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To cite this article: Javier Pang & Kaxton Siu (2023) Keeping A Distance: Changing Everyday Lives of Married Migrant Gay Men in China's State-owned Enterprises, Critical Asian Studies, 55:4, 538-554, DOI: [10.1080/14672715.2023.2265944](https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2023.2265944)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2023.2265944>



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Published online: 11 Oct 2023.



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Keeping A Distance: Changing Everyday Lives of Married Migrant Gay Men in China's State-owned Enterprises

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ABSTRACT

This study examines continuity and change in the lives of rural migrant gay men working in China's state-owned enterprises (SOE) from an everyday life perspective. By examining their sexuality, migration histories, and heterosexual marriage experiences, this study contributes to sexuality and migration literature by exploring how rural-to-urban migrant gay men maintain their everyday homosexual intimacies in post-socialist China. It adds to the perspective that gay men's perceptions, interpretations, and reactions to marriage and sexuality vary, due to their personal migration experiences. These findings also contribute to scholarly discussions of everyday life by providing a nuanced analysis of how spatial tactics are employed as forms of everyday resistance by gay men for maintaining their sexualities.

KEYWORDS

China; *tongqi*; everyday life resistance; urban sexual practice; gay marriage

Gay, *Tongqi*,¹ and mixed-orientation marriages in China

Hetero-homosexual marriages, or contractual marriages between closeted gay men and heterosexual women, present a new challenge to scholars who study family life, marriage, and sexual minorities in China. Despite rising public acceptance of LGBT groups in China, sexual minorities in the country continue to face tremendous pressure from their families and the state. Chinese societal norms and the state repress non-heteronormative sexuality and promote stereotypical masculinity through sex education.² As a result, many Chinese gay men find mixed-orientation marriage a convenient solution to relieve social pressures.³

According to Liu et al.⁴ there are more than twenty-one million homosexual men in China, almost fourteen million of whom have married women. While other forms of

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¹*Tongqi* (同妻) refers to women who are married to gay men without acknowledging their husbands' sexual orientation.

It combines *tong* (*tongzhi*, 同志, "gay comrade") and *qi* (wife, 妻).

²Burton-Bradley 2022.

³Traditional gender roles and the implementation of the one-child policy created an environment that pushed men into marriage. Parents in China have high expectations for their sons to marry and produce a male heir to continue family bloodlines, especially for those with only one male child. Although the one-child policy was abolished in 2016, its influence on procreation continues. Parents from both rural and urban regions keep longing for their children to marry and continue family lines.

⁴Liu et al. 2015.

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marriages in China's LGBT circle are largely built upon fully informed and mutual consensus between partners,⁵ women in mixed-orientation marriages often do not know about their husbands' sexual orientation.⁶ As such, even though gay men in these marriages might fulfill their family roles and duties, these relationships are seen as a form of marriage fraud. Public criticism in China commonly labels gay men who enter into heterosexual marriages without disclosing their sexual identity as selfish and describes them as "liars" or "cheaters."⁷ For these gay men, marriage quality varies significantly. Some find it difficult to get along with their wives, and eventually decide to migrate to other places in the country to escape their wives and relatives.⁸

While the existing literature on Chinese gay migration mainly focuses on foreign countries, studies about gay rural-to-urban domestic migration stress the diversity of these men's consumption patterns and sexual lives.⁹ However, no systematic study about Chinese urban gay men's working lives has yet been conducted. This includes research focused on gay men employed by state owned enterprises (SOEs). SOEs symbolize the collective authority imposed on gay men's lives, similar to the patriarchal system in China. In the context of more than forty years of economic and social reforms, it is worth examining whether gay men's workplace supervisors pressure their gay employees to date and marry women. We are interested in the tactics used by gay men for maintaining public-private boundaries with their colleagues and supervisors in SOEs. Do parental expectations about marriage spill over into SOE workplaces? Do senior workers, supervisors, and co-workers pressure junior singletons, especially junior gay workers, to enter into a heterosexual marriage?

An everyday life perspective is useful for understanding the tactics and resistance strategies used by married gay men in urban China. This perspective helps to "bring light upon the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'."¹⁰ The concept of segregated urban tactics, used by gay men to separate their heterosexual family lives from their homosexual identities in urban environments, is particularly relevant.¹¹ Migration and urban characteristics also shape the everyday resistance strategies of married gay men in China.

