of sexual categories and individuals, and eventually generates sexual hierarchies with varying sexual labels.

The contradiction and dynamic of self-labeling

Like dating apps or websites in Western societies in which sexual labels are prevalent and considered indispensable by many (Sánchez and Vilain 2012; B. Miller 2015), on Blued (a Chinese gay app), sex label is included in users' profiles. They have four options to label themselves: 1, 0, 0.5 or other.[35] Users can easily filter groups they do not want to target. This option was removed for a few months in 2017 after a backlash against sexual labels, because these labels are critiqued to reinforce heteronormativity in queer communities. However, this attempt to deemphasize self-labeling failed, as characterized by Blued's re-adoption of sexual

[35] On Grindr, users have more options (e.g. versatile top and versatile bottom) to specify their roles. This phenomenon was mentioned by several interviewees since they appealed that Blued and Aloha should include more choices in order to accurately reflect their roles. As of 2019, Aloha offers more options, including vers top and vers bottom in order to reflect users' sexual roles more accurately.

labels on its interface in late 2017. In 2018, another Chinese gay app, Aloha, added the option of sexual labels. Before 2018 when users could not choose a sexual label, they would simply enter their sexual labels on their profiles if they wanted to draw other users' attention through this role. The moves of Blued and Aloha demonstrate forces of push and pull among Chinese queer men over the importance of sexual labels. Many users refuse to put a label in their profiles, yet are continually asked about it, as this is a factor often used to evaluate sexual compatibility and desirability.

Even though many Chinese queer men request clear labels from other men, some of them have difficulty self-labeling. This complicates the counting and comparing of the proportions of different categories. Among my interlocutors, the majority did not offer a fixed label, diverging from Tiantian Zheng's findings. This lack of a rigid label is reflected in two ways. First, many queer men disagree over their sexual labels and practices. Thus, they find it hard to reconcile the tension between preferred sexual position, gendered role, and sexual role. That being said, their self-labels, which they perceive as gendered or sexual roles, are at odds with the positions preferred and behaviors enacted in sex. Second, some queer men cannot locate an accurate position in the 1/0 system, or they are still exploring self-identification, and are experiencing the transformation of sexual labels over time. Thus, this dynamic does not permit them to be fixated into a role. In-depth interviews prompted self-reflection of their sexual labels, and engendered self-contradictions in their narratives.

Although public health discourse demonstrates that the 1/0 system refers primarily to sexual positions, Chinese queer men rarely conform to the definition for medical purposes. Some use sexual labels as a reference merely to sexual positions in intercourse; others use it to refer to gendered roles in same-sex relationships, or to sexual roles that deviate from binary gendered

roles. Many queer people oscillate between these understandings, resulting in disconcerting experiences. Wang Fei (30) is one of these who has created double identities online. He has two accounts on Blued, one labelled 0 and the other without any sexual label. Wang Fei characterized the two accounts as *piaohao* (wandering accounts) due to the "fakeness" and instability of his labels.[36] He used the unlabeled account to target men who enjoy being penetrated, but he refused to label himself a 1 on this account. I asked him why he was reluctant to enter a label of 1 when he actually used this account to perform penetration. He replied:

> This may result from my personality or psychological condition. When I do 1 [penetrate others], I'm just releasing my libido and seeking sexual satisfaction. That's all. No one should care about or touch me after I cum. Don't talk to me, don't hug me, don't cuddle with me. It's over after ejaculation. I am a 0 at heart and hope to be taken care of. I will need a 1 if I look for a boyfriend.

I asked why he did not label himself a 0.5, because it sounded reasonable to me for him to self-label in this way. He answered: "I think I am a pure 0. Actually, when I do 0 [get penetrated], I don't have much pleasure [physically]. When I have sexual intercourse with other people and do 0, my pleasure usually comes from the psychological level, rather than the physical level." His elaboration resonates with many Chinese queer men's experiences by distinguishing the *xinli juese* (psychological role) from the *shengli juese* (physical role). According to Wang Fei, he believes that he is a 0, in spite of his preference for penetration in intercourse. Thus, he prioritizes the psychological role over physical role in self-identification. He does not attempt to subvert the same-sex relationship gender binary, neither does he conform to heterosexual norms by simply picking a label. One solution for him to reconcile the tension through the 1/0 system was to live double lives, both on dating apps and in offline life. He self-labels as a 0 to speak for

[36] This narration resembles a particular local queer discourse in Chengdu, because queer men used to label themselves as *piaopiao* (wandering men). This term implies that queer men "can never settle down, but float around like rootless leaves" (Wei 2007, 575).

his gendered role on one account, while using the other to release his sexual urges as simply a penetrator without any identity attached.

John Xu (39) is similar to Wang Fei, as he also self-labels as "bottom" (the literal word he used, not 0), but wanted to practice both penetration and being penetrated. He disclosed that his self-labelling is also reliant on the psychological role. Landon (26) noticed this inconsistency as well, but he labelled himself as a 1 based on his preferred sexual position, in spite of his psychological alignment with 0. Thus, the label of 1/0 means primarily a sexual position for Landon, instead of a gendered role or a particular sexual role. The contradiction of self-labeling makes it hard for them to pick a fixed sexual label, because they might offer distinctive answers under various contexts. Moreover, they use disparate criteria in self-labeling, which variegates the labels' connotations because the label of 1/0 can refer to a sexual position, gendered role, or sexual role.

Despite 0.5 being a component of the 1/0 system, many queer men discredit the system for its failure to provide an effective means of self-labeling, particularly for these men who are undergoing a transformation of sexual labels. For some, exploration of sexuality can be completed in a short period of time, as many queer men are certain about their roles from the beginning. It can take others years, or even an entire lifetime, to explore the possibilities. The shift in sexual labels over time is commonplace in queer communities, another factor that makes it unrealistic to answer whether there are "more 0s than 1s."

Anson's trajectory reflects many queer men's experiences of identification. At the time of this study, he was self-labeling as a 0.5. This had come as a result of years of exploration. In his first relationship, his boyfriend had been a 1, so he "naturally" identified as a 0 in order to make their relationship and sex compatible. His role had reversed in his second relationship, in which

he became a 1 because his partner was the 0. Though he was flexible in switching his role within a same-sex relationship, he had been discontent with both gendered roles in previous relationships because he had wanted to practice both within a single relationship. Thus, he had decided to label himself as a 0.5. This 0.5 is multifaceted for him: it represents a versatile sexual possibility in which he could both penetrate and be penetrated in intercourse; he also constructed a new meaning: he is not a big fan of intercourse and does not enjoy either position. Most importantly, he believes that 0.5 is more than a mere preferred sexual position or a gendered role. In his eyes, 0.5 is a sexual role, more than binary positions or gendered roles. Instead, this sexual role suggests that he is attracted to another person who prefers to practice both positions and develop an equal relationship between partners.

This transformation is not strange to many queer people. The short list below demonstrates the trajectories of the label shifts of several of my interlocutors: Zeming Chen (26, from 1 to 0 to 0.3/0.4), Kongqi (30, from 0 to 1 to 0.5), Tangqianwei (30, from 1 to 0), Xiaopu (35, from 0 to 1 to 0.5), Haiyang (36, from 0 to 1), Mengshu (37, from 1 to 0.5 to 0), Donglai (40, from 0 to 1 to 0.5), Teacher Wang (48, from 1 to 0). This phenomenon is particularly salient among queer men over 30, because they have spent more time exploring identities, sexual pleasure, and ideal relationships. Younger queer men were less likely to disclose such a complicated trajectory to me. These individual trajectories do not signify that all of these men have arrived at their destinations, as many of them were still uncertain whether they should end up with such labels and related practices. In line with Anson's resilience and malleability, Zeming Chen's self-label had originally been a response to his partner's role. He had had fun in all of his previous relationships, but felt incomplete as a person with either label. Unlike Anson who eventually picked a tag, 0.5, Zeming Chen specified his role as 0.3 or 0.4 because he

thought he was not versatile enough to be a 0.5. However, he predicted that he might move to 0.5-0.6 after improving his sexual skills.

Many factors account for the changes, including awareness of sexual pleasure after increasing sexual experience, sexual potency, and aging. I elaborate on these in the following section. Vince (28) offered a different rationale and disclosed season as a factor influencing his label. In summer, he prefers being penetrated because his body is relaxed; in winter, his contracted body pushes him to penetration. In spring and fall, he has no preference. He said that his sexual label reflects his relationship with nature:

> It's pretty hot in the summer and people are more likely to get sweaty, so human bodies are more relaxed. During winter, you feel cold, even though there is enough heat [indoors]. This is a reflection and response to nature. Under such circumstances [in winter], your body needs to get tightened. You know, tires get contracted, so do human bodies. This is what we call *diqi* (ground energy) in China, in which everything congregates under the ground and cannot be released. Thus, human *qi* (energy) should not be emancipated either. You need to tighten your body in winter when you cannot relax. When your body is not relaxed, you cannot enjoy it when you do 0. Do you get it?

By integrating the concept of energy in traditional Chinese medicine, Vince had discussed his sexual pleasure in different seasons due to varied physical conditions as being relaxed or tightened. His narration suggests a cycle of shifting self-labels revolving around sexual positions.

Therefore, the dynamic of some queer men's self-labeling over time poses another complication to comparing the number of 1s and 0s. Which label should we take into account, among their past, present, and predicted future labels? If we decide to choose their label at present, what can we do with those men who have not arrived at a destination of exploration? In addition, for those men who choose to position themselves as 0.3 or 0.7, can we simply lump them into the category of 0 or 1 because they are approximately equal to 0 or 1 in a mathematical lens? Even if I reduce queer men to a label, another problem arises: how should I categorize a 0.5 if I attempt to answer whether there are "more 0s than 1s?" This leads me to believe that more

effort to compare the absolute numbers of 1s and 0s may result in more misunderstandings of the 1/0 system, before unpacking the cultural meanings of distinctive sexual labels and queer men's complicated process of identification.

Asymmetrical understandings of 1/0

The contradiction and dynamic of their self-labeling practices suggest the difficulty, dilemma, and even trickery in such a comparison. Under such circumstances, why is the belief that there are "more 0s than 1s" still widespread and circulated among Chinese queer men? I argue that the myth of "more 0s than 1s" largely stems from Chinese queer men's asymmetrical understandings and definitions of the two labels. My findings demonstrate that there is a higher threshold to qualify as a 1, while anyone can be a 0. This excludes many queer men from the possibility of being a 1, even though many queer men do label themselves as such. Many self-identified 0.5s are also considered 0s by their peers. This asymmetrical understanding draws upon queer men's self-identification and other-identification. In self-labeling, queer men consider many factors and may undergo constant changes in sexual labels. Most of them are actually practicing the fluidity of sexuality and queerness. However, in other-labeling, queer men adopt stricter standards for speculating on others' labels. More importantly, other people's sexual labels are less dynamic in public perceptions than their own. Simply put, others' sexual labels are often simplified and reduced to a fixed category based on certain features, regardless of how a person self-labels himself.

1, 0, and 0.5 are more than sexual positions from which queer men derive sexual pleasure. They may even have little to do with sexual pleasure, as Wang Fei's case illustrates, as he labels himself through a position he does not enjoy (a 0 who prefers to penetrate in

intercourse). These labels also reflect ways of identification on the basis of gender presentation or sexual aesthetics (Bridges 2014), physicality, sexual potency, and even geographical origin.

The asymmetrical threshold is manifested in the commonly held belief that "there is no pure 1, but there are a lot of pure 0s." In other words, these queer men believe that no one can be a pure 1, but many queer men are indeed pure 0s. According to Vince (28), not every queer man can be a 1 because many people have the problem of erectile dysfunction. This physical constraint prevents them from performing penetration, and thus being a 1. Apart from being a physical problem, it can also be caused by psychological state, since men who have no desire for penetration cannot be stimulated and therefore get erect. Thus, the lack of sexual drive and desire can also prevent queer men from performing penetration and being a 1. In contrast, it is easier to be 0 and there are fewer barriers, as everyone can be penetrated, regardless of their desire. However, Vince added one exception. If another man insists being a pure 1, he would suspect that the guy has developed hemorrhoids, which eventually makes being penetrated painful or impossible. This opinion is supported by Dalei (37), who revealed that his ex-boyfriend self-labelled as pure 1, but he supposed that he might also have had hemorrhoids. Though he had never explicitly asked his ex-boyfriend, Dalei speculated this could have been the reason he had considered himself a pure 1.

A second asymmetrical qualification—sexual potency and skill—also contributes to this common belief and discouraging people from identifying as a 1. A qualified 1 is believed to be sexually potent and able to conquer his partner. The lack of confidence in sexual potency, insufficient sexual experience, and erectile dysfunction can all discourage queer men from labeling as a 1. Wukong (27), a finance practitioner, said that he wanted to be a 1, but was limited by his "physical condition." Though he did not clarify what the limitation was, he

implied that his being a 0 was to some extent a passive choice based on his "physical condition." This passive choice is more evident for Teacher Wang (48), a professor at a university in Beijing who is in a heterosexual marriage. He had primarily been the penetrator in sexual intercourse during his 20s, but had gradually transformed to being a 0, particularly after the age of 45:

> After aging, I have probably developed slight sexual impotence. This doesn't mean that I cannot do it [penetrate], I did try it. There was a situation where another person was my particular type and he wanted to be the 0. He suggested we not meet if we weren't going to have intercourse, so I just did it. However, penetration took a lot of work. After I finished, maybe I'm getting old, I felt dizzy, my eyes were blurry, and my ears started ringing right after ejaculating.

Moreover, Teacher Wang said that he derives little pleasure from being penetrated, but needs to meet his partners' needs, since many people ask for intercourse in hookups. Teacher Wang's narration suggests that his sex role transformation had been the result of his decreasing sexual energy and potency. In addition to sexual potency, Zeming Chen (26), a physician in a prestigious hospital, self-labelled as a 0.3-0.4 because of his poor sexual skills.

Anthropologist Everett Zhang (2015) claims that the impotence epidemic in post-socialist China, as a commonplace social phenomenon, has been the result of a masculine crisis, generated jointly by state repression, economic reform, and the transformation of family units and women's status. In Chinese queer communities, the physical impotence or sexual inexperience has triggered a masculinity crisis among queer men, who shy away from the label of 1 which requires sexual potency. To the contrary, no one mentioned that 0s should be equipped with certain sexual potency, as long as they can be penetrated (without hemorrhoids). Therefore, the higher standard of sexual potency excludes many men from self-labeling as a 1, in spite of their desire and longing for penetration.

Apart from physical potency, the asymmetry manifests in individual capacity in terms of personality and socioeconomic status, and this draws upon heterosexual norms. Their self-

labeling relies on binaries such as independent/dependent, protective/lack of a sense of security, simple/flamboyant. These dichotomies also imply capacity and incapacity, which embody various power imbalances. If one is capable enough, he can qualify as a 1. Wang Ke (26), a graduate student in Beijing, labels himself as a 1 in spite of zero sexual experience. He believes that his independence and maturity should make him a 1. On the contrary, Daimao'er (30s) self-labels as a 0 because he is dependent and hopes to be protected and taken care of. Moreover, he expects his partner to be strong-minded and to be his own man. This contrast elucidates how they consider 1 a capable subject, while 0 as an incapable subject, based on traditional gendered norms.

Sexual aesthetics are also a factor that many Chinese queer men take into account. According to sociologist Tristan Bridges, sexual aesthetics "refer to cultural and stylistic distinctions utilized to delineate symbolic boundaries between gay and straight cultures and individuals". They can manifest in "interests, material objects, styles of bodily comportment, language, opinions, clothing, and behaviors" (2014, 62). Whereas Bridges focuses on the aesthetics used to distinguish gay and straight cultures, I find it also appropriate to draw boundaries between different types of queer men—1s and 0s. The sexual aesthetics of 1s often signify virile self-presentation and gender conforming, while 0 is deemed to be related to effeminacy and gender transgression. For example, a virile self-presentation may include short hair, low voice pitch, calm attitude, while effeminate self-presentation may be characterized by long hair with edgy hairdo, sharp and high voice pitch, and dramatic personality. Individuals with supposed feminine features are more likely to self-label as 0, and are often viewed as less manly. Jason (21) labeled himself as 200% bottom, because he found that his femininity stands out in his personality, reflected in his obsession with using makeups and wearing high heels.

This is also the case for Xiaochen (25), a paralegal in an NGO. He had had no sexual experience prior to our interview, but labeled himself as a 0, because he found people with feminine characteristics identified as such, and just followed them. Xiaochen came to our interview wearing a female sailor suit, indicating that to be a part of his selfhood as well as a sign of him being 0. Kongqi (31) revealed his preference for the position of penetrating in sex but was afraid of labeling himself as a 1 due to his lack of virility and decisiveness, which he believed to be necessary to a 1's personality. For example, he has a high voice pitch that has often mistakenly recognized as a woman's voice over phone. In order to seek a compromise, he had chosen 0.5 as his sexual label.

Men with feminine characteristics are more likely to be viewed as 0s, even though some self-identify as 1s, though they are often are not accepted as 1s in the community. However, not all masculine or "straight-acting" men are treated like 1s. Other-identification is often a simpler and more violent process than self-identification, because people usually rely on heteromasculine perceptions to identify a person's role. If the complexity of self-identification signifies the queerness of these men, the highly simplistic way of other-identification exemplifies the internalized heteronormativity and even misogyny among Chinese queer men.

Attacking one's femininity and doubting one's role as a 1 are prevalent tactics in cyberspace. On the live streaming platform Aloha, users discuss their sexual labels in interaction. Zhizhu, an active member, mentioned that he was a 1. This triggered other participants' vitriol because Zhizhu had shown up often and did not appear masculine due to his high voice and exaggerated performances. Furthermore, they labeled Zhizhu as "*mu* 1," which means "effeminate 1." This type of 1 is often not accepted as the true 1. On the contrary, men on Aloha rarely degrade men who are "straight-acting" and self-identify as 0s; instead, they only express

pity that certain guys should be 1s, but in fact are 0s. This contrast suggests that, in public perception, a larger portion of people are likely to be 0s based on affective presentations. This includes all effeminate men, regardless of their self-labels, as well as many masculine men who self-identify as 0s.

Queer men's affective presentations are considered credible and reliable indicators for speculating on others' roles. However, the sexual aesthetics of 1/0 are not limited to gendered presentations. They also include characteristics such body size and accent. This strict boundary also prevents many men who self-identify as 1s from being perceived as 1s. Daniel Zhang (26) said that he had a friend who self-labeled as a 1, but Daniel did not believe this assessment. Daniel's clues included his friend's smaller body size (170 cm, approximately 5'7 ft in height), compared with the larger body size of his friend's boyfriend (193cm, approximately 6'3 ft in height). He believed that in this relationship, the significantly shorter one should be and is more likely to be the 0. Moreover, his friend's accent was close that of Hong Kongers' and Taiwanese', in other words, soft and feminine. Thus, Daniel discounted the possibility that his friend could and should be 1, because this friend did not embody the masculinity that a 1 should possess.

This gendered rule can be rigid and brutal. Many queer men label themselves as 0.5s because they enjoy both sexual positions, and many reject the gendered role in same-sex relationships. However, many queer men have had unpleasant experiences after marking themselves 0.5s on dating apps. Xiaoming (24) said that he was often reduced to a 0 even though he had clearly marked himself as a 0.5. The experiences of many queer men resonate with Xiaoming's. According to Tangqianwei (30), all guys who mark themselves as 0.5s should be considered 0s, because marking 0 would diminish one's sexual attractiveness and popularity

online. He perceived a mark of 0.5 as a strategy for 0s to attract attention. Thus, he discredited the entire category of 0.5s as a real category. The public perception of 0.5s has also become clearer on cyberspace. One man on an Aloha live streaming dating show demonstrated his role as a 0.5 and his origin of Chengdu, a city in Southwestern China. Other people satirized him by saying that a 0.5 from Chengdu[37] means he can *zuo* (坐) both 0s and 1s. They played off of the Chinese pronunciation of *zuo,* which can refer to *zuo* (做) as a verb, meaning "to do" because a 0.5 can both penetrate and receive. However, they used another Chinese character, *zuo* (坐), with the same pronunciation, but which means "to sit". Therefore, these people imply that a 0.5 from Chengdu can sit on either a 1 or a 0; i.e., be fucked by either of them. Moreover, many queer people do not consider any man who has been penetrated to be a 1. Though the importance of the rigid one-time rule has declined, some still emphasize the purity of the anus (never to be penetrated) in order to qualify as a 1.

Overall, the asymmetrical understandings of 1/0 can account for the myth of "more 0s than 1s," because there is a higher threshold to be perceived as a 1 than as a 0. This ultimately excludes many men from the 1 category. In addition, the statement of "more 0s than 1s" is not only based on the calculation of self-labels, but also on other-identification and public perceptions of who should and can be a 1. The commonly held belief that there are no pure 1s but there are pure 0s suggests rigid criteria to qualify as a 1 and little threshold to be a 0. This belief is manifested particularly pronounced in other-identification. In order to be a 1, the person

[37] Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan province. It is far from other major cosmopolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Chengdu and Chongqing, another major city adjacent to Chengdu, have been dubbed the gay capitals of China in online anecdotes. Moreover, people from these cities are usually considered more feminine and are more likely to be 0s. This point will be elaborated upon in the next chapter on racial and geographic preferences.

has to be sexually potent, show capability in every aspect, conform to gender norms, and sometimes ensure the virginity of his anus, as any deviation from the previous rules will likely change how they are perceived. These rigid rules inevitably eliminate many queer men from the category of 1 in public perception. The higher 1 threshold also suggests the difficulty of reaching hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, it implies the related precarity of masculinity.

In addition, these rules in Chinese queer communities have been internalized by some queer men as criteria to determine their sex roles or labels. Paula England (2016) argues that the social can become personal, manifested in the way that these queer men make sense of themselves based on public perceptions and rules in queer communities. As a result, these rules scare many people away from identifying as 1s, because marking the self as a 1 but not meeting public expectations may draw symbolic vitriol through shame or humiliation (Bourdieu 2001), such as what happens on these dating apps. Therefore, the myth of "more 0s than 1s" is not a question that can be answered from a mathematical perspective. This is because it is involved in the dynamic of role transformations, disconcerting experiences between role and sexual pleasure, and asymmetrical understandings of 1/0. My analysis demonstrates that the myth is produced in both the collective and individual levels. This transpires by creating a narrow space with a high threshold for entering the field of being a 1, but a lower threshold for 0s. Consequently, this unequal threshold marks more queer men as 0s while filtering out many from the possibility of being a 1, regardless of how they understand themselves. In this regard, this unequal threshold produces the image that 0s outnumber 1s among Chinese queer men.

