Chinese lalas and the challenges of heteronormativity

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Introduction

Recent crackdowns on Chinese physical and digital LGBTQ+ spaces, including the closure of the famous lesbian bar Roxie in Shanghai (The Economist 2024), the Beijing LGBT Centre (Longarino 2024), and the ban on "Pro-LGBT" content on the video-sharing social media platform Douyin (IPVM 2023) have been the cause for concern related to the lives and rights of Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals. A few years earlier, in 2018, the Chinese Communist Party had attempted to implement a similar ban on "Pro-LGBT" content on the massively popular and widely-used social media platform Weibo (纽约时报中文网 *Niuyue Shibao Zhongwen Wang* 2018). However, at that time, this ban was reversed due to the great amount of pushback from Chinese queer people (The Guardian, 2018). These instances highlight how LGBTQ+ individuals in the People's Republic of China (hereafter: China) have faced significant challenges related to the visibility of their lives and experiences in the public sphere (Shaw and Zhang 2018, 284). However, this does not mean that a decrease in queer activity and community can be observed throughout China (Lo 2022, 142). The lives of Chinese queer women specifically are prone to more invisibility, as they experience double marginalization as women and as LGBTQ+ individuals (Cheng 2018, 199). In addition, romantic and sexual relationships between women have been disregarded and underrepresented in Chinese literature, entertainment, and social movements for centuries (Sun 2024), which has consequently caused an overall public sentiment of naivety and unfamiliarity regarding the Chinese queer female experience, as opposed to the male homosexual experience (Zhang et al. 2024, 2; Ruan and Bullough 1992, 221-222).

For the purpose of this thesis, which focuses on the experience of not only lesbian women, but also other women who are romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women, the local Chinese term *lala* 拉拉 is used in addition to the widely used and accepted term 'queer' to refer to these women. *Lala*, as a concept, is used within Mainland China to refer to women who experience romantic or sexual attraction to other women, or female-to-male transgender individuals (Hou 2023, 711; Liu 2019, 166) The primary reason for this is this study's participants' self-identification with the word and label *lala*, as well as with more commonly used labels such as 'lesbian', 'bisexual', and 'pansexual' in the Netherlands, where this study took place.

In order to shed light on the experiences of *lala*s in contemporary Chinese society and the challenges faced by them to enter into romantic relationships with other women, this thesis answers the following research question: What strategies do Chinese *lala*s use to enter into same-sex relationships in urban China, and how are these strategies used to negotiate familial and heteronormative pressures? Here, heteronormativity is understood as a power structure enforced by social institutions, policies, and public attitudes, wherein heterosexual relationships are regarded as 'normal' and 'natural', and based on a strict gender binary, in which men and women have separate and complementary gender roles (Dollar 2017, 10).

Current academic debates regarding Chinese *lala*s commonly center on attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in China, as well as the role that Confucianism and nationalism play in the heterosexism faced by Chinese lesbians in contemporary society (see Adamczyk and Cheng 2015; Xie and Peng 2018; Lin et al. 2016). While these perspectives are undoubtedly valuable to and inextricable from the experience of *lala*s today, this thesis is more concerned with the way in which the *lala* dating experience in China is both shaped and challenged by the heteronormativity that remains highly prevalent in Chinese society today. Therefore, heteronormativity is used here as a conceptual lens through which the queer experience of *lala*s can be viewed.

Heteronormativity as a power structure, which assumes the superiority of heterosexuality and the inferiority of other sexualities, particularly homosexualities, is not exclusive or specific to the case of China. Heteronormativity is created and recreated through social practices and institutions, which consequently pushes homosexualities "to the margins of normality" in society (Javaid 2018, 84), leading to the isolation, ostracization and discrimination of non-heterosexual individuals. In addition, since heteronormativity is founded on the concept of a strict gender binary, that is, the binary and non-overlapping relation between men and women, it assumes that men and women are assigned fixed and separate gender roles, which are complementary to each other and which therefore reinforces the idea of the superiority of heterosexual relationships in comparison to same-sex relationships (Dollar 2017, 10).

This study adds to the scholarly literature on the Chinese *lala* dating experience through the lens of women who migrated to the Netherlands for higher education or employment. Academic literature regarding the lives and dating experiences of Chinese women with a non-normative sexuality in the Netherlands is seriously lacking. Even though this study is particularly concerned with the same-sex dating experiences of *lala* women in China, it does provide insights into the lives of Chinese *lala*s in the Netherlands, as well as their motivations for this migration from China to the Netherlands. This thesis therefore aims to fill this gap in the current academic literature and debates regarding Chinese women in the Netherlands who experience same-sex attraction.

To form a comprehensive answer to this research question, this thesis first discusses the official, governmental attitudes towards LGBTQ+ behavior and individuals, as well as the public attitudes of heterosexual people towards people who experience same-sex attraction. Afterwards, the role of the Internet and social media in the building of an online LGBTQ+ and *lala* community is outlined. After that, a brief overview of the dynamics between Chinese queer women who identify or present as 'tomboy' or 'po' is presented. Furthermore, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how societal heteronormativity in China is experienced by *lala*s, the Chinese concept of *mianzi* in relation to Confucian values and familial pressures is discussed. Another local concept important for the comprehension of pressures formed from heteronormative and familial pressures is *xinghun*, which is discussed in the subsequent section. In addition, since this study's participants are all Chinese *lala*s who migrated to the Netherlands for higher education, this thesis discusses queer migration and motivations behind the relocation of *lala*s in places that are physically removed from their family and community in

their hometown. After this discussion of the relevant scholarly literature, the methodology used for this study is outlined, followed by a discussion and analysis of the data. This discussion and analysis of the data is divided into two main parts. The first part of the chapter focuses on the heteronormative and familial pressures faced by Chinese *lala*s. The second part analyzes and discusses this study's research participants' most frequently used strategies to negotiate and deal with these pressures and challenges.

Literature Review

Chinese public and official attitudes towards LGBTQ+

Historically, the official and public attitudes towards homosexuality were tolerant, even relatively accepting in China (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 442) However, the Chinese Communist Revolution and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked a clear turning point in the cultural attitudes towards homosexuality, since it was "increasingly characterized as socially deviant", with homosexuality during the Cultural Revolution getting heavily persecuted due to it being regarded as "disgraceful" (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 442). Sexual activity between women in China was never officially regarded as illegal, although this did not spare Chinese lesbians from heavy stigmatization or discriminatory governmental policies, such as the 1998 *Health Examination Criteria of Blood Donors*, which "prohibited lesbians from donating blood until 2012" (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 442). This official cultural narrative has, in turn, influenced the public attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people and behavior in China since 1949, even though homosexuality in China was decriminalized in 1997 and officially removed from the list of mental illnesses in 2001 (Yang, Song, and Xie 2025, 64). Individuals who experience same-sex attraction in China continue to face major challenges as a result of a lack of legal protection and acceptance for LGBTQ+ people.