Married gay men in socialist China

Previous studies about married gay Chinese men describe them as victims. For example, Zhang et al. reported that gay men are pushed into marriage due to family pressures, and their lives can be torn between their love for their homosexual partners and their wives and families.¹² Travis Kong has documented how young gay men escape from rural

⁵For example, performative marriages among gays and lesbians. See Choi & Luo 2016.

⁶Tsang 2021.

⁷Cheng 2016.

⁸Tsang 2021.

⁹Wei 2012; Kong 2011; Luo 2021; Choi 2022.

¹⁰de Certeau, 1984, xiv.

¹¹According to Simmel (1950), social distancing is an instrumental practice to accommodate the complex rhythm of city life. However, physical proximity and social distancing are passively perceived and become a kind of indifference to metropolitan life. Simmel did not consider the possibility that metropolitan everyday life practices can also be tools for resisting unwanted city life or constructing a subjective ideal life.

¹²Zhang et al. 2019.

villages to enjoy unmarried lives in urban areas.¹³ The rural-to-urban migration experience and the development of urban LGBTQ communities have provided opportunities and resources for young generations to avoid mixed-orientation marriages, including for example performative marriages between gays and lesbians.¹⁴

However, running away from rural areas does not necessarily lead to gay men's capacity to resist marriage control. Work units (*danwei*) in urban areas have long been a regulatory system for homosexuality in socialist China. From the Mao-era until the 1980s, *danwei* managers closely surveilled the domestic welfare of their employees and regulated personal norms such as marriage in keeping with Chinese socialist ideology. During this period, scarcely could gay men have opportunities to express any sexuality that deviated from heteronormativity. After legal reforms on marriage became law in 1980¹⁵ and after many urban work units were privatized as part of economic reforms, family and marriage were deinstitutionalized in the non-state sector, giving people more freedom in marriage choice and divorce.¹⁶ Before the decline of importance of work units, people needed approval from their work supervisors to divorce. Nowadays, while divorce is officially treated as a private matter, state-owned enterprise (SOEs), still have an active role in their employee's marriage affairs. This form of patriarchal leadership is rooted in traditional Chinese family structures.¹⁷ Superiors in the workplace play a fatherly role to protect, nurture, and care for their subordinates and in return expect subordinates to show them loyalty and deference. Therefore, matchmaking invitations from superiors are still common in SOEs.¹⁸

In short, the decline of state influence on marriage has allowed the emergence of sexual plurality in post-socialist China. Yet, the persistence of traditional family norms and societal homophobia have not disappeared and still underpin the marriage system.¹⁹

Keeping a distance as a form of everyday resistance

According to Georg Simmel, social distancing is an instrumental practice to accommodate the complex rhythm and interactions of city life.²⁰ We use an everyday life perspective in combination with Simmel's proximity framework to shed light on Chinese gay men's distancing actions in SOEs. According to the everyday life perspective, subordinated groups perform subtle, dispersed, or disguised behaviors to undermine dominating power.²¹ Michel de Certeau's concept of everyday life tactics is particularly useful for understanding how mundane resistance practices are invented, and how people

¹³Kong 2011.

¹⁴Choi and Luo 2016.

¹⁵The 1980 Marriage Law permitted divorce only if based on the complete breakdown of affection. See Marriage Law of the PRC, 1980.

¹⁶Davis and Friedman (2014) use this term from Andrew Cherlin to note that the "taken-for-granted assumptions or even necessity of marriage no longer prevail." David and Friedman 2014, 3.

¹⁷Farh et al. 2008

¹⁸Gui and Meng (2023) document how gay men employed in state agencies and SOEs engage in performative marriages to keep marriage surveillance at bay.

¹⁹Liu, 2019. Her research on rural migrant lesbians illustrates how their lives are still influenced by patriarchal-homophobic family norms. She argues that Chinese rural families still persist in their preference for male offspring and devalue divorced daughters.

²⁰Simmel 1950. The origin of this question is rooted in problematizing everyday life interactions of the self and others in the modern metropolis. In city life, the spatial sense of physical proximity disassociates with the social.