The implications of "more 0s than 1s"

After demystifying "more 0s than 1s," it is crucial to demonstrate the implications of this unverified statement by examining Chinese queer men's sexual preferences. "More 0s than 1s" is

not simply a descriptive statement; rather, it is a result of queer men's discriminatory desires on the basis of heteronormativity and misogyny, and in turn, it has exerted immense impact on their sexual desires. Unlike their fluid and dynamic means of self-identification, the favorable objects in their desires are less flexible. This statement insinuates the excess of 0s in the market of desire, and the lower degree of desirability of 0s compared to the precious 1s. 1 and 0 are actually embodiments of hegemonic and subordinate masculinity, so this statement suggests the superiority and higher position of 1s in the sexual hierarchy, while 0-identified/considered men are located in more vulnerable market positions.

Wang Fei's contrasting experiences with double identities on two Blued accounts exemplifies the power hierarchy between 1s and 0s. After I asked about his experiences on the account on which he had previously been a 1 (though he did not explicitly label himself a 1 on this account), he said:

> There're more options for me to pick from and I feel like an emperor on this [1] account. All those 0s are waiting to be fucked, which offers me a variety of men to choose from. I don't mean that no one cold-shoulders me, as many people don't like me after all, especially some 1s. But this account provides me with a wider range of choices, because I am a 1 here! On the account labelled a 0, however, I'm in a passive position. You know, many 1s on Blued do not even upload their prolife photos. Instead, they just show photos of their stinky feet or shoes. Moreover, they posted things such as "send me your pics first," "no short-flashing pics," or "no pic, no chat" in their profiles. Why should I send you my pics when you don't share yours? Right? This is a normal phenomenon in our community to ask other people to send pics first. [As a 1] You can ask a 0 to share their pics first. I will not talk to you if you don't take action first, since a lot of 0s are waiting for me out there…I find the majority of 0s extremely vulnerable.

Apart from the gendered and unsurprising pattern of preferences, namely that 1s prefer 0s and 0s prefer 1s, 15 interviewees who currently self-label as 1 or between 0.5 and 1 (versatile top) indicated that they prefer 1s rather than 0s, contrary to the gendered expectation. On the contrary, few 0s or men who label between 0 and 0.5 expressed any inclination to seek other 0s. This produces a bizarre but captivating situation, as most queer men prefer 1s regardless of their

positions, gendered, or sexual roles. Among the majority who prefer 1s, a few emphasize the importance of "pure 1." However, among these men who prefer 0s, few emphasize that they prefer "pure 0." Furthermore, "pure 0s" are considered the least desirable subjects in queer communities and are excluded from many queer men's desires, including many 1s' sexual desires, or directly filtered out on their dating apps.

I argue that the phenomenon of 1s preferring 1s does not necessarily imply a contradiction in sexual compatibility. The 1s in queer men's desires and narratives are actually the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, rather than literal penetrators in intercourse. That being said, many men who self-identified as 1 (or close to 1 on the spectrum) desire men who possess masculine traits, yet they frame their sexual preference as favoring 1s. In addition, their exclusion of 0s in desires discloses rampant effeminophobia in Chinese "queer" communities. Effeminophobia is common in both heterosexual and queer communities, in which "the effeminate man is either, depending upon his context, a figure of fun or a monster to be feared" (Richardson 2009, 529). Therefore, one underlying meaning of "more 0s than 1s" is the lack of masculinity among Chinese queer men, rather than real penetrators. The problem of effeminophobia and the embrace of hegemonic masculinity are prevalent in cross-cultural queer communities as well (Chauncey 1994; Taywaditep 2002; Clarkson 2005, 2006; Eguchi 2009). These issues are embodied in the implicit statistical claims of Chinese queer men.

This preference for 1s over 0s is first manifested in and reinforced by the filter of dating apps, which allow users to filter out groups towards which they have no interest. 0 is the label most likely to be excluded in queer men's hunting processes, even among those who mark

themselves as 1s. On Blued,[38] many men who self-mark as 0.5s or 1s had filtered out 0s, such as Yisheng de Tansuo (24), Zeming Chen (26), Daniel (26), and Donglai (40). As for Daniel, he does not find men self-labelled as 0s attractive because he believes that they are more feminine inside or understand themselves as women. Their lack of masculinity is a turnoff for him. Landon (26) self-labels as a 0.5 and prefers the penetrative role in intercourse, but the order of his preferences is 0.5, 1, 0, as he finds 0s often dependent and he does not want to take care of other people. In both Daniel and Landon's justifications, 0s are reduced to feminine men or women, as the rationale for exclusion from their desires. 0s' undesirability is also related to other characteristics that are traditionally considered feminine, such as being too dramatic or pretentious. These feminine-related negative features are naturalized as a part of 0s, which many men attempt to avoid. Whereas many 0.5 or 1 labeled men had filtered out 0s on Blued, not a single one who self-labels as a 0 or 0.5 told me that they had excluded 1s on the app.

Apart from excluding 0s from their desires, Chinese queer men, including these who self-identify as 1, express preference for 1s. The former section demonstrates that queer men consider many factors with regard to self-labeling. However, the same group of men reduce 1/0 to gendered role when they discuss their objects of preferences. Tony (33) is certain about his role as top (the exact word he used) and could not imagine being fucked. Thus, he likes men who can be bottom in sex. Nonetheless, he often ended up with crushes on more 1-identified men than 0-identified men in real life, in spite of sexual incompatibility, since he finds 1s more manly in their appearances, while 0s are more feminine. Among 0.5s, he likes those men who are more masculine looking. Hezheyu (38) complicated his own role by suggesting that he is a 1 in bed,

[38] By the time I finished my ethnography, Aloha had yet to include the 1/0 system in the app, but Blued had.

but a 0.5 at heart. However, he revealed his preference for men who self-presented like 1s, because 1s are more masculine, mature, and calm. The experiences of Kongqi (38),[39] who works in a state-owned enterprise, are more extreme. He considered himself a 1, but it turns out that his three ex-boyfriends were all 1s, because he had been attracted to their masculinity. Nevertheless, all of his previous relationships had ended due to disharmonious sex, because none of them had been willing to be penetrated in intercourse, and Kongqi didn't want to be either.

In contrast, none of my interlocutors who self-labeled as 0 expressed any preference for 0s, even though some had had crushes on someone who had turned out to be a 0. They often described such crushes as happening by "accident," which means they would have been unlikely to desire these people had they been aware of their roles as 0s. Furthermore, when they had talked about relationships between two men who identify as 0s, they often integrated shame into their narratives. Zeming Chen mentioned that clarifying each other's sex role was pivotal before meeting up, because "it would be miserable if a 0 ended up hooking up with another 0, because they could do nothing but chat overnight." This satire emasculates 0 identified queer men through a phallocentric angle. First, a 0 is believed is to be incapable of using his penis in intercourse. Second, the discourse of "do nothing but chat overnight" also eliminates the possibility of having non-genital sex between 0s, as it implies that sex can only take place when a (capable and potent) penis is present. This phenomenon is analogous to lesbian existence in a phallocentric society, in which female same-sex desire is largely ignored and dismissed (Sang 2003), and women's own sexuality is denied through different approaches to punishment (Rich 1980). In China's cyberspace, queer men often attack other 0 identified men by scorning that

[39] Two men use the nickname of Kongqi, but the Chinese characters are different. The age marks can be used to distinguish them from each other throughout this work.

they hook up with other 0s. This is likely to prompt strong reactions, because a 0 and 0 hookup is considered one of the "worst" insults for a 0. In these discourses, 0s' sexuality is not only denied, but ridiculed if a potent penis from a 1 is missing. The 0, as the embodiment of effeminacy, is often a figure to mock. However, rarely did I hear anyone scorn a 1 for hooking up or developing a romantic relationship with another 1. Rather, many explicitly or even proudly talk about or practice a relationship between two 1-identified men. Thus, the two different affects embodied in the discourses of 1-1 hookups and 0-0 hookups show bifurcated attitudes toward the two groups, as the latter relationship is more likely to draw shame, humiliation, and vitriol.

Finally, the hierarchy is reflected in many queer men's obsessions with pure 1s. Because it is widely believed that "there is no pure 1, but there are a lot of pure 0s," the "few" pure 1s are considered precious, valuable, and thus charming. Pure 1 for many queer people means that a man's sexual position, gendered role in a same-sex relationship, and sexual aesthetics are all congruent in the male role in a same-sex relationship. Qishi (30) simplified this by citing the Chinese idiom *biaoli ruyi*, which means that the external appearance accords with what's inside. This suggests that a pure 1 should be manly in every aspect. Some queer men set stricter standards for pure 1s, as Guangguang (31) said that a 1 is no longer pure had he ever been penetrated. On second thought, he lowered his criteria, saying "at least he should not enjoy it and will never do it again." Interlocuters offered different rationales to justify their obsession with pure 1s. Xiaoming (24) labeled himself as between 0.5 and 0.9, but indicated that he preferred someone closer to 1 on the spectrum. He could not provide a clear reason for his preference, so he said that craving a pure 1 may be in the genes, and thus he finds it natural to be attracted to 1s, who are supposed to be like straight-acting men.

Both Qishi and Wang Fei explained their preferences for pure 1s through discourses of "bottom shaming." They did not shame all individuals who are bottoms or 0s in the community. Instead, they cast shame on the possible relationships between two 0s, along with the line illustrated above. According to Qishi, he was infatuated with real men, who should be "more virile than heterosexual men." Moreover, he told me that he would feel like a *tongqi* (gay wife) if he had found out that his partner had been fucked. I asked him what he meant and he replied: "That is, being a *tongqi* means your man actually has another secret identity. You feel cheated and disgusted, you know? If a *tongqi* finds out that her husband is in a relationship with another man, she will probably throw up." I was unclear if the aversion comes from cheating itself or sex with a man, so I asked him to unpack it:

> You feel disgusted if you find out that he has been fucked by other men, so you wouldn't be willing to continue a relationship with him. If he cheats on you by fucking other people but still loves you, that is forgivable. Under certain circumstances when you're away on business or go back to your hometown for Spring Festival, he needs to find some temporary sexual fulfillment but still loves you, which I find forgivable. But if he is fucked behind your back, that is really disgusting.

This elaboration illuminates different attitudes toward two ways of cheating. He is more willing to forgive his partner for cheating by fucking others than for cheating by being fucked. He said that being fucked by other men will significantly damage one's masculinity and therefore reduce a man's masculine charisma. Moreover, his narrative of *tongqi* reduces the same-sex couple to a man and a woman in a heterosexual couple. Being penetrated will turn the "man" into a "gay," so the partner would naturally turn out a *tongqi*—gay wife. In fact, he would not necessarily shame the conduct of being penetrated, but he would feel ashamed if a "normal" same-sex relationship turned into a relationship between two 0s. Thus, the masculinity signified by 1s is precarious because a 1 can no longer be a 1 if he is penetrated. This is another rationale that Wang Fei offered as to why he needed two accounts on Blued: he was afraid that if his 0

partners figured out that he had been fucked and enjoyed being fucked, this might shame all of them.

The illumination of the hierarchy between 1, 0, and 0.5 does not suggest that anyone who self-labels as 1 enjoys such privilege, because a person's position in the hierarchy is not solely dependent on his self-identification. It is also based on others' perceptions of him on the basis of his physicality, sexual aesthetics, and performance. One typical example is the type of 1 called "*mu* 1" (effeminate 1), as illustrated above through the case of Zhizhu. This type of 1 has clear feminine features that other queer men cannot accept, for which a desirable queer man should never possess. Another type is "bed 1," which means that he can only be a 1 in sex, but not in other aspects of life. Landon insisted that "bed 1" was the most aversive to him. By the same token, not all 0s are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. As opposed to "*mu* 1," "*gong* 0" is a popular group. It refers to men who prefer to be receptive in intercourse, but appear manly or "straight-acting" in daily life. Participants like Tony and Hezheyu had encountered the dilemma in which they had had crushes on many people who had turned out to be as 1 as themselves. They had liked their masculinity, but sexual incompatibility had hindered the possibility of furthering the relationship. Both of them, after long conversations and twice thinking, had offered the "solution" that the ideal choice for them should be *gong* 0, because men falling into this category could meet their expectations of both manliness and sexual compatibility.

Therefore, one value of unpacking the myth of "more 0s than 1s" is to show its implications on shaping the sexual hierarchy. Queer men's asymmetrical understandings of 1/0 lead to the phenomenon that less queer men are perceived and accepted as 1s in the market. In addition, queer men tend to set stricter criteria and higher thresholds for 1s than for 0s, particularly in other-identification. Hence, the smaller supply of 1s, particularly pure 1s,

increases the desirability of 1s in the market of choices. This in turn disadvantages many queer men, pure 0s and senior 0s in particular, because they are the group most likely to be excluded on dating apps, as well as in their sexual desires. This exclusion also signifies the ubiquitous effeminophobia or obvious misogyny in China's queer male communities. Wang Fei's double identities on two Blued accounts best illustrate the contrasting experiences and cruel hierarchy.

The intersection of age and roles

The hierarchy of 1/0 intersects many factors which are likely to further marginalize the marginalized including body type, class, geographical origin, and age, (Taywaditep 2002). While the other chapters focus on or include physicality, class, and geographical origin in queer men's desires, this section shows how age intersects with sex labels. According to many interlocutors, there is a watershed of age that divides desirable and undesirable 0s, while this crisis comes later in life for men who self-label as 1s. This division elucidates the vulnerability of 0s in Chinese queer communities.

The watershed could be 25 or 30 years for 0s, depending on the interlocutors. Wang Fei (30) believed that he encountered his "senior" life crisis after turning 30. In fact, he had already felt like an "old girl" before 30. According to him, 30 is a senior age for gay men, but he corrected himself by specifying that this only applies to 0s, because 1s' desirability is less influenced by age. Thus, he had not changed his age to 30 on Blued, the account on which he had labelled himself as a 0, as that mark could have thrown him out of the dating and hookup market. Based on Mr. Wang's experience, the age of undesirability drops to 25. As a man of 27, he said he had literally been thinking about how age had affected his sexual capital in queer communities:

> I attended an event organized by my friend today. There were a couple of gay men, one of them was born in 1992 and looked really beautiful, really gorgeous. I appeared to be

> disadvantaged compared with him. I don't have to compare with him, because I'm not as cute as him. In terms of age, I was born in 1991 and had no advantage either. Moreover, many post-1995 boys have entered the market. I don't have a nice body or a six pack, so I feel like I don't have any advantages.

As he kept emphasizing his disadvantages in this community, I asked him what kinds of men have advantages and he answered, "I find men between 20 and 25 advantageous, because they have just experienced sexual lives." Unsure whether he saw this as a general rule or only applicable to certain queer men, I asked if this was a universal rule. After a second thought, he said:

> Age, in fact, probably intersects with your role. Because if you are a bottom, as I just mentioned, you may have strengths if you are young. This is due to the fact that tops at any age may prefer boys between 20-25. If you are a top, it doesn't matter much if you're 30 or 35, though some young bottoms may prefer young tops. Many tops between 30-35 could date men below 30 or people of a similar age. I don't know the case for people who're older than 35, as I don't have such experience. My point is we have to be attentive to sex roles when we talk about age."

Mr. Wang's narration illuminates queer men's varying aged experiences based on their sexual labels. Fengfeihua's experience resonates with the abovementioned statement, as he finds that being 33 does not detract from his desirability in the market, as he not only self-labels as a 1, but also appears outwardly straight. Both Mr. Wang and Fengfeihua explained this inequality through "more 0s than 1s," which results in the fact that 1s have more choices on the market. Therefore, these divided experiences suggest disparate queer times for queer people. Halberstam (2005a, 6) theorizes queer time as "specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance." In Chinese queer communities, 0s and 1s face distinctive longevity of desirability, as 0s may encounter the disruption of their queer future and more difficulties/risks at an earlier age than 1s. This intersection of age and sexual labels underscores that the hierarchy is co-produced by a variety of social factors.

Alternative queer masculinities and desires

Although masculine obsession is rampant in Chinese queer communities, this does not mean that all Chinese queer people have gendered (masculine) preferences. My intention in this chapter is to reveal the effeminophobia and misogyny among Chinese queer men, which weakens the queerness of the entire community. However, some queer men display overt interest in male femininity, or at least are not adverse to men who possess those features which are considered feminine. Carr (32) and Zhutoumao (35) are two rare examples who show divergent preferences from other interlocutors. In order to avoid tokenistic performances, both demonstrated pleasant experiences with feminine-looking or cross-dressing men to prove that they were indeed attracted to them, regardless of their gender or affective presentations.

Carr is a lawyer with a master's degree. He has been in a committed relationship for five years, but this relationship is less sexual than he had expected and wanted, because his partner is not into sexual contact. Carr told me that he had not cheated on his partner, though he had had a lot of sexual fantasies with other people. In terms of his sexual practices, he prefers to be the penetrative role, though he has had several experiences of being penetrated. Carr's description of his type—men with darker skin, thick penises, and sweaty odor—displays that he is attracted to a traditional type of masculinity or hypermasculinity, because he wants a man who is more virile than average men. While he talked about his specific sexual experience, he mentioned his pleasant experience with a cross-dressing performer, which seemingly contradicted the type he had described as sexually attractive. This sexual encounter took place in the backstage area of a bar:

> I had sex with a cross-gender performer who was a 1. He had a large penis that hurt me a lot while fucking me…I have never seen him wearing men's clothes. He was cross-dressing when I saw him. When we had sex that night, he was wearing his wig and had not even removed his make-up, because we were in a rush to get it done. Many people

> were using the same make-up room as him, so he had not had time or a chance to remove his make-up.

His experience sounds contradictory to his description of an ideal type. In fact, it aligns with his preference for "masculine" men considering his redefinition of masculinity to include many features traditionally considered feminine. According to Carr, he did not deem the cross-dressing performer feminine, because he believes that masculinity manifests primarily through people's personality, instead of their looks, dress, or behavior: "I have known many people who were cross-dressing performers. I actually found them tough and fearless. Although they present themselves in that [feminine-looking] way, they are indeed strong inside. Ah, on the contrary, I don't think I have the courage to be like them."

Thus, in Carr's eyes, female dress does not make men less attractive. Instead, among the top 15 Aloha performers in 2017, Carr indicated that his favorite was a cross-dresser. He anticipated seeing such a beautiful man masturbating in his female clothes, which he claimed to be a huge turn-on for himself. In this case, Carr's label refers to an unstable sexual role, because even if he prefers the penetrative role in sex, he had enjoyed being penetrated by a cross-dressing performer. Moreover, he did not discredit the possibility of a cross-gender performer being a 1 due to their female appearance; instead, he had defended them by expanding the boundary of masculinity and forging a more malleable category of 1, for both himself and others.

Unlike Carr who redefined 1 and masculinity, Zhutoumao embraces femininity in all people. Zhutoumao identifies as gender "*ku'er*" (queer) out of an appreciation for both the masculine and feminine sides of the self.[40] They came to my interview in female dress with chest

[40] Even though gender pronoun is not often discussed in China and Zhutoumao did not provide a preferred pronoun, I find it better to use they/them/their to refer to Zhutoumao, because of the double genders they self-identify as.

exposed to exaggerate style, drawing the attention of many. They dress differently in various situations. However, Zhutoumao does not like the word "*ku'er*" (queer), because it is not queer if we stick to the word queer for self-identification. In terms of sexuality, they identify as pan-sexual out of an attraction to people of different genders, but often deploys the term bisexual in communication for ease of understanding. Zhoutoumao's resistance of such a masculine obsession manifested in his performances as plural genders and in his sexual practices with people of distinct genders and affective presentations.

Zhutoumao does not self-label in a certain way to stay open to different plays. They do not enjoy being penetrated in anal play, but this does not mean that indicate self-identify as a 1. They explained to me that such a position does not produce sexual pleasure, and it has nothing to do with labels, roles, or identities—1 or 0. Thus, even when they have sex in penetrative positions, it does not necessitate behavior in a traditionally masculine way like a 1. More specifically, they like practicing BDSM, which is not common, or even discussed in my field. As a BDSM practitioner, they do not want to be involved in unequal sadist/masochist relationships because this type of relationship may lead to the loss of subjectivity for the masochist. Thus, Zhutoumao pursues egalitarian relationships between both subjects.

In addition, after I presented interlocutors with nine popular performers in the club Destination, Zhutoumao was the only one who chose the cross-dressing performer and considered him sexually appealing. Moreover, they chose several other cross-dressing performers on Aloha as ideal partners. They offered rationale for sexual preferences different from those of Carr, which expanded the boundary of and redefined masculinity; instead, Zhutoumao is attracted to these performers' masculinity AND femininity, regardless of their gender presentations or sexual roles.

The two cases demonstrate resistance to gender and sexual norms in Chinese queer communities. Although masculine obsession is widespread among Chinese queer men, signified by their attraction to 1s and certain types of masculine 0s, some men show non-normative desires because they practice sex with other men who show clear non-masculine features. People like Carr redefine masculinity by expanding its boundaries to include femininity in being a 1, while Zhutoumao embraces femininity in men and considers it the source of sexual desirability. Though their experiences are not typical among Chinese queer men, the two cases suggest that the rule of masculinity is not necessarily rigid for all people, as some queer men contest hegemonic masculinity in both self-labeling and sexual practices.

Conclusion—reevaluating the category of "homosexuality"

This chapter contests the widely believed "sexual truth" of "more 0s than 1s" by examining its production and circulation. My analysis illuminates that it is difficult, or even impossible, to draw a satisfactory conclusion from a statistical perspective. This is due to the unequal and inconsistent definitions of 1 and 0. These labels, 1 and 0, are not merely sexual positions, and also cannot be reduced to gendered roles, because different sexual subjects hold distinct definitions of the two symbols. Furthermore, the label of 1/0 is unstable since many queer men have changed their sexual labels over time and many find it hard to locate themselves accurately along the spectrum of 1/0. Also, there is a higher threshold for being a 1 than for being a 0 in the Chinese queer community. This is because anyone can be a 0, unless he has a biological constraint such as hemorrhoids, while the expectations are much higher for being a 1. This higher threshold for 1 eventually excludes many men's possibility of self-identifying as a 1 or being deemed a 1. The unequal thresholds also suggest that, especially in other-identification, 1 becomes an embodiment of masculinity that queer men should attain in order to be desirable.

Nevertheless, the requirement is so rigid that many queer people who self-label as 1 are not accepted as 1s. For this reason, Chinese queer people perpetuate the belief "there are more 0s than 1s."

