

## Dialectical Family Imaginaries: Navigating Relational Selfhood and Becoming a Parent through Assisted Reproduction in China

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### Abstract

This article examines underexplored aspects of family imaginaries by examining lesbians' ways of thinking and feeling about having children. Drawing on in-depth interviews with lesbians in Beijing, China, I illustrate their agency and difficulties in pursuing parenthood through assisted reproductive technology or other unconventional means and redrawing the boundaries of the family. Building on the concept of family imaginaries and insights into relational selfhood, I identify three types of 'dialectical family imaginaries' in lesbians' accounts of reproductive decision making: imaginaries of bridging, bonding and self-fashioning. These imaginaries are dialectical in the sense that they reproduce cultural ideals of what it means to be related and simultaneously generate new ways of pursuing parenthood while lesbians juggle filial affection and personal, pragmatic goals. This article highlights the sociological utility of 'dialectical family imaginaries' for exploring different forms and meanings of relatedness negotiated between the self, family and intergenerational relations, and wider society.

### Keywords

assisted reproductive technology, family imaginary, intergenerational, lesbian parenthood, relational self, reproduction, sexuality

### Introduction

A growing body of research has documented the experiences of lesbian and gay parents, mostly in western developed countries (e.g. Almack, 2008; Imrie and Golombok, 2020;

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Nordqvist, 2017; Pralat, 2021; Rubio et al., 2020). It generally presents a progressive picture of lesbians' and gay men's parental aspirations, with more members of the younger generations coming out at an earlier stage and considering parenthood to be part of their life trajectories (Gato et al., 2017), despite their continued struggles to navigate heterosexual societal norms (Goldberg et al., 2018). However, little empirical work considers how sexual minority individuals imagine future parenthood in contexts that refuse to recognise them as parents or grant them the rights to adoption or assisted reproductive technology (ART). This study marks the first significant step towards examining how Chinese lesbians, who identify themselves as *lalas*,<sup>1</sup> contemplate and/or actualise their paths to parenthood in China. It adds to the sociological understanding of reproduction and family life by exploring how, and under what circumstances, the clash between oneself and one's family of origin, and that between traditional and new family beliefs, come into play in shaping one's decision (not) to become a parent.

Drawing on the conceptualisation of 'imaginaries' (Adams et al., 2015; Hudson, 2020), combined with insights into the relational self (Mason, 2004; Qi, 2016), this article reveals different types of family imaginaries and discusses how they reflect and reconfigure the tensions between filial affection, pragmatic goals and socio-political constraints. I ask: how do *lalas* think about the prospect of having children in China? What concerns do they have when deciding whether and how to have children? The pressure on adults, especially women, to marry the opposite sex and have children is extraordinarily pronounced in China due to both social norms and state policies favouring the heterosexual family model (Lo, 2020, 2022). *Lalas* are doubly marginalised due to their sexual identity and non-heterosexually married status in China, where coming out remains challenging and same-sex couples are denied access to marriage, civil partnerships, adoption or ART (Engebretsen, 2014; Lo et al., 2022). Drawing on interviews with 33 *lalas*, I argue that they contemplate whether and how to have children through three types of 'dialectical family imaginaries': imaginaries of bridging, bonding and self-fashioning. Embedded within, and constituted through, a web of relationships with the wider family and society, these imaginaries are dialectical in the sense that they both produce and reproduce cultural ideals of what it means to be related as well as swinging between filial affection and personal, pragmatic goals. These different types of dialectical family imaginaries highlight the importance of examining the contradictions and tensions surrounding one's path to parenthood, particularly those associated with the need to juggle personal desires and emotional ties with one's family of origin and to negotiate heteronormative socio-political rules. In short, this article advances both theorisation and empirical evidence about different forms and meanings of being related, against the backdrop of a heteronormative, family-oriented culture that nevertheless encompasses transnational flows of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ)-related information and ART.

I start by discussing how local conditions in China complicate the challenges confronting *lalas* and outlining the theoretical framing of the analysis. I then provide a brief description of methods before illustrating the three types of 'dialectical family imaginaries' in *lalas*' accounts of reproductive decision making. I conclude by highlighting the conceptual utility of 'dialectical family imaginaries' for sociological theorising about reproduction and family life.

