The interplay between intimacy and commodification: Queer agency and vulnerability amid neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which lesbians' economic and intimate lives are closely intertwined amid neoliberal development in the urban landscape. Previous research on queer urban life has primarily drawn attention to commodified gay neighbourhoods and other sites for sexual consumption, which are often marketised as part of a liberal and queer-friendly urban landscape, in Euro-American contexts. Such a focus is not adequate, however, to capture the complex interplay between intimacy and commodification in contemporary societies. Drawing upon interviews with 35 lesbians in Beijing, this study shows how the market is experienced by lesbians as a site of queer agency and vulnerability under neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics. The findings reveal 'commodified forms of intimacy', through which lesbians actively engage in the labour market and (queer-targeted) pink market in order to develop their intimate relations. Meanwhile, 'intimatised forms of commodification' illustrate how women's gendered and sexual expressions are closely policed and evaluated in the workplace as a site of both economic production and the reproduction of social norms. Participants were conscious of their vulnerable position as women and lesbians in the marketplace, but they were active in strategising ways to navigate urban landscapes of heteronormativity and gender inequalities. This article helps to develop a deeper understanding of the complicated and contradictory impacts of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics on queer communities. It contributes to urban sociology and sexuality studies by mapping the multiple connections between commodified relations and intimate relations in the neoliberal city.

KEYWORDS

consumerism, gender inequality, intimacy, labour market, neoliberal, queer, sexuality, workplace

INTRODUCTION

This article engages with ongoing debates about the extent to which urban spaces, particularly those developed under a neoliberal economic climate, prepare the ground for queer[1] agency and/or reproduce inequalities (Moussawi, 2018; Leung, 2009; Oswin, 2014). Given the male-dominated and family-oriented nature of Chinese culture, combined with the state's neoliberal and yet authoritarian style of governance (Engebretsen, 2014; Lin et al., 2017), studying the experiences of lesbians in China is particularly conducive to a theoretical exploration of the interplay between intimate relations and commodified relations constructed by and constitutive of queer urban life. I ask: How do Chinese lesbians navigate their economic and intimate lives in a context where same-sex relationships are yet to be socially or legally recognised? How do gender and sexuality intersect with the wider socio-political and neoliberal climate in shaping Chinese lesbians' economic and intimate lives?

A growing body of scholarship in the fields of urban sociology and sexuality studies has explored how queer identities and desires have been increasingly commodified and consumed in various ways (Hubbard et al., 2017). However, it has predominantly focused on commodified gay spaces, which are often marketised as part of a liberal and cosmopolitan urban landscape, in Euro-American contexts (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Collins & Drinkwater, 2017). There is still limited knowledge about the complex dynamics of underground queer scenes in more restrictive contexts, where large-scale lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) events continue to be suppressed or spied upon and local queer communities are subjected to discrimination and marginalisation. In addition, most accounts of the intersection of commodification and sexuality have focused on particular commercial sites for sexualised encounters, such as bars, clubs, or certain venues for sex work (Hubbard et al., 2017; Kong, 2017), rather than everyday practices and interactions. This article addresses these dual lacunae by focusing on the Chinese context and examining how lesbians' intimate lives are closely intertwined with their economic lives in Beijing, the capital.

This article has two major objectives. Firstly, by engaging with and queering the notion of 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' (Harvey, 2005), which I discuss below, it examines lesbians' attempts to create more favourable conditions for building their preferred intimate lives through participation in the labour and/or consumer markets. 'Queering' here entails breaking the hetero-/homosexual boundary (Butler, 1990), rendering non-normative sexuality central to the analysis of urban experiences. By tapping into lesbians' active participation in the labour and consumer markets in China, this article raises important questions about the extent to which neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics offers new opportunities for Chinese lesbians to develop their intimate and economic lives. I argue that Chinese lesbians' experiences of striving to be respectable workers despite continuing workplace discrimination, and of finding themselves a place in the pink market (LGBTQ-targeted market), are interwoven with the political system, socio-cultural norms, and shifting queer landscape in neoliberal China.

Secondly, this study builds a constructive dialogue between urban sociology and sexuality studies by examining the ways in which lesbians' economic and intimate lives are interlinked in the city. It extends beyond previous research on the commodification of intimacy, which has predominantly focused on commercial market arrangements amidst the rise of transnational intimate economies, such as the care, sex, and reproduction industries (Constable, 2009; Hofmann & Moreno, 2016). I argue for the importance of examining the complex interplay between intimacy and commodification experienced by socially marginalised groups of women in their everyday urban lives. Studying the market as a site of queer agency and vulnerability, I discuss how relationships based on paid work may involve complex forms of intimacy, while relationships assumed to be based on intimacy are interspersed with market transactions and material needs.

I start by analysing the implications of 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' for the urban experiences of Chinese queer communities in general, and lesbians in particular. Drawing upon in-depth interviews, I then discuss Chinese lesbians' experiences in the labour and consumer markets and the motivations and obstacles involved. In conclusion, I highlight how exploring the complex interplay between intimacy and commodification experienced by Chinese lesbians contributes to a nuanced understanding of queer urban experiences in both the intimate and economic spheres.