²¹Scott 1985.

undermine dominant power structures in less visible and non-confrontational ways through creative manipulations of “space, practices, symbols.”²²

Henri Lefebvre’s discussion of the production of space and the exclusion of powerless minorities also provides a lens for understanding how everyday resistance can be possible in urban spatial contexts.²³ Scholars of sexual migration have viewed urban space as liberating people from rural sexual confinement and enabling them to construct their own sexual identities and communities.²⁴ According to Jon Binnie, “space is not naturally authentically ‘straight’ but rather actively produced and (hetero)sexualized.”²⁵ In other words, sexual minorities, such as gay men, face significant hardships but are not passively sculpted by dominant heterosexual governance norms. There are cases in which gay men intentionally segregate their private homosexual lives from their public heterosexual ordinary lives in urban settings. Wei Wei argues that some gay men in urban China even subvert living spaces into queer spaces by implementing individual or collective tactics.²⁶

Sexual plurality is an urban characteristic in which sexual migrants appropriate and construct their everyday sexual lives. Yet the complexity of everyday sexual life in urban China has been overlooked by scholars. What tactics do Chinese gay men use for (re)making their everyday lives? How do sexual minorities employ different tactics in constructing or resisting particular sexual interactions in cities? How do they manage their sexual interactions by appropriating urban space?

Methods

This paper draws on data gathered as part of a larger research project for which we interviewed over sixty married gay men in China between 2016 and 2018. Informants were recruited from NGO service networks, including their strategic partners in gay businesses in Guangzhou, Nanjing, Xiamen and Wuhan.²⁷ Our informants include married gay men, married bisexual men, married lesbians, and gays and lesbians who intend to marry heterosexuals. Twenty-four of our interviewees (Table 1) are employed at or retired from SOEs in Xiamen and Guangzhou.²⁸ These two cities were among the earliest in China to exhibit greater social tolerance after reforms began, including for NGOs. All twenty-four of these informants self-identified as homosexual, and all were either married to or divorced from heterosexual women.

²²de Certeau 1984; Butticci 2012. Chin and Mittelman (1997) conceptualize sites as a spatial dimension of resistance. Everyday life resistance is situated in social spaces. Johansson and Vinthagen (2016) argue that “resistance is practiced in and through space as a central social dimension.”

²³Every representation of space reflects the dominating norms and values monopolized and defined by the power holder. Therefore, to implement such an ideal dominant space, the powerless minorities may be excluded. However, although minorities may passively experience the space, they can appropriate and/or try to change this. See Lefebvre 1991.

²⁴Kong 2011; Kam 2013.

²⁵Binnie 1997.

²⁶Wei 2012.

²⁷This includes businesses such as saunas, mahjong clubs, gyms, and tea houses that cater to gay customers.

²⁸Most married gay men fear having their real sexuality exposed to their families. Therefore, the involvement of local NGOs was essential for recruiting targeted informants. We have worked closely with NGOs in Xiamen and Guangzhou for many years. Their service networks are wide enough to reach married homosexual men. We sent over a hundred interview invitations, and forty-two men accepted. Among these, eighteen were considering or preparing for marriage; the remaining twenty-four were married or divorced.

Table 1. Background information of interviewees.

Interviewee	Age	Education Level	Marriage Status	Year of Marriage	Age & Gender of Children	Position in SOE	Monthly Income
Chan	28	Vocational School	Married, Planning Divorcement	2016	NA	Technician	5000-9999
Luo	30	College	Married	2012	NA	Technician	5000-9999
Hua	30	College	Married	2013	NA	Technician	5000-9999
Ming	32	Vocational School	Divorced	2013	NA	Laborer	5000-9999
Tsang	34	College	Married	2010	4, Female	Profession	15000-19999
Chen	36	Vocational School	Married	2006	8, Male	Manager	15000-19999
Ding	36	Senior High School	Married	1996	19, Male	Laborer	2001-4999
Fong	38	Vocational School	Married	2006	8, Female	Laborer	<2000
Nam	38	Vocational School	Divorced	2009	7, Female	Laborer	2001-4999
Fat	39	Junior High School	Married	2016	NA	Manager	2001-4999
Liu	40	Primary School	Divorced	2003	12, Male	Laborer	2001-4999
Yan	40	Vocational School	Married	2001	9, Male	Laborer	2001-4999
Chi	40	Vocational School	Married	2006	4, Male	Technician	2001-4999
Chun	40	Vocational School	Married	1999	16, Female	Clerk	2001-4999
Kan	42	Senior High School	Divorced	2002	14, Female	Clerk	2001-4999
Yu	43	Junior High School	Married	2013	NA	Labour	2001-4999
Long	43	College	Married	2008	6, Male	Clerk	5000-9999
Yum	44	Junior High School	Married	2005	10, Male	Clerk	2001-4999
Tang	45	Junior High School	Divorced	2009	7, Male	Laborer	2001-4999
Siu	46	Primary School	Married	1988	27, Male; 25 Male; 24, Female	Laborer	2001-4999
Gor	51	Senior High School	Married	2001	15 Female	Laborer	2001-4999
Wang	62	Primary School	Divorced	1976	51, Male	Retired	<2000
Wong	63	Vocational School	Married	2003	13, Male	Retired	2001-4999
Chen	65	Vocational School	Married	1978	37, Male	Retired	2001-4999

