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(Dis)Engagement with queer counterpublics: Exploring intimate and family lives in online and offline spaces in China

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Abstract

There have been ongoing discussions about the ways in which the Internet has created new spaces for sexual minority individuals to meet, communicate, and build their communities in recent decades. Nevertheless, previous studies have paid disproportionate attention to identity politics, civil society, and rights-based movements. They have largely overlooked other possible forms of, and orientations toward, engagement with cyberspace, particularly those that have emerged and been restricted in non-Western contexts. This article examines Chinese lesbians' experiences of using cyberspace and the extent to which these experiences help them develop their intimate and family lives. Drawing on interview data and developing a framework that combines queer counterpublics scholarship with insights drawn from the notion of relational selfhood, this study reveals a wide range of personal, familial, and socio-political motivations for (not) engaging in cyberspace and the mixed feelings of connection and distance experienced by participants. By identifying three forms of (dis)engagement with cyberspace: those demonstrated by 'pioneers', 'skeptics', and 'conflicted pragmatists', this study expands the notion of queer counterpublics beyond its

focus on civic and political participation and illustrates the contested and contingent nature of Chinese queer counterpublics. It shows that Chinese lesbians' interactions in cyberspace enable them to explore non-traditional paths to family formation and motherhood. Meanwhile, these interactions expose them to tensions between the new possibilities revealed by online spaces and established socio-political and familial norms. I argue that prevailing heterosexual norms, coupled with material concerns and the regulatory power of the family and the state, continue to restrict the transformative potential of cyberspace and push some lesbians to withdraw from cyberspace into themselves and refrain from taking part in collective action. The article concludes with some reflections on queer counterpublics and the complex interplay between online and offline lives in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

family, Internet technology, lesbian, motherhood, queer counterpublics, relational self

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that many sexual minority people, especially those who lack offline resources and cannot disclose their sexual identities offline, have moved away from physical locations and into cyberspace, relying on it to create their own social networks and mitigate their experiences of social exclusion (Bartone, 2018; Jenzen, 2017). It is generally believed that online sites now play an indispensable role in the everyday lives of sexual minority people and have given rise to queer[1] counterpublics (Cavalcante, 2019; Friedman, 2017). Warner (2002) conceptualizes counterpublics as discursive spaces that enable groups who are aware of their subordinate status to articulate and develop their identities, interests, and needs in opposition to the dominant group and norms. Inspired by this conceptualization, discussions about virtual queer counterpublics have primarily focused on sexual minority people's experiences of belonging and affiliation, and/or the mobilization of political action via online platforms in Western contexts (Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen, 2017). However, this body of work has largely overlooked other possible forms of, and orientations toward, engagement with queer counterpublics, particularly those that have emerged and been restricted in non-Western contexts where human rights and activism remain limited and even suppressed. This article aims to fill this gap and examines the extent to which cyberspace creates new spaces for Chinese lesbians, who identify themselves as lalas,[2] to challenge established heterosexual and family norms and envision and actualize alternative family forms in the Chinese context, where same-sex relationships remain stigmatized (Miles-Johnson & Wang, 2018) and state control over the Internet has been tightened (Liao, 2019).

My study builds on Ho's conceptualization of 'cyberspace' as 'both an imagined and real space' (2010, p. 101), in which one's online experiences are closely linked to offline ones. As the rise of the Internet destabilizes the conventional public/private boundary and reconfigures the 'realities' of both the public and private realms (Couldry et al., 2016; Moor & Kanji, 2019), this article investigates lalas' experiences of cyberspace as part of their

family-building processes in China. The research questions I seek to answer are: To what extent have lalas' experiences of cyberspace helped them to define and develop their intimate and family lives in the face of persistent heterosexual family norms in China? What are the constraints imposed on their search for new visions of family life via cyberspace?

The objectives of this article are twofold. Firstly, this study aims to contribute to current discussions on queer counterpublics and to sexuality and family studies by investigating the roles of cyberspace in lalas' intimate and family lives. Combining queer counterpublics scholarship with insights drawn from the notion of relational self-hood (Barbalet, 2014; Qi, 2016), which I discuss in the next section, this article identifies the extent to which the features of counterpublics are reflected in lalas' engagement with cyberspace. It also highlights the deep tensions between the transformative potential of cyberspace for lalas' family life and the pressure lalas feel to accommodate socio-political and familial norms. I argue that these tensions reveal the persistence of heterosexual norms and the regulatory power of both the family and the state, which continue to restrict the potentially liberating effects of lalas' experiences of cyberspace on their offline lives.