Moreover, this belief influences Chinese queer men's sexual desires, both directly and indirectly. The "shortage" of 1s can also be understood as the belief that the Chinese queer (male) community has a shortage of masculinity. Therefore, the precious resource—1s—is regarded as more desirable than its counterparts—0s and 0.5s, regardless of their sexual labels. This creates a hierarchy of men's desirability based on their sex labels and embodied masculinity, the latter of which are most salient.

The anxiety over and obsession with masculinity among Chinese queer men also begs a reevaluation of the legitimacy of the category of "homosexuality." Many interlocuters justify their sexual preferences through the category of *tongxinglian* (homosexual), which means that they are men who are attracted to men. This also implies that they are not attracted to men who do not look and behave like straight-acting and masculine men. Interlocutors such as Fanshu (32) said that he could not understand people who cross-dress, and he believes that these people should be excluded from the category of "homosexuals." Many men deploy similar rationale to justify and validate their desires. This problem is not particular to Chinese queer male communities, but applies to Western societies as well (Chauncey 1994). In order to find a solution to such issues, Western academia, and societies as a whole, have created new gender and sexual categories so that queer people can locate themselves in a certain box more comfortably. Should this be the ideal solution to push non-normative and non-masculine men out of the box of homosexuality? To some extent, it works, because alternative identities may reflect some people's gender or sexuality more accurately, and they can more easily navigate the sexual

market after ascertaining sexual targets. However, it has also reinforced hegemonic heteromasculinity in “homosexual” communities, in which all men should be “homo”, and the same in terms of manifesting masculinity. When the category of homosexuality is weaponized for queer men so as to exclude non-masculinity and defend for their effeminophobia and misogyny, we need to reassess its connotation and legitimacy in order to prevent the sexual category from reproducing inequality among different queer subjects. Overall, non-masculinity embodied in the labels 0 and 0.5, and possessed by all queer men, makes them vulnerable in Chinese queer communities.

Chapter Four: Sino/Han-centric Desires: Sexual Imaginations of Race, Ethnicity, and Geography

John is a black Canadian man working as an English teacher at a kindergarten. While sitting at a café in Chaoyang District during a summer afternoon in 2017, he complained to me that he found it harder to hook up in China than in Canada. At the time of our conversation, he had been unable to find anyone to have sex with during his nine months in China. He was upset and disappointed at his decision to come to China. However, he had not given up hope of meeting a guy with whom he could connect emotionally. Moreover, John expected that his future partner would not racially fetishize him as a black man with a big penis. In the months that followed, I found that my Chinese interviewees expressed little interest in black men. At the same time, few expressed sexual interest in white men either. This phenomenon puzzled me. I pondered why Chinese queer men appeared to be so "exclusive" with regards to racial preferences.

In the summer of 2018, one of my Chinese friends from Chicago visited Beijing with his white boyfriend. This interracial couple were in an open relationship. While we were hanging out at Houhai, a popular tourist site, his boyfriend opened his Blued account and expressed his excitement about his popularity in China. He was also proud to have received more messages and hookup invitations on Blued than his Chinese boyfriend, showing me the numerous messages on his phone to verify his statement. This story bewildered me, given that many Chinese queer people professed to having little attraction to white men. Had my participants been lying about their lack of cross-racial desires? Another white friend from Chicago affirmed his "popularity" after his visit to Beijing in the summer of 2018, based on his frequent hookups and ease of finding sexual partners in Beijing. Why were these white queer men so popular while

most of my participants indicated little interest in white men? This apparent paradox has driven me to deliberate over how Chinese queer men imagine men of other races and ethnicities from the standpoint of the "Far East."

After several decades of discussions on Orientalism (Said 2003) and racialized imaginations of others rooted in the West, discussion of how "the Orient" thinks of "the Occident," and how "the Orient" thinks of other "Orients" is lacking. Particularly, how does a Chinese subject imagine other national, racial, and ethnic subjects with respect to sexual desire? Although China is not a country that openly welcomes immigrants of various races, and it does not have a large international population, China has (both actively and passively) been involved in transnational cultural exchange, influx and outflux, through various channels such as the increasing population of overseas Chinese and the growing body of international students in China. In these transnational processes, Chinese queer people have developed complicated attitudes, opinions, and desires toward people of other races and ethnicities.

This chapter sheds light on Chinese queer men's perceptions, desires, and fantasies of men of other races, ethnicities, and geographical origins. As a rising power located in the Global South, how do Chinese queer people understand racial and ethnic categories? How do they fabricate sexual discourses about others on the basis of racial, ethnic, and geographic categories? Are their categorizations of race and ethnicity congruent with those in the West? This endeavor to map the sexual imaginations of race/ethnicity/geography illuminates a different sexualized racial/ethnic relationship in the transnationalizing and rising China (Nonini and Ong 1997; Liu and Rofel 2010). This exploration contributes to the understudied field of sexual racism in China-focused queer studies. It also demonstrates Chinese queer men's imagined positions in a sexualized global order. Unlike body types and sexual roles, which almost everybody

emphasizes as crucial in evaluating sexual desirability, race/ethnicity/geographical origin are not *openly* prioritized, and are rarely mentioned when Chinese queer men express sexual desires. Yet they set standards, show curiosity, and express straightforward sexual preferences for certain types of men on the basis of their racial/ethnic/geographical identities.

In extant scholarship about racialized masculinities, Asian/American men often lie at the bottom, or close to the bottom, of sexual hierarchies, while white men are considered the most desirable subjects. Moreover, Asian Americans are perceived as perpetual foreigners in the West, and are thus categorized in the same box as Asians in faraway lands (Pyke and Dang 2003; Q. Zhang 2010). Pan-Asian men have historically been represented as castrated and emasculated subjects lacking ideal masculinity in Western and global popular cultures. This is manifested in their supposed small Asian penis size, soft body type, nerdiness, etc., relative to the perfect masculinity of white men (A.A. Cheng 2000; Eng 2000; Fung 2004; Q. Zhang 2010; Nguyen 2014). This effeminization of Asian men is not limited to heterosexual societies because in Western queer communities, Asian gay or bisexual men are also deemed unattractive and undesirable. This is reflected in both media representations (C.-s. Han 2006, 2008; C.s. Han 2009) and on dating and romantic markets (Pyke and Dang 2003; Robnett and Feliciano 2011; Callander, Holt, and Newma 2016; Carrillo 2018; Kao, Balistreri, and Joyner 2018). The perception of emasculated Asian men results in the re-marginalization of Asian gay men, despite the Asian diaspora's relatively high economic status in the West. Furthermore, several studies have also indicated that Asian Americans have internalized these racial stereotypes and hierarchies in their desires, particularly among Asian women and gay men, who express explicit preference for dating white people over non-whites, including Asians themselves (Manalansan IV 2003; Tsunokai, McGrath, and Kavanagh 2014). However, these studies have all been

conducted in Western contexts, which do not necessarily apply to racial imaginations and desires in non-Western societies.

My study demonstrates that instead of embracing the superiority and desirability of the West and white masculinity, Chinese queer men show Sino/Han-centric desires. This means that the majority of them express exclusive desire for (Han) Chinese, particularly in romantic desires and long-term relationships. This "Chinese" in their desire refers to ethnically Chinese who speak (either Mandarin or Cantonese) Chinese, understand Chinese culture, and look Asian. I contend that this racial preference derives from China's lack of a colonial history, decades of anti-imperialist and nationalist movements, and restrictions on the influx of Western culture. The intended isolation from information that promotes white supremacy has had a blunted impact on Chinese people's desire structures. However, Chinese queer men's contestation of white superiority does not suggest that they are pursuing a more equal global racial order. Instead, Chinese queer men exclude black men and Muslims from their desires, and categorize "other Asians," such as South and Southeast Asians, as either another race or as lower-class Asians. In spite of the state's endeavor to unite the Developing World since the Mao Era, China has been unable to eradicate its cultural residuals of racism that took shape in late imperial times (Dikotter 1994). In the competition with white masculinities, China's strategy has been to assert its own superiority on the basis of factors such as economic power. This also asserts superiority over other nations, races, and ethnicities. Their discourses of racializing various groups reinforce the extant global racial and ethnic inequality.

At the local level, Chinese queer men deconstruct the idea of a singular Chinese identity by indicating heterogenous desires toward sub-categories of Chinese based on geography. They create two contradictory discourses—on men from the South and men from the North of China:

masculine and desirable Northern men versus effeminate and undesirable Southern men; and perfectly masculine Southern men versus hypermasculine Northern men. This tension between the two discourses implies the multiplicity and flexibility of Chinese masculinities, as opposed to the more rigid and monolithic masculinity of "Others." This tension also suggests space for renegotiating Chinese masculinity.

This investigation of Chinese queer men's sexual discourses about people of different races/ethnicities/geographical origins points to an alternative geo- and racial politics. This deviates from that of the East, which does not necessarily internalize the power order crystallized in the past of the West. Rather, it reveals an alternative process of racialization. It also contributes to deconstructing the idea of a unitary Chineseness by demonstrating the tension between the binary imaginations of Chinese masculinities on the basis of geographies. More importantly, this study reveals extant, and new, racial and ethnic norms that have taken root in non-Western societies, which along with other norms shown in other chapters, privilege and marginalize certain sexual subjects.

Desiring sameness—Asians only?

In her groundbreaking work *Dealing in Desire*, sociologist Kimberly Hoang (2015) demonstrates an alternative understanding of racialized relationships that is not dominated by white men through exploring competing masculinities in Vietnamese nightlife. Situated within the context of the ascendency of the Asian economy and the relative decline of the West around the 2008 Financial Crisis, both Asian (heterosexual) men and women in Vietnam have constructed a map in which the new ascendant Asian men are deemed more desirable subjects in the global racial hierarchy. Meanwhile, Western white men's colonial charm in this postcolonial city is waning. Though she does not intend to claim that the global racial order has been

reshuffled, her ethnography points to the possibility of global resistance and a newly imagined network of racial relationships. Asian men have indeed benefitted from the increase in their financial capital in the new millennium, through which they have begun recuperating their masculinities which had been injured during colonial and war time history. Thus, their economic capital be translated into sexual capital in specific sexual fields.

In Chinese queer communities, queer men project their desires primarily toward other Asian men, and exclude men of other races. Because sexual desire consists of both romantic desire and erotic desire, Chinese queer men's racial references, and their exclusivity, are more complex than a simple question of yes or no. My findings demonstrate that most Chinese queer men have little interest in long-term romantic relationships with white men, but many are open to brief sexual escapades with *exotic* white men. The exoticism and novelty prompt some Chinese queer men's eagerness to experiment with sex with white men. In contrast to the complex relationship with white men, my interlocutors uniformly indicated no interest in black men, regardless of whether they were from the Global North or South, as all black men are lumped into the same box. In addition, Chinese queer men show little knowledge of Latinos, as few even mentioned this ethnic group. Some collapse Latinos into white or black men based on their skin color; some simply know nothing about them. This resembles how many Latinos are unfamiliar with Asians (Carrillo 2018) because the two ethnic groups do not fit into the global racial spectrum defined by skin color.

Among my seventy interviewees, only seven indicated explicit preference for non-Asians, and the majority revealed preference for Asian men. In Western contexts, Asians who prefer Asians are often labeled "sticky rice," a phenomenon unique to Western societies (Ayres 1999; Jackson 2000). Yet this angle does not elucidate Chinese queer men's preference for other

Asian men, because "sticky rice" is a derogatory slang term produced in Western queer communities where white men constitute the majority, and enjoy privileged status.

Before delving into Chinese queer imaginaries of other races and ethnicities, this section sheds light on the rationale behind Chinese queer men's preference for romantic and erotic relationships with other Asian men. They offer two primary rationales: cultural resonance and equality. Cultural resonance is the most common rationale provided, since they believe to be able to strike a chord only with people of similar backgrounds. Andy (28) had only recently returned to China from the UK for school. Even though he had years of experience living in a foreign country, he believed that the cultural gap could be formidable. When he first visited the UK, he was shocked at how handsome white men were. Nevertheless, he gradually realized that white men were just "handsome," and that was all. He found it hard to connect emotionally or to be romantically attracted to them due to the cultural barrier. According to him, cultural resonance a necessary condition for deeming someone desirable:

> In terms of "resonance," a Chinese would have stronger and more intense resonance with other Chinese, and less so with people from Europe and America. This cultural resonance could touch you deeply in your heart. If you are touched by this resonance, you will fall in love with him deeply. But if you and another person cannot develop this resonance, you would just think he was a good person. For example, as with people from Europe and America, they are just "gentle, polite, or something else." Everything is right, but missing such a thing makes it impossible.

Other interviewees also mentioned cultural resonance as a necessity in sexual attraction, because they could only resonate or connect emotionally with people from the same culture who spoke the same language. Such a claim does not deem other cultures superior or inferior, but rather conveys the idea that perception of desirability can only be achieved within one's own group. Otherwise, people only experience superficial desirability by seeing some people as handsome or gentle, but not attractive.

In addition, some queer men use the rhetoric of "equality" to justify their desires for Asians, or for Chinese only. Dabai (30) revealed that he was only into Chinese due to being influenced by the idea of "equality." He prefers someone similar to him, in terms of height, weight, income, and every other aspect, including race and ethnicity. Ruyuan (21) even used the Chinese idiom *mendang hudui*, a term referring to a marriage between families of equal socioeconomic status, as a criterion for choosing partners. This is often used to evaluate the socioeconomic status of two partners, but Ruyuan had used it to include race, because he believed that different racial backgrounds would make two partners unequal, and thus the relationship problematic. The word "equality" is rhetoric that many queer men use to suggest that their desire is rooted in sameness.

Rather than directly responding to my question as to why they were more attracted to Asian men, most interlocutors answered the question through the opposite angle—they could not develop interest in non-Asian men, or *laowai* (foreigners)—to justify their desire for sameness. Many Chinese do not distinguish between several generalized races, but rather only suggest a binary between Chinese and *laowai* (foreigners), or Asian and non-Asian. In China, when people adopt the term *laowai*, they often refer specifically to white foreigners, even though the term should include all non-Chinese people.

Romantic versus erotic desire: Double track (non)desire towards white men

In their justifications for desiring sameness, Chinese queer men rendered various depictions of racial and ethnic groups. I investigated their particular sexual imaginations of people in different categories, including the most frequently mentioned—white *laowai* (foreigners), black, and Arabs/Muslims, as well as the less mentioned Latinos. These categories do not mirror the Western categorizations. Instead, they classify people on the basis of extant

categories of race and ethnicity, geographies, skin color, or religious beliefs, and sometimes a mix of several categories.

Chinese TV dramas from the 1990s show how China has reimagined its relationship with the West by way of romance (Lu 2000). Rather than internalizing the Western racial hierarchy between whites and Asians and inheriting national subordination (more precisely, the Developing World's subordination to the Developed World), a series of mainstream Chinese melodramas has reversed these relationships. In these melodramas, Chinese men end up defeating white men through financial competition, and eventually win the heart of women (e.g. *Beijingers in New York*, *Russian Girls in Harbin*). These conquered women are not limited to Asian women, but also include white women. Thus, the recuperation of Chinese masculinity in these TV dramas is achieved through the ownership of women, which comes to symbolize winning the competition for global (hetero)masculinity. This racial competition on screen reflects Chinese men's yearning for a reordering of racial and national relationships on a global scale.

Beyond the imaginative level, the relationship between whites and Asians in post-reform China is intricate. Even though Chinese men imagine superiority and winning, white men enjoy many privileges in China. However, they do not experience all the privileges in China in the same way as they do in their home counties. Their "alien sexual capital" both empowers and marginalizes Western (white) men in China's interracial romance market (Farrer 2010). The estrangement derives from their "precarious" position of being considered outsiders and foreigners, instead of organic components of the Chinese nation and its culture. The exploration of these intricate ethnosexual relationships explicates the dynamism of global racial and ethnic relationships.

In my interviews, Chinese queer men indicated little or no interest in white *laowai*, and constructed a set of racialized discourses on white men. In addition to no cultural resonance between them, my interviewees believed that white men had worse physiques than "delicate" Asian people. This includes body hair, body odor, and crude skin quality, all said to be turn offs. Additionally, they suggested that white men aged too fast and were sometimes "too white," making them look scary. In Western racial discourse, Asian men are reduced to having either a small penis or no penis at all, while white men are endowed with large penises. To an extent, Chinese men have internalized the perceived difference, but they have transformed this discourse into a weapon to attack white men as undesirable subjects; they contend that a big penis looks fake, that achieving an erection is difficult, and that it causes more pain than pleasure in intercourse. Instead of inheriting the idea of white superiority in China, these queer men have developed their own understandings of white masculinity in the East.

In Asia, particularly in East Asia, delicacy is regarded as a critical attribute that makes men sexy and desirable in celebrity cultures, though this is not universally accepted as the standard. In contrast to Asian delicacy and exquisiteness, white men are imagined to be the opposite—coarse men. This in manifested in their "bad" physiques and skin. Fengfeihua (34) attributed white men's "problem" to their excessive hair: "Taking men from Europe and America as an example, I think the problem comes from their body hair. They have very heavy body hair. Yeah, I mean white men. They also have a lot of facial hair, which I don't like either. This is the same as their body hair." Apart from their unpleasant hairy bodies, Xiaopu (35) also suggested that the white color made their skin coarse and unrefined, to which he was not attracted, because he found white skin more vulnerable than darker skin. Qishi (30) has a more complicated attitude toward white men, and showed his shifting desires:

> I used to be obsessed with Western food [white men], because the early porn I watched was all produced by the West. In this porn, Westerners had strong physiques and their things [dicks] were all huge, so I yearned for Westerners. However, I don't know why, my standard of aesthetics might have changed as I've gotten older, as I have become increasingly attracted to people of the same kind, and more interested to Asians and Chinese. I probably found that Westerners had strong body odor, or noticed that their skin was not as good as that of Chinese. Moreover, they age so fast and thus do not look as delicate as Chinese men.

Qishi's narration introduced another rationale that many queer men mentioned—aging too fast. Moreover, he believed that the accelerated aging process is intrinsic to white people. Aging is often reflected in skin problems, such as wrinkles. Many of my participants pointed out Asian people's presumed racial advantage: aging slower than people of other races.

Through his experiences, Wang Fei (30) reinforced these stereotypes of white men's poor physiques to justify that it is a reality, not merely a stereotype:

> I have actually had sex with white men before, as both a 1 and a 0. But I didn't have good experiences. The experiences were actually really bad. I didn't like Euro-American men. The first reason is their body hair. Although they look smooth after shaving, you feel prickled while cuddling. You understand? I can't put up with it. Second, I had sex with a white pilot once, around 2011 or 2012. We did it in his hotel room in Jianguomen. His thing was really big and looked amazing visually. But it was not good in practice, because it was big but soft. I once penetrated a white man too. Oh, no no no, it was twice I think. He said he wanted a blow job, so I went to his apartment. When he was blowing me, I decided to go down there and insert my dick. I don't know if my thing was too small or his thing [anus] was too loose, but I didn't feel any pleasure.

In addition to his discontent with white men's crude physiques, Wang Fei introduced the discourse of a "big but useless penis" to reverse the discourse of a superior white penis, from an instrumental angle. As he said, a big penis that cannot reach a complete erection is a useless tool. A few queer men emphasized the "disadvantages" of having big penises, which did not make them sexually more attractive; instead, the big penis makes white men "difficult to use." Vince (28) revealed that he had had sexual experiences with both white men and Latinos while he was studying in the United States, but he had conflicting attitudes toward their penis size: "For a

novice, being a 0 is not good because their penises are too big [to allow you to enjoy them]. For experienced 0's, it may be OK because he could experience something different." Vince followed up by suggesting that the perfect penis is neither too big nor too small; it should range between 14 and 20 cm (5.5-8 inches). Paul (26) clarified that a penis bigger than 17 cm (6.7 inches) would be a turnoff for him. Wukong (42) mentioned that he had met a few white men in Beijing's gay bathhouses, but he had turned them down when these white foreigners had approached him, because he perceived their penises as unrealistic, and thus undesirable.

Their narratives disrupt the Western mythical relationship between penis size, phallic power, and sexual desirability. In fact, "white men being too big and too unreal" is also a discourse that circulates among some Asian Americans to dismantle the superior desirability of white men (Manalansan IV 2003, 146). This reverse racialization builds on Chinese queer men's internalized perception of large(r) white penises. Instead of valuing penis size in desirability, my interlocutors created the discourse of "utility" and "usefulness," which in their perspectives should be prioritized over size as a criterion for desirability. Therefore, a larger penis size, which is used to claim white men's superiority over Asian men in Western societies, becomes an objectified impractical organ that repels many Chinese queer men.

Furthermore, my interlocutors also offered various interpretations of white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes, contesting the beauty standards produced in Western popular culture. White skin has historically been recognized as a necessity of beauty, in both the West and in the East (Hoang 2015). Additionally, "blonde hair and blue eyes" is regarded as a standard of physical attractiveness in the West, particularly in the representations of popular Hollywood movies. However, Fanshu (32) pointed out that white people are too "white" to be attractive for him—he believed them to be "pale." John Xu (39) acknowledged that many (straight) men and women are

attracted to people with blonde hair and blue eyes, such as those from Nordic countries, because many supermodels are blonde. Yet he says, "I don't really like European people with blonde hair and blue eyes. I feel that blue eyes are, OMG, so scary. They look very different, they could be beautiful, their photos are cool, but they are not attractive to me at all." Nevertheless, an anonymous musician in his late 20s with Russian heritage claimed that he was only interested in Chinese-looking men. In fact, his brother-in-law was a German with a typical European look, but he said his brother-in-law looked like a "monster" to him. Therefore, these queer men again disrupt the myth of "blonde hair and blue eyes" as superior, and reverse the narrative by racializing white people as "scary" and undesirable.

Chinese queer people are not cut off from the rest of the world. Thus, the phenomenon that Chinese queer men are not attracted to white men cannot be explained simply through Chinese exceptionalism, or by the idea that they are "brainwashed" by the state's propaganda machine. For example, even the Great Firewall has not created a grand partition of China's Internet from the global Internet (Taneja and Wu 2014). Chinese people are still exposed to various transnational cultures, transported via mass media, social media, overseas Chinese, and expats in China. Many queer men in my study could name a series of American and European actors with whom they were familiar. However, long-term exposure to Western media products circulating through China does not assimilate them into believing the superior desirability of white men. This is because Chinese people have also been exposed to decades of nationalist cultural products that aim to revitalize China and recuperate Chinese masculinities, such as the aforementioned *Beijingers in New York* and *Russian Girls in Harbin*. Thus, the desires of Chinese queer subjects are co-produced and organized in an intricate network of cultures that are in tension. In daily receptions of cultures that promote various racialized masculinities, queer

subjects selectively absorb "ideological fragments and larger discourses" (Radway 1988, 364) that are available to them. Therefore, by internalizing information that prioritizes Chinese masculinities, many Chinese queer men have created discourses of white undesirability.