Note: Monthly income is shown in renminbi (RMB). As of October 2023, \$US 1 = RMB 7.3.

Nineteen of them have at least one child. Two are separated from their spouses but not divorced.

We interviewed our informants at local gay clubhouses, karaoke bars, gyms, tea rooms, NGO offices, and their homes.²⁹ To provide comfort and confidence, we

²⁹Given the sensitivity of our research topic, we used a double-checking measure to facilitate the interviews. We conducted each interview with an oral history approach and inserted questions when the interview content conflicted with an answer an interviewee had given in the questionnaire. This measure is important in two aspects: first, it helps clarify the sequence of their migration processes and journeys in exploring their sexualities. Second, it is crucial for clarifying how each considers *tongzhi* and homosexuality, as well as men's roles. Comparing and challenging the answers they provided in the questionnaire and their responses in our interviews reveals how their sexualities are interwoven with their migration process and their changing social circumstances.

invited informants to select a venue for our interviews, and NGO staff accompanied them. Prior to meeting us, we asked interviewees to complete a questionnaire, which included basic background information such as education level and marital status. Each interview ranged from one to three hours. To protect informants' confidentiality, we do not disclose the villages they originally came from and have provided pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Heteronormative family norms and marriage pressure under pre-reform China

In pre-reform China, the party-state planned and coordinated the lives of citizens. SOEs dominated the urban economy, and all urban residents were assigned to a *danwei* (work unit). These *danwei* also managed all aspects of their residents' daily lives and welfare, ranging from housing, food, and daily necessities to health care and recreational activities. Heteronormativity was the only sexual norm endorsed by the party-state, and there was limited space for sexual plurality or circulation of non-heterosexual information in urban areas.

Our three interviewees who were over aged sixty shared similar stories of their marriages in pre-reform China. All of them were employed by state-owned factories and had met their wives through colleagues' networks. During the Maoist period, marriages had to be approved in advance by *danwei* leaders and other authorized party members. When Chen (sixty-five-years old) was young, one of his SOE colleagues introduced him to a lady who was two years younger than him:

Though I did not know I am gay as there was no such a term at that moment, I also felt no interest in women at all. When I was in my second year in the factory, a colleague introduced me to her relative working at another factory in the same town. My *danwei* supervisor encouraged us. Acquainted with her for three months, my mum and my supervisor said it was about time for me to set up a family and urged me to marry her.

Chen and his fiancée sought approval from their respective *danwei* and married six months after meeting. In the pre-reform era, it was common to introduce relatives and friends to colleagues within SOEs. Apart from marriage pressure from family members and colleagues, officials and seniors in work units kept their eyes on workers' private lives and intervened when they thought necessary. All aspects of urban residents' private lives were scripted by the socialist state—a person had to marry someone with a suitable class background, at the right time and in the right place. Living a life that went against heteronormative family norms was challenging, as were finding avenues to explore different sexualities. Work supervisors played a key role in assisting workers to get married and establish families. When Wang (aged sixty-two) was twenty-five and had been working in his factory for six years, his supervisor summoned him one day:

I was just a junior worker, and it was very odd to be summoned. He seriously asked about my future planning and my relationship status. He knew that I had no potential marriage target, and he wanted to introduce me to one. I still remember what he said. "You are already twenty-five. It is time to get married." Under his arrangement, I met my wife, and we were married after two months.