Secondly, by exploring counterpublics in a restrictive context under state control and self-censorship, this article provides empirical evidence of different approaches to engaging with queer counterpublics. Rather than an ethnocentric understanding of publics and counterpublics as mainly political or civic in orientation, or as a continuum between the two orientations (Breese, 2011), this study draws attention to a wide range of personal, familial, and socio-political motivations for (not) engaging in virtual counterpublics and the mixed feelings of connection and distance experienced by participants. I argue that understanding lalas' accounts of intimate and family life in relation to and in tension with cyberspace provides a particularly useful viewpoint from which to study the potential and constraints of queer counterpublics. It raises important questions about the extent to which individuals use personal and/or collective agency to respond to established norms through online and offline spaces in different contexts.

The article begins by discussing the dynamics between freedom and control experienced by lalas in Chinese cyberspace and critically reflecting upon the notion of queer counterpublics. I then provide a brief description of methods before presenting the interview findings and considering how and under what circumstances lalas may benefit from their involvement in cyberspace to find alternative ways of navigating their intimate and family lives. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for a better understanding of the complex power dynamics involved in queer counterpublics within a digital but still heteronormative environment.

1.1 | The co-existence of freedom and control: Reflecting on the Chinese relational self in online and offline spaces

It is important to attend to the complex power dynamics within Chinese cyberspace, where 'state control, a degree of freedom of expression and self-censorship' coexist (Ho, 2010, p. 99). One of the most significant changes in urban China in recent decades has been the growing visibility of topics related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ)[3] issues on the Internet (Bao, 2020; Engebretsen, 2014). Despite tightening state control over the Internet, which will be elaborated below, the potential of online platforms to open up new forms of intimacy and sociality has been widely discussed in the literature (Chan, 2021; Liu, 2017; Martin, 2009). The emergence of cyberspace, including that of dating apps, has enabled lalas (and gay men) to explore their sexualities and connect with each other through low-cost and often anonymous online communication (Chan, 2021). This provides an alternative to face-to-face interaction, which used to put them at risk of involuntarily revealing their sexual identities and exposing themselves to stigmatization (Ho, 2010). As shown in the findings, cyberspace also plays a key role in enabling lalas to obtain information about potential paths to family life, such as same-sex marriage and the availability of assisted reproductive technology (ART) overseas, neither of which have yet been legally permitted in China (Lo, 2020).

Expanding on prior research examining the impact of online engagement on identities, sexual exploration, community, and activism among Chinese lalas and gay men (Chan, 2021; Engebretsen et al., 2015; Martin, 2009), my study investigates lalas' experiences of cyberspace as part of their family-building processes in China. I argue that the extent to which cyberspace helps give rise to new possibilities for imagining and realizing non-heterosexual intimate and family relationships needs to be understood in relation to a person's relational selfhood and the online and offline environment.

It is almost impossible to decipher lalas' (dis)engagement with queer counterpublics in cyberspace with-out understanding their 'relational self', which is inclined to pursue self-interest and yet simultaneously strives to meet family expectations and interests in their family-centred context (Lo, 2020; Qi, 2016). China and other East Asian contexts, such as Japan and Taiwan, share similar Confucian values, which attach great importance to traditional family values and make it difficult for same-sex relationships to be acknowledged in the family of origin (Brainer, 2019; Khor & Kamano, 2019; Tang, 2020). However, the parental and societal pressure on adult men and women, especially that on women, to marry the opposite sex and have children is extraordinarily pronounced in China (Jackson, 2019; Lo & Chan, 2017). Due to the previous one-child policy and the minimal role of the state in providing welfare and care support, older Chinese parents are inclined to arrange matchmaking dates for their single adult children and push them to have children, who can then provide some sort of support for older family members (Hildebrandt, 2019). The lack of siblings generally increases this pressure on lalas (and gay men). Worse still, women who remain single in their late twenties are often stigmatized as 'leftover women' by state-led propaganda, the media, and society (Ji, 2015; Xie, 2021). These gendered and socio-political forces serve as key stumbling blocks to lalas' family-building experiences. Consequently, many lalas may hide their sexual orientation and/or marry a heterosexual/gay man with the goals of appearing to be heterosexual and avoiding disappoint-ing their parents (Choi & Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2014; Lo, 2020). As I explain further in the findings, it is within this context that cyberspace appears to be a site of tension, a place where lalas tend to locate themselves in relation to their wider family and social worlds and find themselves entangled in a series of self-conflicts while simultaneously having to navigate heteronormative norms, parental expectations, and state control.