Queering 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics': Opportunities and challenges faced by Chinese queer communities

Over the past two decades, a growing number of Chinese queer studies have engaged in critiques of established social categories, especially family, kinship, and other cultural traditions, and have explored the reciprocal relationship between political economy and sexuality in China (Engebretsen, 2014; Wong, 2020). Since the beginning of the reform era (from 1978 to the present), while sex has become less of a taboo topic, the Chinese government still plays a pivotal role in governing gender, sexual, and family norms, including its suppression of same-sex desires and relationships (Bao, 2018). Although homosexuality per se has never been criminalised in China, it was defined as a sexual disorder in the first version of the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders, which was followed from 1978 to 2001. Also, until 1997, homosexuality was associated with the crime of 'hooliganism'. Consequently, many gay men and a few women were arrested, imprisoned, or subjected to political re-education as punishment (Kong, 2016). China's opening up to the global market in 1978 is generally seen as a watershed in Chinese history and among scholars studying Chinese queer identities, practices, and relationships (Bao, 2018). Although Chinese same-sex couples continue to be denied access to marriage, adoption, or the use of assisted reproductive technologies (ART), it is generally believed that the reform has opened up new spaces for the exploration of queer subjectivities and the development of (online and offline) queer communities (Lo, 2022a).

Two important forces behind the rise of the market in shaping Chinese queer experiences – the neoliberal and yet authoritarian style of governance and the expansion of the pink market – are worth discussing here. Firstly, it is important to understand that the Chinese government has actively implemented neoliberal governance since 1978 by encouraging a more flexible market in the country, but, simultaneously, it has shown no signs of faltering in its authoritarian rule (Bao, 2018; Harvey, 2005). This mode of neoliberal governance with 'Chinese characteristics' (Harvey, 2005, p. 20) has had a significant impact on both selfhood and queer desires (Kong, 2017; Lin et al., 2017; Rofel, 2007). Rofel (2007) argues for the emergence of a 'desiring subject', who is eager to pursue their material and emotional self-interest with cosmopolitan aspirations, and yet without losing their Chineseness. In other words, despite rapid urban development, Chinese people are still subjected to heterosexual family norms and social expectations of respectability (Liu et al., 2019). Recent studies also reveal how China's combination of neoliberal governance with authoritarianism has shaped queer desires, which incline towards middle-class cosmopolitan values, consumption, upward social mobility, and even migration to more LGBTQ-friendly countries and regions, yet remain detached from rights-based activism within China (Bao, 2018; Kam, 2020; Lo et al., 2022).

Another important force shaping Chinese queer urban experiences is the rise of the pink market. Globally, an expanding pink economy has emerged, targeting members of LGBTQ communities as potential consumers (Weiss, 2018). In line with neoliberalism, which prioritises privatised consumption as its model of citizenship and community, the rise of the pink market is a double-edged sword – it has rendered LGBTQ people visible as

consumers with more choice to express their identities and politics through the purchase of commodities and services, yet it continues to neglect the needs of LGBTQ people of the lower class and rejects more radical and marginalised voices (Weiss, 2018). Notably, it has taken unique shape in urban China amid a combination of neoliberalism, residual socialism, and individual aspirations towards upward social mobility (Bao, 2018; Wong, 2020). China is believed to be the world's third-largest pink market, after Europe and the USA, with an estimated market value of over US$300 billion per year (Jennings, 2017). Despite tightening state control over topics related to homosexuality, both online and offline (Lo, 2022a), the advent of Internet technologies has facilitated the development of a flourishing pink economy. For instance, Blued, a social app targeted at gay men and headquartered in Beijing, has become the world's first gay-focused social platform to go public (entering the stock market) (Feng, 2020). Previous research also suggests that the Internet enables lesbians and gay men to gain access to information about global queer identities and consumerism (Lo, 2022a), including access to the transnational market of ART (Lo, 2022b). There is a growing number of local private companies providing clients (mainly heterosexual customers but also gay men and lesbians) with tailor-made services to gain access to ART abroad. This recent development needs to be understood within a broader context in which the Chinese government has been encouraging economic liberalisation, which has indirectly created a grey area for queer individuals, especially gay men of the middle or upper class, to manoeuvre through market mechanisms (Wei, 2021).

What has been less widely discussed, however, is how lesbians manoeuvre for more freedom and better resources through the flourishing market in China, and the extent to which the market enables and/or restricts their queer agency. While scholars have paid increasing attention to lesbians' identities and family formation in urban China (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; Lo, 2020, 2022b), detailed and nuanced analyses of their working lives and the interactions between the economic and intimate aspects of their lives are currently lacking. This group of women is worthy of additional attention, given that they are doubly marginalised due to their sexual identity and non-heterosexually married status in China. It is still common for parents to take an active role in their adult children's personal lives, especially their daughters' (Ji, 2015; Lo, 2020; Lo et al., 2022). Due to the minimal functioning of the state to support welfare and care work, Chinese parents often arrange matchmaking dates for their adult children, pushing them to marry the opposite sex and have children, who are then expected to care for older family members (Lo, 2022b). In particular, women who are unmarried by their late 20s are often stigmatised as 'leftover women' (Ji, 2015).

