

Special Issue – Experiences of and responses to disempowerment, violence and injustice within the relational lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) people



Family formation among lalas (lesbians) in urban China: Strategies for forming families and navigating relationships with families of origin

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which Chinese lesbians, who identify themselves as lalas, form their own families and navigate their relationships with families of origin. To date, there is a lack of research on families formed by same-sex couples in urban China, where homosexuality remains stigmatized. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 35 lala-identified women in Beijing, this article shows that lalas' formation of families has been shaped by, but at the same time shaping, their relationships with their families of origin, who tend to embrace heteronormative family beliefs. Engaging with ongoing debates on choice and individualization, this study reveals the tensions between lalas' family aspirations and gendered, familial, material, and socio-political constraints imposed on female-led same-sex families. It contributes to sociological understanding of family change by revealing alternative paths to same-sex family formation in a context where the act of coming out is challenging and families formed by same-sex couples remain largely invisible.

Keywords

coming out, family, heteronormativity, homosexuality, lesbian, sexuality

The processes and issues of coming out and ways of dealing with the imperative of opposite-sex marriage have occupied centre stage in existing literature on homosexuality in China (Ho et al., 2018; Kong, 2016). These two key issues are interrelated in the sense that they reflect Chinese sexual minority individuals' responses to the filial obligation to marry and how their responses shape their relationships with their families of

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origin (Ho et al., 2018). Rather than the liberal and 'out and proud' queer subject that has been celebrated in some Western contexts (Decena, 2008; Horton, 2018), it is well documented that Chinese sexual minority people continue to face great difficulties in disclosing their sexual identities and relationships to others, especially to the family of origin (Huang and Brouwer, 2018; Yu et al., 2018) and that they are expected to keep a low profile in society (Ho et al., 2018). It remains unknown, however, as to how they form their same-sex families and navigate parental and societal expectations in their family-building processes.

This article is set within the context of ongoing debates about how intimate relationships are shaped by local socio-cultural, economic, and political circumstances (Ho et al., 2018), particularly by changing intergenerational relationships in contemporary China (Liu et al., 2019; Yan, 2010). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 35 Chinese lesbians, who identified themselves as *lalas*,¹ this article focuses on the perspectives of this group of sexual minority women on forming their own families. Engaging with the key issues of coming out and the imperative of opposite-sex marriage confronting Chinese sexual minority individuals (Choi and Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2009, 2014; Kam, 2013), my study adds fresh insights into the literature by examining the ways in which *lalas* navigate their relationships with their families of origin in the context of female-headed same-sex family formation.

The objectives of this article are twofold. First, this article marks the first attempt to provide empirical evidence of *lalas*' processes of family formation in urban China, with a focus on the interplay between *lalas*' processes of negotiating with their families of origin and their strategies for forming their own families. While there is a growing body of Western literature on same-sex families (Gates, 2015), overlooking non-Western same-sex families prevents a complete understanding of all possible forms and dynamics of coming-out and family-building processes.

Second, my study generates a new understanding of bilateral negotiations between *lalas* and their families of origin in the processes of family formation and adds contextual nuance to theorizing about choice and family change. The individualization thesis posits that individuals are becoming less constrained by traditional conventions and more capable of exercising their own choices (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Gay men's and lesbians' agency in coming out and forming intimate relationships fit well into this grand narrative of individualization (Wimark, 2016). Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to the tensions involved in the relationships between families led by same-sex couples and their families of origin (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist, 2015), which, as I argue using the case of China, have great implications for same-sex family formation.

In this article, I begin by outlining key debates on individualization and coming-out processes and questioning the extent to which the Western model of coming out can be applied to other contexts. I then substantiate my critique by discussing the coming-out processes within the Chinese context and analyze *lalas*' social position as sexual minority women and their challenges. Third, drawing on the interview data, I explore *lalas*' strategies for forming their own families and resisting and/or accommodating heterosexual norms, which are often reinforced by their families of origin. I conclude with a discussion on the implications of my findings for sociological theorizing on choice and individualization in the context of family change.

Rethinking the imperative of coming out in the context of changing family lives

Within the field of family sociology, there have been ongoing discussions about the increasing scope for individual choice in the processes of forming intimate and family relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992). Giddens (1992: 35) argues that people in same-sex relationships are ‘prime everyday experimenters’ as they push the boundaries of how families are understood and formed beyond the traditional heterosexual model. Weston (1991) theorizes same-sex relational configurations as ‘families of choice’, which are comprised of flexible networks, including friends, lovers, and people with or without biological ties. These sociological accounts of family change point to the increased agency of individuals to create their desired forms of intimate and family lives in contemporary Western societies.