## **Becoming a Mother in the Chinese Context: Rethinking Socio-Political Norms Surrounding Gender, Sexuality, Family and Reproduction**

The salience of family relations in China provides an important starting point for understanding *lalas*' accounts of reproductive decision making. The heterosexual family model, composed of two opposite-sex married parents and their biological child(ren), is considered the foundation of social and regime stability and of selfhood (Kam, 2013). The state plays a minimal role in offering welfare or care support; hence, the family bears the major responsibility for the care of family members (Hildebrandt, 2019; Yu et al., 2018). Therefore, it is still common for older Chinese parents to arrange matchmaking dates for their single adult children and push them to have children of their own, who can then sustain intergenerational care support (Hildebrandt, 2019; Lo, 2022). Raising children within opposite-sex marriage is thus considered less of a personal choice than a familial and social obligation (Kam, 2013) and women who are still unmarried by their late 20s are often stigmatised as 'leftover women' (Ji, 2017). *Lalas*, regardless of their childbearing intentions, face a moral dilemma between being labelled as deviant for their single and childless status or being stigmatised as 'abnormal' for coming out as lesbian women/parents.

It is within this context that *lalas*' formation of their own female-headed families and pursuit of parenthood are considered the very antithesis of the Chinese family, if not an unimaginable entity. Many Chinese people equate homosexuality with the rejection of filial piety. This notion, based on Confucian tradition, continues to shape ethical codes in China, despite its change in form from children's complete submission to parental authority to reciprocal support between generations (Liu, 2017; Zheng and Ho, 2017). Given the common belief that biological reproduction 'naturally' gives rise to the most 'respectable' form of family (Kam, 2013; Wong, 2013), *lalas* and gay men are generally considered unable to have their own offspring and/or irresponsible for not fulfilling their filial obligations through reproduction. In fact, my fieldwork has shown that there is a growing number of local private companies providing clients (mainly heterosexual customers but also *lalas* and gay men) with tailor-made consultation services to gain access to ART abroad. To a large extent, this reflects the neoliberal rhetoric in urban China, where individuals, including *lalas* and gay men, are encouraged to utilise the market to pursue their self-interest without challenging authoritarian rule (Kam, 2020; Lo et al., 2022). As I further explain with the data, *lalas* who wish to conceive may travel abroad to seek ART, whereas some may resort to 'partnerships' with gay or heterosexual men to have children without sexual intercourse.

In problematising the taken-for-granted cultural belief that same-sex intimacy and parenthood are mutually exclusive, this article reveals the ways in which *lalas*, who lack legal entitlement to ART and parenthood, think about having children as an (un)achievable goal. Owing to their strong identification with their natal family and desire to sustain good family relationships, many *lalas* and gay men hide their sexual orientation (Kong, 2019; Lo, 2022). Recent research has also shown that some *lalas* and gay men engage in contract marriage (and later get divorced) in order to appear heterosexual (Choi and Luo, 2016; Lo, 2020). In short, the dominance of heterosexual family norms,

coupled with the often hidden nature of homosexual identities in China, largely suppresses and silences *lalas*' (and gay men's) reproductive desires and intentions.

## **Family Imaginaries and Relational Selfhood: A Conceptual Framework**

Reproduction is traditionally understood as 'the process of bringing into the world a copy of that which has gone before' (Nordqvist, 2017: 875). Nevertheless, with the technological advancements in ART, ideas about biological reproduction are changing as people may attach new meanings to biological ties in order to create a variety of previously unimaginable forms of relationships (Franklin, 2013, 2014). ART has provided lesbians with more options to become parents than ever before, in addition to adoption, prior opposite-sex relationships or self-insemination through sperm donation from friends at home or in other settings (Hayman et al., 2015).

Notably, lesbians' ways of perceiving and pursuing different paths to parenthood provide a critical lens through which to reimagine biological relatedness and question the centrality of heterosexuality in reproduction and the family (Mamo, 2018; Nordqvist, 2017). Lesbians who intend to become parents need to undertake unique decision making, including how to conceive a baby, which partner will become the biological parent (Hayman et al., 2015) and how to navigate parenthood in their interactions with health practitioners, teachers and other, heterosexual, families after childbirth (Goldberg et al., 2018; Gusmano and Motterle, 2019; Zamperini et al., 2016). In understanding lesbians' journeys to parenthood, it is essential to examine family imaginaries because they represent personal thoughts, desires and cultural ideals about what it means to be related, within the family and wider society (Nordqvist, 2017; Smart, 2007).