The non-normative sexual identity of Chinese lesbians further complicates the challenges they face in their economic and intimate lives. Given the persistence of heterosexual norms in the family and society at large, many Chinese lesbians (and gay men) hide their sexual orientation and some lesbians engage in contract marriage with gay men in order to appear heterosexual (Choi & Luo, 2016; Lo, 2020). They also avoid disclosing their sexual identities in the workplace due to the fear of jeopardizing their career prospects in a heteronormative work environment, where there is no legislation against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation (Kam, 2013). In particular, research suggests that Chinese lesbians are generally in a disadvantaged position when attempting to build female-headed families, compared with men and heterosexual women (Lo, 2020). This is because the downward transfer of resources from older parents to adult children is still largely premised upon the heterosexual male-breadwinner model, in which men, especially married ones, tend to receive more resources from their parents than women (Lo, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). It is therefore reasonable to believe that, with limited or even no parental support, Chinese lesbians must resort to the labour market and earn money for themselves. While doing so,

they may also explore other options through the consumer market, including travelling abroad to register same-sex marriage and/or use ART.

Taken together, this study explores the ways in which the above-mentioned familial, socio-economic, and political forces in neoliberal China shape lesbians' economic and intimate lives. It also reveals the injustices that lesbians experience in the workplace and consumer market. Building on scholarly debates around the commodification of intimacy (Constable, 2009; Hofmann & Moreno, 2016; Zelizer, 2005), to which I turn below, I seek to advance the theoretical discussion by highlighting different types of connections between the intimate relations and commodified relations involved in lesbians' urban experiences of creating the space to live the life they want.

Mapping connections between intimate relations and commodified relations: A relational framework

This article brings together the analysis of intimate relations and commodified relations within the framework of relationality and situates this analysis within the familial, socio-economic, and political environment of neoliberal China. The framework of 'relationality' has been widely discussed in studies of personal life. Scholars argue that different types of relations, as well as processes of relating, are sociologically important foci in their own right (Mason, 2004; Nordqvist, 2021). Mason (2004, p. 166) sees 'people, selves and values' as 'relational, connected and embedded' in webs of relationships. Jamieson's discussion of intimacy (1998) examines the notion of significant others as intimates who play a key role in shaping the self and the development of relational ties. Informed by these insights, I use the notions of 'intimacy' and 'intimate relations' to refer to a broad range of relationships that matter to Chinese lesbians, including not only sexually intimate relations between the couple but also family relations between lesbians and their parents and those between lesbians and their (prospective) children.

Adopting this relational lens shifts the sociological gaze from the individual to the multiple relations and processes of relating that frame people's lives (Mason, 2004). Taking the enquiry one step further, this article engages with ongoing debates about the interconnectedness between commodification and intimacy in the neoliberal era (Constable, 2009; Hochschild, 2012; Zelizer, 2005). Commodification refers to the process of transforming something that did not previously belong to the market into an aspect of market transactions and giving it market value (Marx, 1978). Constable (2009) argues that intimate relations, which include but are not limited to those involving sex, marriage, reproductive labour, and/or care labour, have become increasingly inseparable from commodified relations in capitalist society. Empirical work has demonstrated how intimate relations are intertwined with commodified relations in various domains of work in different contexts, including sex work in the USA, Europe (Bernstein, 2007), and Vietnam (Lainez, 2020), service work in the UK (Pettinger, 2011), and domestic work among migrants in China (Fu et al., 2018). In these work domains, women tend to exercise certain degrees of agency to reflect upon and negotiate cultural scripts, and yet remain vulnerable to financial precarity and social exclusion (Fu et al., 2018; Lainez, 2020).

Several studies have examined the mixed implications of the commodification of labour power for same-sex intimate relations, revealing the intersection of gender, sexuality, and other social locations in reproducing inequalities (Dilmaghani, 2018). For instance, many studies have examined the inequalities involved in commercial surrogacy arrangements, in which surrogate mothers from underprivileged backgrounds sell their intimate labour to gay intended parents of the middle or upper class from more affluent countries (Hovav, 2019). Such commodification of intimate labour has given gay men more options to build their preferred families. However, it is important to note that less affluent gay men are likely to be

excluded from the surrogacy market (Mamo, 2018). Also, statistics show that lesbian households have significantly lower incomes compared with their gay and heterosexual counterparts in Western contexts, largely due to the gender wage gap (Dilmaghani, 2018). This implies that the attempts made by lesbians to commodify their labour power do not guarantee that they can achieve a reasonable standard of living in a predominantly heterosexual and patriarchal society or enjoy as many options as gay men do when it comes to family-building.

By focusing on the interplay between intimacy and commodification experienced by lesbians in the Chinese context, this study develops the theoretical discussion of how relationships based on paid work may involve complex forms of intimacy, while relationships assumed to be based on intimacy are interspersed with market transactions and material needs. Urban sociologists have long recognised that city space is 'as much a sexual laboratory as a social one' (Heap, 2003, p. 458). While Beijing is often overlooked by scholars interested in studying queer global cities, it is an ideal place to chart hidden queer imaginaries and practices onto the socio-political landscape of the city, where a certain degree of freedom coexists alongside constraints (Lo, 2022a). How do lesbians navigate urban landscapes of heteronormativity and gender inequality while developing their economic and intimate lives in neoliberal China?