Another important point to note is that China's move toward neoliberal governance has given rise to a 'new ethics of self-management and self-orientation' (Zhang & Ong, 2008, p. 8), which urges people to pursue self-interest without challenging the limits set by the government (Kong, 2017, 2019). Scholars have alerted us to the overstatement of the potential of cyberspace for transforming people's thoughts and lives (Berry et al., 2003; Chan, 2021). In particular, recent years have witnessed tightening Chinese state control over the Internet. One example is the recent crackdown on LGBTQ accounts held by university student groups on the WeChat platform in 2021 (Ni & Davidson, 2021). Also, since 2017, homosexuality-related content in online shows and programmes has been banned by the state (Liao, 2019). There have been constant changes and ambiguities in state regulations, which have led to self-censorship by Internet users and businesses in China (Shaw & Zhang, 2018).

These institutional restrictions do not mean, however, that the possibilities of utilizing online platforms as a tool to enhance LGBTQ visibility are completely eliminated (Bao, 2020; Yang, 2019). For instance, some LGBTQ-related NGOs and filmmakers have used the Internet as a 'networked discourse platform' to increase the public visibility of LGBTQ issues and question established sexual norms (Shaw & Zhang, 2018, p. 284). Differently from many of their Western counterparts, who generally enjoy greater freedom to make use of cyberspace to mobilize individual and collective agency for rights-based advocacy and movements (Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen, 2017), lalas (and gay men) have to tread carefully in exploring online spaces while being sensitive to potential state interven-tion (Shaw & Zhang, 2018).

Extending this line of enquiry, the current study goes beyond the focus on political and civic engagement and examines the interplay between cyberspace and lalas' intimate and family lives in order to tackle the unexplored

question: To what extent can cyberspace help lalas form counterpublics and navigate non-traditional paths to family formation and/or motherhood?

1.2 | Re-mapping the diversity of queer counterpublics

Grounding the analysis in a framework that combines queer counterpublics scholarship with insights drawn from Chinese sexuality and family research, the present study engages with important questions about the extent to which cyberspace provides opportunities for lalas to counter the status quo and realize their desired non-heterosexual intimate and family lives. Cyberspace has generally been considered a constructive space that helps organize queer counterpublics (Breese, 2011; Gray, 2014). The notion of 'counterpublics' is premised on the belief that there are multiple and diverse publics in society and that some publics have been excluded from or subordinated to a dominant group or culture due to unequal power relations (Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002). To Warner (2002, p. 112), the 'counter' aspect of counterpublics is manifested in both the awareness of one's subordinate status and the attempt by the subordinate group to 're-create itself as a public'.

The notion of counterpublics has been widely adopted in studies of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other forms of difference (Breese, 2011; Soliman, 2017). In particular, in developing a typology for describing the variety of public spheres, Breese (2011) plots the counterpublics formed by various LGBTQ groups along a continuum between political and civic in orientation. This represents the range of political actions, movements, and civic engagement through associations, clubs, and small groups. The notion of queer counterpublics is useful for my analysis of whether and to what extent Chinese sexual minority women invent counter-discourses in opposition to the mainstream public.

It is noteworthy that current discussions on queer counterpublics have largely been grounded in Euro-American contexts, with a primary focus on the individual and collective construction of pride and activism. Studies focusing on the use of social media among LGBTQ people have highlighted how online counterpublics serve as an ideal vehicle for the practice of 'intimate storytelling', enabling individuals to freely narrate their identities and intimate lives and fostering a sense of pride and community (Cavalcante, 2019, p. 1719). Furthermore, the Internet has become the principal space, especially for young LGBTQ people, to exercise political agency, as evidenced by the prevalence of personal blogs/vlogs and online political campaigns aimed at enhancing LGBTQ visibility and rights (Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen, 2017).

However, the queer potential of cyberspace does not necessarily apply to individuals or communities from different backgrounds. For instance, Roth (2017) acknowledged that the Internet served as a key social resource for coming out among German lesbian-queer people. Meanwhile, the study also found that the participants who encountered most difficulties in coming out offline due to the heteronormative environment also refrained from coming out online, thereby highlighting the importance of understanding online and offline experiences as closely interlinked (Roth, 2017). In other words, the potential of cyberspace to generate queer counterpublics has to take the local context and personal circumstances into account. It does not necessarily translate into the amelioration of social exclusion (Bartone, 2018; Gray, 2014). As I further illustrate with my findings, lalas' experiences of cyberspace may even result in a sense of alienation due to the considerable offline constraints in the Chinese context, where neither the act of coming out nor activism is favored (Kong, 2019; Tsang, 2021).