The concept of the imaginary has gained increasing attention in social science scholarship (Adams et al., 2015). While there are diverse theoretical approaches to understanding imaginaries (e.g. Adams et al., 2015; Taylor, 2002), explorations of imaginaries primarily concern people's meaning making and creative articulations of the social world (Adams et al., 2015). For Taylor (2002: 106), a modern social imaginary is 'the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings'. In examining heterosexual women's experiences of using donor eggs, Hudson (2020: 348) argues that imaginaries should be conceived not only as 'collectively formed meanings and affects' but also as 'material, embodied practices' produced through bodies and technologies. She suggests that the imaginary in the context of reproduction 'illuminates how ideas, ambivalences, deliberations and reflections about future family building are deeply ethical, embodied and reflexive' (Hudson, 2020: 357). This echoes Dawney's (2011: 535) idea that 'a subject's capacity to work with and through imaginaries is central to an ethics of the self', by which an individual negotiates existing ethical frames and manages everyday life.

Previous conceptualisations of imaginaries have primarily been anchored in western modernity (Adams et al., 2015). This article enriches the discussion by bringing in a non-western perspective and, more importantly, advancing an analysis of the dialectic between the productive and reproductive aspects of family imaginaries and that of self/other entanglements that are inherent in imaginative practices. I coin the term 'dialectical family imaginaries' to capture two aspects of the contradictions and tensions surrounding one's path to parenthood.

First, the family imaginaries embraced by lalas demonstrate how past horizons and new conceptions of family relatedness go hand in hand – best conceived as a dialectic that continually shapes lalas’ family planning and reproductive decision making. This perspective builds on previous scholars’ argument that imaginaries can be both ‘productive’/‘creative’ and ‘reproductive’/‘imitative’ (Adams et al., 2015: 20). In particular, attending to the dialectic between the innovative and reproductive aspects of family imaginaries allows us to situate individuals’ reproductive decision making within the broader picture of continuity and transformation in contemporary society, and the interaction between them. This is particularly relevant to urban China, which, as Ji (2017) suggests, has witnessed the confluence of ‘Confucian patriarchal tradition’ and the ‘neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility’. Chinese young adults have been more proactive in pursuing personal autonomy and interests than their parents (Yan, 2021). Nevertheless, women are still subjected to the influence of traditional gendered and heterosexual norms, which expect them to be a good daughter, wife and mother (Ji, 2017). Considering the collision between traditional and modern elements of contemporary Chinese society, this study thus proposes the notion of ‘dialectical family imaginaries’ to reveal how lalas (re-)interpret, negotiate and modify past and present family scripts while contemplating whether and how to have children.

Second, the notion of ‘dialectical family imaginaries’ highlights the ways in which individuals’ reproductive decisions are entangled within a wider web of relationships, especially those with their family of origin. These family imaginaries are dialectical in the sense that they are grounded in relation to, and constituted through, a variety of ‘others’ – parents, relatives and wider social networks – which are integral to the Chinese relational self. This perspective engages with the growing focus on relationality in studies of personal life, which assert the continuing significance of family relationships (e.g. Mason, 2004; May, 2011; Smart, 2007). For instance, Mason (2004: 166) sees ‘people, selves and values’ as ‘relational, connected and embedded’ in webs of relationships. In particular, the specific forms that relational selfhood takes in Chinese society deserve further investigation (Lo, 2022; Qi, 2016). As Qi (2016: 40) argues: ‘The dominant family pattern in China today is neither individualistic nor collectivistic but tends to be relational. The self and his/her family work together in such a way that the interests of family members might be harmonized and optimized.’ Previous research has revealed that Chinese lalas tend to embrace the relational self, which constantly attempts to fit together with the wider family while aspiring to preserve their own self-interest, by hiding their sexual identities and/or marrying a heterosexual/gay man in order to maintain harmonious relationships with their natal families (Lo, 2020, 2022).

Building on these previous insights into relational selfhood, this article uses the term ‘dialectical’ to signify the interactions and tensions between self and others that are inherent in lalas’ family imaginaries. With few exceptions (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist, 2015, 2021), previous studies have largely overlooked the role of the wider family in shaping lesbians’ ways of perceiving parenthood. For instance, Almack (2008) revealed that coming out as lesbian parents to families of origin after becoming mothers remained a difficult task in England. Nordqvist (2015) explored the relationship between lesbian parents and their parents and highlighted the role of pregnancy in connecting the two generations. These studies, however, focus on the negotiations between lesbian parents

and their own parents only after their journeys to conception. Rather than presuming that reproductive decisions are primarily made within the couple, I examine how lalas' family imaginaries in the context of reproduction are embedded within, and constituted through, their relationships with families of origin, ethical frames surrounding gender, family and reproduction, and the wider socio-political environment.