METHODS

This article draws on in-depth interviews with 35 lesbians living in Beijing, China. This was chosen as the site of investigation because of its unique position as the political and cultural hub of China, where vibrant queer communities exist despite intermittent crackdowns on large queer events (Bao, 2018; Engebretsen, 2014). This background is conducive to examining the entwining of agency, vulnerability, and state/social control in lesbians' intimate and economic lives. By conducting in-depth individual interviews, I aimed to offer a detailed exploration of 'socially and biographically embedded "relational selves"' (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013, p. 55), revealing the ways in which lesbian participants give meaning to their experiences and link them to their social world. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford. All names presented here have been anonymised.

Participants were recruited through queer organisations, participants' referral to their own networks, and my personal networks from 2017 to 2018. Purposive sampling was used based on three criteria: type of relationship/family status (single, in a same-sex relationship, in a contract marriage with a gay man, and being a mother), age, and local or non-local status in Beijing. This allowed me to recruit lesbians who were likely to be at different stages of family formation, with different levels of access to financial and cultural resources. I planned to recruit about 6–8 participants for each type of relationship/family status, thereby identifying and contrasting different perceptions of and approaches to intimate and economic lives which cut across the sample. It is also noteworthy that my position as a Chinese woman provided an advantage in terms of accessing the hard-to-reach group of sexual minority women and building rapport with them.

A total of 35 lesbians participated in the interviews, each of which lasted around two hours. Participants were aged between 25 and 45, with the majority in their thirties. Almost half of them were local residents in Beijing while the rest had migrated from other Chinese cities. Around two-thirds were in a same-sex relationship, and the rest were single. Nine out of 35 participants had engaged in contract marriage while simultaneously having a same-sex partner. Only six were mothers. The vast majority were employed in different sectors, namely marketing, human resources, and the media, a few worked freelance or owned their own businesses, and one was unemployed. Over two-thirds had a bachelor's degree. As most of

them belonged to the post-1980 birth cohort, they had benefited from the state expansion of university education. While this sample, which is composed largely of members of the middle class with white-collar jobs, may limit the generalisability of the findings, it provides rich insights into how and why lesbians actively participate in paid work, what obstacles lie in their paths to freedom in the economic and intimate realms, and how they react to these obstacles.

In each interview, I started with questions about personal background and self-identification, followed by questions about relationships with same-sex partners and other family members, experiences of exclusion, connections with queer communities, and the wider social environment. While employment and consumption were not originally planned as key areas of investigation, the importance attached to participation in the labour and consumer markets commonly expressed by participants prompted me to explore the linkage between gender, sexuality, intimacy, and commodification.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify shared meanings and experiences that were meaningful to participants. The particular cases discussed below were chosen because they serve as examples of the generalised patterns of meaning associated with the themes and represent the range and diversity of the data.

FINDINGS

Commodified forms of intimacy: Searching for new spaces for mobility and capitalising on the pink market

The findings show that lesbians' intimate and family lives are 'commodified' in the sense that their plans to develop same-sex intimacy and build their own families are interlinked with their 'choices' to become capable workers in the workplace and resourceful producers/consumers in the pink market. For example, Bo (aged 33) stressed that she would have to surrender control over her own life if she still relied on financial support from her parents. She expressed a strong desire to distance herself from her family of origin, who also resided in Beijing and yet did not know her sexual orientation, due to the intense pressure to marry the opposite sex imposed by her parents:

> When I graduated [from college], I was very clear about one thing – The economic base determines the superstructure. This is something I've been taught in politics classes since I was small. That is, you have to be financially independent so that you can fight for and probably live the way you want… If you stay at [parental] home, once you have a girlfriend, you really can't move out. And this was exactly what happened…When I was 28 or 29 years old, my parents said: 'What's wrong with you? If you stay unmarried, just move back home.'

Bo resorted to the commodification of her labour power to achieve her personal goal – to attain financial independence and escape from her parental home to 'live the life she wanted' with her same-sex partner. Notably, Bo's remark demonstrates her own reflection upon the Chinese government's version of Marxist ideology, which stresses the importance of economic growth in its expansion of influence on the global stage (Zhang & Keith, 2017). It needs to be understood within the wider social environment, where neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics – the coupling of authoritarian rule with the economic impulse for self-interest in neoliberal China – has urged people to pursue personal goals without challenging the limits set by the government (Rofel, 2007).

Additionally, the fact that Bo had been pressurised by her parents to move back into their natal home demonstrates the gendered control imposed on unmarried women in China

(Ji, 2015; Lo, 2020). It is still common for single Chinese women to be disciplined by traditional gendered norms imposed by parents, who expect their adult daughters to live with them until entry into (opposite-sex) marriage (Lo, 2020; Lo et al., 2022). Echoing Bo, many participants believed that, rather than directly confronting their parents with their non-heterosexual identities and relationships, it was more prudent to create a place for themselves in the labour market in order to gain control over their personal lives, maintain distance from their families of origin, and therefore preserve familial harmony. For instance, by working as an entrepreneur in the Internet industry, Bo could afford to move out of her parents' home and rent a flat with her same-sex partner. While previous work suggests that Chinese lesbians and gay men generally consider financial independence to be a precondition for coming out as respectable persons (Ho & Tsang, 2012; Kam, 2013), my findings complement these studies by revealing other motivations behind lesbians' commodification of their labour power – throwing off gendered control and gaining mobility capital within and beyond the city.