Nevertheless, the belief that ‘choice’ has become one of the defining features of lesbian and gay notions of family is, in fact, debatable (Dempsey, 2010; Gabrielson, 2011). One important arena for the re-examination of the liberal discourse of choice amidst changing family lives is the coming-out process experienced by sexual minority people. Given increasing societal acceptance of and legal protection for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in many developed countries (Flores et al., 2018), more and more LGB individuals come out at an earlier life stage and consider pursuing parenthood as one of their possible life choices (Gato et al., 2017). However, not all LGB people prefer and have the capacity to freely come out and challenge established family norms in different contexts (Freeman, 2007). Recent Western literature has indicated that LGB people continue to struggle to come out, especially to their families of origin (Alonzo and Buttitta, 2019). Given the increased prevalence of same-sex parenthood, a limited and yet growing body of literature has looked into the ways in which lesbian parent couples negotiate their relationships with their families of origin in the wake of childbirth (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist, 2015), but these studies still predominantly focus on white populations in Western contexts.

Empirical work in Asian contexts, such as that in China (Engebretsen, 2009, 2014), India (Horton, 2018), and Korea (Cho, 2009), has shown that the Western liberal discourse of coming out excludes queer subjects who do not have the economic, political, racial, and/or gendered privileges to exercise individual choice and come out, and equally importantly, overlooks the queer possibilities inherent in other life trajectories other than the act of verbally coming out. As illustrated in this article, studying the Chinese context, which remains unfavorable for coming out and confrontational identity politics (Kong, 2016), allows us to see the importance of attending to specific circumstances and relational ties of individuals in order to understand different paths to coming out and family-building among sexual minority people.

The difficulties in coming out in the Chinese context: continued struggles to come out and navigate relational ties

In China, political authority and family norms continue to define heterosexuality as proper and normal as well as to value the heterosexual family and reproduction as fundamentally important for social and regime stability (Engebretsen, 2014). Lolas and gay men are not

entitled to same-sex marriage, civil partnership, and the use of assisted reproductive technology (ART). Studies show that the pressure to marry the opposite sex imposed by one's family of origin is considered the biggest challenge among Chinese lalas and gay men (Hildebrandt, 2018). Moreover, women who are not yet married by their late 20s tend to be labelled negatively as 'leftover women' (Fincher, 2014). Lalas are doubly marginalized due to their non-heterosexual identity and their non-heterosexually married status.

Given the family-oriented and heteronormative context, scholars draw our attention to unique models of coming out in China. For instance, Chou (2000) argues for the model of 'coming home', in which Chinese gay men and lalas bring their same-sex partners to their parental home with the intention of tacitly integrating their partners into their families of origin without verbally disclosing the couple relationship. However, the model has been criticized for its perpetuation of violence inherent in the silence regarding one's sexuality within the family (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). Recently, Huang and Brouwer (2018) have suggested the model of 'coming with', showing how Chinese queer subjects transform queer subjectivity without necessarily 'coming out' or remaining silent by 'coming home'. Using the example of *xinghun*, a strategy of 'contract marriage' between a gay man and a lala with the goal of appearing to be heterosexual (Engebretsen, 2014), Huang and Brouwer (2018) demonstrate that gay men and lalas may conform to parental and societal expectations but, at the same time, create space for exploring non-normative sexualities and questioning heteronormativity. Their conceptualization of *xinghun* echoes other scholars' views on the strategy (Choi and Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; Wang, 2019). For instance, by interviewing gay men and lalas who engaged in *xinghun*, Choi and Luo (2016) have developed the concept of 'performative family' to illustrate how adult children collaborate with parents, who may have already known about their children's sexual orientations, in performing nominal marriage with the goal of 'formally meet[ing] society's expectations about family and marriage' (p. 276). Huang and Brouwer's (2018) model of 'coming with' is useful to highlight that the goal of many gay men and lalas is to stay close with their families of origin while preserving their own sexualities.

The Chinese models of coming out provide 'norms, aspirations, and prescriptions for how to live as a queer subject in mainland China' (Huang and Brouwer, 2018: 98). Different ways of coming out may enable lalas to carve out their own space for same-sex family formation, but no study has specifically looked into such mechanism to date. The present study extends the discussions surrounding the issues of coming out into the realm of same-sex family formation.