Although the majority of my interlocuters did not show preferences for white men, this does not mean that white men are excluded from Chinese queer men's desires. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, white male interlocutors were popular on Beijing's sexual markets, as reflected in their "endless" hookups during their short visits. To explain this apparent contradiction between my ethnographic observation and interviews, I suggest that sexual desire be understood as multi-dimensional—composed of both romantic and erotic desires. In fact, many queer men do distinguish romantic desire from erotic desire. They define the former as the desire to establish long-term romantic relationships while the latter only leads to short-term hookups and sexual relationships. Most queer men in my research excluded white men from their romantic desires, because of the difficulty in developing an emotional connection with them. However, a few did include white people in their erotic desires, out of either curiosity, novelty, or fetishization of white bodies. Thus, they were open to hooking up with white men, or proactively sought short-term relationships with them. Teacher Wang (48) clarified his lower expectations and criteria for hooking up with a foreigner (white man): "It's probably because mine [my penis] is small. We have only one life to live, so it's a different experience [to sleep with a white man], right? Hahahaha, right? As long as he is not too bad, because some foreign people are not that good, very fat!" Teacher Wang alluded to his preference for hooking up with white men because of their supposed bigger penises. Therefore, he justified his erotic desire for white men by objectifying them as men with large penises. He followed up by pointing out the impossibility of developing any long-term and meaningful relationship with them, because they

might have nothing in common, and could not rely on genitalia size to sustain a relationship. A few other men showed similar rationales: they had hooked up with white men, or men of other races, as a part of their plan to "collect stamps." This is a popular saying, meaning that they find it appealing to sleep with different types of people, including exotic foreigners, in order to enrich their life experiences.

This differentiation between romantic and erotic desire explains why some white men are popular, or more popular, in hookup markets than their Asian or Chinese counterparts, because their popularity stems from their exotically erotic desirability. Moreover, China's massive population also means there are many queer people. As long as a small portion of that group shows interest in white men, white men will have hookup opportunities. One of my friends, Tom, a white American, told me that he found it hard to find a boyfriend in China after numerous hookups, because they had failed to establish connections beyond sex. In fact, many Chinese men do not even intend to develop deeper emotional connections. As Farrer (2010) discovered through his ethnography in Shanghai, although white foreigners enjoy many privileges, they are often deemed outsiders who are fetishized as exotic subjects with large penises. They take the fast track to some Chinese queer men's bedrooms for quick sex, but they gradually realize that they are sealed out and isolated from Chinese queer men's romantic futures.

Racial categorizations and anti-black racism

Chinese queer men's contestation of white men's superior desirability is not aimed at creating racial equity on a global scale. In order to assert their exclusive desires for Asian men, many Chinese queer men fabricate discourses to reinforce racism towards blacks and Arabs, and Islamophobia. Many queer men deployed the discourse of "I'm not a racist" to validate their

sexual preferences as non-discriminatory, even though racism is rarely mentioned or acknowledged as a problem in China. Their sexual narrations often mix race, ethnicity, geography, and religion to justify why they do not long for "non-Asians," which includes darker people from South Asia.

Many studies have delved into racism targeted at blacks in post-1980s China (Sullivan 1994; Y. Cheng 2011; Frazier and Zhang 2014; M. Zhou, Shenasi, and Xu 2016). This ranges from the anti-blackness incident on campus in the 1980s, to new forms of racism in digital spaces, influenced by new understandings of national identity. Chinese people express overt prejudice towards black people, associating them with an ahistorical backward Africa, disease, and deviance (Frazier and Zhang 2014, 4). Some Chinese netizens essentialize and reinforce racial differences, while applauding racial heterogeneity (13). With black people's increasing presence in China, particularly in cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou, racialization of blacks has intensified.

Compared with the contradictory desire for white men, Chinese queer men show more homogeneous attitudes toward sexual pursuits with black men. In Farrer's ethnography of Shanghai's nightscapes, African and South Asian men are rarely mentioned, and are positioned near the bottom of the sexual hierarchy among straight people (Farrer 2011, 756). In my study, Chinese queer men in Beijing often brought up topics pertaining to black men, but they presented various rationales to demean and reject them as ideal choices in both romantic and erotic pursuits. Moreover, some even dehumanized black people by drawing upon early scientific discourses of racism. In their racial imaginations, black people are a vague category, which includes people whose skin color is dark enough to be black, such as South Asians. They imagine that black men represent backwardness, primitiveness, violence, and thus undesirability.

A few interlocutors were forthright about their disinterest in black men. Mengshu (37) was straightforward about his lack of interest: “I reject black men. In terms of other people, I don’t care.” Baiyang (27) opened our conversation with hesitation about his racial preferences: “I have had little experience with foreigners…so I don’t [have an answer to that question].” After pausing for a second, he continued, “I probably won’t consider black people in particular, not because of their race, but due to their appearance.” Baiyang attempted to disentangle race and looks in order to validate that his expression of preference was not racist. Many queer people, particularly those with study abroad experience, were more cautious while discussing this matter, because they were self-conscious about not being politically incorrect, and therefore being judged by me. In many cases, after they had indicated little interest in black men, they would immediately add “I’m not racist,” as studies have shown that people in the West do as well (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Carrillo 2018).

Given that race and racism are not common discussion topics in China, instead of justifying that they are not racist, some queer men adopted another rhetorical tactic: generalizing that most Chinese are racist and that Asian societies cultivate a culture that is racist towards black people, such that they are not exceptions. After Dave (38) revealed his reluctance to accept black men, he added “I think all Chinese discriminate against black people.” Li Biao (26) expanded the geography to suggest “I think it’s not limited to China, because people throughout East Asia rarely accept black people.” There is an idiom in China—*Fabu zezhong*, which means that the law cannot be enforced if the general public are offenders. According to its logic, since everyone practices racism towards black people, individuals should not be judged, blamed or condemned for being overt racists.

These queer men imagined black men as primitive, violent, and backward. Racial narratives are never fixed or static, so we must recognize the "polyphony and adaptability" of these narratives within specific historical contexts (Dikotter 1994). Despite shifting discourses of racism, these racialized narratives of black people could date back to the late Qing Dynasty when revolutionaries portrayed black races as inferior to Asians or Chinese. Though the imaginations have narrowed with regards to how they are perceived as inferior, the imagined relationship between Chinese and black people remains similar. The racist residuals in the public realm were never eradicated, despite Mao's effort to collaborate with black people in global anti-imperialist movements.

Black men are deemed primitive due to their perceived body odor, as well as their hypermasculinity. Zhangdao (34) admitted having never had sexual contact with black men, but he imagined them being odorous. He said his lack of interest only derived from his intolerance of their supposed body odor: "I didn't mean to discriminate against them, but they are indeed odorous. Didn't I just say it? I don't dislike anyone. I just couldn't tolerate that odor, which makes me want to throw up." The imagined odorous body is often related to primitiveness, because a cultivated body is supposed to be odorless or smell good. Guangguang (31) declared that he had had one sexual experience with a black man, but it had been unpleasant due to the man's strong and intolerable body odor. Furthermore, he perceived this man as violent, as he had been indifferent to Guangguang's feelings. From this particular experience, he induced this man's indifferent attitude as a general feature of black men, which he deployed to validate his future exclusion of black men.

Guangguang's discourse of "violence" implies that black men are uncivilized, but many participants were more forthright about black men's perceived incivility and primitiveness. Some

even dehumanized black people to justify their racial preference. Wang Fei (30) pointed out that black men are "wild beasts" to him. Therefore, he tried to distance himself from, in his words, the "scary species." Hezheyu (38) made a similar claim after I questioned why he did not accept black men: "They are so black and thus don't look like human beings. I don't categorize them under humans if I want to have sex with someone. In social interactions, I may consider them as humans, but not in the aspect of sex." I did not quite understand the distinction, so I followed by asking why he perceived black people as humans only in social interaction. He replied:

> It means…in social interaction, we can be friends, we can go out and travel together, we can chat. I have no problem with these at all. But if I want to have sex, I don't consider them humans, so I can't do it…Apart from their skin color and their appearance, they just don't make me feel comfortable. Maybe they find it comfortable to look at each other, but I completely don't feel it. I don't even feel comfortable when I see a person of mixed race. I just can't accept them deep in my heart.

Thus, this elaboration marks the dehumanization of black people, who are deemed undesirable, in both romantic and erotic desires. They are only socially accepted as "friends."

A handful of men provided the opposite narrative because they deemed black men sexually available, exotic, and thus desirable, but did not consider themselves socially or romantically available. Tangqianwei (30), a man just entering a contract marriage, indicated that he would not consider black men at first. However, upon second thought, he switched his absolute tone and claimed, "It might be great to have sex with black men, because they're pretty primitive and wild. But spiritually, it would be hard to communicate with them." Similar to the distinction between erotic and romantic desire, Tangqianwei defined black men as only options in erotic desire; they were undesirable in terms of romance. He also portrayed them as socially and spiritually incapable.

Similarly, Haiyang (37) showed sexual interest in black men, but he was more explicit with his desire than Tangqianwei, "I want to try black men." He continued to explain his erotic

preference for black men over other races: “it’s said that they are bigger. That’s the only reason.” In his words, Haiyang had reduced black men to a penis. According to Frantz Fanon, “the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis” (1970, 120). Apparently, these representations and imaginations of black men have crossed oceans and landed in Chinese queer communities, because the desirability of black men only originates from their imagined big penis, as well as their hot blood and extraordinary sexual vigor (Mitchell 2016).

In addition to denying the sexual desirability of black men by directly imagining them as backward, Tyrell (24) conflated black people with frenetic religious followers, making them non-ideal options for atheistic and secular Chinese. He mentioned that black people were probably more religious than Asians. The two races’ divergent religious beliefs may cause ceaseless conflict. Since few of my interviewees commented on religion, I asked him what religions black men followed, and he answered, “Islam. Well, I mean North Africans are Muslims. In terms of Sub-Saharan Africa, I’m unsure of their religious beliefs. Some of them are probably Christians or Catholics, and the rest probably follow their local religions.” Tyrell had perceived all Africans as black, including North Africans, who are primarily white. Moreover, had he conflated all black people with conservative religious followers, which he used to validate his lack of interest in black men.

In order to prevent accusations of racism or other judgement, some queer men turn to another rhetorical tactic to demonstrate their interests in certain black individuals. After I asked Landon (26) about his racial preferences, he acknowledged being open-minded to people of all races, including “good-looking black men, such as Kobe Bryant.” He concluded by suggesting his primary attraction to a handsome face, instead of people’s race. Tianbing (26) was forthright about his preference for Asian men, but revealed that he was open to any men he found

physically attractive by citing one experience: “Mainland Chinese are more exclusionary towards black people, relatively. But there was a time when I was on my way to work, I saw a black man. Wow, he was too handsome, like a model! I’d never seen such a handsome black man before. That moment reminded me that I’m actually open to all races as long as they’re handsome enough.” Both Landon and Tianbing justified their openness to all races by citing a particular example of black men—men who stand out among black people, like Kobe or a model. This rhetoric implies the inferiority of black people in their minds, as only a handful of extraordinary black men can enter their desires.

Because racial categories in non-Western societies are not the same as those in the West (Farrer 2010, 71), South Asians, including people from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and neighboring countries, are often excluded from Chinese queer men’s desires. This is similar to how they are excluded from the category of Asians in Chinese queer men’s understandings of race. South Asians’ categorization has long been contested in the US and the UK, particularly the question of whether or not they are black (Koshy 1998). Regardless of the controversy, Chinese queer men often collapse South Asians into the category of black people due to their darker skin. In some participants’ eyes, South Asians are not just “darker,” but rather “black.” Carr (32) answered my question on racial preference first by explaining his preference for Asian men. However, when I mentioned South Asians and Southeast Asians, he indicated that these groups are not included in his definition of “Asians.” Rather, he considered South Asians black people. Moreover, he added that the darkest men that he could accept were men from Hainan, an island province just off of China’s southern coast. Moreover, Fengfeihua (34) implied that he could not tolerate Indians’ body odor, which he specified as curry odor. Body odor was regularly

considered a feature of other races, such that this perceived odor separated South Asians from the Asian to which Chinese queer men found similarity and emotional connection.

Islamophobia and secular homonationalism

In addition to rampant anti-black sentiment in Chinese queer communities, queer people also revealed an anti-Arab or anti-Muslim penchant by viewing them as homophobic, and viewing secular China as more tolerant. Yet unlike white and black men who were frequently mentioned throughout my interviews, fewer interviewees commented on Arabs. Mr. Wang (27), who had lived in Eastern Europe for a few years, was one of the few who introduced Arabs into our conversation. At first, he indicated no racial preferences. However, when we started discussing his experiences with men of different races, he suddenly added "no Arabs." He specified that he was referring to Arabs who had been born and grown up in Arab countries, because he was fine with Arab Americans, whom he considered different from Arabs born in the Middle East. Mr. Wang listed several reasons why he was repulsed by Arabs:

> First, I think their body odor is pretty strong. Second, I find them feudalistic and close-minded. I mean they're very paternalistic, which is more obvious among Arab-born Arabs. I mean, my repulsion by Arabs has nothing to do with their looks. It's all about their personality. In terms of their looks, they should be popular given their handsome faces and big sexual organs, but I just cannot stand their personalities. Moreover, I find Arabs' personalities crafty. It's because they have been running businesses in that important location [bridging Africa, Asia, and Europe] and everyone needs to pass by them to do business.[41] I lived there for a while, but they left me with a bad impression.

According to his depiction, Arab men are linked to body odor, patriarchy, and craftiness, which turns them into undesirable objects, in spite of their favorable physical features.

[41] Many Chinese people view businessmen as inherently crafty and greedy. These personalities lead to success in business. This is why Mr. Wang associated Arabs with this negative characteristic of craftiness.

Because China (and especially its Han-dominated areas) is primarily an atheistic country, many people refuse to pursue a relationship with religious men, particularly Muslims. Owen (26) also demonstrated concerns and fear towards Middle Eastern men, because "Muslims are…all terrorists. They also persecute LGBT people, so I do discriminate against Middle Easterners and Muslims. Well, it's more about hatred than discrimination." This image of homophobic Muslims reinforces many Chinese queers' beliefs about the incompatibility of secular Chinese and religious Arabs/Muslims. This perception substantiates Jasbir Puar's critique of homonationalism that imagines the Orientalist as terrorist others. This is particularly applicable to the Middle East, which is hostile to homosexuality, as opposed to the gay-friendly United States (Puar 2006). Although my interlocutors acknowledged China's homophobia, they contended that China's anti-homosexuality policy has been removed from the law, and it has not been institutionalized as it has been in the Middle East. Thus, China is supposedly more friendly and tolerant for gay and queer people.

Being anti-Arab and being anti-Muslim in China are apparently different because the former refers to the specific distain for people from the Arabic world, while the latter could refer to the sentiment against Arab Muslims, as well as Chinese Muslims.[42] Han Chinese queer men sometimes conflate the two. Chinese people's Islamophobia has been triggered by the Chinese media's portrayal of Muslims as domestic terrorists over the past decade. Particularly after the Xinjiang riots in 2009, the state media has portrayed many Uyghurs as extreme separatists, criminals, and terrorists (Barbour and Jones 2013). The 2014 Kunming attack reinforced these images of Uyghurs and other Muslims in China (Trédaniel and Lee 2018), which has precipitated

[42] Muslim is primarily practiced in Xinjiang, Ningxia, and several provinces in the Northwest of China, and among Hui people throughout the nation. Muslims only account for a small portion of the population.

Islamophobia. Due to the conflation of Arabs with Muslims in China, this Islamophobic sentiment has been parlayed into racism towards Arabs in general.

Passionate Latinos and an unknown category

Although Latino is a broad ethnic category in Western societies, few of my participants mentioned Latinos, either in a positive or a negative light. In fact, Chinese queer men showed little knowledge of any races besides "whites" and "blacks." This echoes Héctor Carrillo's findings among Mexican immigrants, who had little to say about Asians (2018). In the global racial spectrum, most people seem to know little about those who fall outside the dichotomy of black and white. Among the seventy interviewees, only two offered any narratives about Latinos. These two had had similar experiences because both had studied Spanish in college. Due to their interests in Spanish and Latin American culture, the two queer men offered positive narratives on Latinos. According to Owen (26), who had studied Spanish for one year, he prefers South American and white (Caucasian) men:

> [In terms of South America], I mean countries like Colombia or Peru. Men from these countries have brown skin and strong physiques. Some have darker or darker brown skin. They also have great personalities because South Americans are generally more optimistic. I also like Latin music because I studied Spanish and can understand some basic Spanish.

Although he indicated desire for both South American and Caucasian men, he eventually suggested that Caucasian men may be better options for romantic relationships, due to their better education and higher social status. Jason (21), on the other hand, displayed more interest in Latinos:

> I know many people from Latin America and "they are big, they are really big!" [speaking in English]. I have been learning Spanish for a long time, so I really like their passion, because both Latinos and Spanish people are very passionate. The Spanish may be flirtier, but Latinos are extremely passionate, so I like them a lot…I have many friends from Mexico, Ecuador, and Venezuela. They are all nice people, very friendly.

Jason adopted the rhetoric of "Latin passion" (Carrillo 2018) to justify his preference for Latinos. Moreover, he believed that Latinos' endowed penis size increased their sexual attraction. The remainder of my participants had little to say about Latinos, because this ethnic group is underrepresented and rarely discussed in Chinese societies.

This section maps how Chinese queer men imagine men of other races and ethnicities by exploring their cross-racial desires. It explains why John, the black Canadian, found it hard to date or hook up in China, because racism towards blacks is omnipresent in Chinese societies, and few people are open to black people in their sexual desires. However, this explicit racism towards blacks and Muslims has been overlooked in both Chinese queer studies and local activism. This is because China's government also labels itself as a nation consisting of a singular race, and underestimates the effect of racism in a transnationalizing society. This section also elucidates why most of my interviewees claimed little interest in white men, yet my white interlocutors were enjoying their sexual privileges by having continuous hookups. This is because most Chinese queer men eschew opportunities for long-term romantic relationships with white men, while staying open to short-term flings. In addition, my findings also show that Chinese queer men do not necessarily follow or conform to racial and ethnic categories minted in the West. The point is not whether they are "correct" while using existing racial and ethnic categories, but how they understand and imagine these categories and the relationships across racial and ethnic groups.

No, Asians are not all the same—Sinocentric Asianness

Although the majority of my interlocutors expressed a preference for Asian men, this does not mean that they are open to all Asian ethnicities. The category of the pan-Asian American has been contested as unstable in the United States over the past several decades

(Kibria 1998). Similarly, the Chinese queer men in my study did not buy the concept of a pan-Asianness. Many limited the applicability of "Asian" to East Asians or to Chinese (including the Chinese diaspora) when they adopted this term. These queer people often exclude South and Southeast Asian men from the category of Asian because they identify more differences than similarities between East Asians and South/Southeast Asians. Thus, when Chinese queer men sexualize ethnic groups in Asia, they deconstruct the category of Asianness by suggesting hierarchized relationships between Asian ethnicities with regards to their sexual capital. In short, my interlocutors believed that "Asians" are not all the same.

"Darker," "lower-class," and "effeminate" Asians

Over the past decade, China's growing consumption capacity has given more people access to international travel. Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, has become the hottest overseas tourist destination for Chinese travelers. The annual Songkran Festival (the Thai New Year), has attracted thousands of Chinese queer men to Thailand since 2010. Over time, this traditional Thai holiday has accumulated cultural meanings: it has become a transnational gay carnival. Thailand used to be a paradise for white gay tourists, and it still is. However, East Asian gay tourists have started sharing this gay mecca as their backyard. The international East Asian presence in Thailand is growing, both economically and culturally. According to Dredge Byung'chu Kang's ethnography (2017) , middle-class Thai gay men have redirected their desires over the past decade by racializing East Asians as "white Asians." Therefore, they have been reorienting their desires away from Caucasian partners, and towards East Asian men. Chinese queer men also racialize Thai men, but not in a mutually positive way. The increasing tourism to Thailand among Chinese queer men has been a result of the perception that Thailand is more sexually liberal than China, and that it offers more space for expressing and performing their

sexualities; it is not that Chinese queer men are particularly attracted to Thai men. Thus, this transformation is not a reciprocal process, as Chinese queer men do not show as much as enthusiasm and desire for Thai men.

In contrast to the images of East Asians as "white Asians" in Thailand and Vietnam (Hoang 2015), queer men in China perceive Southeast Asians as "dark Asians", and thus the undesirable ones. Xiaochen (25) excluded Southeast Asians after I mentioned them as an option, because of their supposed dark skin. The "darkness" had two connotations in my interviews: a signifier of either essential racial difference or class difference. Some of my interviewees racialized Southeast Asians as another racial group, different from East Asians, while others excluded them on the basis of class: as the lower-class Asians. Either way, they considered Southeast Asians a category separate from East Asians.

Yuan Xiaojing (30) had internalized racial differences between Asians. He contended that the difference is reflected in Southeast Asian's darker skin, smaller eyes, and flatter noses. Because of these perceived physical differences, he is not attracted to Southeast Asians. However, he added that he was interested in Southeast Asians of Chinese descent. Similarly, Carr (32) expressed repulsion toward Southeast Asians, as he deemed their looks "too primitive", making them look like "incomplete products of evolution," manifested in their high cheek bones and outward chins. Both Yuan Xiaojing and Carr essentialized the physical differences between East Asians and Southeast Asians as racial differences. As stated in the above section, the majority of Chinese queer men expressed preference for men with whom they believed to fall within their own racial category.

Unlike the queer men who essentialize racial difference, others, such as Anson (29), excluded Southeast Asians from their desires by emphasizing global class stratification. Anson

had lived in Australia for several years before repatriating to China. He suggested that he was uninterested in Southeast Asians, including people from Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines, because "I think they look pretty dirty. I'm sorry, but I'm not interested in their skin. They generally leave me an impression that they are dark and skinny…That's why I feel that they're dirty." The rationale he provided did not connect darker skin to his perceptions of dirtiness, so I asked him what image came to his mind when we were talking about men from Southeast Asia. He replied:

> Every time I talk about Southeast Asian men, one image emerges in my mind. It's the image of a boatman we met on our way from Phuket Island to the Phi Phi Islands. He's very dark due to years of sunburn, and he's also extremely skinny. I don't know what their skin is really like after long-term unprotected exposure to sunshine and wind. He was also wearing some shabby clothes, so I, to some degree, conflate them with lower-class people.