Liu (2019) identified the stance of the Chinese Communist Party towards homosexuality as one of "no approval (不支持), no disapproval (不反对), and no promotion (不提倡)" (Liu 2019, 167). According to Liu (2019), this grants queer individuals in China the opportunity to express themselves and their queer subjectivities, as well as to form activist networks and communities of like-minded, queer individuals (Liu 2019, 167). However, the ambiguity and lack of clarity regarding this policy of no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion allows the Chinese government to justify their actions related to LGBTQ+ activities, content, and attitudes, no matter the actions they undertake or the official statements they make. This can be observed in, for example, the government's recent measure to ban "boys' love dramas", "rainbow-themed clothes at concerts", and pro-LGBT content on Douyin (Longarino 2024), as these can be considered forms of promotion of homosexuality, though it can just as easily be argued that the crackdown on LGBTQ+ related content and actions illustrate the Chinese Communist Party's disapproval of homosexuality. In addition, the Chinese government's refusal to recognize LGBTQ+ as its own distinct group in society subsequently results in a lack of legal protection for LGBTQ+ individuals in relation to crimes and behaviors stemming from heterosexism (Lin and Wang 2021, 3434).

Lin and Wang (2021) have observed a major shift in public attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in China. According to a 2016 study by the United Nations Development Program and the Beijing LGBT Center, less than 30% of the over 10.000 non-LGBTQ+ people surveyed believed that "LGBTQ individuals do not belong in schools or workplaces", which illustrates

a trend of more widespread tolerance and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and same-sex behaviors in China than ever before (Lin and Wang 2021, 3433). However, it is important to note that the survey upon which Lin and Wang's data is based was conducted among primarily young, highly educated people from urban areas, making it not fully representative of attitudes towards same-sex attraction and behavior all throughout China (Lin and Wang 2021, 3433), since a higher education level can be linked to relatively tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality (Liang et al. 2022, 1571). These findings are largely consistent with a study by Lin et al. (2016), which concluded that Chinese college student's attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people tend to lean quite tolerant, with participants having slightly more favorable attitudes towards lesbian women than towards gay men (Lin et al. 2016, 166). This tolerant attitude is in spite of the primarily negative attitudes of the participants' parents towards people of a sexual minority, with 70% of this study's participants reporting "that their parents disapprove of homosexuality" (Lin et al. 2016, 168). Nonetheless, the findings from both of these studies are based on data that is at the time of writing this paper, almost at least a decade old. Moreover, the information and data on which Lin and Wang's (2021) research is based was gathered by the non-profit organization Beijing LGBT Center, which was forced to suspend its operations and close down in 2023 as a result of *buke kangli* 不可抗力 "force majeure", as mentioned on the Weibo post announcing the organization's official closure on May 23rd, 2023. This illustrates that, while attitudes towards homosexuality and sexual minority individuals have potentially become increasingly tolerant among young, highly educated people according to the data collected by Lin and Wang (2021) and Lin et al. (2016), the political environment appears to have become more repressive and intolerant over the past decade.

The influence of the Internet

In pursuit of finding a community of like-minded people, research has shown that LGBTQ+ individuals across the globe turn to social media and online communities for a sense of social belonging (Han et al. 2019, 91; Owens 2017, 436). The perceived anonymity and interactivity of the internet is cited as one of the primary reasons for this in China (Chen 2009, 4), considering that homosexuality remains a stigmatized and sensitive topic for some in daily, offline interactions, but can be easily discussed and researched from the comfort of one's home, hidden behind an online username (Wu et al. 2018, 25). In addition, the popularization of queer social apps and networks, such as the widely-used Chinese social network ReLa 热, has provided Chinese *lala*s with a channel to alleviate and liberate themselves from the pressures placed on their by their heteronormative environment, family, and community (Li 2020, 693-694).

Information shared on the internet by LGBTQ+ individuals furthermore has a wider reach than information published on paper or through other traditional forms of media (Wu et al. 2018, 25-26). Social media therefore consequently provide a relatively safe and anonymous space for Chinese queer people "to seek online support and health information" (Han et al. 2019, 91), in addition to serving as a platform and online space to negotiate one's sexual and romantic

identity (Han et al. 2019, 92). In addition, given the relatively open and accepting attitudes towards homosexuality and non-heteronormative lifestyles on the internet, social media and other forms of user-generated content serve as places and sources of knowledge for heterosexual people to learn about the LGBTQ+ community in China. The widespread usage of the internet across China has made information about and from LGBTQ+ individuals more accessible to both heterosexual and non-heterosexual people, which has been linked to the de-stigmatization of same-sex behavior and people (Lin and Wang 2020, 3435; Wu et al. 2018, 24-25).

However, this is not to say that the internet should be regarded as a utopia for Chinese queer individuals, where ideas can freely be shared and where progressive and liberal LGBTQ+ community members exist and socialize in a bubble. On the contrary, the enormous rise in popularity of the internet and online communication has resulted in a diversification of perspectives and attitudes that can be observed at all times, whereas the role of the Internet from the late 1990s to the early-2010s was to spread new and innovative ideas to the public (Lin and Wang 2020, 3442). These ideas frequently clashed with the official, conservative narrative of traditional forms of media controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (Lin and Wang 2020, 3442-3443). Moreover, the current online environment on Chinese social media remains scrutinized and censored by the Chinese government, which has amped up the crackdown on homosexual and LGBTQ+ content on online platforms due to this content being perceived as 'immoral' (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 443). Perhaps the most prominent example to illustrate the contrast between the public and official attitudes towards homosexuality and queer content can be regarded in the midst of this crackdown on gay content, when the Chinese government proposed to ban non-heterosexual content from the popular social media platform Weibo. This proposal to ban gay content was ultimately retracted as a result of the outrage expressed by Chinese internet users, but content related to same-sex behavior and people still frequently falls victim to government censorship (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 443).

'Tomboy' and 'Po' dynamics

Lesbian social network and dating apps allow Chinese queer women to express themselves and their same-sex desires within their own community (Li 2020, 692). Within the queer female community in China, individuals frequently use the essentialized labels 'T' or 'P' in order to position themselves within this larger community. The label 'T' was originally derived from the idea of the 'tomboy', and in the Chinese queer community currently refers to a masculine-presenting *lala* (Kam 2014, 253). The contrasting label to 'T' is 'P', which refers back to the word 'po', a romanization of the Chinese character for 'wife' (Fung 2021, 141; Kam 2014, 253). A narrative widely adopted by researchers studying 'T' and 'P' women in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China in the late twentieth century and the 2000s was that 'T' women were 'legitimate' queer women, whereas 'P' women were only thought to temporarily be part of the queer community (Fung 2021, 142). Instead of being recognized as a feminine-presenting *lala* woman, 'P' women were frequently considered to be heterosexuals who merely temporarily

"falsely displaced" their heterosexual desire on to a masculine-presenting woman, but who "would eventually return to their "true" heteronormative lives" (Fung 2021, 141). Fung (2021) argues that this perspective appears to have shifted slightly in the 2010s, in the sense that 'P' women were more commonly recognized as 'legitimate' queer women than in the decades prior to this. However, in order to realize her 'true' sexual desire, Chinese 'P' women need to have experienced hardships in the form of parental objections and a struggle to accept her own same-sex desire (Fung 2021, 156). These perspectives continue to highlight the strong influence of heteronormativity on the *lala* dating experience, since feminine-presenting queer women are still expected to be faking their same-sex desire or temporarily displacing it on to 'T' women instead of men. Their same-sex desire is only recognized and legitimized after the 'P' woman has suffered various hardships in order to come to terms with and accept her same-sex desire (Fung 2021, 155-156).