## Methods

The data presented in this article was gathered during a qualitative study, which explored lalas' views on and experiences of family formation in China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 Chinese women who identified as lalas. Broad discussion topics included: (1) identity development as lalas; (2) interactions and relationships with same-sex partners and other family members; (3) attitudes towards and/or experiences of parenthood; and (4) experiences and perceptions of the wider social environment. This article focuses on the latter three topics, and particularly on how lalas feel and think about having children. Of the 35 participants, two had become mothers through sexual intercourse with heterosexual men before meeting their same-sex partners. These two are excluded because this article is concerned with the ways in which lalas imagine and/or actualise their futures of (not) having children within the context of their same-sex relationship. 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 between 2017 and 2018 from LGBTQ-related and gender-related organisations, participants' referral to their own networks and my personal networks. Their ages ranged from 25 to 40, with the majority in their 30s. All participants were living in Beijing, the capital of China. Fifteen out of 33 participants were local residents, whereas others had moved to Beijing for work for over two years. Twenty-two participants were in a same-sex relationship. Among them, about one-third had entered into contract marriage with gay men while cohabiting with their same-sex partners. While a few participants were in couple relationships with each other, individual interviews were conducted with the goal of enabling each participant to narrate their experiences on their own terms (Heaphy and Einarsdottir, 2013).

Participants were at different stages of the reproductive decision-making process, ranging from having become parents (six participants), actively planning to have children through various means (nine), hesitation and delay in taking action to pursue parenthood (11) and a lack of interest in or hope of becoming a parent (seven). Of the six participants who were mothers, two had become biological mothers through the use of ART, three had become non-biological mothers through their partners' use of ART and one was the non-biological mother of her gay husband's child conceived through surrogacy. All six were raising their children in China.

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



Given the relatively small sample size, the findings cannot be generalised to the whole lala population across China. Another limitation is that the majority of my participants were middle class with white-collar jobs. Nevertheless, recruiting participants with different ages, local/non-local status and relationship/family status allowed me to reach a heterogeneous group of lalas. This article thus represents a significant step forward in opening up a more comprehensive understanding of diverse views and experiences of (not) having children. More importantly, the sociological utility of 'dialectical family imaginaries' can be applied and further developed when studying journeys to parenthood within a wider context of family change and continuity in other societies.

## Findings

This section presents three types of 'dialectical family imaginaries' – bridging, bonding and self-fashioning – which are grounded in participants' perceptions and experiences related to reproduction and informed by the conceptualisation of the self as relational (e.g. Mason, 2004; Qi, 2016). Following Putnam (2000), bridging refers to the development of social ties across different social and cultural groups and community divides, whereas bonding signifies the development of social ties within social and cultural groups. In the following, I explain how bridging is envisioned as an integral part of lalas' reproductive decision making, as they attempt to bridge the divide between their heterosexual parents and themselves. I use the term bonding to illustrate how lalas who want to become mothers try to bond with their same-sex partner and (prospective) children and stabilise same-sex relationships. Finally, acknowledging the 'ethics of the self' inherent in imaginaries (Dawney, 2011: 535), I identify the ways in which lalas adopt self-fashioning techniques to negotiate established ethical codes and manage their reproductive plans.

### *Imaginaries of Bridging: Negotiating Parental Acceptance of Same-Sex Identity and Family*

When asked about the meaning of becoming a mother, almost all participants associated it with gendered moralities and the fulfilment of parental and societal expectations as a 'normal woman'. One of the surprising findings is that several participants considered having children to be a practical way of negotiating parental acceptance of their same-sex identity and family.

Ru (aged 36) was pregnant at the time of the interview, having entered a 'contract marriage' with a gay man. She engaged in 'contract marriage' to appear heterosexual so as to meet parental and societal expectations about family and marriage, while simultaneously creating space to develop her own family with her same-sex spouse, whom she had married in the USA without her parents' knowledge. She had taken out a loan to conceive her baby through in vitro fertilisation (IVF) using her own egg and sperm from a sperm bank in the USA. Ru's parents, however, had been kept in the dark about the real identity of her baby and assumed the pregnancy to be genetically connected with Ru and her gay husband. Ru said:

We're ready to come out after our baby is born. I'm going to lay out my cards in front of Mum because once our baby is born, what do you want? I'm almost 40 and I still can't decide my own life? That's ridiculous. And I think that my parents and their grandchildren, this kind of intergenerational blood tie is very close. They'll accept their grandchildren even if they don't accept you.