This elaboration does not explicitly label "dark Asians" as another race; instead, "dark Asians" are perceived as a classed group—the lower-class Asians who are excluded by the prospering East Asians. I discovered that Chinese queer men often draw a class borderline to exclude Southeast Asians, instead of essentializing racial differences between the two groups.

In addition to being racialized and classed, some Southeast Asian men, Thai men in particular, are emasculated and gendered as the effeminate Asians by their languages. Li Biao (26), an English teacher who was about to pursue a master's degree in Australia, claimed that the Thai and Vietnamese languages sound hilarious. He said that all thrillers produced in Thailand are of high quality, but thrillers often turn into comedies when actors and actresses open their mouths to speak. Wang Fei (30) specified that he found Thais feminine, a feature that dampened their thrillers. Wang Fei elaborated that regardless of how masculine a Thai man looked, he would be turned off whenever he started speaking. He explained that this aversion to Thai men derived primarily from their language's non-masculine accent.

On the contrary, a few participants held positive attitudes toward Thais (not Southeast Asians in general) and mentioned the 2007 film *The Love of Siam*. This romantic drama depicts a story of same-sex love between two teenagers, played by Mario Maurer and Witwisit Hiranyawongkul (see Figure 14). Many participants suggested that neither of the actors had the undesirable features believed to be typical features of Southeast Asians such as darker skin or "lower-class looks". Instead, the two actors have become gay icons in Chinese queer communities, representing "pure" same-sex romance. Maurer has been particularly popular, and has been deemed to represent desirable Thais. Although Maurer is an actor from Thailand, he is actually of mixed Chinese and German heritage. His (non-Thai) look has won him fame and popularity among Chinese queer men as the most popular "Thai" actor.

Figure 14: Witwisit Hiranyawongkul (left) and Mario Maurer (right)

"Authentic" Asian men: "Simpler" Koreans versus "complicated" Japanese

Chinese queer men exclude South/Southeast Asians by categorizing them as either non-Asians or lower-class Asians. However in my interviews, East Asians (people from China, Korea, and Japan),[43] were considered a more uniform category, and a preferred group. When my

[43] In the mainstream discourse of Mainland China, Taiwan is considered a province of China. Thus, it was rarely separated for discussion as an independent country, even among my two Taiwanese interviewees. Moreover, North Korea is invisible and missing in discussion because people from North Korea are either collapsed into the category of Koreans, or neglected due to a

interlocutors expressed preferences for "Asian" men, they referred primarily to East Asian men, who have more common physical features, as well as shared Confucian cultural origins. The cultural proximity connects Chinese queer men with men from Korea and Japan. However, some queer men do not consider men from the three countries homogenous, because the different languages complicate communication. Furthermore, in spite of similar cultural origins, each nation has developed distinct popular cultures, which differentiate fashions and understandings of beauty. Queer men in my study declared explicit interest in men from (South) Korea and Japan, but contemporary cultural differences and language barriers have turned many queer people away. The preference for Chinese over Korean or Japanese men entails less sexual discrimination and racism than does the repulsion toward South/Southeast Asians, as my interlocutors focused on differences rather than hierarchies.

Among my interviewees who revealed interest in Korean and Japanese men, more preferred Korean men, who are believed to be more masculine in terms of their body types and affective presentations. The edgy Japanese style, to many Chinese queer men, strays too far from Chinese aesthetics. Both Korean and Japanese popular cultures have been transported to China where they have exerted their effects on Chinese cultures. Transnational cultural flows at the regional level have shaped the way that Chinese people, particularly the younger generations, perceive and understand beauty and desirability. This regionalization of transnational cultural circuits disrupts the singular cultural flows from the West to the East, and from the North to the South (Ryoo 2009). The Korean wave, channeled primarily through K-dramas and K-pop culture, has promoted a hybrid image of Korean masculinities, embodied in pop stars such as

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lack of knowledge about them. Thus, the analysis of East Asian men resolves around three general categories: Chinese, Korean and Japanese.

Bae Yong-Joon and Rain (Jung 2011), or Song Seung-heon, Song Joong-ki, and Kim Soo-Hyun. These men were mentioned as ideal types in my interviews. Chinese queer men often believe that these celebrities epitomize Korean men with perfect bodies, either with a muscular body like Rain, or the lean and tall type signified by Kim Soo-Hyun (see Figure 15). Moreover, they perceive Korean men as more masculine than Japanese men. This is because Korean men look "simpler" and "cleaner", as manifested in their fashion, hairstyles, and facial appearance. "Simpler" looks refers to elegance with minimal decoration. This is a gendered concept upheld among many Chinese people, including the queer men in my study, because men are not supposed to overdress themselves like women. According to Xiaopu (30), this simpler masculine style makes Korean men fit Chinese men's aesthetics. His statement prompted me to deliberate over whether it is that Korean men's styles fit Chinese queer men's aesthetics, or that Chinese (queer) men's aesthetics have been influenced by K-pop culture. I cannot claim a causal relationship at this moment, but Chinese queer men have certainly adopted many criteria for sexual desirability from contemporary Korean popular culture.

Figure 15: Rain, Kim Soo-Hyun, Song Joong-ki, Song Seung-heon (from left to right)

Unlike the simpler and more masculine Korean men, Chinese queer men posited that Japanese men might be too effeminate, due to their "complicated" and "edgy" style. In addition

to Japanese TV dramas and music, Japanese manga and pornography have also exerted a cultural impact on Chinese people. My interviewees did not discuss specific Japanese pop stars as often as they discussed Korean men, since they were not as familiar with Japanese celebrities. However, manga is popular, and so is pornography, among queer men across the age spectrum. Jason (21) indicated his interest in Japanese men, since he is confident in their sexual prowess. He also believed that every Japanese man was a master of sex, though few other queer men supported this statement.

The perceived effeminacy of Japanese men manifests in their long hair, make-up (e.g. eyeshadow, mascara), and personal accessories. Moreover, they are believed to shape their eyebrows and dye their hair often, making them look "weird". Japan is also famous for creating many streetwear brands targeting niche markets. However, few Chinese queer men follow their trendy fashion, because, according to Mr. Qi (26), Japanese are overdressed and look *feizhuliu*, or "non-mainstream". Thus, they are easy to differentiate from Korean men. Mr. Qi is a Japanese manga enthusiast and showed me his favorite boys in pornographic manga, who he claimed look "simple" and "like Chinese" (see Figure 16). However, he is not into Japanese men in real life, because they are "distant" from the men represented in manga, and thus different from Chinese men with respect to their looks. Additionally, some queer men in China hold the prevalence of Japanese pornography against Japanese men, who are thought to be hypersexual. Therefore, these perceived traits differentiate Japanese from other East Asian men, and thus few of my participants indicated preference for Japanese.

Figure 16: Manga photo provided by Mr. Qi

Although "Asian" is a singular racial category in Western and global racial politics, Chinese queer men challenge the category by excluding South/Southeast Asians because of their noted (or perceived) differences from East Asians. This classification is based on either the racialization of other Asians, or by classifying them on the basis of their perceived lower economic status. Chinese queer men's sexual imagination of "Asian men" suggests the instability of racial categories in global contexts. It also illuminates variegated forms of racial hierarchies that are invisible or incomprehensible if limited to the racial politics produced in Western societies.

Conflicting desires and renegotiation of spatialized masculinity in China

While the majority of my interviewees were forthright that they preferred East Asians, or just Chinese, they did not perceive all Chinese as being the same. China's 56 ethnic groups, its vast territory, and its array of dialects render "Chinese" a slippery category, and Chineseness a contested cultural concept. After I moved from Hunan Province in Southern China to Beijing for university, I often heard people say that men from Northern China were more masculine than men from the South. Many of my interviewees' narratives reinforced this perceived difference.

However, nearly half of my interlocutors contested this rigid definition of masculinity, because these queer men had distinct understandings of masculinity, and held different views on spatialized masculinities.

There is no official demarcation between Southern and Northern China. However, the Qinling Mountains-Huaihe River line (Figure 17) often serves as a geographic boundary, due to the bifurcated climates, cuisines, and cultures on the two sides. There are a few provinces, such as Anhui, that are hard to categorize because they straddle the line. In fact, people often lack clear-cut ideas about the boundary's location when using the categories of Southerner and Northerner. Nonetheless, their narrations on the differences between the two types of men provide discourse for understanding their spatialized sexual imaginations of Chinese men. Among the seventy interviewees, just over half indicated no preference for either Southern or Northern men. Among the rest, sixteen expressed inclination for Northern men through the discourse of "masculine Northern men versus effeminate Southern men." Seventeen held the belief of "perfect Southern masculinity versus Northern hypermasculinity" and desired Southern men. The two discourses elucidate that masculinity remains a concept that can be contested, negotiated, or redefined by Chinese queer men.

Figure 17: The boundary between Northern and Southern China (Gao, Gao, and Zhong 2019, 492)

Masculine Northern men versus effeminate Southern men

The queer men who explicitly preferred Northern men often considered men from the North more masculine than men from the South. This was manifested in their stronger physiques, virile gender presentations, candid and forthright personalities, and manly accent. This discourse reveals a gendered understanding of Northern and Southern masculinities. Men from Shandong Province and Dongbei,[44] epitomize the masculine ideal of the Northern men. In 2019, users of TikTok, one of China's most popular short video sharing apps, published a series of videos showing how much taller Shandong men are than men from other parts of China. Most of these videos present several tall men, approximately 190 cm (around 6′4") tall, and suggest that it is common to see men of this height in Shandong. In the comments, followers reveal jealousy or desire for men from Shandong due to their exceptional physicality. Thus, the physical features of Northern men are often emphasized as evidence of their superior masculinity, as the average height of men from several Southern provinces are believed to be below 170 cm (approximately 5′7"). This is based on a series of survey results which lack a clear origin that circulate online. In addition to their height, some queer men believe that Northern men have larger penises, which is also reflected in these survey results, and they believe them to also have superior sexual skills. Despite their unknown origins, these online survey reports consistently rank Northern men ahead of Southern men. The statistics project an image that Northern men have stronger physiques, which many queer men deem a necessary component of masculinity, particularly for men who self-identify as 1s. On the contrary, many queer men believe that Southern men are short and

[44] The word Dongbei means Northeastern (China). It consists of the entirety of three provinces (Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning) and the section of Inner Mongolia located in Northeastern China.

skinny. Moreover, Southern men are supposed to have smaller penises than Northern men and are also allegedly not masters of sex.

Apart from the contrast in physical features, many queer men claimed that Northern men were more virile in terms of their affective presentations. Dabai (30) suggested that most men from Dongbei were non-feminine, the most basic criterion for a man to be his partner, because he could not accept any man who behaves like a woman. Hezheyu (38) found Northern men more popular on dating apps, thereby labelling himself as being from Dongbei on Blued, a label that he believed would increase his sexual capital. This is backed by Fanshu (32), who often patronized male escorts. According to him, men who claimed to be from Shandong or Dongbei were more likely to draw his attention on the market. The virile affective presentation, as illustrated in Chapter Three, manifests in men's behavior, speech, and through their gestures.

In addition, queer men specified that affective presentations are also embodied and signified by their personality and accent. In these men's eyes, Northerners, including both men and women, can get to the point in a more straightforward way and will not beat around the bush as Southerners often do. In contrast to the candid and forthright personality of Northern men, many queer men insisted that Southerners were more indirect, petty, and fastidious. Hezheyu (38) complained that he had found it hard to find hookups in the South:

> When I went to Zhejiang, someone wanted to hook up with me. In that situation, you gotta do whatever you're supposed to do. But he was really coy. I don't mean that he was a sissy. He was just indeterminate and indecisive. I had to guess what he was thinking and the communication exhausted me. He wouldn't respond to you, you understand? Neither did he say "yes" or "no", but just said "uh-huh." I found it hard to communicate with him.

Hezheyu tried to disentangle this coy and indirect personality from femininity to justify that the person mentioned was not feminine, with regard to his affective presentation. However, he

concluded by implying this character was unpleasant, the opposite of the masculine personality of Northerners who are straightforward and candid.

Similarly, Mengshu (37) stated that he was not attracted to men from the South because he found them "petty and complicated, which exhausts me. Maybe because I'm from Dongbei, I prefer to be direct in everything, but they cannot cut to the chase." I asked him if there was an example of how Southern men complicated matters and he replied, "For example, in terms of asking about sexual roles, they do it like conducting a survey and asking a series of questions on how big and thick your dick is, how hard it is, how long you last during sex when you're in a good mood, and when you're in a bad mood, and stuff like that. They ask everything in detail, which I find unnecessary." Instead of asking endless questions, Mengshu expected that a potential partner could ask all of the questions at once so that they could proceed to other topics. In addition to complicating matters, Mengshu contended that Southerners were fastidious and calculating:

> I have several friends from Shanghai with whom I have had meals before. But they turned out so picky about restaurants and dishes. They also discriminated other people…We split the bill, this was before we could use a WeChat group to split the bill evenly. At that time, they calculated every penny. OMG! I could really just treat you if we were close enough, because that's what people from Dongbei do.

This is an example that I heard multiple times from interlocutors who complained how fastidious Southern men could be in restaurants, because they often consider splitting the bill an effeminate act.

The last contrast is the difference in spoken accent, which these queer men believed demonstrated that Northerners were more masculine than Southerners. Although the idea that standard Mandarin Chinese originated from the Beijing dialect is flawed (Coblin 2000), many queer men insisted that Northerners' Mandarin Chinese was standard, or close to standard. More

importantly, the Northern accent was believed to sound more masculine by some. According to Anson (29):

> I don't like men from Fujian and Guangdong because their strong accent turns me off. The Southern accent, I mean the Fujianese and Cantonese accent particularly, sound undesirable to me. This may be caused by the fact I grew up in Northwest China and I work in the North. Southern China is just so different for me…Their way of speaking is very soft, which I cannot define as "sissy." It's probably a matter of masculinity.

As Hezheyu had done to distinguish "sissy" from non-masculine features, Anson positioned the soft accent in opposition to masculinity. However, it was not feminine enough to be deemed "sissy." Many Southern accents are depicted as soft. This includes the Taiwanese accent, which many people mock in daily life, so as to satirize the soft speech of Taiwanese men. Guangguang (30) was from Taiwan but was working in Beijing. In many situations, he avoided introducing himself as Taiwanese. One rationale he offered was that many people are prejudiced toward the supposed soft accent, a feature that he deemed would detract from his sexual capital.

Because of the supposed differences between Northern and Southern men, queer men like Qishi (30) indicated an interest in men from Northern China only. Qishi, who self-labelled as a 0, revealed that he was more likely to have a crush on a man once he learned he was from Northern China, such as Shandong, Dongbei, or Inner Mongolia. In contrast, Qishi said:

> If you learn that someone is from Chongqing or Sichuan, even if he self-labels as a 1, you don't have the urge to hook up with him. Because in the public's impression of Chinese *tongzhi*, people from these two areas are mostly 0s, or they changed from a 1 from a 0. I mean, you feel that they're like sissies regardless of their sexual labels, you understand? Even if he self-labels as a 1, you can picture how he's fucked by other people.

Qishi's narrative genders geographical origins and demarcates men as either from the North or from the South. As illustrated in Chapter Three, men from Chengdu are often effeminized and essentialized as 0s because they are believed to be incapable and incompetent of being 1s and penetrating others. These gendered images of Southern and Northern men are more prevalent on

dating apps. This contrast generates a dichotomy between the masculine Northern man and the effeminate Southern man, the former being more desirable than the latter.

Perfect Southern masculinity versus Northern hypermasculinity

In contrast with the gendered discourse that promotes Northern masculinity, seventeen of my participants demonstrated more interest in men from the South because they exhibited "perfect Southern masculinity," as opposed to the supposed hypermasculinity of Northern men. Rather than considering Southern men physically weak or effeminate in terms of their gender presentation, or petty and complicated, and speaking with effeminate accents, these seventeen men held positive views towards Southerners. They believed Southern men to be delicate but exquisite, considerate and good tempered, and to speak with a cute accent. This opposing discourse contests the singular way of understanding spatialized masculinity in China because these men had created alternative criteria to define "perfect masculinity" as a softer masculinity. This contrast and ambivalence also appears in Chapter Two in the discussion of popular bodies on Aloha.

Unlike the former group of queer men who claim Northern men's masculinity on the basis of body size, these men de-emphasized body size in evaluating desirability. They contended that although many Southern men look more "delicate" than Northern men, Southern men are more "exquisite" than "crude" Northern men. Youyouluming (41) generalized that Southern men looked more refined, but he did not elaborate upon what this entailed. Mr. Qi (26), who grew up in Taiwan and went to university in Hong Kong, claimed that the portion of handsome men from Chengdu and Chongqing, two Southwestern cities, far exceeds that of Northern cities. He explained, "They're all very cute and maintain great skin, which may benefit

from the climate.[45] I think it may also be the genes, because people from these areas are more likely to look cute. Moreover, they age slowly." Mr. Qi suggested that skin is crucial to being exquisite, and implied that smooth and whiter skin would make a person more desirable. In addition to the exquisite physique, Xiaoben (26) added that the exquisiteness also manifested in their lifestyle, such as how they dressed and the daily products they used, that is, simple but stylish. Most of these queer men acknowledged that Southern men might be shorter, but they did not perceive this as detracting from Southern men's attractiveness.

Similarly, these seventeen participants also believed that Southern men had a better temper and were more considerate than their Northern counterparts. Their interpretations of Southern men's personalities diverged from the aforementioned discourse of "petty, complicated and hard-to-understand" Southern men. Paul (26), who self-labelled as 0, showed an explicit preference for Southern men because he deemed them more considerate, like "household husbands." I asked him whether masculinity and being considerate were incompatible concepts and he said:

> They're not paradoxical. It's okay for men to have careful thoughts. They [Southern men] have both rational and sensible sides. Their rationality is reflected in the way they argue with adequate evidence and good logic, which can be truly convincing. Their sensibility is reflected in their being more considerate, because they're always thinking of other people. We can solve the problem together if any problem comes up between us. I don't like holding all the problems uncommunicated and unresolved, which may generate more problems. That is like when a minor ailment becomes a serious illness if it isn't cured, and may explode at a certain point.

Paul did not regard Southern men as complicated; instead, he perceived their calculating personalities as an advantage in a relationship, since this personality type makes Southern men more communicable and considerate. Thus, Paul did not feminize the perceived sensible side of

[45] The climate in Chengdu and Chongqing, and Southern China in general, is more humid than the arid North. This is believed to be beneficial to the skin.

Southern men, but rather integrated it as an indispensable part of a balanced, and thus perfect, masculinity. This was because his understanding of masculinity incorporated more than virility.

Several other participants also expanded on, or redefined, understandings of masculinity. Yuanxiaojing (30) preferred men from the North, but he liked Taiwanese, who were often classified as Southern Chinese in my interviews. Many participants contended that Taiwanese men were "sissies" due to their accent, but Yuanxiaojing found them cute and masculine. He even defended cuteness and masculinity as not mutually exclusive, "I mean they could be both masculine and cute at the same time, because a masculine person can also be cute in some ways. Masculinity refers to his appearance, while cuteness refers to his personality...Moreover, their [Taiwanese's] voices and accent sound very good." Yuanxiaojing's preference for Taiwanese had /originated from his experience at the Pride Parade in Taiwan, where he saw numerous muscular bodies in the parade. These images persuaded him that Taiwanese men did have masculine bodies, as reflected in their muscular physiques. Thus, he found Taiwanese men to be equipped with "perfect" masculinity because of the juxtaposition of masculine bodies and cute personalities, which many others consider incompatible.

Additionally, a few queer men disputed the idea of the "feminine" Southern accent. Instead, they alleged that they sound cute and sexy, as mentioned in Yuanxiaojing's narrative. Both Mr. Wang (27) and Carr (32) argued that they found it sexy when Southerners did not speak "standard" Mandarin Chinese, and particularly when Cantonese people attempt to speak Mandarin. These men challenged the norm of the desirable accent and disrupted the relationship between "standard" Mandarin Chinese and hegemonic masculinity. The "deviancy" from the norms and standards is where they had located the desirability.

Furthermore, these queer men discredited the idea that the Northern accent, or standard Mandarin Chinese, was more masculine. On the contrary, they asserted that accent was an embodiment of their class status. The Northern accent, particularly the Dongbei accent, sounds vulgar, like a lower class accent. As Axl (30s) commented, the Dongbei accent does not sound "graceful." Daniel Zhang (26) explained that many people he knew from Dongbei had left him with an impression of low *suzhi* when they started speaking. According to Tamara Jacka, *suzhi*, loosely translated as quality, "refers to the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct" (2009, 524). *Suzhi* is often used to distance the speaker from other subjects, and to exclude particular subjects from proper cultural citizenship (Rofel 2007, 104). Daniel Zhang's adoption of *suzhi* suggests his perception of Dongbei men as inferior on the basis of class, because their supposed vulgar accent makes them sound undereducated. Xiaopu (35) also related the Dongbei accent to lower *suzhi*, as a reflection of their personality and socioeconomic status:

> I've just told you that I don't like conflict. People from Dongbei seem to have a bad temper. Although their accent sounds humorous, they make you feel that they have a bad attitude…This hardness of their accent signifies aggressiveness…Their aggressiveness manifests in their disrespect for others, which causes their interlocutors' discomfort…I think personality has something to do with geography, as well as the socioeconomic conditions of an area.

Xiaopu admitted that Dongbei men were masculine in many aspects, but in a way that is threatening. Dongbei was the center of China's heavy industry during the planned economy era, which relied on a large workforce for state-owned enterprises. However, this region gradually lost its position in China's economy during China's Reform and Opening Up. This resulted in its economy lagging behind those of other regions, particularly that of the Southeast. Because Xiaopu was from Jiangsu, a developed province adjacent to Shanghai, he alluded that the lower *suzhi* of people from Dongbei could be shaped by their lower economic status. Therefore, accent,

to many Chinese queer men, embodies class status; and the Dongbei accent embodies lower-class hypermasculinity.

Through the seventeen queer men's narratives, many acknowledged Northern Chinese men's "advantageous" physical features, such as being taller on average, but they did not consider these to be masculine or desirable features. This was because they preferred "delicate" and "exquisite" masculinity over the Northern hypermasculinity. This softer masculinity resembles the traditional literati masculinity in pre-modern China, as depicted by Song Geng (2004) and Giovanni Vitiello (2011), in terms of physical features. Unlike the stronger bodies of martial arts practitioners, the literati's bodies are not "fragile" and "docile." Their faces are just more "exquisite" than the average person. The differences between the two discourses on Northern versus Southern masculinities suggests the tension between several masculine ideals, and neither one has crystalized as *the* hegemonic masculinity in Chinese queer communities.