Compared with other institutions, the market was generally considered a relatively 'freer' space for lesbians to exercise their agency. At the time of the interview, Bo was running a business providing an online dating app for lesbians in China. Given her own bitter experience of handling her relationship with her heterosexual family of origin and the pressure she felt to live a secret life as a lesbian, she was determined to create an online community for other lesbians so that they could enjoy more opportunities to meet each other and develop intimate relationships. Bo said: 'I want to do something related to lesbians' lives…I think every lesbian needs this kind of seed'. To Bo, opening up a lesbian-oriented virtual space through economic entrepreneurship would sow the seeds for a better future for lesbians and provide them with more choices. It is evident that Bo actively embraced the state's neoliberal values and that she reflected the neoliberal aspiration to be a mobile entrepreneurial subject. She emphasised that turning to market mechanisms while finding ways to circumvent anti-LGBTQ Internet censorship was a practical approach to serving the Chinese lesbian community, rather than resorting to activism or mounting direct challenges against the authorities. In other words, the strategy to commodify digital same-sex intimacy can be seen as both complicit and resistant. It does not challenge the state's neoliberal and yet authoritarian style of governance, but it does open up new spaces for queer communities in ways that such governance might not have predicted.

While not all participants had the knowledge or capital to engage in the pink market as Bo did, it was not uncommon for participants to express a need to accumulate more financial resources in order to achieve their fertility and family plans. For instance, Jun (aged 26) was a non-local resident in Beijing and recalled how difficult her life was before:

> I came from a small village, where traditional beliefs prevail. The connection between people is much closer. For example, neighbours always visit each other and talk about a lot of things, so there are no secrets at all… It's more difficult for them to accept it [homosexuality] because everyone will gossip.

Participants often emphasised social and spatial mobility as key to realising personal and familial goals and circumventing the societal and institutional challenges faced by same-sex couples. Almost all the non-local participants said that migrating to Beijing was a way to avoid possible interventions from natal families, enjoy more freedom, and access better resources in the large capital city. Not only did Jun search for better job opportunities in Beijing, but she was also actively planning with her partner to conceive a child. She admitted that earning money was her 'number one priority' so that she could access in vitro

fertilisation (IVF) abroad and thus circumvent the institutional barriers which deny same-sex couples access to ART or adoption in China (Lo, 2022b).

In short, commodified forms of intimacy, as demonstrated by Bo and Jun, largely align with the economic and political logic of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics – respectable (queer) citizens are those who can gain a foothold in the marketplace through the consumption and/or creation of commodities and capital, without challenging the established political order. Meanwhile, opportunities to develop intimate and family lives, subvert traditional gendered and parental expectations, and pursue parenthood carry a high price tag, which can be unaffordable for many economically disadvantaged lesbians.

Intimatised forms of commodification: Handling gendered and sexual obstacles in the labour market

Despite participants' determination to earn money through paid work, it was not uncommon for them to experience discrimination and prejudice in the workplace due to both their gender and sexuality. Not only were some participants cautious about disclosing their sexual orientation in the workplace, but they were also alert to the fact that their gender expression and marital status might affect how they were treated. This sub-section highlights the subtly intimatised forms of commodification, through which one's expressions of selfhood and practices of intimacy are closely monitored by oneself and co-workers and evaluated as aspects of work relations. The findings add new insights to the existing literature demonstrating that traditional boundaries between private and public life are blurring (Hubbard et al., 2017). They show how gender and sexual identities and intimate practices have been differently commodified and valued in the workplace as a location for both economic production and the reproduction of social norms.

Working in the human resources sector for several years, Lu (aged 38) aired her grievances against the dominance of heterosexual norms and the silence around homosexuality in the labour market. She argued that any talk of homosexuality was 'strictly taboo', 'completely impossible', and 'the most sensitive' subject in the workplace in China. Therefore, rather than coming out in public and/or standing up for her own rights and those of other queer communities, she preferred to remain silent about her sexual identity to 'protect' herself from harassment or threats to her career. Nevertheless, she recalled being asked during a previous job interview why she was still single at her age. Lu said she found it 'ridiculous' that women's marital and fertility choices carried such weight in recruitment and promotion:

> They [employers] favour those who are married and have children. Many of my colleagues are married with children. Some of them [female candidates] even explicitly wrote in their resumés that they were married and had one child, or two… I find it ridiculous. Can't you just cut that out? Personally, if you're capable enough, your advantages would outweigh your disadvantages.

Lu's experience shows that lesbians are vulnerable to discrimination in the workplace due to their unmarried status, even when they decide to hide their sexual identity. This reflects a wider social environment where Chinese women still face extraordinary pressure to fulfil heterosexual roles as wives and mothers (Ji, 2015; Lo, 2020). Given the deeply ingrained gender and heterosexual norms in China, decisions about whether to marry someone and have a child, which are generally seen as a personal choice in Western democratic societies, are a moral question about the fulfilment of familial and social obligations (Kam, 2013; Lo, 2022b). Echoing many other participants, Lu argued that failing to conform to these norms and staying single, voluntarily or involuntarily, came at a price –

being labelled as ‘unstable’ or ‘abnormal’ and thus disadvantaged in the job market. Within patriarchal culture, women suffer more from the stigma attached to being single than men, who are less likely to be considered unmarriageable at a later age (Gui, 2020). The fact that Lu felt the need to work extra hard and excel in the labour market demonstrates her agency in attempting to overcome her ‘disadvantages’, but it also shows an awareness of the structural inequalities confronting single women.