Ru's path to parenthood showed that her family imaginaries were shaped by the cultural ideology of blood ties and the felt obligation to maintain good intergenerational relations. Moreover, she was actively planning with her same-sex spouse to conceive another baby using her spouse's egg and the same donor's sperm, given their shared belief that the 'sibling' relationship between the two children would appear more acceptable to their parents. They could then use this to gain recognition for themselves and their newly formed family when they came out later. The couple thus demonstrated a collective effort to build a bridge between what many participants called the 'small family' (the lala family) and the 'big family' (the natal family). This example shows how individuals' and couples' family imaginaries and reproductive decision making are shaped by and shape wider relational ties, particularly those with their families of origin, as well as reproducing the cultural meaning of blood ties. It foregrounds the relational selfhood inherent in the conception of family imaginaries, through which individuals envision their own aspirations while simultaneously not abandoning their felt obligation to meet parental expectations.

The familial and cultural significance of bringing a grandchild to the natal family was frequently mentioned by participants. Research has shown that the transition to grandparenthood takes place earlier and is much more common in China than in western societies, such as the USA and Europe (Zhang et al., 2020). This has much to do with the continued pressure to have children and established norms surrounding intergenerational practices of care (Lo and Chan, 2017; Lo et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020). It is against this backdrop that many participants' narratives around having children included concerns about their parents' desire to take on the normative role of grandparent and raise a grandchild. For instance, Jia (aged 31) recalled several success stories about coming out among her lala friends who had children:

They [parents] hug the baby and then cry for two days. On the third day they will be very happily hugging the baby . . . As the Chinese saying goes, 'The most unfilial act is to have no offspring.' These friends of mine have a happy life now. Their parents are raising the children.

Another participant, Bo (aged 33), shared a similar belief: 'If I don't have a kid, they [parents] will have no face. They'll be looked down upon by their peers . . . Having a grandkid can spice up their life.' She did not plan to have her own child because of her concern about potential discrimination against children of same-sex parents in China. Nevertheless, she had eventually decided to become a mother through an unconventional path – by collaborating with her gay 'husband' – to save the 'face' (prestige) of her family. Bo lied to her parents that she and her 'husband' had adopted a child, who, in fact, had been conceived through surrogacy overseas and had a genetic connection with the gay husband.



It is important to understand Bo's decision to become a mother as not only rationally planned but also continually shaped by relational ties embedded in Chinese family-oriented culture. When asked about her feelings towards her 'son', she said, 'the so-called maternal sense of connection is more like something imposed by myself. It's not real.' This remark shows that the feeling of relatedness between Bo and her 'son' was forged within the established framework of parent-child relationships and the gendered script of motherhood, which prescribes love and care for a child. This connection with the child was also inseparable from her goal to establish a recognised place in her natal family and bridge the gulf between her heterosexual parents and herself. This echoes what Nordqvist (2012: 301) terms 'contractual intimacy' in the sense that parent-child ties can be considered instrumental rather than purely altruistic. Moreover, it shows that one's decision (not) to have children may not be made purely within the couple, but in relation to his/her natal family and other third parties.

Bo realised her pathway towards parenthood by bringing her gay husband and his son into her family life and carefully negotiating the tricky path between performing the normative roles of wife and mother and concealing the truth about her sexuality. She embraced relational selfhood in the sense that she was constantly constructing her sense of self in relation to significant others in order to maximise the interests of her own family. In short, Bo's case highlights the innovative and reproductive aspects of family imaginaries conceived and practised by lalas. It reveals new possibilities for co-creating family ties between lalas and the older generation, which may expand the acceptable boundaries of the 'family' beyond genetic connections, albeit within the confines of the heterosexual family model.

### *Imaginaries of Bonding: Conjoining Genetic and Social Ties*

The prospect of cementing the couple relationship and making the bonding more 'stable' and 'complete' was commonly expressed by participants who wanted to have their own children. To a certain extent, this echoes Gabb's (2018) finding that the technological advancement of ART, coupled with the availability of legal recognition for same-sex partnerships and parenthood in Britain (and other countries), has reinforced, rather than challenged, the values of biogenetic relatedness and future-oriented forms of relationship commitment and family making. In fact, regardless of the restrictive Chinese context, many participants were still able to imagine futures of relatedness by researching online information about ART overseas or inventing other ways of becoming a parent. It is noteworthy that most participants who wanted children emphasised the significance of genetic ties. Li (aged 36), who was planning with her partner to seek IVF, said:

When both of us do this [conceiving a baby] together, no matter who made it in the end, the child belongs to us. Indeed, the lack of blood ties is a legal issue, but not a psychological one. What I worry is that this child would actually have nothing to do with you under Chinese law.