Wang's story demonstrates how workers' political and economic positions were greatly influenced by particularistic relationships and ties cultivated within factories.³⁰ Workers' relationships with their leaders and supervisors could also determine their welfare benefits, housing, and chances of promotion. This particularistic authoritarianism extended beyond working lives and demanded workers comply with their unit leaders' authority even in deciding their marriage targets.

Urban migration as sexual discovery and resistance

Since the 1980s, the private sector has developed rapidly while the number of state-owned enterprises has declined.³¹ This economic transformation has provided a new urban context for sexuality exploration. Sexual and marriage legal reforms have created a social space for sexual plurality, while the party-state has intentionally retreated from managing citizen's private lives. However, it still regulates fertility through birth control policies.³² Our data shows that even though the *danwei* system has been dissolved, its grip on people's sexualities and family lives has been turned into a micro-embodiment within SOE working environments. Different from the local urban-born SOE worker generation exemplified by Chen and Wang, younger workers have developed vibrant forms of everyday resistance in counteracting the management of sexualities by SOEs.

Marching from the countryside to the city

A number of scholars have examined same-sex sexual encounters of rural-to-urban male migrants.³³ Before economic reforms, tight state control of citizens' mobility prevented rural-to-urban migration. Since reforms began in 1978, the loosening of domestic migration controls has resulted in an explosion of maneuverability in urban spaces and increased spatial-sexual exposure. Tang, a forty-five-year-old divorced man with a seven-year-old son, told us how he discovered his sexuality during his early migration years:

At that time, in order to save money, we all stayed in the employer's home. I still strongly remember how I discovered my sexuality. The employer's house was not that big. He suggested I sleep with him, and my relative slept in the other room. At midnight, he suddenly kissed me and asked if I had had sex before. He then sucked my dick, and I felt so sexually excited. Before such a sexual experience, I was quite unaware of my sexuality because there was no such information or sexual stimulation like pornography in my village. After this sexual encounter, I realized I might love or enjoy same-sex intimacy.

In rural Chinese villages, people all know each other and are packed into close networks. If a stranger enters a village, they are surveilled by villagers. As Tang explained, "In our village, when a pan repairman came to our village, we all knew it, and took out our ruined pans for repair. I cannot imagine there was any space for any same-sex sexual encounter."

³⁰Walder 1984.

³¹Song 2018. The number of SOEs declined from 118,000 in 1995 to 34,000 in 2003, and by 2007 had declined to below 10,000. However, strategic and key industries, including defense, power generation and distribution, and telecommunications, are still one hundred percent owned and controlled by the state.

³²Davis and Friedman 2014.

³³Wu and Chou 1996; Li 2009.

This spatial disposition in rural areas eliminates any unconventional or non-heteronormative sexual possibilities. Although Tang enjoyed sexual relationships with men while working in the city, this experience did not affect his later decision to marry. Before he was introduced to an urban factory girl by a relative, Tang had never had a relationship with a woman. But he believed that getting married was normal and a responsibility for a filial son. “I did not establish a sense of homosexual identity at that moment,” he told us. “I just thought that it was time to get married.”

From socialist collectivism to urban individualism

Tang married when he was twenty-five. When he was thirty-two, he started working in a state-owned factory, and soon after this he and his wife divorced amicably when he was thirty-five. Tang admitted that although he had sex with his wife, he had no intention to maintain the relationship because of his same-sex desires. He persuaded his wife to give him custody of their child. When news of his divorce spread at his factory, his supervisor became quite concerned about his well-being and was eager to introduce him to other women so he could remarry. Tang explained:

My colleagues and supervisor are enthusiastic about matchmaking. But I usually use my divorce as an excuse to thank them for their efforts. You know, you are divorced, and it is quite embarrassing for them if they manufacture another “marriage tragedy” on you. Basically, if you are totally fine and your son or daughter is good enough, after several attempts, they will give up, and there is no pressure for remarriage in my factory.