Mianzi

Chinese society in the 21st century remains highly influenced by cultural values based on Confucian thought and morality. Within Confucian society, interpersonal relationships on five different levels, i.e. the "relationships between government and citizens, parents and children, husband and wife, siblings, and friends", serve as the foundation of society, social institutions, and humanity as a whole (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 443). As a result of the emphasis on interpersonal and familial relationships within Chinese contemporary society, as well as the importance of filial piety, Chinese individuals are not inclined to make individual decisions without simultaneously considering all the ways in which their family may be affected by their decision, either positively or negatively (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 444). The romantic relationship between two women deviates from the essential interpersonal relationships most valued in societies informed by Confucianism. Therefore, the dating experience of *lala* women in China should be researched within the context of Chinese society in the 21st century, with a particular emphasis on these Confucian ideals surrounding familial and other interpersonal relationships as the basis for Chinese contemporary society as a whole.

When discussing the challenges faced by *lala*s in regards to their dating life and experience with other women in China in relation to heteronormativity, the idea of *mianzi* 面子, or 'face' in its English translation, cannot be omitted. This Chinese concept, which has its roots in Confucianism (Peng, Su, and Zheng 2024, 3), can roughly be equated to 'reputation' (Ren, Howe, and Zhang 2019, 213), not only of the individual but also of their family, and an individual's perceived evaluation by others (Peng, Su, and Zheng 2024, 2). In addition, *mianzi* is regarded as a concept closely related to status, dignity, and honor, and the consequences of losing one's *mianzi* by engaging in behaviours that are commonly seen as undignified and dishonorable are therefore commonly tied to (social) shame, both on an individual and a familial level (Peng, Su, and Zheng 2024, 3). In contemporary Chinese society, traditional family structures, filial piety, fulfilling traditional gender roles, and producing an heir to the family line are held in high regard, and a woman finding a female partner as opposed to a male

partner is commonly contrasted with these values and structures (Ren, Howe, and Zhang 2019, 214). Individuals entering female-female partnerships are therefore often regarded as unfilial by their parents and community, since same-sex couples cannot biologically produce an heir on their own. According to Cheng (2018), the period of the one-child-policy in China, which lasted from 1979 until 2015, has only increased negative attitudes towards homosexual relationships and behaviours in the mainstream, due to the current unequal gender ratio in China, with couples during the one-child-policy favoring men over women. As a result, women engaging in romantic relationships with other women are seen as an impeding factor on the production of an heir to continue the family line (Cheng 2018, 193). In addition, the structural changes brought about by the one-child-policy put a tremendous amount of pressure on Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals to marry and have a child with someone of the opposite sex (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 445). It is therefore common for older LGBTQ+ individuals and *lala* women in China to regard creating a family and continuing the family line as an unshirkable responsibility towards their parents and ancestors, even if this may be hindered by their own romantic and sexual identity (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 444). Being unable to fulfill these expectations is seen as a 'failure', not only on the part of the woman or daughter, but also on the other members of the family, due to the association of homosexual thoughts and behaviors with mental illnesses, even though homosexuality has officially not been considered a mental illness for over two decades now (Adamczyk and Cheng 2015, 277). A study by Lin et al. (2016) shows that negative attitudes towards homosexuality are much less common among university students and highly-educated young people in China than their parents (Lin et al. 2016, 166-167). Nonetheless, this study by Lin et al. (2016) further proves that negative attitudes towards homosexuality are linked to the importance individuals place on two measures of filial piety, namely loyalty to their parents' wishes and the filial duty of obedience (Lin et al. 2016, 167). It is therefore common for Chinese *lala*s to feel pressured to 'save their family's *mianzi*' by ignoring their sexual identity, since this sexual identity does not align with the ideas and actions typically associated with filial piety and valued by families across China (Ren, Howe, and Zhang 2019, 214). Even the act of "coming out", or expressing one's *lala* identity to family members or their community as a whole, has the potential of leading to "social death" as a result of ostracization and isolation (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 445). One of the primary reasons for this is the importance of Confucian interpersonal and familial relationships, as well as the perceived value of filial piety in Chinese society. Coming out can be regarded as selfish and individualistic, which opposes the collectivist ideals for society that remain present in contemporary China (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 445).

In order to save their own or their family's *mianzi*, it is thus common for Chinese *lala*s to refrain from coming out to their family or their community altogether. For some women, this results in a complete suppression of their feelings of romantic and sexual attraction towards other women (Ren, Howe, and Zhang 2019, 220). However, another solution that is frequently discussed by scholars to the problems relating to social death and the risk of ostracization and isolation that come with openly entering into a same-sex relationship is through a 'formality marriage', known in Chinese as *xinghun* 形婚.

Xinghun

As a result of the legal and societal pressures faced by *lala*s across China, many lesbian women may look for methods that comply with the heteronormative values and expectations of Chinese contemporary society to enter into same-sex relationships. A concept that has received attention from scholars researching Chinese society is xinghun 形婚, or 'formality marriage', which refers to the relatively recent phenomenon in China of gay men and lesbian women marrying each other to "stay within the family kinship system" (Huang and Brouwer 2018, 140). Entering into a *xinghun* allows these individuals to present themselves as part of a heterosexual couple. To some, this provides an attractive alternative to the option of simply pretending to be single one's entire life, since this will eliminate the pressure placed on the individual by their family and community to get married and have children (Huang and Brouwer 2018, 147). For Chinese *lala*s and heterosexual women alike, this pressure includes an added dimension of haste, since single and unmarried women after the age of around 27 risk being labeled by society as *shengnü* 剩女, or 'leftover women', referring to the idea that they have missed their ideal window of opportunity for marriage, as well as to a perceived decrease in femininity and sexual charm (Feldshuh 2018, 50). Knowingly entering into a *xinghun* allows both the gay man and the lesbian woman to fulfill the expectations of their family and society as a whole, while at the same time not having to hide one's sexual identity in their personal life (Huang and Brouwer 2018, 140). Individuals who are part of such a *xinghun* may even live separately from their spouse and with a same-sex partner (Lo 2020, 635). Such a 'formality marriage' can therefore be regarded as exemplary of *lala*s and gay men navigating and using societal heteronormativity in order to still enter into same-sex relationships.

On the one hand, *xinghun* can be regarded as undermining and combating the heteronormativity that remains present in Chinese society, since it provides a way for *lala*s, as well as their queer husbands, to engage in romantic and sexual relationships with members of the same sex. However, on the other hand, the entire concept of *xinghun*, as well as the manifestation of it in the daily lives of its participants all over China, consequently reinforces the heteronormative nature of contemporary Chinese society. As a practice, *xinghun* is common and widely used in the queer community, and its purpose is to allow the *lala* and the gay man to present as a heterosexual couple, perhaps even a nuclear family, to the family and the community**.** As a result, same-sex couples and activities remain relatively invisible due to the contrast between the homosexual private sphere and the heterosexual public, social sphere (Ren, Howe, and Zhang 2019, 215). This invisibility of homosexual and queer acts in the public sphere, even by queer individuals, may give the people with a non-heterosexual sexuality the feeling that they live in isolation with their 'deviant' sexual identity, due to the lack of public expression of queer sexual and romantic identities (Ren, Howe, and Zhang 2019, 215). In addition, this invisibility may cause heterosexual individuals to believe that other, minority sexualities either do not exist, or are a lot more rare than is the case in actuality, which in turn reinforces heteronormativity present in contemporary Chinese society.