Another concern commonly raised by participants related to the social expectations and expressions of femininity and heterosexuality in the workplace. This complicated the ways in which participants, as both lesbians and women, positioned themselves as workers and interacted with co-workers. Qin (aged 35) worked in the energy industry, which she described as ‘very traditional’ and ‘patriarchal’. Similarly to the vast majority of participants, she had not come out to colleagues because she did not think that they would be able to accept or understand her sexual identity. Additionally, she revealed the everyday challenges that she encountered in the workplace:

> I often wear a mask when facing colleagues and bosses. For instance, I just make myself look very feminine. And also when I talk with them, I don’t show who I truly am. Rather, I talk in a so-called socially expected feminine way… It’s emotionally exhausting.

Qin admitted that she had no choice but to perform femininity in order to win recognition from her co-workers, especially men, and to avoid being seen as ‘threatening’ to the male-dominated structure of the workplace. Her remark was echoed by other participants, who believed that lesbians with a masculine gender style tended to face more unfair treatment than those with a feminine gender style. This is in line with previous work showing that non-conforming gender expressions push lesbians, including those who do not disclose their sexual identity, into a disadvantaged position in the workplace (Lo et al., 2022).

A number of participants, including Qin, reported attending matchmaking dates with men introduced by their supervisors in order to avoid arousing suspicion about their sexual orientation. For instance, Dong (aged 33) described her struggles around attending matchmaking dates arranged by her former supervisor and maintaining her secret relationship with her same-sex partner: ‘I just pretend to be a straight woman. She [her same-sex partner] is definitely not happy about it. From the bottom of my heart, I also find it unfair to her.’

These findings show that lesbians’ experiences in the workplace are inextricably linked with their choice (not) to engage in the traditional social script around femininity and opposite-sex intimacy. Given the dominance of heteronormativity in Chinese culture, it was not uncommon for participants to pretend to be heterosexual and engage in business practices of intimacy (such as attending matchmaking dates) in order to meet heteronormative expectations and maintain good work relations.

Fitting into the neoliberal market or being out of place: Strategies to accommodate and/or resist established norms

Participants adopted different strategies to manoeuvre for position within the unequal landscapes of heteronormativity and gender inequalities and to develop their desired economic and intimate lives.

Finding your own ‘comfort zone’

The majority of participants hid their sexual identity in the workplace because they believed that traditional gender and heterosexual expectations remained deeply rooted and that they needed to avoid any threats to their job. Maintaining a low profile in the workplace,

some even reported becoming accustomed to inequalities and protecting themselves by blocking out hostile comments or attacks. For instance, Xian (aged 40), who worked at a state-owned enterprise, said:

> You can't force your colleagues to accept who you are. You're born a woman. This means that you're doomed to inequality…You're not only a woman but also a lesbian, why bother to tell everyone [about your sexual identity]? So I need to find my own place, find my own comfort zone in this chaotic world…I block out the disturbances brought by those negative messages or discrimination.

Participants were conscious of their doubly marginalised position as women and (hidden) lesbians in the workplace. Xian represents a typical example of being caught in a predicament as she realised the importance of keeping her job and yet needed to mentally prepare herself for and acquiesce to workplace injustices.

Rather than attempting to challenge heterosexual norms in the workplace, a few participants decided to play along with the heterosexual rules of the game. Jia (aged 31), who was single at the time of the interview, had been lying to her co-workers by stating that she had married a heterosexual man and had a child. She explained:

> If you tell them [co-workers] that you're single, they'll arrange matchmaking dates for you. Being introduced to guys – it's a nightmare! Also, discrimination against women is actually quite serious in China… It's difficult for a single woman at the age of 30 to find a job. If you're afraid, just go and get married and give birth to a child as soon as possible. So the story I'm telling now is that I'm married and have a child… everyone sees me as normal.

When asked whether she feared her co-workers would discover the truth about her 'married' life, Jia replied with a touch of sarcasm in her voice: 'How dare they question me? Being married and having a child is the default social norm. I just happen to fit in! A perfect match with what society needs.' Her remark highlights the continued power of heteronormativity, which, as conceptualised by Berlant and Warner (1998), refers to 'the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations' that privilege heterosexuality and endow it with 'invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness' (p. 548). Such heteronormativity led her to believe that the story she had fabricated would remain unquestioned. In contrast, any deviance from the normative understanding of the life course, which is tied to entry into opposite-sex marriage and parenting responsibilities, tend to render individuals, especially women, vulnerable to questioning and even discrimination in the workplace. As a result, alternative ways of relational being, especially those that deviate from conventional gendered and sexual scripts, are devalued and suppressed in the labour market.