During the *danwei* era, instrumental-personal ties were important in factory life and helped workers gain access to goods and resources.³⁴ Matchmaking was a tool for maintaining good relations among colleagues, and they expected this relationship exchange would bring them rewards in the future. In post-reform China, these collective instrumental-personal ties have faded, replaced by an individualized market logic. Before 2003, a petition for divorce had to be first approved by a person’s *danwei* supervisor.³⁵ In most cases, the supervisor would first mediate and even try to persuade the couple to reconcile.³⁶ The 2003 Marriage Registration Ordinance greatly simplified this procedure and removed any role for work supervisors. Tang told us that his supervisors still considered themselves responsible for the well-being of their workers, but marriage pressure usually happened on unmarried juniors. “Once the workers are married and have children, even if they have divorced, they are treated as complete men, and the supervisor would not over-intervene into their single-family living,” said Tang. Even though some of his colleagues occasionally still asked him about his relationships, Tang said, “I know they just like me and are concerned about my well-being, but I don’t feel any pressure from them.”

A possible reason for this is the high rate of divorce in the past fifteen years. The 1980 Marriage Law permitted divorce only in cases in which both parties agreed. In 2001, this law was revised to permit unilateral divorce. Between 2002 and 2003, the national divorce rate rose 13.1 percent, from 1.17 million in 2002 to 1.33 million in 2003.³⁷ By 2019, there

³⁴Walder 1984.

³⁵Diamant 2000.

³⁶Bailey 1993.

³⁷Xia and Long 2007.

were an estimated 4.5 million divorces annually.³⁸ This rapid growth in divorce reflects increased social tolerance towards the practice. Nowadays, people may still gossip about divorcees but reported cases of bullying and discrimination have significantly declined.

We asked Tang if the matchmaking invitations from his colleagues were annoying. Tang snickered and explained how he kept himself “blurred” in his work environment:

I do not share my life so much with them. Apart from the one or two colleagues who come from the same rural area but not the same village as me, they know little about my detailed background and can only exchange information about me from gossip. I perform my best in the factory; on the other hand, I obscure my private life in the workplace. And you know, it makes me not valuable to be discussed and focused on in gossip. There are so many better single young men in the factory. They are more treasurable in the matchmaking market than me. My colleagues are now gradually losing interest in me.

According to James Scott, the resistance of the weak does not necessarily involve rebelling against domination but rather surviving by minimizing loss.³⁹ In his heteronormative working environment, Tang covered his true sexual desire by shaping and maintaining social anonymity.⁴⁰ This tactic of vagueness helped him reduce sexual pressure at work. Although not all of our interviewees used the same tactics as Tang, fifteen of them described their relationships with colleagues as “so-so” and had no intention of enhancing closeness. As thirty-six year old Ding said, “I don’t want to be the center of gossip among my colleagues. Stepping one step away is the most comfortable zone to keep ourselves out of trouble.”

Mobilizing urban-rural resources for preserving heterodox sexuality

Marriage pressure seems omnipresent, but the understandings and tactics used to response to this differ across generations. Thanks to the popularity of smartphones, younger men can more easily reject unwanted matchmaking invitations. Our ten interviewees who were less than forty years old confided that their emotional life usually was a topic for chit-chatting with family members and colleagues. Some interviewees reported that their seniors directly introduced girls to them several times a year. Before the popularity of mobile apps, it was difficult to reject these invitations. As Hua exclaimed, “You have no girlfriend. You have no grounds to reject!”

Hua, who was thirty, realized his same-sex desires during middle school. “Thanks to the internet, I learned a lot about homosexuality via chat rooms and forums,” he explained. Hua became used to identifying as gay by meeting friends on gay forums during his first migration journey. One online buddy taught him how to use a smartphone and download gay and straight dating apps. Hua met his ex-boyfriend online and was in a long-distance relationship when he first started working in his SOE. During his early days in the factory, he had an interesting conversation with a senior:

My supervisor is a nice guy. He is friendly to everyone. One day he shared two photos of pretty girls with me. He asked me which one was prettier. I answered him promptly without thinking; then, he directly invited me to have a match-date with the girl I chose. I said, “In this era of free love, how come there is still such old-fashioned match-dating?”

³⁸Ren 2021.

³⁹Scott 1985.

⁴⁰Scott 1990, 136.

“We all do it online!” My supervisor just smiled embarrassingly and answered me, “You are right. But you know, as seniors here, we have to take care of the juniors’ well-being. I think we should at least do this once, although we all know it is quite old-fashioned.” We then laughed together.

This episode nicely demonstrates how persistent marriage norms and a paternalistic work ethic among senior managers are at odds with younger SOE workers’ views. Managers in SOEs still see themselves as responsible for supervising party-state familial norms and their juniors’ private lives. However, they also know that this practice might not be feasible for the younger generation, especially given online dating trends.