The current study: lalas building their own families in the face of family norms and changes

As demonstrated by their experiences related to coming out, Chinese sexual minority people tend to embrace their 'relational self', which shapes their 'multiple self-formations' in their everyday lives (Kong, 2016: 506). Qi (2016: 40) argues that the individualization thesis 'fails to appreciate a third possibility, namely the Chinese relational self', who embraces more choices to pursue self-interests nowadays, but at the same time, continues to be responsible for working together with his/her family members to maximize

the interests of the family. This notion alerts us to the fact that it is impossible to fully understand lalas' family-building processes without examining their relational ties within the generational and gendered hierarchies in Chinese families.

Lalas, like other Chinese women, are offered new opportunities and yet confronted with challenges as they cope with social and economic changes in China (Ho et al., 2018). The post-socialist era has opened up more space for women to develop their potential, gain access to advanced education and career advancement, and thus enjoy higher social status and mobility (Zhang et al., 2019). Under the one-child policy, parents of only daughters offer concentrated investment to them (Yan, 2013). Also, supported by their parents, more and more women are able to leave their hometowns to pursue better life chances and career prospects through within-China or overseas migration (Jackson and Liu, 2017). It is generally believed that the form of filial piety has changed from children's complete submission to parental authority to reciprocal support between the two generations (Liu, 2018). In particular, downward transfers of resources from older parents have now become a crucial source of support for young adult sons and daughters to deal with practical needs, such as the rising costs of living and housing in urban China (Zhang et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that lalas remain largely disadvantaged when it comes to intergenerational transfers of resources. Given the deep-rooted patrilineal norms (Zhang et al., 2019), several studies have shown that Chinese adult daughters still receive fewer resources from their families of origin compared with adult sons (Hu, 2017). Based on the assumption that a woman would (co-)own a home after marrying a man, parents of adult daughters are less inclined to provide financial support for their children's home ownership compared with those of adult sons (Fincher, 2014). In other words, the downward transfers of resources from elder parents to adult children are still premised upon the traditional heterosexual family model, in which heterosexual older parents are willing to offer more help to their married sons than that to daughters with the goal of facilitating their normative family lives (Zhang et al., 2019). It is thus reasonable to believe that lalas would experience great difficulties in building their female-headed families with limited or even no parental support.

This article seeks to make a further contribution to the ongoing exploration of how individuals juggle family and personal commitments (Yan, 2010). Specifically, my study signifies a new step to probe into the formation of same-sex families by examining lalas' accounts of their experiences of negotiating with their families of origin and building their own female-led families. To date, a growing and yet limited body of literature on homosexuality in China mainly focuses on issues of individual identity and community/activism development (Bao, 2018; Engebretsen, 2014; Engebretsen et al., 2015; Kam, 2013) and tackles how sexual minority individuals negotiate with their parents to respond to the imperative of opposite-sex marriage (Choi and Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; Wang, 2019). Drawing from the perspectives of lalas on forming their own families, my data adds further insights to the current literature by engaging in the rarely discussed aspect of Chinese family relations in the context of female-headed same-sex family formation. What strategies do lalas use to form their own families in China? To what extent and how have lalas' ways of forming their families been shaped by and/or shaped their relationships with their families of origin? These are the key research questions that I seek to answer in this article.

Methodology

This article draws on the findings of the interview data collected between July 2017 and June 2018. I conducted face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 lala-identified Chinese women living in Beijing. Informants' ages ranged from 25 to 45. The majority were in their thirties. 25 were employed and working in a variety of sectors, including media, non-governmental organizations, design, and business. Five worked freelance, four were self-employed, and one was unemployed. Most informants had a Bachelor's degree, while nine had a Master's, one had had high school education, and two had received vocational training.

I recruited my informants through LGBT-related and gender-related organizations, my personal networks, and informants' referral to their networks. I employed purposive sampling based on three criteria, including type of relationship/family status, age, and local or non-local status in Beijing. This allowed me to obtain rich data with a high degree of diversity among informants. Out of 35 informants, 23 were in a same-sex relationship. Among the 23 informants who were in a same-sex relationship, 4 of them were married (same-sex marriage overseas) and 20 were cohabiting with their same-sex partners. Of 35 informants 9 had engaged in contract marriage and were cohabiting with their same-sex partners. Sixteen informants were local residents in Beijing whereas 19 informants came from other provinces in China but had lived in Beijing for work for two or more years.