Othering border ethnic minorities—inside "outsiders"

In addition to the dichotomy of Northern and Southern Chinese, my interlocutors introduced another variable, ethnicity, to contest the category of Chineseness and complicate their ideal Chinese partner. China has 56 government recognized ethnicities, among which the Han are the dominant ethnic group, accounting for 91.5% of the population. Meanwhile, the other 55 ethnic groups, who comprise 8.5% (China 2010) of the population are scattered across the territory. The queer men in my study sometimes singled out a particular border ethnicity to discuss their (un)desirability; but more often, they conflated the discourses of ethnicity with geographical origin and religion. Among my participants, the Sinocentric desire was often Han-Chinese-centric. This does not mean that they exclude all Chinese ethnic minorities; instead, they often exclude those ethnic groups that do not *look* like Han Chinese, especially those who reside

in the borderlands, such as Tibetans and Uyghurs. Thus, in spite of being Chinese nationals and residing within China's borders, these borderland ethnic minorities are often othered and marginalized in Chinese queer men's desires. This is due to their outward physical differences from the Han Chinese and the other minorities that look like the Han. I refer to these borderland minorities as inside outsiders.

Vince (28) revealed his repulsion toward ethnic minorities in the borderlands due to his obsession with "East Asian faces." Borderland minorities, according to queer men in my fieldwork, typically referred to men from Tibet, Xinjiang, and some people from Inner Mongolia, who looked different from typical Han Chinese. Among these minorities, men from Xinjiang, such as Uyghurs, are often singled out as a different race. Uyghurs are ethnically Turkic, with close affiliations with Central Asia. Most of them reside in Northwest China. John (40) acknowledged that men from Xinjiang were good-looking, yet the "cultural conflicts" stood in the way of any attraction to them. The word "cultural conflict" was only deployed when the Chinese queer men in my fieldwork would rationalize not being attracted to "other races". The parallel uses of the term in the two contexts implies that John did not include these border minorities in the category of Chinese or East Asians.

Wukong (26) specified that he found it impossible to develop a relationship with Hui people, an ethnoreligious group of Chinese Muslims. Most Hui people do not actually live by the border, but they are often deemed outsiders due to their religiosity, as opposed to the secularity of most (Han) Chinese. Wukong started by discussing Hui people, but moved to Muslims in general, including other ethnic groups that adhere to Islam, such as Uyghurs. Because family plays a pivotal role in Chinese (heterosexual) relationships, Wukong clarified that the different beliefs of the two families would sever any relationship:

> If the other person is a Hui Muslim, it's unrealistic to be together, especially if he has conservative parents. That would be horrible…I mean their religion of Islam may make it horrible, unless he cuts off connections with his family. But if he is in a dilemma, or finds it hard to cut off connections with his family, and his family has pure religious beliefs, I don't think it will work…

I asked him why he found religion problematic, and he replied:

> Religious beliefs are a thing that you cannot explain with science, right? If he is faithful to, or superstitious to, a religion that excludes homosexuality, there's nothing you can do to change it. I have a friend who told me that [heterosexual Hui] girls even find it hard to be with Han guys, unless the girl's parents are open-minded, or she grew up in a cosmopolitan area. If they're from Qinghai,[46] it would be too hard.

Wukong's elaboration othered Muslims as exclusive and homophobic through Han-centric homonationalism. Though Han-dominated China is not known for being "gay friendly," Chinese queer communities are often proud of their lack of religious traditions that are hostile to homosexuality as exist in many Western and Middle Eastern societies. This leaves room for homoeroticism in society, particularly in private spaces. Muslims, as the threatening and backward others, are placed in opposition to the category of the more "tolerant" Chinese. Moreover, as mentioned above, Muslims, particularly Uyghurs, have been portrayed, represented, and conceptualized as a security threat to the state since the 2009 uprising (Tobin 2019). This has made them seem threatening as outsiders in a secular China. However, Wukong did not essentialize Muslims as a fixed category; instead, he saw the flexibility and potential through which Muslims could be "sinicized," or assimilated into the Chinese secularity, through conversion, cutting off connections, or via migration to inland cosmopolitan areas. In this way, they could become more "open-minded." These processes would sinicize borderland Muslims, and allow them to gain more Han-centric Chineseness.

[46] Qinghai is a province adjacent to Tibet and Xinjiang with many ethnic minorities, but it is not a border province.

Within the map of China, many queer men reterritorialize the domain by imagining desirable Chinese, and occluding those that they perceive as outside the box of "Chinese" on the basis of ethnicity, geography, and religion to redefine Chineseness in relation to desirability.

Sexualized imaginations of race, ethnicity, and geography

In Chinese queer studies, race has received scant attention as a category that mediates queer people's desires.[47] This chapter demonstrates Chinese queer men's perceptions, knowledge, and categorization of people of different origins, cultural backgrounds, skin colors, looks and religious beliefs. It also maps how Chinese queer men imagine the desirability of other races and ethnicities vis-a-vis Chinese, and how they contest cultural understandings of Chineseness. From the global to the local level, Chinese queer men's narratives shed light on the desire for sameness, as reflected in Sinocentric or Han-centric desires. Meanwhile, they exclude those who they consider to be members of other races or ethnicities, or who do not fall into similar racial and/or ethnic categories. Their desires differ from those of many other Asians in postcolonial societies, as well as Asian Americans in various ethnographic studies (Manalansan IV 2003; Kong 2011). Despite the global racial order that is still supposedly dominated by Caucasians, Chinese queer people show little interest in people in the "higher" positions, particularly with regard to romantic relationships. This desire could be a result of the lack of colonial history, isolation from the West during the Mao Era, and the Chinese government's constant effort to limit the influx of Western culture, such as restrictions on Hollywood movies. I do not suggest that China has been insulated from the rest of world, nor do I assert Chinese exceptionalism, because globalization can flow through invisible channels, and transnational

[47] I refer particularly to queer studies about Mainland China because queer studies in other Sinophone societies, such as Hong Kong, have been involved in many discussions of race in queer desires, due to their colonial histories and cultural residuals.

cultural exchanges can transpire outside of the formalized venues. One example is through pornography from Japan and the West. However, the state's efforts to restrict the influx of foreign culture has indeed reduced Chinese people's exposure to cultural products that promote white hegemony.

However, their alternative desires, which do not prioritize white masculinity, do not suggest that Chinese queer men intend to create an equal racial relationship on a global scale. As my findings show, Chinese queer men have inherited many racialized understandings of black men and Muslims. They have also categorized South/Southeast Asians under racial or class groups different from those of Chinese. Thus, at the global and regional levels, Chinese queer men both challenge global hegemonic white masculinity, and reinforce the existing racial order. At the local level, Chinese queer men display conflicting and ambivalent discourses concerning men from Southern and Northern China. This ambivalence leaves space for Chinese queer men to negotiate the definition and understanding of ideal Chinese masculinity. It also reveals the ongoing and incomplete process of masculinity construction among Chinese queer men. This ambitious endeavor to map Chinese queer men's global sexual imaginations is an invitation for more research to explore sexual racializations in China, as well as in other non-Western societies, and how these racializations affect their sexual desires and practices in a transnationalizing world.

Chapter Five: Technologies of the Sexual Self: (Optimistic) Promises of Transformation and Self-actualization

On the night of Destination's anniversary celebration, a few commercial partners occupied the front yard with exhibition booths. My attention was drawn to a booth after I heard someone hawking, "Sisters, come here and scan the QR code. Winning first prize will win you the opportunity to grab the trainers' dicks," with two muscular gym trainers standing by. The amusing announcement, the two sexy trainers, and its interactive activities made the booth one of the most popular ones that night. Apart from promoting muscular bodies, this queer space, in collaboration with bodybuilding business, called on people to transform their physical features in order to gain popularity in queer communities.

Throughout that summer, while walking in the metro stations of Beijing, I was often overwhelmed by window and banner advertisements for hair implantation. Having been reminded multiple times about my potential hair loss by several barbers, who attempted to persuade me into buying their products for hair regrowth, I became increasingly sensitive about information on hair loss. I had not seen any advertisements promoting hair implantation when I was living in China several years ago,[48] or I simply did not notice. These ads unceasingly alert people of the possibility of hair loss and the necessity of pursuing self-transformation. As Michael Lovelock (2019) has argued, physical appearance has been consolidated as a vital part of gay male identity and signifies gay men's state of being in contemporary popular culture. Furthermore, commercial gay male culture has been promoting corporeal normativity through "fitness, aesthetic competence … ways of dressing, and ways of undertaking physical exercise"

[48] I saw many shampoo ads that targeted people who were bothered by hair loss, but the products of shampoo clearly differ from surgeries of hair implantation.

(2019, 560) — "disciplinary regimes" for gay men to achieve self-realization and arrive at an optimal self (Cover 2013).

As more Chinese people stepped into the middle-class tier in the new millennium, many began to perform middle-class rights as consumers. One major consumption field is beauty and self-transformation. Participation has become compulsory for some people, especially for women and certain queer people. According to published reports about the status quo of China's pink economy (Shan 2016; Danlan 2016), LGBT groups have higher average incomes than heterosexual counterparts and are more likely to engage in consumption activities. These studies validate queer people as more capable and valuable consumers that future business should target. The expansion of the middle class in China has prompted a culture in which any responsible person should take care of themselves with regard to health, beauty, and intelligence, as a way to mark their difference from older generations and people in the lower classes. In queer communities, this emerging culture has reminded people that all responsible individuals should attempt to transform the self, leading to a new queer subjectivity. Queer men who fail to transform are likely to be made to feel excluded from the desirable middle-class queer community.

Queer men want to express desire toward other men as well as be desired themselves as sexual objects. This chapter thus analyzes the technologies — methods and products — these men adopt to fashion the self to increase sexual capital and improve competitiveness in the sexual market. In his later works, Foucault turned attention to how the self constitutes itself as a subject, as opposed to his earlier works that explore how the self is objectified in various socio-historical contexts. The subject is fashioned through practices (Kelly 2013). According to Foucault, there are various forms of practices, one of which is technologies of the self,

> "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, and immortality." (Foucault 1988, 18).

Situated his study in ancient Greece, Foucault's analysis reveals the central role of ethics as a technology that constitutes the subject. Each era of history provides different repertoires of technologies available to attain a state of happiness or seek perfection. Drawing on this concept, I delve into the technologies of the sexual self that render themselves desirable in post-2010 China, as parts of the "postsocialist technologies of the self" (Rofel 2007, 118), and attempt to understand by these means how queer men constitute a self that is considered sexually normal, desirable, or even superior.

I discovered that, in general, Chinese queer men have adopted corporeal, online self-presentational, economic, and cultural technologies to increase their sexual assets and capital to climb to higher positions in sexual hierarchies. Among all these technologies, most queer men perceive corporeal technology as the most efficient approach and practice corporeal transformation to pursue upward mobility in the sexual market. This aligns with their understandings of the body as the most crucial factor in determining sexual desirability, as shown in the second chapter. Influenced by contemporary standards of male beauty, more than half of my participants express dissatisfaction with their body types or looks. So they aim to change their corporeal being through working out, applying cosmetic products, and receiving cosmetic surgery. Given the fact that online presentations have become an indispensable part of queer identities, some queer men, rather than rely on actual change of the self, resort to refining online self-presentational skills, including manipulating personal statistics and photoshopping. Moreover, even though Chinese queer men consider class a less important factor, some believe that improvement of their economic status will win them more sexual opportunities. Also, some

queer men are convinced that external beauty is tied to internal beauty. This means that becoming more cultured, by means of reading or developing certain talents, will manifest in one's persona and thereby be reflected in one's looks. The socioeconomic shift in contemporary China has offered an enormous amount of resources available to queer men to fashion new selves, a phenomenon that was unimaginable decades ago.

Based on extensive fieldwork during 2004-2005 in Chengdu, Wei Wei (2009) has argued that the consumer revolution in contemporary China has facilitated the emergence of queer spaces and contributed to the liberation of queer people. I agree with his argument about how consumerism has brought to light queer individuals and their needs. However, I find that the intensified consumerism embedded in post-2010 Chinese queer cultures has alienated some queer people and produced precarious sexual subjectivities. For instance, the optimistic promise of gym culture has, for many people, turned out to be a mere fantasy of possessing a fit, muscular, and thus desirable body. Quite a few people suffer from the cost of buying into the optimism, instead of being liberated.

In spite of the increasing methods one can deploy to attain a happier life, I argue that these promises are building on a cruel optimism wherein many people are struggling with the fantasy of the unachievable (Berlant 2011) and thereby living in continual anxiety, disappointment, pain, and resentment because of failing to live up to the fantasy or to maintain the idealized state. In the pursuit of supreme sexual selves, they are moving into a more precarious situation financially, psychologically, and physically, because their success depends on genetic difference and unceasing investment of money, time, and other resources, as well as shifting standards of beauty. Various beauty industries have been planting the seeds of neoliberal rationality globally that everyone is able to fashion an ideal self based on normative standards,

but this rationality exaggerates individual autonomy and responsibility. A relatively open economy under an authoritarian regime leaves China not immune to this neoliberalizing process.

However, effort does not always pay off in the way that people expect. Or their effort only pays off temporarily and the ideal self turns out to be just an ephemeral fantasy, because remaining on the top of sexual hierarchies demands successive investment, which is not realistic for many urban workers who have already been struggling with a 996 work schedule (X. Li 2019).[49] Unlike China's LGBTQ advocacy by organizations such as PFLAG and Beijing LGBT Center that calls on queer people to remain authentic to themselves, particularly their sexualities, the sexual market demands that an idealized self is not simply authentic but rather a transformed and actualized self. This means that they should not only wholeheartedly accept themselves as queer people, but also endeavor to become desirable queer persons, by the standards of various queer media. While attempting to be desirable, many people undergo stress, injury, trauma, and the loss of wealth. Therefore, this chapter articulates the precarity of new sexual subjectivities made possible by various methods and technologies, manifested in pervasive dissatisfactions with the self and the urge for self-transformation according to normative expectations, as well as the disjuncture between the optimistic promise that consumerism has brought to everyday lives and the difficulty or failure of living up to the fantasy of queer desirability.

Economy of anxiety

Because of their lack of alignment with the popular images circulating in gay nightclubs, on dating apps, and in men's magazines, many interlocutors expressed dissatisfaction with various aspects of their selves, especially their physical features. This new bodily discontent

[49] 996 means working nine hours a day and six days a week. This is a typical work schedule, particularly in China's tech industries and not uncommon in other industries in metropolitan areas, such as in finance. This phenomenon has been widely criticized as labor exploitation.

could develop into or add to their shame, anxiety, or pain. These feelings are not intrinsic to us, but rather prompted by the compulsory culture of transformation, as a product of current affective economy. According to Sarah Ahmed (2004, 8), "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation." This particular type of anxiety about our bodies, facial appearances, and personal accessories as embodiments of social status has been an affect effectively utilized by today's consumerism to incite more uneasiness about ourselves and thus becomes a lucrative driving force for many businesses (Read 2016).

One of my interviewees, Yuan Xiaojing (30), revealed his anxiety through three aspects that he yearned to transform: his non-muscular body, receding hairline, and average economic condition. The former two are both about his bodily condition, which he posited as more important in the sexual market than his economic situation. The fact that corporeal technologies are considered the most critical means in sexual markets has been facilitated by the proliferation of the economy of anxiety in contemporary China. I define the economy of anxiety as a social domain of production and consumption based on the provocation and activation of people's feelings of anxiety to create consumer needs and increase consumption activities. I mentioned my experiences at several salons at the opening of this chapter, where stylists persistently suggested that I had been experiencing "serious" hair loss and suggested that reparation (by using their products) should be addressed urgently, triggering my intense anxiety about my possibly deficient body. This is not uniquely a strategy of salons, but applies as well to gyms, massage parlors, spas, and other body-related businesses. Their promotion strategies involve constant reminders of deficiency and defects in our corporeal beings, thereby producing strong anxiety among consumers and turning this affect into consumption and economic interests.

We have also been reminded by visual materials, such as fashion magazines, window advertisements, and pornography, that we are not as desirable as visuals are, and that we ought to aspire to develop similar images in order to be qualified and responsible citizens. The ideal images represented in these visual materials crystallize as the "imaginary order" that mirrors and regulates people's perceptions of themselves (Lacan 2004). Social psychologists (Halliwell and Dittmar 2004) have discovered that long time-exposure to images of models' bodies will cause body-focused anxiety among women. I found that corresponding images are increasingly affecting queer men's understandings of themselves as well. Queer theorist Paul Preciado (2013) coined the concept "pharmacopornographic," which "refers to the processes of a biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (porno-graphic) government of sexual subjectivity—of which 'the Pill' and *Playboy* are two paradigmatic offspring" (33-34). In China, the "pharmaco" regime includes not only medical industries but also fields such as cosmetic industries and fitness centers that pretend to deploy "scientific" discourses to define our bodies and the standards for ideal bodies. The "porno-graphic" field includes gay nightclubs, men's magazines, and dating apps that regularly promote ideal users and nudge our erotic nerves. Queer people's desires are aroused by the joint force of these industries or by a singular one that exerts more profound impact on individuals. These industries crystalize knowledge of bodies, demarcating the normal from abnormal, the desirable from the undesirable body. However, the ideal body defined in many cases represents a fantasy that most people fail to reach no matter how hard they try.

In addition to knowledge produced at the social and cultural levels, everyday interactions contribute to people's understanding of the self and cultivate various feelings toward selves. Sociologist Charles Cooley coined the concept of the "looking glass self" (Cooley 1998) and argues that humans develop a sense of self through the perceptions that other people hold of

them. Selfhood takes shape as a result of responses to external judgments of the self (Shaffer 2005). Many queer men's dissatisfactions are cumulative effects of and affective responses to other people's negative judgments. Xiaopu (35) attempted to change his physical features twice. When he was still in graduate school, his advisor inadvertently mentioned that Xiaopu looked fatter than before, which compelled him to change his body type. Subsequently, he was motivated by a guy he had a crush on who told Xiaopu that he was attracted to lean bodies, implying that Xiaopu's body was not lean enough to be his type. External judgments, albeit unwittingly, worked as a mirror for him to reflect a defective self-image. Moreover, he internalized these judgments and developed strong dissatisfaction with his own "overweight" body. Though neither suggested that Xiaopu was imperfect, he believed that to achieve a better self with an ideal body image he ought to take immediate action.

The selfhood takes shape in successive intersubjective actions that begin at our birth, according to Lacan. Some people tend to resist others' judgments while other people internalize particular ideas in the articulation of selfhood. The latter group then develops more dissatisfaction with themselves and stronger desires for transformation.

With the maturation of pharmacopornographic industries and induced daily interactions, this epistemological gap between the ideal/fantasized self and actual/frustrated self is purposely created to activate our innate anxiety. This gap drives us to be active consumers for self-transformation and self-actualization. In an article entitled "We are all very anxious," critical theorist Mark Fisher (2014) lays out the different affects that dominate each stage of capitalism. He believes that the form of contemporary capitalism characterizing Western societies is marked by omnipresent anxiety produced by pervasive webs of surveillance, such as NSA, performance management reviews, and personal data collection on social media. In China, increasing living

expenses (such as the prohibitively high housing expense), growing modes of exploitation (the 996 mode aforementioned), and covert forms of surveillance have also prompted intense anxiety among citizens, particularly in cosmopolitan areas (H. Li 2006; Pan 2010; Murong 2016; X. Li 2019).

In Chinese queer communities, people express discontent with their looks, body shape, sexual potency, penis size, affective presentation, income, occupation, and social status, among other features. For example, after being asked about his possible disadvantages in the community, Wang Ke (26), a graduate student in Beijing, resignedly said: "Well, you could see all my disadvantages here, including my look and height [referring to himself as being average-looking and short]. All these disadvantages are so obvious. I don't have a good look, refined body shape, muscles. That means I'm not attractive at all." His response revealed his perception that external beauty is a determining factor of sexual desirability and his evident physical deficiency was seen as a huge barrier. Dabai (30), a PhD student in engineering, forthrightly declared that we are living in a fast-food culture where corporeal features matter more than other factors:

> Let me conclude. At this moment, people only care about looks. If you're good-looking, it's easy to get everything fixed. Basically, I think we're all frivolous and fickle-minded, because we only pay attention to looks. If one doesn't look fine, we don't even want to know more about him. This is what a particular fast-food culture is like: if you have good looks, you can get everything; if not, then bye-bye.

Neither of them found their educational background sufficiently helpful in navigating the sexual market, because, on dating apps, the first impression usually comes from users' physical features. Many other queer men in my research held similar views. As illustrated in Chapter Two, this phenomenon is increasingly notable after the emergence and popularization of dating apps, which crystallized a new way of queer networking focusing more on physicality than

deeper connections. This dating culture has triggered different degrees of anxiety among queer men about themselves if they believe they do not live up to the standards.

Chinese people are also anxious about non-bodily aspects of the self, particularly in post-Olympic China, where housing prices have been skyrocketing.[50] These concerns, alongside anxiety about a deficient body, keep nudging our nerves, hastily driving us to pursue transformation, or even transcendence of the self, materially and non-materially. Anxiety among the middle class has thus been widely taken advantage of to facilitate the increase of GDP in today's China.[51] Anxiety has developed into a tacit indicator of prosperity.

Technologies of the sexual self

Across histories and cultures, people have been exploring, experimenting, and practicing various technologies to constitute an ideal self, as shown by Michel Foucault. This section does not aim to examine all technologies used for self-improvement. Instead, I focus on Chinese queer men's technologies adopted to climb the ladders of sexual hierarchies. One objective is to pursue external beauty. Physical beauty has rarely been integrated in previous studies about Chinese men, but rather considered a critical indicator of superior femininity only. In premodern studies, Chinese masculinity was marked by the dichotomy of *wen* (literary talent) and *wu* (martial arts),

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[50] Heterosexual people, particularly men, encounter significantly more financial pressure than queer people. *People's Daily* conducted a survey in 2010 showing that women expect that men in heterosexual relationships should be responsible for purchasing the property or paying the majority of a home as a prerequisite for a marriage, while women are not often pressed to take this responsibility or just take little responsibility. But this finding about women's expectations has been countered by Leta Hong Fincher's research (Fincher 2014). Though it might not be true that most women expect their future husbands to afford a home, this perception has widely been circulated in mass media and our daily lives, which eventually activates men's anxiety about their financial situation. Some queer men, such as those who intend to enter opposite-sex marriage, may also undergo equivalent anxiety.