Online dating platforms and mobile dating apps have become a social distancing resource for blocking any unwanted conversations at the workplace and a vital buffer against heteronormative marriage norms. Hua confided that not only did he use apps to meet potential partners, when his colleagues tried to introduce girls to him, he simply showed them the apps and said (a lie) that he was already dating someone. “It is a wonderful trick. Most of the time, when I do so, I can successfully turn the topic to something else,” Hua said with a crafty smile.

Hua told us that most of his colleagues only knew and used apps produced by Chinese technology companies like Tencent and TikTok. When streaming platforms first popped up in China, his colleagues spent lots of time learning how to use them. However, the cost of getting into trendy tech products was relatively high for the older generation, which has created a communication gap between them and their younger colleagues. Most older workers only use simple mobile apps for things like watching beautiful or handsome anchors on streaming platforms, as Hua explained:

Even if they get familiar with the apps I show them, new apps are always created and replace the old ones. The older generation colleagues would never learn quickly enough like us with newly developed apps. But they now don’t question me anymore and focus only on what they are interested in.

Distancing through rural-urban distinction: Appropriating urban taste and living space

Apart from daily contact in the factory, younger SOE workers are rarely in touch with their older colleagues. Although they may use mobile apps to communicate after work, it is only casual chat, and they actively keep virtual and physical distance from their colleagues.

Living apart and having fun away from their factory circles are common strategies used by our informants. Younger workers try to avoid living near their workplaces. Some prefer areas close to urban centers, even though this increases their transportation and living costs. Doing so provides a greater sense of freedom, and, most importantly, more space for homosexual contacts.

Luo married at the age of twenty-nine due to family pressure. His wife was introduced to him by his relatives and worked in the same area as he did. He told us they only had had three dates before their wedding. When we asked him if this was because of his sexual orientation, Luo said the story was entirely different:

Although she and I were working in the same city, we worked and lived quite far apart. It was difficult for her to squeeze in time to date. You know, if you have been working for six days, you would prefer to take a good rest on your holiday or use the time to deal with

chores. Indeed, most of my straight friends share similar experiences. They did not meet [their future spouses] a lot before they got married. Even though they have married, they do not live together. I talked with my wife on the phone before the wedding. We agreed that in order to earn more money, we should not insist on living together. She can go anywhere if there is a better job opportunity. In truth, it is also a relief for me. I can still have my own time and space!

Due to economic conditions, it is common and understandable for husbands and wives to live and work apart in China. This situation also enables married gay men to postpone facing their marriage relations. Our informants all treasured this possibly last single moment and tried hard to protect this personal space and freedom. Luo chose to live far away from the factory where he worked, spending nearly one and one-half hours going to and from work every day. Luo told me that he rejected almost all leisure activity invitations from his colleagues and preferred to spend time with his gay friends:

Living far away from the factory is quite inconvenient, but it is a good excuse to reject any invitations from colleagues. Even though some of my colleagues have seen me having fun with [gay] friends in the urban area, it is totally fine because I really live there.

Like Tang, Luo also used a similar tactic and rarely shares (or, as he puts it, “selectively” shares) his private life with his colleagues. This left room for Luo to explain any unexpected exposure of his private life:

Live your life! This is a good way to differentiate yourself. Your habits, your taste, your living style ... they all can be weapons to resist any unwanted matchmaking invitation. These urban vibes embodied the distance between the girls they would like to introduce to me and my life.

Luo’s views on urban taste differentiation echo Simmel’s ideas on strangers and proximity.⁴¹ Differentiating lifestyles creates a sense of an insider/outsider group. The social proximity between the insider group (Luo and friends) and outsider group (others) is based on the urban living experiences they share (or not). Most of the girls Luo’s colleagues introduced him to shared similar rural backgrounds; it was not easy for a rural girl to live and act like an urban diva. The urban taste of living he cultivated became a weapon for Luo to use to repel any unwanted invitations.