This remark shows that, even though one might not see the blood tie as important to oneself/the couple, its lack creates a real hurdle given the legal and institutional constraints in China. Li reported that, through a DNA test, which is required by the local

authorities in Beijing, she could acquire a Beijing hukou for her genetically connected baby as a single mother. The hukou system, as a (heterosexual-)family-based registration system in China, regulates individuals within each household and their access to basic state welfare, including education and healthcare (Lui, 2017). This can be considered a political institution, through which the government defines the 'household', which ideally comprises a married couple of man and woman and their biological child(ren), as the backbone of a harmonious society (Jackson, 2019). Li strived to accommodate the structural regulation by seeking IVF overseas and proving that she was the biological mother of her child. This example signals lalas' felt need to legitimise their bonds with their children within a heteronormative environment and their strategy to negotiate system loopholes to access otherwise regulated social resources that are only available to biological parents.

It was not uncommon to see participants embrace the aspiration to circumvent heteronormative rules and create new family ties, while at the same time feeling attached to traditional family values and practices. Kun (aged 37), who was planning with her partner to conceive a child through IVF, stressed the importance of genetic ties, without which she worried that she would be reluctant to take on the roles of parent and carer in the future: 'If the kid's my own . . . I'll keep telling myself, "This is my biological kid . . . somehow genetic, biological . . . Just bite the bullet!"' Echoing Nordqvist's (2017) notion of genetic thinking, Kun demonstrated that the genetic tie with her child would shape her perception of her legitimate status and responsibility as a parent. This belief lent colour to her family imaginary, in which she had internalised fixed and conventional ideas about the unbreakable bond between parents and biological child(ren) while attempting to create her own family outside the heterosexual family model. This, in turn, shaped the ways in which the couple co-created biological parenthood – with Kun providing the eggs and her partner conceiving – so that both would be 'related' to the child.

While participants demonstrated traditional ideas about family relatedness to varying extents, it is noteworthy that some put distance between their ways of making sense of relatedness and the old ways endorsed by their parents. Shi (aged 31) provided an interesting example of being a social innovator. She was devoted to helping the lala (and gay) community achieve their fertility plans and worked for a private company in Beijing that helped people access ART overseas. Like most participants, Shi was not immune to the influence of, in her words, the 'Chinese logic', which shaped her desire for a genetically related child. Meanwhile, she actively reflected upon and distanced herself from the old ways of building relatedness endorsed by her parents. She used the term 'small love' to refer to how Chinese parents treat their children, and differentiated it from her pursuit of 'big love'. She said, 'Like my Mum, she knows that the money she's earned all her life is to give to her daughter. Spending every penny on her daughter is good, but spending even one penny on others is uncomfortable.' To Shi, 'big love' extended beyond emotional and material support within the biological family and entailed making a significant contribution to the wider lala community, such as helping more families realise their reproductive desires and needs.

These examples demonstrate lalas' inclination to bond with their partners and/or the wider lala community and resist the dominance of heteronormativity in China, and their simultaneous emotional attachment to established reproductive and family norms. Their

ways of imagining the future of becoming a parent are both assimilationist and socially disturbing, allowing us to see how the old and new family scripts collide and unfold.

### *Imaginations of Self-Fashioning: Reflecting on the Future Self and Managing a Sense of Insecurity*

Participants generally considered children to be good company and a potential source of emotional support as they aged. More importantly, their narratives about (not) having children included ways of thinking about their present and future selves within the ethical frame of intergenerational care. Some participants were explicit about their desire to have children, who would endow them with 'a sense of security' as they/their partner aged or died. The common expectations of care and/or emotional support provided by one's offspring, especially in later life, need to be understood within the local context, where the family, not the state, is the key source of welfare support (Hildebrandt, 2019). It has become common for parents to forgo traditional authority and demand less financial support but more mutual care and intergenerational intimacy from their children, taking into account the increasingly competitive and precarious job market faced by the younger generation (Yan, 2021). This largely explains why concern over care support in old age, coupled with pressure from parents, plays a key role in shaping lalas' views on having children. Xia (aged 38) said:

My parents worry a lot. 'What are you going to do when you're old?' My mother's still with me. I can still take care of her when she's sick or whatever . . . But you have to face your old age on your own. That's very scary.