With the assistance of an interview guide, I discussed a wide array of topics with informants in their native language, which was Mandarin. I responded flexibly to the flow of conversation and allowed enough room for informants to share what they considered important. The topics ranged from informants' identity development as lalas, their everyday interactions with same-sex partners, their ideas or actual practices of (contract) marriage and childbearing, to their social lives and involvement in lala communities. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality.

Using thematic analysis based on Braun's and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, I coded the transcripts line-by-line and generated initial codes after familiarizing myself with the data. I then sorted the different codes into potential themes by carefully considering the relationships between different codes and between different themes. In relation to my research questions, I identified the following three themes to show the complex experiences of informants.

Findings

The strategy of short-term contract marriage: navigating a dual sense of belonging to the family of origin and same-sex family

Out of 35 informants, 9 had decided to engage in a contract marriage with a gay man, sharing the same belief that the major reason behind this strategy was their concern over their parents' well-being, especially their psychological well-being. They highlighted the 'short-term' nature of the marriage as they shared a common plan to get divorced at a

later stage, stalling for a while until a ‘good time’ or the death of their parents. The strategy foregrounded the ways in which lalas navigated their dual sense of belonging to their families of origin and their families with their same-sex partners to varying extent.

Yang (aged 30) had disclosed her sexual identity and relationship to colleagues and friends. She explained her reason for engaging in a contract marriage with a gay man.

My parents are very stressed in their neighbourhood . . . that is why I have done it. Now I find it very troublesome, exhausting . . . but this is the choice. . . . I should not let them suffer . . . just let them live happily in their world, but I won’t change my life trajectory because of anyone, including my parents.

Yang’s view about the intense pressure faced by parents was echoed by many informants. They were worried that coming out would threaten the ‘face’, or prestige, of their parents and force their parents to bear the burden of keeping their non-conventional identities and family lives secret among relatives and neighbours. What concerned them most was that coming out would ‘push parents into another closet’. Also, Yang believed that the strategy enabled her to enjoy freedom by moving out of her natal home and cohabiting with her same-sex partner. Her need to escape from parental control was typical among informants. It is common for Chinese parents to expect their single daughters to live with them before marrying someone of the opposite sex (Wang, 2019).

Impact of contract marriage on lalas’ family lives. The strategy of contract marriage, nevertheless, impacted the relationships of lala couples to varying extents. Yang reported that her same-sex partner was very sad to ‘see her get married’ despite the fact that she supported her strategy. That was why Yang had decided to organize a wedding with her same-sex partner before the wedding with her gay husband. The wedding with her same-sex partner was attended by more than 100 people, including their friends, teachers, and colleagues but not their families of origin. Yang saw her family of origin and her family formed with her same-sex partner as ‘two separate parts’ of her family, both of which were considered very important but mutually exclusive in her everyday life.

Another informant Hong (aged 31) engaged in contract marriage to avoid her parents ‘suffering the pain of accepting [her] sexual orientation’. Similar to Yang, she expressed mixed feelings of intimacy with and distance from her parents.

Our relationship [with same-sex partner] is a much more important family relation to me than that with my parents. I know that my parents treat me so well and have done a lot for me. But I rely much more heavily on the intimacy with her. . . . Because my parents can’t understand me and I can’t reveal my true thoughts to them. This has fundamentally created a huge distance between us.

Hong’s experience was typical of the complicated dynamics that came into play in informants’ family-building processes as they needed to manage their dual sense of belonging to the family of origin and same-sex family, and navigate intimacy with and distance from parents to varying degrees. Hong recalled several conflicts with her same-sex partner, who also engaged in contract marriage. Hong was particularly disappointed

by the fact that her partner still gave money to her natal family and treated her natal family 'more as her family'. By contrast, Hong tried her best to contribute to their same-sex family by capitalizing on her contract marriage and seeking parents' financial support, which was hardly a feasible option among other informants who had come out to their parents and thus suffered from their parents' withdrawal of financial support.

When narrating her conflicts with her same-sex partner, Hong added that the closet nature of their family put her into a difficult position to handle her relationship with parents because her secret family life created an inevitable distance between her parents and herself. Such difficulty was seen by Hong and many other informants as one of the greatest challenges confronting lala families. It could explain her mixed feelings towards her parents and her disappointment towards her partner, who was reluctant to distance herself from her natal family in the same way Hong did. While heterosexual couples may also experience disagreements in relation to filial obligations for their natal and marital families (Choi and Peng, 2016), the experience of Hong highlights lalas' additional difficulties in handling such disagreements. It is difficult for lalas to negotiate with their natal families due to their closet identities and family status, and at the same time, manage different degrees of mixed feelings towards parents within the couple.