Few studies have examined the ways in which cyberspace may reconfigure conceptions of intimate and family life in Western contexts. For example, by studying families headed by lesbian couples or single heterosexual women with children conceived through sperm donation, Andreassen (2017) revealed how these families created new forms of intimacy and extended family bonds by online and offline interactions with 'donor siblings' conceived by the same donors but, at the same time, experienced fear that connecting with donor siblings might threaten the existing nuclear family. Similarly, Cooper (2010) discussed how lesbians in

opposite-sex marriages connected with the online community to share similar feelings and experiences of exclusion from not only mainstream society but also from LGBTQ movements, which advocate the pride of coming out. Such exclusion, however, put them in a difficult position when attempting to decide whether and how to maintain or choose between their two separate identities and relationships. These studies demonstrate the different ways in which lesbians may attempt to resist the heteronormative family model by engaging in practices of sharing and community-building in cyberspace. They also highlight the importance of studying the tensions related to, or ambivalences toward, the use of cyberspace and a wider range of forms of, and orientations toward, engagement with online queer counterpublics. This article attends to the generally neglected aspects of queer counterpublics that arise in the family-centered and authoritarian context of China and untangles the ways in which the 'counter' aspect of counterpublics is manifested in lalas' engagement with cyberspace.

2 | METHODS

The themes that I explore in this article are based on in-depth interviews conducted with 35 lala-identified participants. Rather than analyzing online content, I draw on participants' personal narratives of their experiences of cyberspace in order to illustrate their subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. Interviews of around two hours were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, audio-recorded and transcribed, and then translated into English. They included discussions of: participants' experiences of realizing their lala identities, finding same-sex partners, engaging in lala-related online and offline activities, and their views and experiences of intimate and family lives. Ethical approval was provided by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford before the fieldwork commenced. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality.

Recruitment and fieldwork took place in Beijing, the capital of China, between 2017 and 2018. This city serves as an important site for investigation because of its unique position as the political and cultural hub of China and the co-existence of freedom and control within it. Lalas can generally enjoy more opportunities to explore the city's vibrant lala community culture than their counterparts in smaller cities. Yet they continue to be subjected to tight political control, such as intermittent crackdowns on lala public events (Engebretsen, 2014). To diversify the sample, I recruited participants through various channels, including LGBTQ-related and gender-related organizations, my personal networks, and participants' referral to their networks.

Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 45. At the time of the interview, about two-thirds of participants were in a same-sex relationship. The majority had white-collar jobs, working in a variety of sectors, namely the media, finance, logistics, and administration. Over two-thirds had a bachelor's degree and only three had not received a university education. According to recent research (Li, 2019), because the post-1980 cohort in China has generally benefited from government support for basic education and the expansion of university enrolment policies, this generation tends to enjoy greater access to university education than previous generations. As most participants were born in the 1980s, they had experienced these better opportunities to enter university. All participants had had access to the Internet since the rapid development of the Chinese Internet industry during the 1990s. While the relatively small sample size and the hidden nature of the lala population limit the generalizability of the findings, this study is explorative in nature and reveals the complexity of lalas' experiences of cyberspace in relation to their family-building processes.

All the interviews were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the assistance of NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. I checked each of the potential themes against the coded data extracts and the entire data set to ensure that they coherently and meaningfully captured the relevant data. The particular cases discussed here were chosen because they reflect key aspects of themes that are typical among the wider

sample. They serve as examples of the generalized patterns of meaning concerning participants' experiences of cyberspace.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | The pioneers: 'Opening the door' to alternative conceptions of intimate and family life and avenues to motherhood

Almost all the participants said that they would have found it very difficult to resist parental and societal expectations of opposite-sex marriage or to pursue their desired way of life as lalas if they had never been able to access the Internet. 'I would have kept my affections deeply hidden. Perhaps forced to get married? Probably. But my married life would definitely have been unhappy, tragic' (Wen, aged 35). 'It turns out that I can live the way I like. It's not a problem' (Cong, aged 31). These remarks illustrate how lalas' experiences of cyberspace had enabled many of them to challenge established heterosexual norms. Participants also shared their experiences of watching American television series and Chinese lala movies online, which opened their eyes to diverse family forms beyond the traditional heterosexual model. The sharing of such open spaces by lalas echoes, to a large extent, Fraser's description of counterpublics, 'where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (1992, p. 123).

In addition, the experiences of some participants showed that the Internet can be not only a catalyst for self-recognition but also a way of building bridges between parents and adult children. For instance, Qin (aged 35) explained why and how the Internet had been important to her: 'At that time I needed a medium to locate my sexual orientation, to give it a place in society. So I went online and searched for a great deal of information'. This remark highlights her need to navigate her relational selfhood and agency in order to find her own place in her social world through the Internet. Additionally, she had taken the initiative to make use of the Internet to expose her mother to lala-related online information and offline events after years of concealing her sexual orientation. She elaborated on her motive for doing so:

> After all, the accumulation of knowledge and information is all that matters. You have to let your parents know about and receive information about this [sexual orientation] … When they know about it and become familiar with it, they won't find it horrifying, or weird, or terrible.