Furthermore, the way *xinghun* is performed and carried out by its participating *lala* and gay participants is strongly influenced by the current heteronormative familial expectations present in China. When considering the ideal partner for *xinghun*, a potential spouse should be willing and able to adhere to the traditional Confucian gender roles expected of their sex, meaning that the requirements for potential *xinghun* partners closely resemble the requirements of heterosexual individuals searching for a partner (Liu and Tan 2020, 455). In the case of *lala* women, this means that they are generally inclined to choose a husband who can serve as the breadwinner of the family, holds an academic degree, and is tall and handsome in a masculine way (Liu 2013, 497; Liu and Tan 2020, 455). In contrast, gay men looking for a *lala* wife tend to prefer women who are gentle, caring, feminine-looking, willing to bear a child, and prepared to play the role of a 'good wife' by taking care of the household (Liu and Tan 2020, 455-456). These contrasting expectations of both partners in a 'formality marriage' conform to the heteronormative ideals tied to the institution of marriage in contemporary China, and the differing experiences and performances of gender of gay men and *lala*s in such a marriage inevitably reinforce the heterosexual norm and traditional gender roles within marriages in China (Liu 2013, 498).

Queer migration and relocation

Given that this study focuses on Chinese queer students in the Netherlands, a thorough discussion of the flows of migration, both domestic and international, and how it shapes and is shaped by sexuality is necessary. Queer migration, as an academic field, adds to the existing, primarily heteronormative scholarship on international migration by considering how an individual's motivation for permanent or temporary relocation may be influenced by their gender- or sexual identity (Yang 2024, 1794). According to Yang (2024), sexuality as a "driver of migration" can even be regarded as "definitional to queer migration" (Yang 2024, 1795). Queer migration or "sexual migration" (Carillo 2004, 59) is thought to be largely propelled by a queer individual's prospect of more free and open opportunities for queer self-expression relative to the opportunities available to them in their home countries (Yang 2024, 1795). In addition, queer individuals may migrate away from their hometown or home country as a result of a perceived threat to their safety once their non-normative gender- or sexual identity is disclosed (Yang 2024, 1795).

A study by Cui and Song (2023) regarding the motivations behind the decision of Chinese queer international students to study in New Zealand highlights a commonly recurring theme in discussions surrounding Chinese queer migration. New Zealand, in this case, is seen by queer Chinese international students as an attractive country to relocate to for academic pursuits due to "its long history of migration and established reputation of diversity," in addition to the country's legalization of same-sex marriage in 2013 (Cui and Song 2023, 2). For these Chinese queer international students, the creation of physical distance from one's family in China provided a sense of hope and relief from the familial pressures back in China to fulfil the Confucian duty and filial piety of getting married and, in the case of Chinese men, having children to carry on the family line (Cui and Song 2023, 5). The same motivations for moving

abroad can be observed in Kam's (2020) research regarding the migration of Chinese queer women to Australia. The country's queer-friendly environment was consistently listed as one of the primary reasons from Chinese queer people to migrate to Australia, as well as the less competitive nature of the work- and academic environment in comparison to the environment in China (Kam 2020, 133). Furthermore, in a country with queer-friendly legislation and attitudes, *lala*s can share their happiness in their relationship and family life, and do not feel the need to hide that part of their life and identity (Kam 2020, 134). In addition, migrating to another country to acquire an academic degree or gain experience as a skilled laborer abroad, which will likely consequently increase their class position, grants queer individuals "other forms of capital that leverage their negotiation of non-normative sexuality" (Yang 2024, 1798). In other words, these other forms of capital acquired abroad as a result of a privileged class position can be utilized to negotiate the heteronormative pressures from family and their community in China.

Chinese queer people and *lala*s attempting to escape the heteronormative pressures to get married and have children by increasing the physical distance between oneself and their family and community can be observed within China as well. Liu (2019) discusses the motivations of rural *lala*s to migrate to urban centers in China, specifically *lala*s who have come to work in factories in these larger cities. Through their migration from their rural hometown to an urban center, these *lala*s were able to escape the "patriarchal-homophobic family life" in their hometown, without having to disclose their romantic or sexual identity with their family and community (Liu 2019, 172). It should be noted here that, perhaps not surprisingly, rural areas in China are generally more heteronormative and conservative than urban areas, making urban areas attractive locations for Chinese queer people, specifically *lala*s, to migrate to (Gong and Liu 2022, 207). In addition, working in factories in urban areas provides these *lala*s with their own income, which allows them to become financially independent. This financial independence gives these migrated *lala*s "the necessary leverage to negotiate with family and social pressures" (Liu 2019, 172). Another advantage for *lala*s in regards to the creation of physical distance from one's hometown and community is the opportunity to freely, at least relative to the situation in their rural hometown, mingle and socialize with other *lala*s and Chinese queer people. This provides them with a sense of community that is removed from their family and community back in their hometown, and will in turn allow them to express their non-heterosexual identity in a community of like-minded individuals without the fear of being completely isolated or ostracized on the basis of their romantic and sexual identity (Liu 2019, 177).

However, the motivations behind queer individual's choice to migrate to a specific country, be it New Zealand (Cui and Song 2023), Australia (Kam 2020), the United States or Canada (Yang 2024), or the Netherlands, should not be regarded as an indication that the 'West' somehow provides Chinese queer migrants with a sense of equality and belonging that is completely unthinkable in China. On the contrary, while Chinese queer migrants did indicate that the campus and overall environment in such Western countries is more LGBTQ+-friendly than in China, these students tend to face heteronormative microaggressions that intersect with, and are a result of, their Chinese ethnic identity (Cui and Song 2023, 9). This is illustrated by

various examples in the research done by Cui and Song (2023), which shows that Chinese students who try to 'come out' to fellow students by using same-sex pronouns to refer to their partners are frequently immediately corrected by these other students, who believe their English to be too poor to think of the 'correct', heteronormative pronoun of the opposite sex in English (Cui and Song 2023, 9). In addition, Chinese queer international students may not always feel fully removed from their home country and from their family and community back in China, due to the fear that other Chinese international students will report back on their sexual and romantic identity to this Chinese community (Cui and Song 2023, 10). Chinese queer international students reported that they struggled significantly more with coming out to fellow Chinese students than to local students from New Zealand, partly as a result of this idea that other Chinese students will share this information with the queer individual's community, but also due to the heterosexism that Chinese queer students regularly face from other Chinese students or members of the Chinese community in New Zealand (Cui and Song 2023, 10-11). Chinese queer international students in not only New Zealand but other Western, more officially 'queer-friendly' countries due to these countries' tolerant or inclusive policies, therefore remain at risk of feeling isolated and ostracized as a consequence of the intersection of their queer and ethnic identities (Cui and Song 2023, 11).