Engaging the family of origin in contract marriage and divorce. Consistent with previous research on contract marriage (Choi and Luo, 2016), my findings showed that engaging in contract marriage could be the result of collaboration between parents and lala adult children rather than a decision made by lalas themselves. They also provided further insights into the ways in which lalas worked strategically with one or both of their parents to rebuild familial emotional bonds and redefine the acceptable boundaries of the family as lalas paved the way for the dissolution of the short-term contract marriage.

Wen (aged 35) had a very stable relationship with her same-sex partner for almost 10 years. She believed that it was very important for her to be true to herself and her parents and thus she had decided to come out to her mother. The act of coming out was immediately followed by, as Wen described, a three-year 'fierce storm' which involved numerous phone calls from her mother to her partner to ask her to leave her daughter, her mother's threats to commit suicide, and her father's experience of heart attack after learning from Wen's mother about her sexual orientation. Thus, Wen had taken the initiative to suggest staging a fake wedding to protect the 'face' of the family. She said, 'But I assured them [parents] I would not marry a guy. They definitely had thought about it [the fake wedding].'

The turning point in her 'bitter struggle' with parents came after Wen gave her mother an 18-page written letter, in which she clearly explained her desire for women since she was small, her ability to lead a decent life, and her future plan. After reading the letter, her mother called Wen and asked her to organize a fake wedding in front of her father and other relatives in her hometown. As Wen's father raised doubts about the 'marriage' in front of Wen's mother from time to time after the wedding, Wen reported that she had been working with her mother to reveal the truth bit by bit, with the goal of gradually changing her father's mindset from a focus on the 'face' of the family to that on the 'happiness' of family members. Wen was the only one among the nine informants who entered contract marriage in 'collaboration' with her parent, but her case clearly demonstrated the persistence of rigid and heteronormative family values upheld by parents, especially the

father, and at the same time, the compromise solution reached among lala adult children and their parent(s).

While planning for the divorce, one of the informants, Ting (aged 32) had also decided to come out to her mother. Although her act of coming out was followed by her mother's outburst of shock, tears, and anger, Ting took the initiative to share information and articles about homosexuality with her mother. Her mother eventually began to ask Ting more questions about her girlfriend and their relationship. Ting recalled one of the remarks of her mother:

She said to me, 'The way you two are living, it's fine as long as you feel happy.' . . . 'You used to bear huge pressure on your own. Now that I am aware of it, let's share it together.' This is really touching.

Although Ting's mother still held the belief that homosexuality should be kept as a taboo subject within the wider family, Ting saw her mother's support as 'a very good start' in their changing parent-child relationship, in which she used to experience an intense contradiction between 'keeping a huge distance' and 'treating parents well' in her performance of contract marriage.

The necessary 'detour': avoiding confrontations and (re-)framing intimacy

There was a strong belief among most informants that one of the prerequisites of building a lala family is to make compromises that took into account heteronormative beliefs endorsed by their families of origin. One of the common ways of doing so was to take an indirect and non-confrontational route to same-sex family formation. Four informants referred to the same Chinese term '*qu xian jiu guo*' (*qu xian*: curve; *jiu guo*: save the country) to illustrate their strategies. Dating back to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–45), this term depicts the ways in which Chinese politicians cooperated with the Japanese enemy as a political manoeuvre with the ultimate aim of resisting the enemy, keeping the peace, and rescuing the country. The scenarios below illustrate the ways in which informants pursued different indirect routes in their processes of family formation.

Impact of the detour (qu xian) on lalas' family lives. By registering a same-sex marriage overseas and claiming her preference for singlehood, Shan (aged 29) made her detour to avoid confrontation with her parents. Shan had been with her same-sex partner for more than nine years and they got married in the US. Nevertheless, she insisted that she 'preferred a single life' in front of her parents because she was afraid of hurting them by coming out. She considered her expression of the preference for a single life an 'indirect strategy' for reducing her parents' expectations of her marrying the opposite sex. Also, coming out would pose a threat to her job in the government, which was secured due to the network of her family of origin.

Despite Shan's emphasis on the importance of making the detour, she adopted the strategy at considerable cost to her own family life with her spouse. Living with her parents as a 'single' daughter, she could not cohabit with her spouse. Also, she had given up the possibility of having children due to heteronormative expectations towards reproduction.

It's impossible to tell my mum that I am having a child as I haven't got a boyfriend and I am still single. If I really decide to have a baby, I probably need to consider whether I need to enter contract marriage and find a guy. . . . But seriously this is another huge trouble.