Qin was one of very few participants who had gained parental support after coming out. While she attributed the support from her open-minded parents to the fact that her family was always receptive to new ideas and different sources of information, given her father's job in the film industry, she also highlighted her continuing efforts to advance her parents' understanding of her sexuality 'step by step' and the key role of cyberspace in facilitating this gradual change. As suggested by Jackson (2019), despite being constrained by the available social and material resources, people can reflexively make and remake their sense of self and locate themselves in relation to others and their social worlds. Qin's experience highlights that cyberspace offers a platform for lalas to actively reflect upon their relational selves and, more importantly, to counter the heteronormative expectations endorsed by their parents.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that participants who were considering having children or had already become mothers tended to attach the greatest importance to the lala community they found via online platforms. For this group of lalas, cyberspace was commonly regarded as an indispensable site for developing feasible ways of forming alternative families within heteronormative Chinese society, which denies them access to ART and refuses to recognize them, socially or legally, as parents (Yu et al., 2018). For instance, Li (aged 36) was seeking ART overseas and planning to conceive during the coming year. She expressed deep gratitude for the practical and

emotional support she had been receiving from an online/offline support group, which targeted lalas who wanted to become or had become mothers.

> In the past I didn't dare to believe that I would be able to have my own children. I thought I should just be very thankful to find a partner in my life. But when I met them [the group] online, I came to realize that there is a new path for us, and I really want to pursue it … It's no exaggeration to say that they're the lighthouse, giving us a clear direction when we were like a lost boat drifting at sea.

Additionally, Li and her spouse took the initiative to share their tips for registering same-sex marriage and seeking ART overseas on the online platform. She explained the motive behind this: 'Because we think this would be especially helpful to everyone in our group … Sharing and being shared complement each other.' The couple's act of sharing their personal experiences online could be considered an example of 'counterhegemonic practices' (Leung & Lee, 2014, p. 343), which helped the group of (prospective) lala mothers to counter the traditional heterosexual family model and pursue the family life they wanted.

The view that the online community of lala mothers could help to create an offline community for their prospective children to socialize with other children raised in lala families was echoed by other participants who were contemplating having children or had already become mothers. They had joined the same online/offline support group because it was the most well-known and established group within the lala community in Beijing. 'There are gatherings from time to time. The child would develop a sense of belonging and understand that he/she is not alone' (Kun, aged 37). 'I don't want the kid to feel that he's that different from others. That's why I've joined the group online to find similar families for him to socialize with other kids' (Ya, aged 34).

In short, the features of counterpublics are reflected in lalas' engagement in cyberspace in the sense that lalas involved in cyberspace may attempt to overcome social exclusion and explore non-traditional paths to family formation and motherhood. Meanwhile, it is also worth noticing the internal heterogeneity within these counterpublics (Soliman, 2017). For instance, only women with relatively more material and social resources might try to pursue motherhood and thus engage in the online community of lala mothers. Also, familial and socio-cultural factors, such as their relationship with their parents and parents' education and occupation, might come into play in lalas' decisions about whether or not to use cyberspace to directly challenge their parents' heteronormative beliefs.

3.2 | The skeptics: Distancing from online/offline communities of lalas and reorienting the focus toward oneself

Although cyberspace was found to help many participants in countering parental and societal expectations toward opposite-sex marriage, it is noteworthy that several participants expressed a sense of alienation from the online community of lalas, and some even revealed a sense of skepticism toward the online community. The suspicion that lalas they met online were 'unreliable' was commonly expressed by my participants. For instance, rather than seeking external support from the online/offline community of lalas, Xuan (aged 27), who was single, shared the common belief held by other participants that it was important to rely on herself. In the past, Xuan had frequently used online dating apps to find potential partners because she found it hard to identify other lalas in real life. Nevertheless, as she aged, she had decided to distance herself from the online community of lalas:

> Although we are all lalas, I don't feel as if I belong there … I feel like everyone is just there for fun … Perhaps some people feel it's good to just idle the days away. To some people, it's totally fine to have recognition from a partner only, or recognition from family. But there are people who need

recognition not only from their partners but also from society. I probably need recognition in many respects.

What mattered most to Xuan was not only a stable same-sex family but, more importantly, parental and societal recognition for herself and her family. At the time of the interview, she reported that she had not come out to her parents, who arranged matchmaking dates for her with men from time to time. To cope with the pressure being exerted on her to marry the opposite sex, she worked long hours every day with the goal of achieving career success and eventually gaining recognition from others. In her opinion, her craving for recognition and career success marked a clear distinction between herself and other lalas, who indulged in cyberspace for frivolous purposes.