Methodology

In order to discuss answer the research question, I conducted ten in-depth interviews with Chinese women who self-identify as *lala*, lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual, and who moved to the Netherlands for higher education and who were enrolled in Leiden University at the time of the interview. The primary reason for this is that the scope of this research project does not allow me to find research participants in China in person, and it might be difficult to find interviewees solely from posts that are publicly available on social media platforms such as Weibo, in part due to the aforementioned recent crackdown on LGBTQ+ related content. Furthermore, it is likely easier for Chinese women living in the Netherlands to compare their experiences with love and relationships with other women in China with their experiences in the Netherlands, since they are not actively in a situation where they feel pressured to suppress part of their identity. This physical distance from China may allow these women to adopt a different perspective on their lives as *lala*s in China. As a result, this study's research participants are able to reflect on their *lala* experiences from the perspective of a Chinese woman who has experienced familial pressures as outlined above, but also from the perspective of an 'outsider' to their Chinese community and family due to the physical distance from this community.

To find participants for this study, I outlined the topic and purpose of my project and asked a Chinese classmate to forward my request for participants in a WeChat group chat consisting of Chinese students currently studying in the Netherlands. All of the interviewees are currently enrolled in Leiden University, meaning that the data acquired from these interviews may not be representative for the experiences of all Chinese *lala*s in the Netherlands, since the *lala*s I interviewed are all highly educated and geographically concentrated in one part of the country. Furthermore, all interviewees either grew up in urban centers in China or lived in one or multiple large cities for a significant amount of time for work or higher education. The participants' families all remained in China. As a result of the comparatively conservative and traditional environment and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in Chinese rural areas, these participants are likely to have a perspective that leans more cosmopolitan and progressive than their peers who have only experienced life in the countryside. Lastly, these participants all had the financial means to migrate to the Netherlands, with various participants having lived in multiple other countries for education or employment as well. In addition, more than half of the interviewees mentioned that they received at least some financial support from their family. These participants' preferred strategies to negotiate heteronormative pressures from their family and society therefore likely differ from the strategies utilized by *lala*s who are less financially privileged.

The participants I interviewed were all born and raised in China, and had experienced same-sex attraction and/or at least one relationship with another woman while living in China. The primary focus of this study is on the same-sex dating experiences of the Chinese *lala*s I interviewed and how these experiences differ or compare to the *lala* dating experiences of their friends. The participants were all eager to talk about their experiences and were passionate

about this topic. The interviews were conducted in English, semi-structured, and lasted approximately one hour each. Furthermore, due to time and location restraints, the interviews were primarily conducted through Zoom and recorded with explicit permission from each participant the purpose of transcription. The transcription of these interviews was done manually. However, two interviews were conducted in person, and one was done entirely through chat messages on the Chinese messaging application WeChat. To analyze the data collected from these ten interviews, I highlighted the various strategies mentioned by each interviewee and manually compared these strategies to those mentioned by the other participants. I also took note of the frequency with which the strategies were mentioned. To ensure the complete anonymity of the participants in this study, each person will be referred to by a pseudonym.

Data & Analysis

In order to properly articulate an answer to the question of how the methods Chinese *lala*s use to enter into same-sex relationships with other women in China challenges or reinforces societal heteronormativity, it is crucial to gain an understanding of what types of strategies are used for this purpose in the first place. This chapter is therefore divided into multiple parts. The first part introduces this study's participants and outlines the methods utilized by these participants to meet other *lala* women in China. This is followed by a discussion of the most frequently cited forms of heteronormative and familial pressure experienced by the *lala*s interviewed. Lastly, the strategies mentioned by the participants to negotiate and deal with these pressures are examined and analyzed through the lens of heteronormativity and the previously discussed familial pressures and challenges.

In response to the question of what label the interviewees would use to describe their romantic or sexual identity, most participants first mentioned one or multiple specific labels commonly used in the Netherlands and other Western countries, such as lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual, likely as a result of the interviews being conducted in English. However, when asked about their attitude towards the Chinese label *lala*, all participants except for Ilya, who discussed her personal uncertainty about her sexuality, noted that this is a label that they feel comfortable using to describe themselves. The term *lala* is regarded as relatively broad and inclusive, in addition to sounding more casual and appealing than other Chinese labels:

> It's a more general label that I'm quite comfortable with [...], because in the Chinese context, it's a very useful label. It's much easier to explain than 'bisexual', so I think that if there's a general label [...] in the Chinese context, I will use that label. So yes, I think it's a good one. (Anna)

> I'm a bit confused which label is exactly perfect for me, because I have only dated girls before. So I don't know if I'm bisexual or just lesbian, I'm not sure about that. But I'm comfortable with *lala*. (Charlotte)

***Meeting other* lalas**

Although academic research regarding *lala* communities in China has been conducted in the past, these studies tend to focus primarily on how the *lala* dating and socialization experience is influenced by social media platforms and websites specifically created for the purpose of finding a (same-sex) partner (See Tao 2022; Cui et al. 2022). However, the vast majority of my interviewees, eight out of ten, shared that they met their first girlfriend in person, with the most frequently occurring answer being that they met their girlfriends in middle school, high school, or university. Out of these eight participants who met their first girlfriend through in-person contact and conversations, six women were able to identify their partner as *lala* as a result of

her ‘stereotypically lesbian’ appearance. This ‘stereotypically lesbian’ appearance is often indicated with the letter ‘T’ for ‘tomboy’ in China, and this label refers to women who present more masculine, with short hair and masculine clothing (Kam 2014, 252-253). This label ‘T’ can be contrasted with the relatively feminine, ‘less obviously *lala*’ label ‘P’ for ‘Po’ (Kam 2014, 253). Anna shared that she believed her first girlfriend to be *lala* immediately upon meeting her, due to her “appearance, gestures, and her way of sitting”. In addition, when asked how she identified her first girlfriend as a *lala*, Eva had no clear answer, only that “[...] she is a very typical lesbian. Short hair, very cool.” These answers illustrate the importance of the ‘gaydar’, a slang term commonly used in English-speaking countries to refer to a (commonly queer) individual’s ability to identify a queer person’s non-heteronormative sexuality or genderqueer identity, and which Tan (2016) argues is based primarily on “skilled vision” as a result of queer socialization, rather than on an LGBTQ+ person’s “inborn talent” (Tan 2016, 842). It could be argued that, by presenting or labeling oneself as a ‘T’, or a masculine *lala*, Chinese women who are interested in dating other women both subconsciously use and reinforce the heteronormative standards of the dating-experience in China. By presenting in a masculine, more stereotypically ‘boy-ish’ manner, Chinese *lala*s can be identified by other *lala*s as women who are interested in same-sex relationships. Two participants shared their experience using the Chinese *lala* social network app ReLa, known as ‘The L’ in English, which is dominated by discourse about ‘T’ style *lala*s looking for a ‘P’ girlfriend, and vice versa, with Brianna stating that:

> [...] it turns out that on that app, people are like little puppies, and they like to label themselves like that, because it’s kind of popular for young, tomboy style lesbians to find a relatively mature, beautiful, strong, independent *jiejie* 姐姐 ‘older sister’]. It’s a very popular narrative. They will call themselves *xiao gou* 小狗 [‘little puppy’]. (Brianna)

This popular narrative of a masculine ‘T’ *lala* looking for a beautiful ‘P’ women can therefore, in a way, be regarded as reinforcing heteronormative dating standards, since it is aligned with the heterosexual ideal of a strong, masculine man dating a gentle, feminine woman (Dollar 2017, 10). Within heteronormative power structures, masculinity is assigned to men and femininity to women, and these two traits and genders are essentialized, seen as complementary, and believed to not overlap with one another (Dollar 2017, 10). In the case of Chinese *lala*s looking for their ‘T’ or ‘P’ counterparts, masculinity and femininity are also essentialized and placed in strict, non-overlapping categories. It can therefore be argued that these ‘T’ and ‘P’ labels align with ideas stemming from heteronormative power structures. However, by using this masculine aesthetic to move away from the personal aesthetic and presentation that is expected from their gender, Chinese masculine *lala*s can be seen as u sing these same heteronormative standards to signal their interest in a *lala* dating experience, since these ‘T’ *lala*s may use this ‘T’ and ‘boy-ish’ aesthetic to, either consciously or subconsciously, signal to other *lala* women that they are interested in a same-sex relationship.