Echoing Shan's view, Jia (aged 31), who was single at the time of the interview, believed that singlehood was much more acceptable than homosexuality in urban China. Nevertheless, she had been lying to her parents that she had been dating men and had experienced several break-ups. She hoped to show her parents her 'good attitude' towards the search of a reliable male partner despite numerous failures and thus to pave the way for eventually coming out when she would be in need of care by another person in her old age. For Jia, the biggest difficulty in building a family with a lala was to find a like-minded person who would be willing to 'take such a detour and not to choose an easy mode', which referred to the mode of entering opposite-sex marriage and having children.

Guiding the family of origin through the detour. Continued effort to avoid confronting their parents with their sexuality was commonly seen among informants. However, some lalas might take a more proactive role in 'educating' their parents about non-traditional forms of family life.

As a divorced lala, Meng (aged 33) explained the reason for marrying a man at the age of 30, 'At that time I felt the need to get married and live a life as a normal person because of my parents.' Right after giving birth to her daughter conceived through ART, Meng, however, had decided to divorce her husband, who provided the sperm, and end the marriage, or as Meng called it, the 'game'. Since then, Meng and her current same-sex partner had been raising the child and they sometimes met her parents together. Meng expressed that she was very curious about how her parents viewed her relationship with her partner, but she had never asked any questions and neither had her parents. Her decision not to verbally come out to her parents demonstrated the persistent confines of heteronormative family life. Meanwhile, Meng expressed her strong desire and attempt to 'lead a freer life and be able to do what [she] wants'. Therefore, she continued to push back the boundaries of the family by educating her parents on the torture of normativity without breaking the taboo subject of homosexuality.

This is what I've told them. 'Do you want me to live a good life or not? Living a life you see as normal? Living a life as a normal person is sheer torture to me. Do you want me to have a tortured life?' . . . My parents are becoming more concerned about themselves and they no longer bother that much with others. This is how we have been guiding them . . .

Similarly, Min (aged 37) had been reframing her relationship with her same-sex partner in a way that could be more easily accepted by her 'traditional' father. With a strong determination to 'be herself' and not to 'play the role of a submissive child', Min had already come out to her mother, who had then decided to tell her husband. Nevertheless, Min's father insisted that what Min's mother said was 'impossible'. While Min shared gay-related movies with her mother to increase her understanding of same-sex relationships, she used a different approach to dealing with her father's denial.

I don't directly tell him that I am a homosexual, or that I like girls. I just let him recognize my current living condition. That is, I am living together with my partner, living a life together ever after. . . . Now my dad has already accepted that I am single and living a life together with my partner. . . . Sometimes when she didn't come [to family gatherings], my dad asked me to bring her next time.

Min expressed a strong sense of responsibility to encourage her parents to 'grow' and thus she strongly opposed the use of the strategy of contract marriage. Although her relationship with her same-sex partner had not yet completely accepted by her father, Min was willing to walk her father through a display of non-heteronormative intimate and family ties, albeit in an indirect way.

In short, informants' strategies for taking a detour were intended to accommodate or circumvent heteronormative expectations and rules. Drawing on the idea of '*qu xian jiu guo*', Jia explicated, 'In the past, it was all about the country. Now it's about myself. That is, you save your own love life through a *qu xian* [an indirect route].' Lalas' pursuit of indirect routes to same-sex family formation not only highlighted the intense struggle between a lala's desire to 'be herself' and the persistent power of heteronormativity, but it also revealed the attempts and potential of lalas to influence their families of origin in a positive way.

'My ability is my sense of security': excelling as a self-sufficient and independent lala

In the absence of parental support and official recognition of same-sex families from the government, informants revealed that they needed to devote themselves to securing financial independence and to become independent-minded in order to conquer parental influence, navigate relationships with families of origin, and develop their own families.

Impact of financial independence on lalas' family lives. Many informants indicated that they would not have put as much effort into paid work if they were 'normal heterosexual' women. 'My ability is my sense of security. I must be able to earn money. . . . I feel that making myself better is the best weapon to shut people up' (Meng, aged 33); 'I want to use my own ability to turn it [marriage] into reality and this is why I plan to migrate to a foreign country' (Tao, aged 36). Similar to previous studies, which show that Chinese sexual minority people tend to see financial success as a precondition for coming out as respectable persons (Ho and Tsang, 2012; Kam, 2013), my findings suggest that lalas tend to rely on their 'economic power' to overcome parental and societal disapproval of homosexuality and practical constraints in China, such as the unavailability of legalized same-sex marriage and ART for same-sex couples.