Steering towards the empowering space

A few participants had decided to manoeuvre for a better position that could grant them recognition and respect in the labour market. For instance, Dong (aged 33) shared her experience of working at an LGBTQ-friendly international corporation in Beijing after quitting her previous job at a conservative government organization:

> You can't stand up for human rights. But it's fine to just get what you want through indirect ways. For example, by joining this company headquartered in the USA…Yesterday my partner joined a gathering with my colleagues…We do have these kinds of social events.

Joining an LGBTQ-friendly organization had significantly improved not only Dong's sense of self but also her intimate relationship. Being able to be open about her sexual identity and introduce her same-sex partner to her co-workers helped her feel at ease and respected in the workplace. Meanwhile, like almost all the other participants, Dong admitted that she had never had any intention of rebelling against established norms or rules in her previous work organization or other institutions. This shows that lesbians may be internalising the 'new ethics of self-management and self-orientation' (Zhang & Ong, 2008, p. 8) – a foundation upon which neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics is built – which urge people to pursue self-interest amid the thriving labour and consumer markets without questioning authoritarian rule.

The work experience of Shi (aged 30) represents another example of both the agency and the constraints experienced by lesbians. Shi worked for a private company in Beijing helping people gain access to ART overseas. She was responsible for providing information about fertility treatment options for Chinese gay men and lesbians in particular. She described how her job had enabled her to develop new ideas about her intimate and family life:

> Before joining this company, I was even thinking that perhaps one day I'd just break up with her. I'd never date a woman… But in this company, my boss deliberately recruits members of the queer community. They said that I've brought a lot to the team – new vibes, new information, and new channels that they need [for attracting customers]…I feel really proud!

Having quit her job in the marketing industry in her hometown, which she considered 'conservative', she believed that her new job in Beijing had opened the door to new possibilities for herself and other same-sex couples who might want to have children through ART. Nevertheless, she reported that the vast majority of her clients were middle- or upper-class gay men. It remains more difficult for lesbians to save enough money to use ART, given the persistent gender inequality and pay gap in the Chinese labour market (He & Wu, 2018). Thus, while Shi could exercise agency and capitalise on market mechanisms to become a valued worker in the labour market and a potential consumer in the ART market, such agency did not necessarily challenge existing structural inequalities, including stratified reproduction along the lines of gender and class (Mamo, 2018).

Getting your priorities right

Despite the positive transformation experienced by some participants in their work and intimate lives, several of them reported that they had to make certain sacrifices in either the realm of work or that of intimacy and re-prioritise what they considered important. Min (aged 37) wanted to have a child, but admitted that she had not made any fertility plans or started any in-depth discussion with her partner over the past nine years because of the huge 'trouble' confronting (prospective) lesbian mothers. Min's remark highlights the 'trouble' that deterred over half of the participants from actively pursuing motherhood:

> If lesbians want a child, they need a great deal of strategic planning and preparation work. Heterosexuals probably need to make preparations only after childbirth. For us, we need to do a lot of preparation before childbirth to give him/her a status, to think about how to get the baby.

Min reported that her life priority was to put her energies into her work as an editor, especially given that her job remained unstable. Her remark illustrates the additional emotional and material burden borne by lesbian couples who want to have children and need to fight for legal and societal recognition of their ties with their children (Lo, 2022b; Lo et al., 2016; Mizielinska, 2022; Tao, 2022). The choice to become a consumer in the transnational intimate economy of assisted reproduction is largely dependent upon one's socio-economic status and access to financial and cultural resources (Lo, 2022b; Yang et al., 2022). My previous work has also highlighted the 'dialectical family imaginaries' in Chinese lesbians' experiences of reproductive decision-making, during which they envision their own aspirations for their ideal family lives while simultaneously striving to gain parental recognition and considering the extent to which their parents can accept non-traditional family scripts (Lo, 2022b). Given that Chinese parents still consider opposite-sex marriage the only pathway to biological parenthood, it is rare for lesbians to discuss their fertility plans with their parents or to seek financial support from them to consume ART (Lo, 2022b). As same-sex couples are denied access to adoption or the use of ART in China, becoming a lesbian mother and building family relations is inextricably linked with commodification processes via overseas markets. Considering these relational and material factors, it is evident that, although neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics has unintentionally transformed the lives of some of the wealthiest queer consumer-citizens through empowered consumerism, it fails to benefit many lesbians, who still earn limited incomes and struggle to overcome gendered and sexual obstacles in the workplace.

The few participants who actually had a child through the use of ART commonly experienced struggles to balance their career with caring responsibilities for their children. Ru (aged 36) had a senior position in a large consulting firm, whereas her partner earned a lower income as a freelancer. At the time of the interview, Ru was pregnant, having conceived her baby through IVF abroad. Choosing not to disclose her lesbian mother identity to her co-workers, she said that she had had no choice but to quit her job in order to embark upon her journey of motherhood:

> I'm very career-oriented. I found it so hard to accept that I'd become unemployed…Giving birth to a child and raising him/her will probably take me three years or more, during which I can't work…But the success rate [of conception via IVF] just gets lower and lower as I age. Later it dawned on me that, as long as I'm capable enough, I'm still a warrior, and I can start over [with my career] later.