[51] The lower class also feels anxiety due to constant concerns about issues such as medical cost and the instability of work. But their anxiety cannot be converted into substantial financial interests and thus is often overlooked in consumer markets.

in which *wen* was prioritized over *wu* in defining someone's masculinity. This suggests that physical features as the basis of *wu* was not core to premodern Chinese masculinity (Louie 2002, 2014). Geng Song (2004) adds another dimension of ideal masculinity—morality. Superior masculinity is supposed to have little to do with physical beauty. In postsocialist China, the growing importance of corporeal beauty is believed to reflect women's subjugation and objectification. Because women used to be the primary target consumers, studies of the beauty economy focus on how women become the subjects and objects of consumer capitalism (Hopkins 2007; Xu and Feiner 2007; J. Yang 2011). Indeed, women suffer more from the pursuit of external beauty than men and are still the major target of beauty and body modification industries, because being good-looking is capital for women in both the job and sexual markets in contemporary China (Hua 2013).

However, it is also important to acknowledge and understand how men have also been targeted by beauty industries in recent years. An increasing number of men becomes active consumers of cosmetic products and operations. According to a report published by CBNData and Alibaba (2019), almost 80% of post-90s men are stable consumers of cosmetic products. Moreover, within the cosmetic surgery industry, more than 10% of the customers are men (So-Young International 2018). Although that number may be relatively small, men are reported to have spent much more per person than women on cosmetic surgery (So-Young International 2018; RUC Newsroom 2019). Therefore, men have grown into visible consumers of beauty during recent years in China. Because of the widely circulated force of anxiety and the glass mirror of external judgment, queer men are developing individualized technologies to cope with a deficient self, including corporeal technologies, online self-presentational technologies, economic technologies, and cultural technologies.

Corporeal technologies

Among all the technologies that queer men deploy, corporeal practices and products are the ones considered most effective in boosting sexual capital. At least 47 out of my 70 interlocutors have practiced, are practicing, or plan to practice technologies to seek a new physical appearance, including working out, sports, application of cosmetic products, cosmetic surgery, and taking certain pills. Many contemporary businesses promise beauty, health, and a new lifestyle through their products or services. Moreover, as many gym ads seek to demonstrate, a responsible person should be both beautiful and healthy. These businesses join the discourse of aesthetics with the discourse of health. This suggests that the pursuit of beauty is not an option but instead an obligation. Furthermore, in most cases, an ideal body cannot be achieved in the short run. Rather, it is a fantasy that absorbs consumers' long-term wealth and energy and can exhaust pursuers of beauty.

Chapter Two shows that Chinese queer men generally prefer sport-produced bodies over gym-produced bodies because of the supposedly natural, innate, and organic masculinities embodied. However, they often turn to working out as the preferred option, as this technology is more efficient to forge a fit and muscular body, compared with sports that demand longer periods of investment and perseverance. Moreover, gym work allows people to train specific parts of their bodies. Each gym piece of equipment specifies how to train a particular part. Therefore, working out enables people to individualize their training objectives and is perceived as a "shortcut" compared with the general training of sports, which has gained popularity among the younger generations. Moreover, the gym has developed into a highly sexualized space that facilitates homosocial connections among men and offers a new site for cruising. Some gyms, such as the one mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, take advantage of trainers' sexual

capital to attract queer men to the space to both produce a similar body and sexually connect with these bodies. In fact, the trainers' bodies on display are not attainable for many queer people, nor could they develop such a muscular body, but the fitness industry exploits queer men's as well as some women's desires and turns their desires into tangible economic profit.

In addition to building (erotic) connections with other people in this queered space, queer men work out primarily for three goals: to lose weight, to gain weight, or to develop muscles. In spite of the seemingly divergent objectives, each is moving toward creating a similar physical image. The aesthetic and medical industries have crafted certain knowledge about ideal bodies and the standard becomes increasingly singular and normative. Although the knowledge of bodies seems to be a centripetal force that brings together (middle class) queer men into the same space for a rather similar body type, actually, and ironically, this knowledge of corporeal being, as a disciplinary power, works to divide and hierarchize queer people.

In contemporary China where numerous people have entered fairly well-off lives, being overweight has taken the place of malnutrition as a primary concern of society, as about one-third of the Chinese population is reported to be overweight or obese (French and Crabbe 2010). Many people in my study expressed their intent to lose weight or have tried different approaches to achieve this goal. Tony (33) used to hate exercising when he was in school, but for almost five years now he has been working out. He decided to lose weight after being in a relationship for three years, which, in his words, spoiled him and led him to gain weight to around 100 kg (220 pounds). He had a definitive goal in the first year and succeeded in losing about 25 kg (55 pounds) through working out. Working out has since become his daily routine. He now maintains at around 70 kg (154 pounds). Bodybuilding also involves diet and change in lifestyle.

During the first year, Tony replaced his oil with low-calorie salad oil and changed his dinner to homemade salads, vegetables, apples, chicken breast, and salmon.

Mass media, social media, and various advertisements have presented numerous successful stories of weight loss. The so-called secret recipe often includes perseverance and a correct way to slim down. However, these media do not often reveal other secrets contributing to success, such as high income, access to resources, and genetic feasibility, and hardly expose us to alternative narratives of changing one's body, including failure, injury, trauma, etc. Xiaomin (18) is a young man who does not have a stable job. He expressed a desire to lose weight since he perceived himself as oversized compared with slim young celebrities on TV, but he acknowledged no financial capability and no idea how he could achieve this objective. As mentioned before, Xiaopu (35) had two unpleasant experiences that pressed him to lose weight and the motivations still remain fresh to him. Both experiences caused anxiety as well as humiliations. In the first time, he took weight loss pills, which did much damage to his health. The second time he decided to resort to diet and aerobic exercise at a gym. Gradually, he grew fixated on numbers and was eager to see his weight dropping day after day. But in spite of his investment and effort, he could not reach the weight goal he set for himself. Years have passed and he is still discontented with his body. Frustrations that result from the gap between the ideal self and the actual self often swallow him.

While many aim to lose weight, a few queer men hope to gain weight and grow stronger through working out. One year before our conversation, Leo (40), who was 180 cm (5'11") tall and weighed about 65 kg (143 pounds), had a crush on someone who preferred stronger men. So Leo paid a personal trainer to help him gain muscular weight. But working out itself seemed inadequate. So he also started taking protein powder, a rather common approach among

bodybuilders. He eventually reached 75 kg (165 pounds). However, Leo finds it hard to persist in bodybuilding and maintain an ideal state. After realizing that the other guy did not reciprocate his affection, he lost motivation to work out and lost a few pounds quickly. The payoff of bodybuilding turns out to be ephemeral for Leo. A permanent state to being desirable required not only enormous economic investment, but also emotional commitment. The latter is more difficult for white collar individuals with hectic schedules in China's urban areas.

Some queer men do not have specific concerns about their weight. By working out, they mean to develop muscles and refine their body shapes. Mr. Wang (27) does not expect to grow big muscles, but instead anticipates maintaining or tightening his body, since he worries about the slackness of age. Paying for a personal trainer, Fanshu (32) intends to develop pectoral muscles as well as widening his shoulders. Besides, Fanshu takes this as an opportunity to satisfy a personal desire by choosing and approaching masculine trainers. Gym has been sexualized as a queer space and even integrated into urban queer life. A few people turn to other exercises for bodybuilding, such as swimming, playing tennis, or cycling. But those usually take more time to achieve the body that they aspire to possess.

Although fitness culture has become pervasive in cosmopolitan queer men's life, and different practices of bodybuilding have helped a few queer men forge a more desirable self and gain more confidence in the sexual market, most people in my research could not physically become the person that they yearned to be or sustain their ideal self, even after enormous investment.

The cost of hiring a professional personal trainer is unaffordable for most people in urban China. Some of my interlocutors are not affluent, but they believed that such an investment would pay off eventually. Besides his membership fee, Leo paid more than 20,000 yuan (over

3,000 US dollars) for his training sessions, as each session cost 300 yuan. The expense would double or triple in high-end private studios. In addition to their upper-class customers, these gyms and studios target the middle class by persuading them of the value of an investment in the self. A fit body symbolizes a middle-class status and a decent queer identity. After developing a muscular body as they expect, they will be advised of the necessity of more investments to maintain the ideal body shape. This long-term investment is unrealistic for many middle-class queer people, let alone those who are less well-off.

Furthermore, intense training does not ensure the production of a gratifying body. Instead it can lead to injury or trauma. David (43) could not continue working out before finishing his paid sessions, because he was exhausted by all the training and his fear was gradually building up. I myself paid for eight sessions in Beijing during the summer of 2017, from which I learned that trainers always push their customers to the extreme. According to their words, customers will not cultivate a desirable body until being pushed to the limit in successive training sessions. However, many trainers do not take into account the trainee's health conditions and do not make personalized plans based on individual health conditions. I almost fainted during a training session, but my trainer insisted that I continue — until he saw my face turning paler and paler. Some of my interlocutors mentioned knee and shoulder injuries as well as muscle strains after intensive trainings. In addition, other approaches of transforming bodies have strong side effects, such as the weight loss pills that Xiaopu (35) took, which he claimed caused irreversible damage to his health, including his digestive function. All he remembered about bodily transformation is trauma caused by weight loss and what is left in his body is the sequelae of overtaking weight loss pills.

Not only did many people find it impossible to achieve the physical ideal, they also discovered that continuous endeavors did equal the value of the financial, time, genetic, or physical constraints. And, as noted, for some there was tremendous trauma and pain. As Berlant has argued, “a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (2011, 1). The zealous desire and intensified effort of pursuing a promised ideal physique might turn into an obstacle of becoming a better self.

In addition to refining body shape, Chinese queer men attempt to perfect their facial appearance by applying expensive cosmetic products or resorting to cosmetic operations. As shown above, the majority of men in the younger generations utilize facial products on a regular basis. My interviewees told me that basic skincare is necessary for both men and women, which will unlikely damage men’s masculinity as long as they are not obsessed with skincare. Their goals of skincare include whitening skin, smoothing out wrinkles, and shrinking pores.

When reaching his current age, Baiyang (30) realized that it was time to take care of his skin. Otherwise, he thought, his sexual desirability might drop quickly. He changed his lifestyle by using facial cleanser and putting on facial masks from time to time. He posits that moderate use of these products does not make someone effeminate, because he is not as “exquisite” as those men who trim eyebrows or apply expensive creams. Hezheyu (38) justified his use of cosmetics by comparing himself with straight men. He acknowledged that some people indeed attack men as sissy if they are known to use cosmetics, but society has been changing and more straight men have begun utilizing facial products. This is more notable among male celebrities.

In the late twentieth century, more Japanese male celebrities appeared androgynous, with makeup, slim bodies, and long hair, such as Kimutaku, whose influence has travelled across Asia. This new image of desirable masculinity contests the traditional hegemonic masculinity

embodied by salaryman in Japan and partly reflects erotic desire by women who reject the hypermasculinity produced under Japan's capitalism (L. Miller 2005). A Korean wave has also promoted men whose beauty is characterized by androgynous looks, such as Bae Yong-joon (Jung 2011) or the band Super Junior (Louie 2012). Under the influence of regional globalization, a large number of feminine-looking male celebrities have appeared and gained popularity in China, include Kris Wu and Cai Xukun. In spite of the backlash against "little fresh meat" because of their supposed male femininity in Chinese mass media, the new standards of pan-East Asian male beauty have facilitated the acceptance and consumption of cosmetics among men. Most men in my study nevertheless do not go as far as these celebrities, because in everyday life male makeup is still often deemed feminine.

Considering the slow process of skincare, a few queer men take a shortcut to improve their facial appearance by way of cosmetic surgery. Among urban women in China, transformation through cosmetic surgery is considered a sign of modernity (Lindridge and Wang 2008). In queer communities, many men deem cosmetic surgery a feminine process that only produces unnatural and effeminate subjects (Z.B. Zhou 2020). Andy (28) said that many transformed faces look particularly fake. Between a "natural" blemished face and a perfect transformed face, Qishi (30) said he would possibly choose the former, because "natural" represents supremacy. Despite the widely existing bias against plastic faces, some people risk receiving transformation on eyelids, nose, mustache, hair, and eyebrows, etc., because they hold the belief that, as long as the surgery is successful and unnoticeable, cosmetic surgery would help them gain more self-esteem and confidence, thereby winning more sexual opportunities. Unlike cosmetic products whose effect is limited, surgeries allow them to change dramatically in a short period of time.

While discussing plans of cosmetic surgeries, Landon revealed his intention to grow some whiskers, straighten teeth, and change his eyes and lips. He developed the thought of changing his appearance in middle school. Assuming that Landon was just talking about his plans or possibilities, as many people do, I asked him whether he would take action to receive cosmetic surgery. To my surprise, he had a surgery appointment the day after our interview, one he made almost a year ago. On the next day, he would receive both double eyelid surgery and a blepharoplasty. After finishing his eye surgery, he would consider slimming his face and thinning lips. But he will go only so far because he is wary that some changes might make him look fake and plastic:

> Surgeries on chin and nose would likely make a person look fake. If you implant a chin, it's so easy to be identified as possessing an implanted chin. This makes you seem plastic. Yes, it's the same case for nose. If you have a rhinoplasty with a high nose bridge, people can easily find out that you've had a cosmetic surgery. That's really sad.

According to Landon, a successful cosmetic surgery should not only improve your look, but also be unnoticeable. Because cosmetic surgery is still despised by many men as a women's procedure, men may experience a loss of masculinity if they are found to have been involved in such a transformation. However, as long as there is no trace of artificial transformation on the face, cosmetic surgery is accepted or encouraged among certain queer men, since concealed transformation does not hurt one's masculinity. Thus, the beauty project is often promised to produce desirability, but due to its interpellation with gendered perceptions, investment in cosmetic surgeries does not always pay off in the way that practitioners expect.

Apart from changing one's facial features, some people consider hair transplants, a procedure that is supposed to help people look younger. Many interlocutors implied that a bald head or sparse hair is a huge turnoff. They therefore endeavor to keep or regrow their hair to remain desirable. After counseling with a dermatologist, Wukong (42) planned to get a hair

transplant in a few months, with a need to transplant about 2,700 hairs. This surgery would cost him about 30,000 yuan (more than 4,000 US dollars). He has cheaper options, but he decided to stick to the more expensive plan that is more likely to help him grow high-quality hair. The high cost of these transplants makes them unaffordable for many queer people.

Despite widespread discrimination against people who receive cosmetic surgery, many queer men are optimistic that this situation will change sooner or later. Many heterosexual people reject potential partners who have received cosmetic surgery because they consider the transformation a type of cheating and believe the cost will manifest in the next generation. Figure 18, a cosmetic operations ad from Taiwan circulated in mainland China, shows huge differences in facial appearances between the now-young-looking parents and kids. But this difference is also interpreted as how the next generations would suffer from their parents' dishonesty. Tianbing (26) suggested this is not a concern for queer people, because contemporary technologies do not allow two same-sex partners to have their own kids with both genes. However, his rationale reinforces discrimination against cosmetic operations as long as they may pose any inter-generational implications. In a society where facial transformation is either gendered or medicalized as being inferior, the promotion of such corporeal technology and the spread of optimism may lead to opposite outcomes. This situation is particularly salient in Chinese popular cultures where people constantly expose others who are found to have clues of cosmetic surgeries on their faces (Z.B. Zhou 2020).

Figure 18: A cosmetic surgery ad from Taiwan

Online self-presentational technologies

Since Chinese queer men's networking is remarkably reliant on digital queer spaces, such as dating/hookup apps, men have adopted techniques to improve their self-presentation in cyberspace. This approach includes refining personal appearances without literally changing their physical features. In order to convert online presentations to offline dates or relationships, they need to first impress other users and establish virtual connections through impression management. Digital media users have explored various new ways of constructing desirable identities on apps including Tinder, Grindr, Jack'd (Birnholtz et al. 2014; Chan 2016; Jaspal 2017; Ranzini and Lutz 2017; Ward 2017). On Blued and Aloha, queer men manage their profiles and posts to catch more attention, affection, and followers. They may manipulate statistics in their profiles (e.g., change their height and weight), make selective presentations of self (e.g., present only what would increase their sexual capital), and use reverse technologies (e.g., show a self that is less desirable in order to lower other queer men's expectations and thus increase the success rate in actual meetings). These technologies enable many queer men to gain attention, hookups, or relationships. But not all of them end up lucky, because the disjuncture between their online self-presentation and offline physical features may lead later to contempt, vitriol, or even violence.

Manipulating statistics is a common way for queer men to display a more desirable self. My previous chapters reveal the rampant discriminations against short, overweight, and older men on these apps. These prejudices have motivated many queer men to manipulate the numbers presented, a tactic that Ranzini and Lutz (2017) define as deceptive self-presentation. Older queer men in my study often find it important to adjust their ages on their profiles. Wang Fei (30) mentioned to me that 30 is a threshold boundary between desirable and undesirable for queer men, particularly for men labeling as 0s. Thus, he was reluctant to change his age to 30, but rather kept it as 27 or 28 on his several accounts. Likewise, Teacher Wang (48) labels himself as 43, five years younger than his real age.

Dave (38) adopts different technologies on Aloha and Blued based on his intentions in using each app. He perceives Aloha as a more serious app where people intend to establish meaningful relationships, while considering Blued an app for hookups. According to him:

> If you'd like to build deeper connections, I think you shouldn't deceive them, right? This is a basic principle. On Aloha, the connections are more serious, so I believe we shouldn't present something fake. However, I don't post real information on Blued, including my real age. It's just a hookup app; why bother to include a lot of personal information?

Other queer men hold similar views and thus adjust the demographic information presented. Presentation of certain real demographic information may prevent them from being seen and obtaining targets in the hookup app. For example, some queer men use filters to exclude men who are older than 30. Posting an age of over 30 will likely result in the loss of sexual opportunities. Because they are certain that sexual partners cannot really tell whether they are 30 or 28, they come up with tactics to manipulate their presented demographics to make themselves more desirable, or at least not pre-excluded on apps. They defend that such slight adjustments

should not be deemed as deceptions which, according to them, will not make a huge difference in hookups.

In addition, queer men selectively present what they believe would increase their sexual capital and do not mention other parts of the self. For example, some overweight men only include a height but leave weight blank in their profiles, thereby avoiding presenting what they consider disadvantageous. As an active bodybuilder, Haiyang (36) posted many pictures epitomizing his muscular body on these apps as well as on other social media, because he is well aware that queer men are largely attracted to such types of bodies. The photos posted by Wukong (42) emphasize his expertise as a photographer and his cultural taste, and minimize his personal photos. Such approaches enable queer men to constitute a better self by emphasizing a particular side of themselves on apps. People like Ruofan (21) use selective information for other purposes—as the filter to attract certain men while excluding others. As a graduate of a top Chinese university who is heading to a high-quality graduate school, Ruofan includes on his profile the books he read, such as titles by André Gide and Raymond Carver. He also includes his universities and his major, as well as his favorite types of music and poetry. His posts construct a well-educated, cultured, and elite image of self. This selectivity works as a covert filter that rules out people who do not understand his presented information. It also helps attract people with similar interests. He said he would have a better impression if a man initiates a conversation to discuss a certain book about which he had posted.

Mastering impression management requires digital proficiency. The digital divide prevents many queer men from constructing an ideal online identity. The digital divide is based on both the access to fancy digital devices (Harwit 2004) and digital skills (Hargittai 2002; van Dijk 2006; van Deursen and van Dijk 2010). For example, Mr. Qi (26) believes that he is more

attractive offline than online due to his lack of skill at managing online images. He is very confident of his appearance, but he does not have ideal photos to post. A bad first online impression often turns other people away. He is therefore considering learning to use photoshop or other editing apps. Some moderate use of image editing software may allow him to present a better self, because it would be a huge disadvantage to use original images while other people use edited images. While online image construction remains an effective approach to get more attention, its success is based upon the ownership of advanced digital devices with high resolutions that allow editing and proficient digital skills to use all kinds of apps. Many working-class queer people do not have access to such high-end equipment.

In fact, not all queer men intend to constitute an attractive self on these digital platforms. Guangguang (32) differs from other interlocutors in that he tends to adopt a reverse technology to build a less attractive image online. He admits being a calculating person. He does not buy into the technologies used to create an ideal image distant from the real self, because that might have a negative impact on turning his online connections to offline relationships. An ideal online presentation would lead to other people's unrealistic high expectations. According to him, "the higher the expectation is, the deeper the disappointment would be in actual meetings." Queer people always complain about inauthentic selves presented online, signified by edited photos, deceptive demographics, or just entirely fake information, disappointing queer users over and over again and generating enormous distrust of online networking. So Guangguang hopes to pleasantly surprise his dates or sexual partners in person. His version of reverse technologies uses photos of his grimace or pictures that characterize his defects. By doing so, he indeed turns many people away online but could increase the possibility of successful dating, because he is less likely to let other people down.

Online self-presentational technologies enable queer people to increase their sexual capital without literally changing their physical features. Yet even as they practice presentational technologies to compete in the sexual market, a great many deeply complain about the culture of people faking their demographics or editing photos based on normative standards of beauty to create an inauthentic self in digital spaces. The resulting unpleasant experiences have therefore generated distrust of online dating. Moreover, not everyone has equal access to digital resources or proficient digital skills to construct a fancy self-image online as some social media influencers do. These technologies have brought some queer men success, but they also fail many people.

Economic technologies

Although wealth is given a lower priority when Chinese queer men choose partners, 11 members of my sample said they found improvement of their economic capital an effective way to succeed in the sexual market. In a Chinese relationship constituted by two men, they do not legally share the wealth as heterosexual couples do. This factor is even less important in short-term sexual relationships. Still, a few gay men believe that heightening one's economic status will bring them more sexual opportunities.

The ideal of *mendanghudui*, a Chinese idiom meaning a perfect marriage between individuals with similar socioeconomic status, or homogamy, kept emerging in my interviews. A few interlocuters held the belief that a stable and happy relationship should build on the similar status of each man in the couple. For example, Paul (26), said he could not develop a healthy relationship with a man whose economic status was significantly lower or higher than his. A higher economic status does not in itself necessarily increase the pool of choices, based on the understanding of *mendanghudui*. However, the transformation of a rising economic status provides more opportunities and connections with men in the higher class, who are more likely

to be sexually attractive, because economic capital enables people to forge a more formidable and masculine body, to be more well-educated, and therefore to turn their economic capital to sexual capital.