Ya (aged 34) further illustrated the importance of both financial independence and mental strength in families formed by lalas. She married her same-sex partner in the US two years before. They had a child conceived by Ya's partner through ART overseas the previous year. Despite a working-class family background, Ya had been working very hard to secure a job at the mid-senior management level. She said:

If you are a boy, your parents have probably been trying their best to save money for you since your early age so that you can buy a house and marry a woman. But if you are a girl, your parents don't do the same for you. These are the difficulties. So you must have enough money. Your relationship has to be more than good enough.

Ya's remarks pointed to the persistence of heterosexual norms embedded in parent-child relationships and the lack of intergenerational support for women who would like to head their own same-sex families. That is why Ya suggested that it was very important to have a stable and good relationship that could provide a solid foundation for continued resistance against material obstacles and against the temptation to enter opposite-sex marriage which would generally guarantee support from parents and the husband.

Having come out to her parents, Ya reported that her parents had already accepted that her happiness was the most important thing and that they no longer persuaded her into changing her sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Ya was deeply concerned about her parents' 'face', taking account of their difficulties in openly talking about her non-normative family life in front of their friends and relatives. The feeling of guilt and the pressure to 'succeed' in the (future) same-sex family were commonly found among informants who had verbally come out to their parents. Ya said:

You have to believe from the bottom of your heart that you do not feel sorry for your family members. This hurdle is very challenging because you know that your family members would be hurt by others because of you. . . . After turning yourself into a stronger person, you definitely have to show your parents that you are living a decent life. You really have to!

Pursuing independence from the influence of the family of origin and the heterosexual model. The need to develop the ability to cope with uncertainties and rely on themselves was emphasized by informants. Qu (aged 27) came out to her parents when she was 18 years old and used to believe that 'family was probably a place for you to rely on'. Nevertheless, after coming out, her father forced her to leave their home and terminated financial support for her. Since then, she had learnt to rely on herself and been working very hard to develop her career. When describing her current relationship with her same-sex partner, she firmly indicated that she would never take on the traditional role of a 'housewife':

I am the type of person who very strongly believes in independence. There is a precondition of being a housewife. That is, you have to financially rely on another person. This absolutely runs counter to my values.

Qu admitted that her strong belief in independence had to do with her bitter experience of 'worrying about money every single day' without family support. By showing her parents that she could live a decent life on her own and with her partner, she was now able to get rid of parental control and even reshape her relationship with her parents, particularly that with her mother. She reported that she had gained 'complete acceptance' from her mother and included her mother into her family formed with her same-sex partner. Her mother came to her and her partner's shared apartment to help cook meals and feed their dog every day, whereas her father deliberately avoided the

subject of relationships and no longer interfered in her intimate and family life. After all, Qu's way of forming her own family with another woman posed a direct challenge to the heterosexual male-breadwinner model, which remains deep-seated in patriarchal Chinese society.

While informants who had come out to their families of origin were in the minority in my sample, Qu's strong emphasis on the importance of independence was echoed by many other informants. For instance, Ping (aged 40) had been in a marriage with a heterosexual man for over five years and they had been raising their son together. Similar to the other three informants who had married heterosexual men, Ping reported that she had felt a strong need to follow the norms, which had pushed her into marriage without serious consideration. In addition, she feared that she 'would not be able to live a life on her own' in both financial and psychological terms if she did not get married. She had been earning an unstable income as an artist. Thus, Ping experienced intense struggles as to how and when to get divorced, and how to continue her current intimate relationship with another woman, who was also in a marriage with a heterosexual man.

It really tears you apart to leave something you are familiar with. . . . You can no longer rely on your family. . . . You don't have to think of it as a choice of an intimate relationship. In fact, it's a journey of independence. . . . I have to be independent in my emotional, spiritual, and economic life.

Although Ping had noticed her sexual attraction towards women since she was young, the fact that she had been financially and mentally relying on her family of origin and on men (including her ex-boyfriends and current husband) over the past 40 years made it very difficult for Ping to question the norms and leave her comfort zone. Nevertheless, after meeting her current same-sex partner, Ping had become determined to resist heterosexual norms and become independent-minded as an adult in order to fully engage in their relationship.