While some participants were willing to invest significant resources, including money and energy, to seek ART overseas and circumvent institutional hurdles in China, practical and financial constraints around the use of ART were major obstacles on the path to parenthood. Therefore, other participants adopted different approaches to becoming parents in order to shape the kinds of future they desired.

Meng (aged 33) could not afford to seek ART overseas but believed strongly in the importance of having one's own child for company. She had married a heterosexual man in order to conform to parental expectations, but divorced him immediately after giving birth to their child conceived through IVF using his sperm. In fact, Meng had begun her relationship with her current same-sex partner before her pregnancy and they had been raising the child together.

I'd always had the feeling that I was adrift . . . and that I had no roots or home without a child . . . I'm that type of person who feels insecure all the time. Neither your partner nor your parents can stay with you all your life, but a child can, because he/she is your flesh and blood and can't leave you behind.

Meng believed that her status as a mother had caused her parents to acquiesce to her family form and that her divorced status also saved her from the pressure associated with the traditional roles and duties of a wife and daughter-in-law. While Meng's path to

motherhood was unique in the sample, it demonstrates that some lalas will go to extraordinary lengths to create their own family ties, which are considered significant psychological protection for their present and future selves. It is also a typical example of how lalas handle their relational selfhood, and may feel conflicted in the process. As Meng recalled her journey to parenthood, she admitted that she was torn between two self-ideals: to become a respectable self who would be seen as ‘normal’ and accepted by parents and others, and to become a ‘free’ self capable of living how she wanted outside the heterosexual family model. Her family imaginary was dialectical in the sense that it swung between filial affection and personal, pragmatic goals of having a child for company in old age, without confining herself to traditional gender or familial roles. It was rooted in the warring sides of herself and could be regarded as constitutive of what Foucault (1988: 16) calls ‘technologies of the self’, which refer to practices that an individual actively engages in to achieve self-fashioning and transform oneself to attain a certain mode of being. Embedded within systems of power, these practices may resist dominant power or be self-disciplinary in nature. In the context of journeys to parenthood through ART or other unconventional means, ongoing debates about the ethical character of family imaginaries resonate with this perspective, emphasising that meaning making during these journeys ‘informs and is informed by the ethical frames in which one is situated’ (Hudson, 2020: 349). From this perspective, Meng’s experience illustrates the productive and reproductive aspects of family imaginaries. While it shows how the self is entangled within the familial and social environment and how family imaginaries may reinforce the traditional idea of having children as old-age security, it also highlights the individual’s agency in enabling a new sense of self and new family relations to emerge.

Other participants also engaged in their own self-fashioning, albeit in different ways. Nearly a quarter said they did not want to have children. Instead, they were firm about their plans to become self-sufficient and prioritise their own career and/or freedom over fulfilling gendered and family expectations. It is noteworthy, however, that these participants expressed insecurity and uncertainty about the future when asked about their thoughts on having children. Guo (aged 30) said: ‘My life is still so unstable as a migrant to Beijing. It’s not that suitable to have a kid. No one can tell what the future looks like.’ Similarly, Cong (aged 31) firmly stated that she did not want a child, irrespective of her sexual identity: ‘It’s so hard to live a decent life on my own. Why bother to have a child?’ Non-local resident status, such as that of Guo and Cong, tended to generate a sense of insecurity and exacerbate worries about personal finances and the future, discouraging these lalas from making extra efforts to have children through non-traditional means.

Some lalas’ reluctance to have children is also attributable to the lack of legal recognition of and social support for same-sex relationships in China. Ting (aged 32) described how her identity as a lala put her into a ‘turbulent state’, which could explain why she had never thought of becoming a mother:

We’ve always been in turmoil, in a turbulent and hidden state of life . . . because you can’t rely on your partner to give you a promise for the future . . . If you don’t have children, you probably have less emotional support in the future, and you lack the same things ‘normal’ families have . . . What if this person can no longer stay with you, what would you do?

Rather than embracing the hope that a child would stabilise her family, Ting was actively planning with her partner to run a business together, which was considered their prospective 'child' capable of generating a shared purpose and sense of 'family'. Ting's case shows how the lack of legal protection, coupled with normative expectations around the heterosexual family model, might lead lalas to lower their expectations of achieving a stable, long-term same-sex relationship and to abandon the prospect of having children. However, her form of self-fashioning demonstrates individual ability to become an agent of change and create new forms and meanings of relatedness beyond biological reproduction.