Familial pressures and **mianzi**

All ten interviewees mentioned that they had shared their *lala* dating experiences and their thoughts regarding their sexuality with intimate friends, but only Anna, Freya, and Joy had told some of their relatives. The pressures underlying family member's heteronormative ideals and attitudes for the trajectory of their *lala* daughter's life were consistently emphasized as the primary cause for these *lalas* to keep their sexual and romantic identity concealed from their parents and relatives. Even though all the interviewees had shared their past *lala* dating experience with at least some close friends, it was highly uncommon for them to disclose this information to their family, since almost all of the participants expected their parents to not accept them and their sexuality due to their heteronormative 'traditional' attitudes towards marriage, childbearing, and gender roles. This is illustrated by, for instance, a conversation that Brianna had with her mother one day:

> I asked [my mom]: What would you think or do if I liked a girl? It was just [a question], I didn't like girls at that time. My mom was like: "I won't be your mom anymore." I mean, it was just a random conversation, none of us took it seriously, but you can still see their views. (Brianna)

The relatively less-accepting and intolerant attitude that parents may have towards their own queer children was observed by Lin et al. (2016), which they linked to the Confucian values of filial piety and bringing honor to one's parents (Lin et al. 2016, 168). Same-sex couples, who cannot biologically bear children by themselves and do not participate in a husband-wife relationship, undermine the Confucian hierarchy that remains of significant importance to Chinese contemporary society (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 443). Furthermore, same-sex couples and queer individuals undermine the heteronormative power structure that Chinese society and institutions are based on (Dollar 2017, 10). This is further exemplified by Ilya's idea that she would not be regarded as a "perfect daughter" anymore if she were to date a woman:

> From my family's point of view, I'm just a perfect girl, a perfect daughter [...] they want me to act as perfectly as I can. And if I date one girl… they are really modern people, but some aspects of them are very traditional. So I think they would consider this a black spot in my life. So I don't really want to [come out]. It causes me trouble and also causes them trouble. I don't want to do that. (Ilya)

Ilya mentioned that coming out as a *lala* would not only cause trouble for her and her relationship with her family, but would also damage the family's *mianzi*, This being a major reason not to disclose her sexuality to her family can be understood as a result of the importance of maintaining an individual's and their family's *mianzi* in Confucian societies. It is common for people living in societies influenced by Confucian thought to first consider the impact of one's individual actions on the family, before considering the ways in which it may affect one's own livelihood (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 444). This perspective was shared by Gina, who believed that telling her mother about her girlfriend and sexuality would "break her in some

sense", which she did not want to do unless she had no other option since "mothers have a lot on their plate already, [such as] the issues inside the family". Therefore, not disclosing one's non-heterosexual identity to their relatives is regarded by some *lala*s as a way to protect the reputation and well-being of the family. Freya, who had come out to her family and whose parents were relatively accepting of their daughter's sexuality, gave similar motivations to remain 'in the closet' around other, specifically older relatives:

> Older relatives, many from smaller counties, couldn't accept it. And my parents would think: "it's embarrassing for everyone to know my daughter is lesbian". I won't come out to avoid a fight. But if relatives press for marriage in the future, maybe I will… Also, my grandparents love me very much and they don't know what homosexuality is. I'm worried that it might hurt them. (Freya)

Brianna shared that she believed that the vast majority of Chinese lesbians never come out to their parents as a result of the social pressure to get married and have children. In addition, she mentioned the economic pressure placed on Chinese lesbians, since these women frequently want and need to be financially independent from their family, in order to live their lives as freely as possible. When asked whether she believed these heteronormative ideals regarding marriage to be the reasons why she believed that her mother would not accept her is she was romantically attracted to or involved with a woman, Brianna stated:

> I cannot figure out the logic of this. Why, if I don't get married, am I not your child? Why, if I don't have children, am I not your child? Why? I was so surprised when she said that. It wasn't a thoughtful conclusion, it just immediately came out from her mouth. (Brianna)

At the time of my conversation with Demi, she was in the process of actively trying to come out to her parents, and attempting to convince them to accept her *lala* identity. This *lala* had a strategy thought out to get her parents to slowly tolerate and get used to her non-heterosexual identity. The first step in this process was to tell her parents that she had no interest in ever getting married, but that she may have children in the future, and that she will ensure that those children receive her surname. At first, her parents could not comprehend that Demi would not want to get married, since people in her parents' hometown strictly follow heteronormative traditions and routines, and individuals who deviate from such traditions are regarded as less respecting of their parents and their ancestors. However, Demi's parents were happy to learn that any child Demi would carry her, and by extension their, surname, as this would allow her to continue the family line and compensate for her unwillingness to get married. After her parents started accepting Demi's rejection of these heteronormative traditions, she began to mention her ex-girlfriend and LGBTQ+-related activities that she attended to her parents, in hopes that they will, over time, come to tolerate this other form of rejection of heteronormativity from her as well. However, based on the information gathered from the interviews, it is a regular occurrence for parents of Chinese *lala*s to pretend not to know or understand their daughter's identity as part of a sexual minority, as mentioned by Charlotte, even if these *lala*s are actively trying to come out to their family and relatives. Joy, too, needed years of convincing her mother

to understand and accept that she is a lesbian, since her mother would refuse to talk about it even after Joy confided in her mother about her ex-girlfriend, and would even keep asking whether she had already found herself a boyfriend. These reactions illustrate the deep-rooted effect of heteronormative ideas and traditions on the attitudes of Chinese parents and relatives towards people who experience same-sex attraction.

Sexual privacy

A common way for these *lala* women to partially alleviate the heteronormative pressures and attitudes of conservative family members was by moving in with their girlfriend, but pretending to simply enjoy a single lifestyle of living with their 'best friend'.

> In China, I have a friend who has a girlfriend, and she [...] brought her girlfriend back home to live with the parents for one or two days, and told them: "That's my roommate." That's a common way I think, to tell parents that it's your roommate. And I think that somehow, they don't want to know the truth. If you tell them it's a roommate or a friend, they can pretend they don't know. But deep inside, they do know. And when your parents see how you grew up, how you never got a boyfriend, I think they will already know. (Charlotte)

> [My parents] don't have a clue. I'm still in the closet, and my girlfriend also is still in the closet. Even though we have lived together for three years now and we have three cats together, they still don't know anything about us. It's quite weird, because our parents both know us, like my parents know about her being my best friend and the same for her parents, but they just assume that we are super besties, they never think of us being in a romantic relationship. (Gina)

Furthermore, Gina shared that she had no intention of telling her parents or other family members about her relationship with her girlfriend, unless she absolutely could not hide it from them any longer. The idea that staying 'single' is regarded by parents and family members as superior to dating another woman is commonly shared among the other participants. Only Anna stated that she believed that her mother, the only relative who knows about her same-sex attraction, would prefer that she dated and started a family with another woman rather than staying single forever, even though she would still prefer her daughter to get married to a man. The other interviewees had no plans or intentions to tell their relatives in the future, unless they either had no other choice but to share that information, or unless they are financially independent and do not have to rely on their parents' support for their livelihood.