Such concerns about career development are common among (intended) lesbian parents because at least one member of the lesbian couple has to sacrifice her career for childcare (Lo et al., 2022). These career-related worries need to be understood within the broader Chinese context in which the welfare system and wider society do not recognise a lesbian couple (and their children) as a family unit (Yu et al., 2018). Not only are lesbian parents denied entitlement to maternity leave at the legal level in China, but they also find it difficult to communicate with their supervisors and co-workers about their parental and familial status and the need to claim maternity leave at the social level. In this heterosexual-family-centred culture, the lack of social scripts around lesbian (and gay) parenthood makes it difficult for lesbian mothers to openly express their preferred ways of being as lesbians and queer parents and thus further complicates the challenges involved in reconciling work and family lives.

These findings demonstrate how neoliberalism operates in China – it engenders queer desire and agency, while perpetuating social inequalities and hierarchies (Bao, 2020). Given the lack of institutional protection and social support for lesbians (and other queer

communities), the neoliberal rhetoric continues to constrain the extent to which lesbians can actualise their ideal forms of intimate and economic lives, openly and with equal rights.

CONCLUSION

This article has built a constructive bridge between urban sociology and sexuality studies by examining Chinese lesbians' experiences of agency and vulnerability in their intimate and economic lives, which have become closely intertwined in the neoliberal city. The findings show that the neoliberal rhetoric surrounding economic success and the expansion of the pink market render the market a site of both queer agency and social inequalities. Studying the interplay between intimacy and commodification offers new empirical and theoretical insights in three ways.

Firstly, by drawing attention to lesbians' everyday urban experiences, I have identified a need to shift the analytical gaze away from particular commercial sites for sexualised encounters, such as bars, clubs, and venues for sex work, towards everyday practices and experiences of 'commodified forms of intimacy' and 'intimatised forms of commodification'. The findings demonstrate the web of social relations that span intimate and economic realms in increasingly diverse and interlinked ways. These include the following:

- how one's commodification of labour power can create favourable conditions for developing intimate relations;
- the subtly intimatised forms of commodification through which intimate relations (such as same-sex intimacy and/or unmarried status) can impact upon career prospects, and work relations can influence the development of intimate relations (such as hiding one's same-sex relationship and/or being pressurised into attending matchmaking dates);
- the dilemmas confronting lesbians, who are left with little choice but to rely heavily on the commodification of their labour power, given that they want to pursue certain types of intimate relations (e.g. working hard in the labour market in order to consume ART overseas), and yet, are sometimes forced to choose between work and intimate relations given the lack of state support (e.g. sacrificing career for motherhood due to institutional and social barriers to access to maternity leave).

While this list is not intended to be exhaustive, the focus on lesbians' everyday lives in a non-Western context enables us to see the multiple connections between commodified relations and intimate relations. Further research is needed to study people's personal lives, not only within the broader political-economic frame but also in terms of the micro power relations within and across the economic and domestic spheres.

Secondly, the findings highlight the catch-22 confronting lesbians: Without a decent job, it is difficult to lead the life they want; but, if openly leading the life they want, it remains difficult to get a decent job. China's heteronormative family-centred culture, coupled with the individualist neoliberal ideology advocating self-responsibility and self-development (Kong, 2017; Lin et al., 2017), may explain why lesbians tend to actively engage in the labour market. Their aim is to enhance both social and spatial mobilities, gain recognition, and/or form their own families with or without children. Lesbians tend to have no choice but to use indirect strategies, such as enacting femininity, hiding their sexual orientation, and at times, performing heterosexuality, in order to navigate gendered and heteronormative expectations. Nevertheless, these strategies may reinforce forms of commodification that shift the state's moral responsibility for protecting individuals from discrimination and ensuring equal rights to family formation to individuals, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies along the lines of gender, sexuality, and class.

Related to the previous point, this article helps to develop a deeper understanding of the complicated and contradictory impacts of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics on the urban experiences of queer communities. Participants were conscious of their vulnerable position as both women and lesbians in the marketplace. However, they were active in strategising ways to deal with this reality and circumvent gendered and heteronormative restrictions. These strategies are, therefore, both conformist and resistant. They continue to facilitate the flow of capital under neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics, while opening up creative space for alternative family imaginaries and practices, in ways that such governance might not have predicted. The participants' creative solutions are worth documenting because they demonstrate various ways of anchoring queer imaginaries to a restrictive urban environment. Research on sexuality and space has highlighted people's efforts to imprint their values, traditions, and aspirations onto a landscape and has called for more attention to be paid to national, geographical, and socio-political variations in the expression of urban sexualities (Stillwagon & Ghaziani, 2019). Moving beyond the focus on Western queer-friendly urban landscapes, this study takes an important step towards providing a richer map of the social dynamics involved in queer practices of carving out distinct places in response to neoliberal rhetoric.

To conclude, by discussing 'commodified forms of intimacy' and 'intimatised forms of commodification', this study reveals how conventional gender and sexual norms, market forces, and institutional hurdles intersect and push lesbians into a difficult position, even though some of them strive extra hard to create a place for themselves in the labour and consumer markets. Future research can build on this study to further explore how interactions between the intimate and economic spheres provide new opportunities for and/or exacerbate the disadvantages of different groups of gender and sexual minority people.

Notes

1. Queer refers to the broad range of non-normative sexual and gender identities, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans.

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The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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