## **Discussion**

This study has not only revealed lalas' reproductive needs, desires and challenges, which have long been invisible in the literature and Chinese society, but it has also clearly demonstrated the analytical usefulness of the notion of 'dialectical family imaginaries'. The notion calls for attention to the ways in which individuals' family planning and reproductive decisions are shaped by both traditional and new conceptions of family relatedness and entangled within a wider web of relationships, including those with the family of origin. The findings show that lalas' decisions (not) to become parents are inextricably interwoven with their relationships with their families of origin and their continuing struggle to handle familial, material and socio-political tensions. This study offers a unique contribution to empirical and theoretical understandings of reproduction and changing family life in two ways.

First, exploring dialectical family imaginaries enables us to perceive the tensions and contradictions with which sexual minority women must deal when thinking about (not) having children. It draws attention to how and under what circumstances the clash between oneself and one's family of origin, and that between traditional and new family beliefs, contribute to shaping the decision (not) to become a parent. Building on the conceptualisation of the self as relational (Mason, 2004; Lo, 2022), the findings show that future analyses of family imaginaries and experiences of assisted reproduction and parenthood should move beyond the liberal and rights-based conception of the 'free' individual and couple. It is important to '[expand] the range of relationships that are seen to matter' in family life (Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016: 145) and, as I further argue, to explore the role of the family of origin in shaping why and how individuals come to the decision (not) to have children and/or use ART. For instance, participants made additional efforts to circumvent heterosexual rules and seek recognition from their natal families, as evidenced by one participant's performance of the role of mother to her gay husband's child and others' pursuit of biological parenthood through the use of ART overseas. These family imaginaries of bridging and bonding show that lalas must wrestle with personal desires and persistent norms defining who may or may not become a parent. The notion of dialectical family imaginaries adds to our understanding of how alternative forms of relatedness are engendered and given meaning through everyday negotiations between the self, the wider family and multiple socio-political forces.

Second, this study enables us to rethink how and under what circumstances individuals' reproductive practices may reinforce or challenge established social norms and

inequalities. Although the participants demonstrated a high degree of agency in reflecting upon traditional family norms, it is important to understand that any tactics may simply mirror or even reinforce existing social structures. While only lalas with sufficient financial and social resources are able to access ART overseas and conceive, this privileged group still needs to face and try to circumvent other constraints, by, for example, clinging to the ideology of blood ties to overcome the institutional barrier to hukou and associated welfare and/or to generate a sense of 'family' in a context that denies their parental status. In particular, participants' 'imaginaries of self-fashioning' need to be understood within the wider social environment, where 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 government (Zhang and Ong, 2008).

It is within this context that the lack of legal recognition or welfare support for same-sex families and worries about personal finances exacerbate lalas' sense of insecurity, thereby discouraging many of them from making extra efforts to have children and/or travelling abroad to seek ART. These findings are in line with previous studies highlighting the roles of legal frameworks and social climate in shaping sexual minority people's reproductive 'choice', which is by no means free but structurally regulated (Franchi and Selmi, 2020; Gusmano and Motterle, 2019). In short, although some of my participants serve as living evidence of pioneering alternative family forms in Chinese society, it is important to understand that their family imaginaries are moulded by familial and material concerns and wider structural conditions and that they may turn out to be self-disciplinary practices that reproduce established family norms and social structures.

To conclude, rather than perceiving lalas' reproductive decision making as rationally planned and carried out, it is important to understand that their imaginaries and decisions are laden with emotions and shaped by relational selfhood constructed in relation to the wider family and other socio-political forces. Highlighting the dialectical nature of family imaginaries, this study reveals how the clash between traditional and new family beliefs and reflections about intergenerational relations and care between lalas, their parents and their (prospective) children came into play in participants' reproductive decision making. We need to understand lalas' pursuit of parenthood as both cutting-edge and conventional. The struggles, tensions and resistance demonstrated by lalas' dialectical family imaginaries have led us to rethink the layers of complexity in reproductive decision making, which should take into account familial and material concerns, socio-political conditions and negotiations with families of origin and wider webs of relationships.

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## Note

1. The term 'lala' is widely used for self-identification by women with same-sex desires in urban China (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). It is pronounced 'la-la' (Pinyin transliteration) in Mandarin Chinese. All the participants identified themselves as lalas. Therefore, it is important to use this Chinese identity category to describe their perspectives and experiences. Given the cultural specificity of the term lala, which originated in Taiwan and has become localised in Mainland China through the Internet since the late 1990s (Engebretsen, 2014), using this term is preferable to borrowing western terms, such as lesbian or queer, which carry social and political meanings in their specific local contexts.

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