Migration to the Netherlands

Around half of the participants explicitly mentioned that their sexuality was part of their motivation behind moving from China to the Netherlands, in addition to wanting to get away

from the current cultural and political environment in China, which they primarily perceived as too patriarchal. The physical distance from their family, community, and hometown in China was furthermore emphasized as a strong motivator to migrate to another country. The Netherlands was regarded as an attractive option due to its relatively queer-friendly environment, since these *lala*s desired to be far removed from the heteronormative pressures that their family put on them while living in China:

> A more friendly environment is definitely one of the reasons why [my girlfriend and I] moved here. And the other reason is related to our parents [...] We haven't come out yet, so the Chinese parents always ask: "When are you going to get a boyfriend? When are you going to get married, have kids and settle?" It's very extreme. (Gina)

> The sexuality reason is a very big reason for me to move to the Netherlands, also the political reasons. Chinese lesbians… we do not live better, even than 10 years ago. I think it's because of the presidency and because of the censorship. (Demi)

These perspectives illustrate that moving away from China, specifically to the Netherlands where the environment is perceived by these participants as more queer-friendly and where LGBTQ+ individuals and marriages enjoy legal recognition and protection laws (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010, 964-965), may be a strategy urban *lala*s use to alleviate the heteronormative pressures placed on them by their family and Chinese society more broadly. The participants' experience of migrating to a location far from their hometown and family in order to 'escape' the both patriarchal society and community of their environment where they were socialized, and the heteronormative ideals and attitudes from family members is in line with the academic literature regarding queer individuals' motivations behind relocating in a place outside of China (Liu 2019, 172).

Online spaces for self-expression

Despite the presence of the familial pressure to fall in love and procreate with a man in offline, everyday conversations and physical spaces, the participants all shared that they are able to express themselves more freely and openly on the Internet, and that, regardless of the online censorship practices of the Chinese Communist Party (Liu 2019, 167), Chinese *lala*s still have access to content related to other *lala* women and female same-sex relationships. This illustrates how, at least in certain online and offline social circles, the power and subsequent pressure of heteronormative ideas and attitudes on queer individuals has been decreasing. In fact, multiple interviewees shared that, in their current online environment and community in China, as well as in physical urban centers such as Shanghai or Beijing, "being a lesbian is a cool thing" (Brianna). This is, according to Anna and Demi, due to Chinese women's growing discontent with Chinese men and the power imbalance between men and women as a result of the Chinese patriarchal society, with its roots in traditional Confucian ideas concerning the hierarchical relationship between men and women (Hua, Yang, and Goldsen 2019, 443).

> I think [my straight friends] are very envious, because right now in China, there's a trend that women do not like men. On some social media platforms in China, people who look like lesbians are more famous, and they can get many likes on their videos. [...] I have many straight friends, but they will say: "Oh you are so lucky that you like women, I wish I could". (Demi)

These examples demonstrate the participants' perceived dichotomy between heteronormative pressures from family and relatives on the one hand, and the popular discourse regarding same-sex relationships and *lala*s on social media platforms where users can stay relatively anonymous such as Xiaohongshu 'Red Note' and among their peers in larger Chinese cities on the other hand.

Attitudes towards xinghun

None of this study's participants had ever seriously considered *xinghun*, the 'formality marriage' between a gay man and a lesbian woman, for themselves. However, all of them know or have at least heard of people in their circle who did decide to enter into a *xinghun* in order to reduce the amount of pressure from their family and community in their hometown to get married and have children quickly. Right before moving to the Netherlands, Brianna stayed in her hometown for a few months and used the ReLa 熱拉 dating app while she was there. This made her realize that:

> there are many lesbians in my hometown, but many of them are married and have children. [...] They would cover up their sexuality and live a normal life. And the only one I know, she's also a Tomboy style [lesbian], and she married a gay. [...] They have a child, a boy. They don't live together. They are legally married, but they don't live together, and she raises the boy by herself. And that guy is the boy's biological father. They used IVF. (Brianna)

The overall consensus among all ten participants in this study is that *xinghun* is ultimately more beneficial for the man than for the woman, since Chinese women in a *xinghun* are still expected to perform the traditional gender roles associated with their gender in a heteronormative society, namely "childbearing, taking care of one's children and elders, and defending the family's integrity" (Liu and Tan 2020, 455), as can also be concluded from Brianna's anecdote. This view is shared by Demi, who lists multiple problems related to the practice of *xinghun*, such as the risks of giving birth for women, the mixing of the woman's money with the man's money, and the bond between the *lala* and the gay man once the two have a child together. This, according to Demi, can not only result in legal issues, but is also "not fair to the woman you [will] love later" (Demi). Freya's perspective on *xinghun*, too, is overwhelmingly negative:

> This practice is very common. I don't have any [people in a *xinghun*] around me. But I have a classmate who pretends to date a gay in order to hide his sexual orientation. The examples I've heard of *xinghun* don't tend to turn out too well. There have been cases of out-of-wedlock girlfriends who couldn't handle it and broke up, cases of marital rape by the man, and cases of parents pushing for children… (Freya)

It is primarily as a result of these risks and inequalities for the *lala* women in the *xinghun* that the participants of this study have never considered such a marriage for themselves, in addition to the aforementioned expectation of needing to perform the role of the 'perfect', heterosexual wife (Liu 2013, 496).

> I never thought of getting married to a man, because I know around my friends' friends, some of them [...] did *xinghun*, they married a gay man, just for the family and to pretend to be normal. But I think I would never do that. I won't get what I want from a man. (Charlotte)

Existing research indicates that the most important factor for most individuals engaged in *xinghun* is the financial status and situation of their partner, and therefore money tends to be a recurring problem in 'formality marriages' (Liu 2013, 497; Huang and Brouwer 2018, 150; Liu and Tan 2020, 443). This was corroborated by Joy, who actually introduced a gay and a lesbian friend to each other for the purpose of *xinghun*, but their marriage later concluded in a messy divorce over problems related to money and their child's custody. Nonetheless, according to Charlotte, *xinghun* may be beneficial for some LGBTQ+ individuals, including one of Charlotte's friends and this friend's girlfriend, depending on what exactly they want out of this marriage:

> I think at least [my friend and her girlfriend] got what they want, because I know the girl's parents are really traditional, they really want her to get married, and she herself also thinks that that's normal, that she needs to get married and have kids. She also works as a teacher, and that's for the government, you just can't come out in that working environment. Getting married would help with your work [...] I think maybe that's what she thinks she has to do. (Charlotte)

Conclusion & Discussion

When considering the pressures the participants of this study faced as a result of societal heteronormativity and the strategies they used to circumvent or utilize ideas rooted in heteronormative power structures, one of the most frequently used and mentioned strategies is to disclose the details of their *lala* dating experience with friends and, occasionally, colleagues, but to refrain from coming out to their parents or other relatives. Even if these *lala*s had lived or are currently living together with their same-sex partner, most of them would not reveal the romantic nature of their relationship to their parents. In order to save their own and their family's *mianzi*, they would rather pretend to remain single than to inform their parents that their roommate is, in fact, their girlfriend, since in a society with heteronormative ideals and power structures, staying single is regarded as favorable to being in a same-sex relationship. I argue that this is due to the fact that a relationship between two women directly opposes and undermines such heteronormative ideals, whereas staying single would not explicitly attack the status quo in a heteronormative society. A *lala* woman deciding to remain single more so suggests that she is choosing not to participate in, and thereby reinforce, activities related to heteronormative power structures and institutions, such as heterosexual marriage.