Discussion and conclusion

This article examines lalas' family-building strategies, which have been shaped by, but at the same time shaping, their relationships with their families of origin. Building on ongoing debates about how intimate relationships are moulded by local socio-cultural, economic, and political circumstances (Ho et al., 2018) and previous efforts in theorizing the relational understanding of selfhood and coming-out experiences in China (Kong, 2016; Qi, 2016), my study further explicates the ways in which lalas' formation of female-led same-sex families is shaped through relational ties and demonstrates different forms of resistance. This article contributes to sociological understanding of family change in two significant ways.

First, the findings shed new light on the ways in which individuals juggle traditional family obligations and non-normative aspirations for building their own families. Although recent studies on Chinese homosexuality have looked into contract marriage as a response of gay men and lalas to the tension between their personal and other motivations and parental expectations for opposite-sex marriage (Choi and Luo, 2016; Wang,

2019), more attention needs to be paid to the perspectives of same-sex couples on forming their own families. Shifting the focus to female-led same-sex families, this study marks the first attempt to reveal the gendered, familial, material, and socio-political constraints imposed on these families. For instance, worries over parents' loss of 'face', attempts at escaping from parental control over adult daughters, and difficulties in gaining acceptance of one's sexual orientation from parents, especially fathers, influenced the ways in which informants' choices were perceived, constrained, and enacted in their family-building processes. Consistent with previous research on shifting Chinese intergenerational support, which is still biased towards sons and opposite-sex marriage (Fincher, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019), the findings show that it is particularly difficult for lalas to benefit from downward transfers of resources from older parents given their female identity and unmarried status. Informants thus had no choice but to rely on themselves and use various strategies to seek recognition and resources. As the formation of female-headed same-sex families can be seen as a challenge to not only parental authority but also the heterosexual male-breadwinner model, informants were put at a distinct disadvantage in their family-building processes, without parental, state, and societal recognition of their family status. This article highlights that the choices that lalas have in their family-building processes are by no means free from the regulation of social and familial norms, which are often tightly governed by their families of origin, especially fathers.

Second, studying the Chinese context enables us to discover diverse paths to same-sex family formation and alternative forms of resistance against heteronormativity other than the act of directly coming out. The findings suggest that lalas have the potential to reshape the institution of the family from within the family sphere as both lalas and their families of origin negotiate to redefine the acceptable boundaries of the family. The complicated manoeuvre performed by lalas, exemplified by the strategy of short-term contract marriage and that of taking a detour, challenges the overgeneralization of Weston's model (1991), which posits that the act of coming out can create a 'common cultural ground' for 'lesbian- and gay-identified people of all colors and classes' to challenge the long-established solidarity associated with blood ties and develop family ties of their choice (1991: 60). My findings also question the notion of a 'crisis of filial piety' proposed by theories of Chinese individualization (Yan, 2010). Rather than ignoring traditional family obligations and turning their backs on their families of origin, my informants saw their blood ties as an inseparable part of their lives and went to extraordinary lengths not to disappoint parents. Thus, unlike most of their counterparts in Western countries, lalas are unlikely to go through the path from directly coming out to forming their own families in a linear fashion. Rather, they have to handle gendered, familial, material, and socio-political constraints to carefully decide whether, when, and how to come out throughout their family-building processes.

To conclude, this article highlights that understanding families formed by same-sex couples, particularly in contexts where the act of directly coming out remains challenging, requires us to pay more attention to intergenerational family ties and material and socio-political constraints. Future research looking into different aspects of Chinese same-sex families, namely reproductive decision-making and migration, should continue to explore the dynamics of different kinds of relational ties inherent in the family-building processes and power relations within and beyond the family.

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Note

1. I use the term 'lala' in this article for two major reasons. First, 'lala' is a widely known identity category used by Chinese women with same-sex desires for self-identification in urban China (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). Second, all informants in this study identified themselves as lalas. Therefore, I use this term to reflect their identities and lived experiences. Given the cultural specificity of the term 'lala', which is believed to have originated in Taiwan and have been localized in Mainland China through the Internet since the late 1990s (Engebretsen, 2009, 2014), it is noteworthy that this Chinese term does not equate to Western identity categories such as lesbian, homosexual, or queer. In its current use, 'lala' serves as an umbrella category that denotes same-sex sexual subjectivity among women in urban China (Engebretsen, 2014; Yu et al., 2018). While it is important to attend to diverse social and political meanings inherent in Chinese sexual identities, including not only 'lala' but also 'gay' (male same-sex sexual subjectivity) and 'tongzhi' (gender-neutral term for same-sex sexual subjectivity) (Bao, 2018), the complexity of sexual identities is beyond the scope of this study.

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