Moreover, the belief that some lalas who used online dating platforms were just muddling along and/or seeking casual relationships needs to be understood within the wider social context. Di attributed her unpleasant experiences of meeting 'unreliable' lalas to the social problem in Chinese society, where same-sex relationships and LGBTQ events cannot be 'open' or 'publicized'. She added:

> This is a problem that particularly leaves me at a loss. What you can do is to sneak around, or search [for partners] through apps and online … because this is the only way of finding a friend or a lover or developing a relationship. Is there another way out?

Di's sense of loss and helplessness illustrates the lack of channels, apart from the Internet, for lalas to develop the intimate and family relationships they desire. As mentioned by Di and other participants, the Internet was seen as overflowing with 'unreliable' lalas, who were mostly deep in the closet and reluctant to expose an 'authentic' account of themselves. This echoes the existing literature, which suggests that the 'multiple self-formations' endorsed by lalas (and gay men) in the face of heterosexual norms may complicate the ways in which their sexual identities and intimate relationships are compartmentalized into private and public spheres (Kong, 2016, p. 506). Such compartmentalization further curtails the transformative potential of cyberspace. It is evident that some lalas were not complacent about the increase in freedom brought by exploring their sexual lives online and that they were active in improving their own offline lives by developing their careers and earning a decent living.

On the one hand, participants' decisions to distance themselves from online/offline communities of lalas and rely on themselves could be considered an instance of personal agency. As suggested by Jackson (2019, p. 52), agency 'arises from the human capacity for self-reflexivity, the ability to reflect on ourselves and our social situation, and from relationality, our interactions with others'. My participants were able to actively reflect upon their relational selfhood in the sense that they were trying hard to climb up the social ladder and navigate a better position in relation to others, with the aim of overcoming the stigma attached to their sexual identities and gaining parental and societal recognition.

On the other hand, such agency needs to be understood within the specific context of the neoliberal market economy in China, where people are expected to both obey authoritarian rule and become self-enterprising subjects in pursuit of wealth and personal advancement (Kong, 2017, 2019; Zhang & Ong, 2008). This context might explain why some of my participants set great store by personal agency and development, instead of community-building together with other lalas. It should also be noted that my participants' dislike of casual relationships formed online has rarely been found in previous studies about the use of cyberspace among Chinese gay men. Recent studies on the use of social apps among Chinese gay men show that seeking casual sexual partners and meeting sexual needs are their primary motivations for using these apps (Wang, 2020). In Western studies, it has also generally been found that, compared with lesbians, gay men engaging in online dating tend to attach less importance to monogamy and hold more open attitudes toward uncommitted sex (Potârcă et al., 2015). Such gender differences, coupled with the emphasis on familial stability in Chinese culture (Kong, 2019), might explain why the

majority of participants in my study expressed a strong desire for a monogamous and stable family relationship with their partner. In short, the above-mentioned gendered, familial, and socio-political factors play a role in some lalas' decision to turn their backs on cyberspace and devote their energy to their careers.

3.3 | The conflicted pragmatist: Avoiding being too 'radical' and navigating local and global discourses about rights and same-sex marriage

Another important finding concerns the ways in which lalas made sense of the local and global discourses about rights and same-sex marriage that they witnessed online in relation to the restrictive reality in China, where such discussions remain sensitive (Ho et al., 2018; Liao, 2019). When asked about their views on effective ways of improving the living conditions of lalas, most participants shared the common belief that cyberspace, due to its capacity for spreading messages at high speed and with wide coverage, serves as the most ideal platform for advancing the rights of lalas, particularly the right to same-sex marriage and the right to be free from discrimination. 'There are more and more lala movies and TV series featuring Internet celebrities from this circle [lalas] … Politics or other means is neither efficient nor effective enough' (Yi, aged 33). 'Relatively speaking, the Internet is a free platform. Although they [the government] can delete your message, your autonomy is relatively stronger. No matter what you say, there could be certain power and effects' (Xian, aged 40). These remarks highlight that cyberspace, on which the state tends to keep a relatively looser grip than on physical spaces despite tightening Internet censorship (Bao, 2020; Liao, 2019), was perceived to be a comparatively freer platform for the concerns and needs of lalas to be heard and advocacy of their rights to be publicized, at least among Internet users. They demonstrate that the key feature of counterpublics, which allow socially marginalized individuals to generate and circulate counter-discourses (Soliman, 2017), can be realized in Chinese cyberspace.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that none of my participants had thought about challenging the political authority of the government or claiming any rights for lalas through institutional channels. They were alert to the fact that they could only express their opinions about LGBTQ issues online within acceptable limits. They reported witnessing tightened control over the Internet in recent years. The ban on homosexuality-related content on the online platform Weibo[4] is an example of Internet censorship that was commonly raised by participants. Despite participants' different responses to the ban, there was a common belief that it is unwise to be 'too radical' and that it is important to 'mind your own business' rather than challenging the government. For instance, Lu (aged 38) was one of the very few participants who revealed her attitude toward the ban via the Internet. She shared a photo in which two men are secretly holding hands in the dark environment of a cinema with the intention of highlighting the invisibility of same-sex couples in public, and yet the persistence of true love between them. She explained how and why she had responded to the ban:

> I didn't express my opinion, but I just shared a post [the photo] … I'm relatively prudent, but I do express my thoughts within my scope … To be honest, it's hard to say whether it's useful or not … As a matter of fact, you can just mind your own business. As for me, I just want to be with a person of the same sex. So I keep searching for her …

Lu's statement reveals how lalas' experiences of cyberspace tend to be shaped by the state and self-censorship and how, in turn, these experiences shape their life prospects. It is evident that she exercised self-censorship on the Internet by carefully framing her resistance to the ban. She added: 'Deep down, I feel it's a bit unfair, but I won't ask for too much … I'll just play my part well'. Lu was single at the time of the interview, and she made it clear that finding a same-sex partner and forming a stable family was her top priority, taking the restrictive environment in China into consideration. She touched upon many of the ways in which other participants also reported

experiencing limited agency in cyberspace due to various offline constraints. Her belief that lalas could not 'ask for too much' was echoed by other participants, highlighting an inner conflict between the realization of new life possibilities via cyberspace and the burden of conforming to established social norms and the authoritarian regime.

Xia (aged 38) also admitted that she had been thrilled to witness the growing visibility of LGBTQ lives through the Internet, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage in other countries. Nevertheless, as she aged, she had developed a stronger belief that entering same-sex marriage would never become a feasible option in her real life. This view had much to do with the lack of state and familial support in China in general and her own experience with her parents in particular, who had 'little education' and were unwilling to accept her identity after she came out. Xia explained her reasons for becoming less involved in lala-oriented cyberspace and losing interest in keeping up with the latest trends in global LGBTQ movements:

> Knowing about Pride Parades, public speeches, or the legalization of same-sex marriage in other countries, I was particularly excited, and I felt that our world is getting bigger and bigger … However, now I can't stand others [lalas] getting married … it's too distant from me, although I really want to do it … But for me, without the presence of the parents of both of us, there's something missing.

Xia represents a typical example of how most of the participants were caught in a predicament as they experienced a collision between the excitement and hope triggered by witnessing global LGBTQ movements and the lingering gloom of not gaining recognition in the local Chinese context. On the one hand, her experience of cyberspace, where global discourses about LGBTQ rights abound, had enabled her to recognize her own identity and affirm her previous and current same-sex relationships. On the other hand, as Xia aged, she had come to believe that it is totally unrealistic to fight for rights for lalas in China, given its authoritarian regime. Similarly to many other participants, Xia stressed the importance of paying more attention to her personal finances and practical concerns, such as maintaining a harmonious family relationship with her partner and their families of origin. Thus, she was willing to take up different roles, including the role of a lala in the private sphere and that of a good citizen who would never challenge the heteronormative rules of the state in public.

Such a perception and actualization of social roles could be seen as evidence that runs counter to the Western 'liberal' understanding of selfhood, which overemphasizes individualized choices and neglects the continued significance of the relational ties and structural constraints that shape people's ways of leading their lives (Jackson, 2019; Jackson & Ho, 2020). Xia's experience highlights the continued significance of relational selfhood and family obligations, which largely restrict the extent to which cyberspace can be fully utilized as a platform for counterpublics or can liberate lalas from established norms.

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has shown that lalas' experiences of cyberspace enable them to imagine and realize alternative routes to intimacy and imagine family lives beyond the traditional heterosexual model but, simultaneously, expose them to tensions between the new possibilities revealed by cyberspace and established socio-political and familial norms. The findings show that the constant need to navigate such tensions may push some lalas to withdraw from cyberspace into themselves, prioritizing personal interests instead of community building. Lalas continue to struggle with various constraints that limit the extent to which they can exercise individual and collective agency in order to challenge established norms and bring changes to their intimate and family lives in the digital age. These constraints include the prevailing heteronormative expectations endorsed by parents and society at large, tightening state control, and their own material concerns. My study contributes to current discussions on queer counterpublics and to sexuality and family studies in the following three important ways.

Firstly, by combining queer counterpublics scholarship with insights drawn from Chinese sexuality and family research, my study links the personal and the familial to wider social processes, including the expansion of cyberspace and online LGBTQ and mothering communities. It thereby sheds new light on different opportunities for online and offline resistance to heterosexual family norms. Due to the huge pressure to engage in opposite-sex marriage imposed by their parents and society in general (Engebretsen, 2014; Lo, 2020), participants explained that pursuing their desired forms of family life would not have been possible without cyberspace. These new findings about lalas' family-building aspirations and practices inspired by cyberspace echo previous research showing that online platforms, such as online forums and dating apps, play a key role in helping lalas to connect with each other and attain mutual emotional support against the backdrop of widespread societal disapproval of homosexuality (Chan, 2021; Liu, 2017).