Another important strategy that was mentioned by various participants for starting relationships with other women was by physically distancing themselves from their family, their community, and their hometown. The distance resulting from international migration, in this case to the Netherlands, frequently combined with the opportunities for higher education or work, allows for *lala*s to date or enter into a relationship with other *lala*s. This distance and lack of overlap in social circles with *lala* women's family and community back in their hometown facilitates a more carefree attitude towards one's dating life and sexuality, partly due to the *lala* individual not needing to worry as much about carefully maintaining her family's reputation and *mianzi*. In addition, the positive attitude of this study's participants towards their lives as *lala* women in the Netherlands illustrates that the Netherlands is regarded as a relatively queer-friendly country by Chinese women with non-normative sexualities.

Furthermore, all the participants of this study had at least some knowledge or experience with the practice of *xinghun*, although none of them had seriously considered it as a strategy for same-sex relationships for themselves. This concept has been discussed quite extensively by scholars studying queer relationships in China (see Huang and Brouwer 2018; Liu 2013; Liu and Tan 2020), which suggest that *xinghun* remains a common method for *lala*s to enter into same-sex relationships with other women, despite being somewhat undesirable among the urban *lala*s interviewed here. This 'formality marriage', generally consisting of a gay man and a lesbian woman, can arguably be regarded as both challenging and reinforcing societal heteronormativity in China. By entering into a marriage that allows both participants to present as heterosexual towards their family and their community, the gay man and lesbian woman significantly reduce the amount of pressure they receive to fully suppress their sexuality, and it provides an opportunity for both parties involved to explore their identity as part of a sexual minority group privately, with a same-sex partner. Therefore, I argue that *xinghun* can be seen

as a challenge to societal heteronormativity, since it provides *lala*s, who may have never gotten romantically involved with other women had they not gotten married to a gay man, the opportunity to start relationships with other women.

However, contrary to what the current academic literature regarding *lala* women and relationship suggests, this study's participants never considered engaging in such a 'formality marriage' for themselves. *Xinghun* is regarded by all participants as a practice that is ultimately more beneficial for the man than for the woman. This gendered inequality within the *xinghun*, which stems from the heteronormative and patriarchal power structures that remain dominant in contemporary China, was cited by the vast majority of the participants as the primary reason why they would not enter a *xinghun* with a gay man themselves. Participants in a *xinghun* are not immune to the traditional roles that are expected of and ascribed to them on the basis of their gender identity and presentation. In fact, gay men in a *xinghun* are expected to be the breadwinners of the family and to present in a strong, masculine manner, whereas the lesbian women are required to bear and raise a child, as well as maintain strong bonds with relatives and community members (Liu and Tan 2020, 455).

A potential explanation for this study's participants' negative attitudes towards *xinghun* is their relatively privileged financial position. These *lala*s' preferred and more positively perceived strategy to negotiate heteronormative and familial pressures in China is to migrate to the Netherlands, which is perceived as a more queer-friendly country than China in terms of public and official attitudes towards non-normative sexualities. This increased physical distance from their family and community provides these *lala*s with an increased sense of privacy, which allows them to express their sexual identity and enter into same-sex relationships more freely. However, migrating to a relatively queer-friendly country such as the Netherlands is only an accessible strategy for Chinese women who either receive financial support from their family or other members of their community, or who are financially independent due to their work experience prior to moving abroad. The fact that this study's participants were financially able to migrate to and study in the Netherlands has likely influenced their perception of *xinghun*, since a more desirable strategy, namely 'queer migration', was available to them.

The heteronormative dichotomy between the non-overlapping masculine and feminine individuals within a relationship as previously discussed in the case of *xinghun* can, to a lesser extent, be observed on *lala* dating applications such as ReLa as well. On these apps, *lala*s essentialize themselves by assigning themselves to the categories of 'T', referring to a relatively masculine 'tomboy', or 'P' for 'Po', which is used to refer to a feminine-presenting *lala*. While dating apps such as ReLa and HER are used primarily for the purpose of finding other women to date in one's vicinity, it is noteworthy that it is particularly common for 'T' women to seek a relationship with a 'P' woman and vice versa, which plays into the heterosexual and heteronormative dating experience in China of masculine men looking for feminine women. Nonetheless, the existence of *lala* dating apps can, in itself, be regarded as a challenge to the heteronormative status quo in Chinese society in the 21st century. Furthermore, *lala*s frequently use the aesthetics associated with a stereotypically 'T' or 'P' Chinese woman in order to signal to other *lala*s that they are not heterosexual, in hopes that this may trigger the other *lala*s

‘gaydar’. However, ‘gaydar’ as a concept has not received extensive attention from scholars and researchers, even less so in the context of Chinese *lala*s. It cannot be concluded that all masculine presenting women in China are attracted to other women, in a similar manner as that it cannot be assumed that all feminine women are only attracted to men. Furthermore, while it lies beyond the scope of this current study, a discussion of an individual’s personal presentation or aesthetic preferences in relation to their gender identity, as well as to its link to sexuality, needs to be explored further in the context of China before concluding that a relatively masculine presenting woman is always attracted to other women. Gender and sexual identity and how these subjectivities relate to personal style and aesthetics are highly nuanced, and an individual’s way of presenting themselves should therefore not be essentialized and viewed as a definite marker of their gender and sexual identity.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What label to describe your sexuality do you feel most comfortable with?
2. How do you feel about the term *lala*?
3. Where (in China) are you from?
4. Have you ever had to 'come out'? Were any of the people around you aware of your experience dating another woman in China?
5. What was your coming out experience like in China, if you had one? How did your family and/or friends react?
6. What was your coming out experience like in the Netherlands, if you had one? How do the two experiences (China vs. the Netherlands) differ?
7. Did you always intend on coming out or have you ever felt tempted to keep your romantic/sexual identity hidden? If so, why?
8. Do you think that living abroad changed your perspective on being part of the LGBTQ+ community? If so, how?
9. Could you tell me the story of how you met and started dating (or engaging in another kind of romantic/sexual relationship) another woman in China?
10. How did you meet other queer women while you were living in China? Were these women openly 'out'? If not, could you tell me why you think some women who are part of the LGBTQ+ community in China do not feel comfortable coming out?
11. From your own experience, do you think it is common for LGBTQ+ women in China to suppress their sexual identity? If so, why?
12. Have you heard of *xinghun* 'formality marriages', or experienced this in any way while you were living in China?