A few queer men, including Kongqi (38) and Youyouluming (41), believe that economic capital is indeed critical and can be conflated with sexual capital. Unlike men who stick to the belief of *mendanghudui*, Kongqi and Youyouluming contend that increasing wealth means a larger pool of options because they could target people lower than them in the economic hierarchy. Youyouluming, a man in his forties and the vice president of a corporation, finds today's dating culture and the younger generation more materialistic than his generation. The materialistic culture became more pronounced after 2008 when housing prices and living expenses started spiking in China. He was nostalgic about the dating cultures before 2008, a time when people were more innocent and less money-oriented. So he has to compromise and succumb to the reality. On his dating apps, he prefers to post travel photos or other personal moments as a way of recording his daily life, but he is well aware that the younger generation would rather see him post photos of first-class cabins and breakfast at a five-star hotel. He acknowledges his unwillingness to establish a relationship based on his economic capacity, but has to accept the fact that revelation of his wealth would significantly increase his options on the market. Kongqi (38) holds a similar view and considers wealth accumulation a way to improve his sexual desirability. For instance, the purchase of a high-end car, such as a BMW or a Mercedes-Benz, can be converted into his sexual capital. According to him, the ownership of an apartment in Beijing is a huge appeal for many people due to its prohibitively high expense. Yet, at least initially, the car is easier to show off.

Cultural technologies

Eleven interviewees say they deploy cultural practices in their everyday lives through reading, film watching, or developing talents, to become more attractive on the sexual market. It is undeniable that such technologies are not free from contemporary consumerism. But people relying on these technologies are often not obsessed with endless investments in building up sexual desirability and therefore less likely to be trapped in the optimistic promise of fashioning a more desirable self. Coined by Bourdieu, the term *cultural capital* comprises a cultural asset that allows people to move upward on the social ladder, including embodied capital (e.g., knowledge and taste), objectified capital (e.g., books and musical instruments), and institutionalized capital (e.g., educational qualification) (Bourdieu 1986; Goldthorpe 2007). People try to increase their cultural capital not just for upward mobility on the sexual market, but also for mobility in career and other aspects of life. Even if cultural technologies do not help queer men gain sexual opportunities in the same way corporeal technologies do, queer people can still benefit from these practices.

Many participants complained about superficial and frivolous cultures in queer communities today, where someone could hardly find a romantic relationship because most people aim to merely hook up. Xiaoqiang (32) posits that cultural qualities are particularly useful for people who crave long-term relationships. According to him, self-cultivation through readings or talent development will enable the formation of a better self that can connect with another soul, not just another body.

But not all Chinese queer men hold such a binary view between physicality-enhancing corporeal technologies and soul-cultivating cultural technologies. People such as Donglai (40) demonstrate that cultural technologies are ideal approaches to connect soul and body, because

internal beauty is inseparable from and can be reflected in external beauty. Donglai aims to change his personal image by controlling his weight and developing some muscles. In addition to these physical transformations, he reads literature, such as the works of Lin Yutang, Wang Zengqi, and Romain Rolland, and practices *guzheng*, a Chinese plucked string instrument, to improve his self-presentation (as well as his self). Through reading, he expects to gain more knowledge on life philosophy, which in turn helps him deal with issues he encounters. Playing the traditional musical instrument, in his words, allows him to cleanse his soul and cultivate his mind. Moreover, he connects mind/soul with body by quoting the Chinese idiom *fu you shishu qi zihua*, which can be translated as "wisdom in hold, elegance in mold." This idiom means the improvement of internal beauty will ultimately be reflected in external beauty. Thus, (1) certain people adopt cultural technologies to attract people who prioritize spiritual connections and could develop deeper connections, and at the same time (2) they believe that long-term cultural training improves externally observable embodiment, disposition, and personality.

I do not here prioritize mind/soul over body by claiming a superiority for cultural technologies. My point is that although book or talent cultivation industries have also been highly commercialized, the objectives of these industries are not directly linked to producing beauty and sexual desirability. Many people resort to these practices because they simply enjoy reading or playing musical instrument. A more desirable self is more often a byproduct of cultural practices. Due to the low promise to increase sexual capital, cultural technologies are less likely to trap people into the optimism of self-actualization on the sexual market.

The precarity of a desirable self

A desirable self is built on many factors. In Beijing's queer male communities, a desirable self is heavily defined by and reflected in corporality. Thus, most participants in my

study resort to corporeal technologies to accumulate sexual capital in order to gain more sexual opportunities. In post-2010 China, the primary corporeal technology is bodybuilding at fitness centers, a costly form of metropolitan consumerism, through which sexual subjects are able to produce a fit, muscular, and well-refined body and therefore achieve self-transformation or even self-sublimation, becoming an entirely different person. In addition to literally changing a dimension of the self, some queer men turn to presentational technologies to improve their images on digital media. Some have adopted economic and cultural technologies to constitute new/improved selves that would be deemed more desirable, with or without involving direct transformation of personal images. And a bonus in self-presentation may be achieved through personal accessories such as expensive cars, or may reflect in one's personality after cultivating some artistic talent.

However, the constitution of a new self and the maintenance of a desirable condition ask for continuous investment, which makes the shaping of a desirable self an optimistic but precarious project. To maximize profits, the market seeks to activate people's anxiety, prompting them to be zealous practitioners of self-transformation. In today's China where the sexual market has been deeply entangled with consumerism, various industries push the idea that everyone can achieve an optimal state of beauty. In order to build a hard masculine body, one needs to constantly attend to and maintain that status at a potentially enormous cost, injury, or even psychological damage. The seemingly supreme body is in fact on the verge of collapsing, because today's standards of beauty demand perfection. In addition, the newly possible self-presentational technologies often result in the disjuncture of on- and offline self. These adjusted ways of showing oneself lead to vulnerability in hookups and dating, as "inauthentic" or "dishonest" self-presentations are likely to be the target of complaints, vitriol, and other forms of

symbolic violence. Successful impression management requires access to advanced digital devices and proficient skills in using digital media. Constant worries about imperfection bring sexual subjects to a precarious situation, causing intense anxiety, fear, or pain. The management of beauty can be a long-run, laborious, and prohibitively expensive project.

Economic technologies indeed turn out helpful for certain people with the resources to take full advantage of the consumerist signs of various commodities, and convert these symbols into sexual capital. Relatively few men, usually in their middle age with successful careers or who were born into wealthy families, can afford to mobilize such technologies to navigate on the sexual market. Many others often talk about this technology as a part of their plans.

Some queer men find cultural technologies more necessary for self-actualization, particularly for seeking long-term relationships. These queer men believe that adoption of cultural technologies allows them to create deeper connections and build more sustainable relationships in an era in which queer cultures have been criticized as superficial. These technologies allow some queer men to convert cultural capital into sexual capital, but not often as effectively as other approaches, especially in online interactions where the depth of communication is limited. But cultural technologies do not promise queer subjects great success on the sexual market, and they thus have less to lose even if these technologies are not sexually useful.

In sum, marketized China today offers many readily available technologies for sexual subjects to constitute a new self. The beauty, medical, dating, and various other industries, jointly or independent, all convey the idea that a responsible modern self should keep seeking self-transformation and actualization in contemporary societies in order to become a better and more desirable self. These industries also vividly portray the prospect that most people can

actually make it, through successful stories and individuals represented and circulated in mass media, social media, and the physical spaces where we live. The neoliberalized myth of personal responsibility and full autonomy pushes many people to incessantly pursue change so as to be more competent on the sexual market. However, the repeated process of pursuing self-actualization may end up draining queer men, financially and emotionally, and producing a desirable but precarious self.

Conclusion

This dissertation sheds light on the emergence and manifestations of Chinese queer men's homonormative desires since 2010, and how queer men are hierarchized on the basis of age, body type, sexual labels and embodied masculinity, race, ethnicity, geographical origin, and class in urban China. The normalization of desires results in the remarginalization of already disenfranchised individuals. This exploration illuminates the limitations of the queerness of homoerotic desires in urban queer male communities. Although the expressions of same-sex desires challenge the culture that only allows for the display of opposite-sex desires, many same-sex desires are produced that reinforce heteronormativity or create new sexual norms in queer male communities.

Therefore, this project brings to light that Chinese queer people not only face external oppression from heterosexual communities, but also live in everyday discrimination from members of queer communities. The internal inequality is crucial to understanding the heterogenization of Chinese queer communities. Moreover, it also demonstrates that transnational processes, through consumerism/pink capital, technological innovation, and transnational activism, do not necessarily bring sexual liberation or equality to queer individuals. These processes have indeed helped ostensibly diversify the communities, manifested in queer men's multiple modes of identification. However, the differentiation has also deepened the division and hierarchization among queer men, because individuals are granted varying amounts of sexual capital on a sexual market. Only queer subjects who meet the normative standards live in the fantasy of sexual freedom and self-actualization. These subjects are also believed to be representatives of queer men in China. The rest struggle to navigate a sexual market in which they are deemed to have insufficient sexual capital. The internal sexual hierarchies in China's

queer communities deserve more attention in academia and activism because neglecting these issues may perpetuate social injustice. This map of heterogeneous and hierarchized queer individuals enables a reevaluation of China's future queer politics.

My analysis is situated in an era in which Chinese queer people have become increasingly visible as lucrative consumers in mass cultures. This has been brought about by recent socioeconomic transformations. The ecology that nurtures, or limits, queer cultures and individuals has been shifting. Thus, queer desires have been reorganized. These shifts broach several questions for future exploration.

The first question is how the movement for marriage equality in Asia will reorganize Chinese queer people's desires. In May 2019, Taiwan legalized same-sex marriage, a first for Asia. This milestone was cheered and celebrated across Asian queer communities. It also prompted queer people's longings for marriage equality on the opposite side of the strait. Later that year, China's legislative body called for suggestions from the public for updating China's civil code. This was considered a precious opportunity for queer communities to destabilize a marriage system based exclusively on opposite sex marriage, and to grant marriage rights to queer individuals. NGOs, such as PFLAG China, mobilized queer communities to send their petitions to the government online. Among more than 200,000 comments received, about 190,000 of them proposed that same-sex marriage be legalized in China (Fan 2020). Unprecedentedly, a state spokesperson publicly acknowledged that same-sex marriage was among their primary considerations, given the plethora of proposals received. Although the proposal for same-sex marriage was eventually rejected in the updated version of civil code, the public discussion gave Chinese queer people hope for the prospects of legalized same-sex marriage in China in the near future. Due to this potential, marriage rights have become critical

to the agenda of LGBTQ activism in China. Yet there are few reflections online on the stakes of gay marriage, as if it is a necessary step in queer politics.

In spite of this dissertation's focus on homonormative desires in daily contexts, Chinese queer people's desires for same-sex marriage reveal that the process of normalization works at both the macropolitical and micro-daily levels. The prospect of marriage rights in China has triggered my own thoughts on how this seemingly tangible pursuit would reorganize queer people's desires. As I have demonstrated, Chinese queer men do not prioritize class when evaluating sexual capital as do their heterosexual counterparts. This is because many do not see the long-term financial benefits in same-sex relationships that are unprotected by the state. Will that mentality change now after Taiwan has approved same-sex marriage and Mainland China has shown some twilight of legalization, or at least will there be less hostility to it? And if so, how? The longings for official legal recognition have crossed international borders and taken root in China's local queer activism. I speculate that they will prompt queer men to reevaluate the role of class in determining sexual capital.

The second point on the agenda is the impact of the global pandemic and China's changing global influence on queer people's racial and ethnic imaginations in sexual fields in a post-pandemic era. When the novel coronavirus first appeared in China, the state had been attempting to mitigate the crisis and recuperate its international reputation. As a rising power, China's political confidence was shaken at first. However, when the epidemic evolved into an pandemic in March of 2020, China had already pacified the crisis within its borders. This marked a turning point in which China reimagined its relationship with Western states, and its own position in the global order. This was manifested in social media discourse. Since then, China's propaganda machine has been promoting China's superiority over Western states due to its

capacity to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. In spite of the pandemic's calamity on China's economy, the Chinese government has noticed that Western societies, particularly the U.S., have been hit worse, and perhaps in a more long-term way. This has been reflected in the U.S.'s failure to control it over a period of several months. On China's social media, criticism of the state's inaction in February has turned into a collective carnival celebrating China's accomplishments since March. This comparison has constantly been reported to characterize the decline of "White America", and the ascendance of "Yellow China". This reimagined global geopolitical relationship has prompted me to consider how this perceived reshuffling of the global order and nationalist sentiment would affect Chinese queer people's racialized and ethnicized desires in the subsequent decade. My findings reveal that Sino/Han-centric desire may contest white masculinity and hegemony on a global scale, but it also reinforces extant transnational racism. Additionally, it creates new forms of sexual racism packaged in desires. How will Chinese people's racialized desires manifest in the post-pandemic decade?

Another question that is understudied in this dissertation, but which may deserve more attention in the future is how increasing alternative sexual practices and desires disrupt normative codes of desires, or even dismantle sexual hierarchies? My use of the plural form sexual *hierarchies* acknowledges that some sexual subjects who lie at the bottom of the major hierarchy may find a favorable place in another sexual market. These alternative desires generate niche markets within this subcultural group, such as bear/baboon groups and kink communities. For example, Destination launches events that target men who fall into the category of bear and baboon. Although they do this out of financial considerations, these events catering to men deemed to be bears and baboons, as well as their followers, expand space for including the expressions of non-normative desires for alternative types of bodies. They also offer them sexual

opportunities. In addition, Chinese queer people have been practicing BDSM, though few mentioned this to me in my fieldwork. Kinky sex (or desires) are rarely a topic that queer people would bring to the table to discuss, because it is still seen as an aberrant practice. Thus, much of it remains invisible in China's queer communities. However, the popularity of online amateur pornography has enabled a window into kinky practices among Chinese queer men on Soutong, a popular online bulletin board for gay pornography. Twitter has also provided another venue. Based on what factors do they express sexual desires and fantasies in these alternative sexual practices? Do body types, sexual labels, race and ethnicity matter in the same way as they do in "vanilla" sexual practices? More importantly, how do these desires interact, or disrupt, normative desires in queer communities?

The last question that I propose is the direction of China's queer politics. My dissertation criticizes how Chinese queer people have been objectified and alienated by the intensified consumerism that treats queer individuals only as valuable consumers. It also indoctrinates them with economic rationality. Additionally, my dissertation explicates how certain queer subjects are neglected, or even marginalized, in business-based politics. However, given China's political environment, which limits political expressions, actions, and social movements (King, Pan, and Roberts 2014), it would be difficult to mobilize individuals to participate in radical politics to challenge the government and social norms. The Western traditions of LGBTQ movements do not enlighten the future of China's queer politics, including the less confrontational and celebratory pride, which cannot transpire in Mainland China on a large scale. I acknowledge that the depoliticization of sexual subjects is an effective, or even necessary strategy, for creating space for queer desires, visibility, and sociality. Business might be the field through which China's queer politics could find a breakthrough. Yet we should remain mindful of the costs of

financializing and commercializing Chinese queer cultures, as this infringes on queer people's interests while hierarchizing queer individuals. This question remains a contested issue, and begs for theoretical inquiry in queer Marxism. However one thing is for sure, China's queer politics should devote more attention to the emergence of the homonormative desires that cause internal discrimination and oppression among queer subjects, and work to inhibit the calcification of sexual norms as a surreptitious oppression mechanism in queer communities.

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Appendix 1: Glossary

Mandarin Romanization (*pinyin*)

Pinyin	Chinese
boli	玻璃
caihong	彩虹
duanxiu	断袖
eryizi	二椅子
gaoji	搞基
guilao	鬼佬
ji	基
ji	鸡
jilao	基佬
jiyou	基友
ku'er	酷儿
longyang	龙阳
nantong	男同
piaopiao	飘飘
quanzi	圈子
saobi	骚逼
shou	受
si gay	死 gay
tonglei	同类
tongxing	同性
tongxing'ai	同性爱
tongxinglian	同性恋
tongxinglian huanzhe	同性恋患者
tongzhi	同志
tuye	兔爷
tuzi	兔子
wande	弯的
xianggong	相公
xiangxialao	乡下佬
xiao gay	小 gay
ya	鸭

Appendix 2: List of Interviewees

Name/ Nickname	Age	Occupation	Education	Geographical Origin	Marital Status	Religion
Andy	28	Finance	Master	Chongqing	Single	N/A
Anson	29	Entertainment	Master	Xinjiang	Single	N/A
Auberry	19	Pilot trainee	High school	Heilongjiang	Single	N/A
Axl	30s	Engineer	Master	Beijing	Single	Christian
Carr	32	Lawyer	Master	Heilongjiang	Single	N/A
Chen Zeming	26	Doctor	PhD	Jiangsu	Single	N/A
Daibao	21	Fitness trainer	Bachelor	Unknown	Single	N/A
Daimao'er	31	Journalist	Bachelor	Unknown	Single	N/A
Daniel	26	Engineer	Bachelor	Jiangsu	Single	N/A
Danny	25	Student	Master	Anhui	Single	N/A
Dave	38	IT	Bachelor	Born in Guangdong, Grew up in northern China	Single	N/A
David	43	Finance	Bachelor	Heilongjiang	Single	Buddhism
Frank	43	Education	Associate	Shandong	Divorced	N/A
Fredrick	26	Engineer	Master	Hebei	Single	N/A
Kimmy	24	White collar	Bachelor	Unknown	Single	N/A
Jason	22	Student/ English teacher	Bachelor	Yunnan	Single	N/A
John	39	Marketing	Bachelor	Henan	Single	N/A
Juno	27	Internet banking	Master	Shandong	Single	N/A
Landon	26	Public relations	Bachelor	Jilin	Single	N/A

Leo	40	IT	Bachelor	Heilongjiang	Single	N/A
Mark	26	Interpreter	Master	Yangtze River Delta region	Single	N/A
Owen	25	Blued	Bachelor	Xinjiang	Single	N/A
Paul	25	Student	Master	Unknown	Single	N/A
Roger	26	Finance	Master	Chongqing	Single	Agnostic
Simon	46	Consulting	Bachelor	Heilongjiang	Single	Christian
Tony	33	Private equity	Master	Hunan	Married (Contract marriage)	N/A
Tyrell	24	Student	Master	Henan/Xinjiang	Single	N/A
Vince	28	Freelancer	Master	Beijing	Single	N/A
Yisheng de Tansuo	24	Psychologist	Bachelor	Sichuan	Single	N/A
Buyuan	34	Finance	Bachelor	Beijing	Single	N/A
Donglai	40	Internet	Bachelor	Jiangsu	Divorced	Buddhism
Ruyuan	22	Student	Bachelor	Beijing	Single	N/A
Guangguang	31	Retail	Bachelor	Taiwan	Single	Daoism
Fanshu	32	Student	PhD student	Shanxi	Single	N/A
Fengfeihua	33	Finance	Master	Henan	Single	N/A
Anonymous	Late 20s	Music	Unknow	Unknow	Single	N/A
Wukong	42	IT	Bachelor	Beijing	Single	Muslim
Youyou Luming	41	Vice president of a company	Master	Inner Mongolia	Single	N/A
Dabai	30	Engineer	PhD	Shandong	Single	N/A
Dalei	37	IT	Bachelor	Hebei	Single	N/A
Tianbing	26	Media	Bachelor	Hunan	Single	N/A
Xiaoqiang	32	Engineer	Bachelor	Hubei	Single	N/A

Xiaomin	18	Freelancer	Middle school	Henan	Single	N/A
XiaoK	24	Musician	Bachelor	Guangdong	Single	N/A
Xiaoming	24	Student	Master Student	Anhui	Single	N/A
Xiaopu	35	Engineer	Master	Jiangsu	Single	N/A
Xiaoben	26	Researcher	Master	Hebei	Single	N/a
Zhangdao	34	Media and cinema	Bachelor	Henan	Single	Buddhism
Wukong	27	Finance	Bachelor	Sichuan	Single	N/A
Xiaochen	25	NGO	Bachelor	Tianjin	Single	N/A
Libiao	26	Teacher	Bachelor	Inner Mongolia	Single	N/A
Tangqianwei	30	Finance	Master	Shandong	Married (Contract marriage)	N/A
Haiyang	36	Masseur	High school	Guangdong	Single	N/A
Hezheyu	38	Media	Bachelor	Liaoning	Married (Contract marriage)	N/A
Zhutoumao	35	Unemployed	Bachelor	Beijing	Single	Agnostic
Buliu	24	Advertising	Bachelor	Unknown	Single	N/A
Mr. Wang	27	Internet	Bachelor	Shandong	Single	N/A
Wang Ke	26	Student	Master student	Unknown	Single	N/A
Teacher Wang	48	Professor	Master	Liaoning	Married	N/A
Wang Fei	30	Designer	Bachelor	Jilin	Single	N/A
Baiyang	27	Advertising	Bachelor	Hebei	Single	N/A
Baiying	30s	Finance	Master	Henan	Single	Christian
Mr. Qi	26	Internet	Bachelor	Henan/Taiwan	Single	N/A
Kongqi	38	State enterprise	Bachelor	Beijing	Married (Contract marriage)	Communism

Kongqi	31	Book editor	Bachelor	Shandong	Divorced	Buddhism
Laolu	40	Freelancer	Bachelor	Jilin	Divorced	N/A
Ruofan	21	Student	Bachelor	Beijing	Single	N/A
Mengshu	37	Unemployed	Bachelor	Jilin	Single	N/A
Yuan Xiaojing	30	Technician	Bachelor	Hubei	Single	N/A
Qishi	30	Engineer	Bachelor	Hubei	Single	N/A

Appendix 3: Interview Protocol

This is a semi-open interview structure, so not all questions are listed. I followed up by asking questions based on participants' answers.

Part One: Language:

1. What terms do you use to refer to men who are attracted to men?
2. Do you think that these terms represent the same or different images of men?
3. If they are different, what are the differences?
4. Can you specifically describe the image of men embodied in each term you use?
5. Which term do you use most frequently? Why?
6. In what contexts do you use these terms?
7. Which term do you find the most offensive or detestable? Why?

Part Two: Desired Sexual Partner(s) in Daily Life:

1. Can you describe your desired sexual partner?
2. Can you name several icons to exemplify your ideal man?
3. Can you recall any experiences when you encountered such a person, either online or offline?
4. What factors do you consider when evaluating your ideal man?
5. According to your answers, you think X, X, X, etc. are important for an attractive man. Could you please take some time to rank the importance of each?
6. Why do you think these factors are important?
7. Why do you think (X) quality is the more important than the others?
8. What kind of men you find unattractive?
9. In what way do you consider them unattractive?

Part Three: Favored Sexual Partner(s) in Destination and on Aloha:

1. Among these men, which one do you prefer?
2. What characteristics do you consider the most important to you?
3. Does your choice reflect what you describe as your ideal sexual partner?

4. Do you feel that muscular bodies are necessary to be attractive?

Part Four: Self-construction of Sexual Attractiveness:

1. How do you evaluate your attractiveness in Beijing's gay communities?
2. Have you made efforts to make yourself more attractive in this community?
3. If so, what efforts have you made?
4. If not, why don't you want to try?