More importantly, as the first of its kind, this study reveals some lalas' active efforts to build mothering communities, both online and offline, which challenge the traditional belief that homosexuality and parenthood are mutually exclusive. In this sense, cyberspace serves as a vital platform for lalas to resist traditional sexual and family norms and seek recognition for their pioneering forms of family life and parenthood in China. These findings show that one should not assume the absence of counterpublics or the incompatibility of queer counterpublics scholarship in China in view of its authoritarian regime. Rather, it is of empirical and theoretical significance to examine how 'personal' or 'family' matters are transformed into matters of online public debate in the digital age. This ties in with the feminist concern to share and politicize everyday life, and potentially allows for new opportunities to counter the status quo (Moor & Kanji, 2019).

On the other hand, the simultaneous sense of connectedness and distance experienced by participants in cyberspace reveals its complex nature and highlights the interplay between online and offline explorations of selves and intimate and family relationships. It is evident that, overall, participants felt inspired by local and global discourses about LGBTQ lives and rights in cyberspace and had discovered new possibilities for forming their own families and pursuing motherhood. However, their relational selfhood, coupled with the wider context of heteronormativity and the regulatory power of the state and the family, could explain why many found themselves entangled in a series of self-conflicts while attempting to navigate established socio-political norms and parental expectations. From this vantage point, this study makes another contribution by generating a deeper understanding of the full terrain of queer counterpublics in different contexts. As mentioned in the introduction, current discussions on LGBTQ people's experiences of cyberspace have been largely grounded in Euro-American contexts, with a primary focus on the discourses of civil society and human rights (Breese, 2011; Cavalcante, 2019). By focusing on lalas' accounts of their intimate and family lives in relation to and in tension with cyberspace, my study extends beyond this focus on political and civic engagement in cyberspace and draws attention to a wide range of personal, familial, and socio-political motivations for (not) engaging in cyberspace, and the mixed feelings of connection and distance experienced by participants. The power of the state and self-censorship in cyberspace, coupled with deep-rooted family norms and material concerns, came into play in cyberspace and even compelled some participants to refrain from actively engaging in it, prevented some from fighting for their own rights, and discouraged some from acting on the family aspirations inspired by their engagement with cyberspace. The current study highlights the contested and contingent nature of Chinese queer counterpublics, in which lalas attempt to adjust and readjust their counterhegemonic practices and to resolve the tensions between the self and established norms by taking their own specific circumstances into account.

Rather than relying on Western-based conceptualization of queer counterpublics, which mainly focus on their political and civic aims (Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen, 2017), I argue for the importance of contextualizing people's experiences of queer counterpublics within the socio-cultural, economic, and political realms of everyday life. Extending the discussion of relational selfhood, my study reveals the complexity of the tensions between non-normative family aspirations constructed through cyberspace and deep-seated socio-political and family conventions. It suggests that any counterpublics facilitated by cyberspace continue to be subjected to the mainstream, still-heteronormative social environment. It calls for more attention to be paid to how and why certain individuals and groups engage in or distance themselves from queer counterpublics, or shift between engagement and self-isolation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] I use the term 'queer counterpublics' as a broad category to refer to the counterpublics engaged by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other groups of gender and sexual minority individuals.

[2] 'Lala' serves as an umbrella category that denotes same-sex sexual subjectivity among women in urban China (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). As all my research participants identified themselves as lalas, this article uses the term to precisely capture participants' identities and document their lived experiences. This is preferable to borrowing Western terms that cannot be seen as equivalent to the term lala, given its cultural specificity.

[3] LGBTQ is used as an umbrella term to refer to issues related to gender and sexual minority people in general. Although diverse Chinese terms have been used to denote LGBTQ subjects in China, including not only 'lala' but also 'gay' (male same-sex sexual subjectivity) and 'tongzhi' (a gender-neutral term for same-sex sexual subjectivity) (Bao, 2018), an in-depth exploration of these identity categories is beyond the scope of this article.

[4] Similar to the functions of Twitter, Weibo serves as the largest microblogging platform in China. To protest against the platform's proposed ban on homosexuality-related content announced on 13 April 2018, many online users of Weibo used the hashtag #IAmGay# to share their experiences of coming out, advocate for LGBTQ rights, and condemn social media censorship (Liao, 2019). As a result, Sina reversed the ban on 16 April 2018 and announced that no more homosexuality-related content would be removed from the platform.

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