Not all of our young informants completely segregated their free time from their colleagues. Some joined mahjong games or karaoke sessions with their workmates out of courtesy. Ming, a thirty-two-year-old heavy machine operator, shared his tricks on maintaining distance by showing a sense of collectivity:

You need to work here; therefore, maintaining a good relationship with your colleagues is necessary. I occasionally play mahjong with them. It is good for building up a sort of manliness and bonding among the male colleagues. But I reject other leisure activities by saying that I need to spend time with my wife, though we live apart in fact. Most of my leisure time is spent with gay friends hanging out, drinking at a gay bar, or singing karaoke.

Elderly informants also developed tactics to separate their retired lives from their SOE circle. Wong, a sixty-three-year-old rural-born retired worker, had a different sexual life after retirement. Although Wong identified as *tongzhi*, he had not divorced his

⁴¹Simmel 1950.

wife. Instead, he had left her in their village with his adult sons while he lived in the city. He had used his savings and pension to launch a mahjong club in a suburban area, approximately forty-five minutes from the town center. Wong said that he had been “twisted” (*baiwan*) when in his fifties he encountered young gay men in a park toilet. At first, he felt disgusted but started to enjoy it later on. He stressed he never took the initiative or an active role in his homosexual relationships; it was all about his attractiveness to the young gays.

At the time of our interview, he had a twenty-three-year-old boyfriend. Like other retirees, he needed to keep in contact with his *danwei* to enjoy his benefits, but this did not affect his personal life:

I am not like other gays. I am not born to be gay. I am twisted to be gay. Before being gay, I could keep having sex with my wife and enjoy my family life. I am the sole breadwinner (*yijiazhizhu*). My wife and son respect me and never ask about my life in the city... I don't join any retirement activities in the plant, but I do keep checking out with them because I deserve my retirement welfare [benefits]. I have paid with my labor to earn it.

Wong and other rural-born informants mentioned the absence of sexual information in rural areas. Wong had never thought that, as he said, “men can have sex with men,” until he was approached for sex in a public toilet. After working in cities for several years, he was introduced by a village relative to a state-owned plant that manufactured metals. Before his retirement, Wong had planned to go back to his home village. Although he had worked for nearly thirty years at his job, he was only partially integrated into the neighborhood where he lived. He would go back to his village whenever he had a holiday. Otherwise, he spent his free time playing mahjong with other migrants from his home village (*laoxian*). He described himself as quite disassociated from the urban city life, saying, “I just work here and sleep here. I do not live the urban life here.”

After he entered into a homosexual relationship, he lived with his partner in a nearby city to keep his distance from his urban relatives. For Wong, heterosexual marriage was the orthodox way of living for a man, and he had never thought about divorcing his wife. “Marriage is a man's duty and I lust for a family,” he said. “However, at the same time, now I love living with my young boy together.”

Recent research examines how the migration process is structured by sexuality⁴² and provides conceptual tools for understanding the sexual migration process of young people in China.⁴³ However, these studies are insufficient for understanding how sexualities develop in the migration process, as seen in the case of Wong. The high density, diversity, and anonymous life available in urban areas provides space for sexual interactions that are impossible in villages. Even while working in SOEs, workers like Wong can keep their distance from their workplace social networks and enjoy private space. The following episode related by an informant perfectly captures how urban anonymity helps gay men bypass scrutiny from their colleagues:

One day, I brought a young guy I encountered in the toilet back to my dormitory, and my colleague saw it. If an old man brings a young girl, it must be very odd, and I guess everybody knows what is going on. But for a young guy, Aha! He is just “my relative from the village.” No one knows the truth and asks anything.

⁴²Carrillo 2017.

⁴³Luo 2021.

The managing power of the *danwei* system is rooted in the proximity of personal networks to a *danwei* community. However, as Wong's story illustrates, separating one's personal and work networks makes exploring one's sexuality possible.

Keeping distance is not just about maintaining a physical distance from the work circle; this also requires skills to maintain reasonable physical and intimate boundaries without damaging one's heterosexual disguise. Not all our interviewees chose, like Luo, to live far away from their workplaces since the time and money costs could be relatively high. For those who chose to live near their workplaces, the absence of this physical barrier meant they must pay close attention to organizing their private lives in the shadow of their colleagues' heteronormative expectations: that they should be gregarious, masculine, heterosexual men.

Conclusion

Most scholars who have studied *tongqi* relationships assume male sexualities are static; however, our data shows an alternative dynamic process that varies with the migration process. This paper has illustrated how the urban migration process can be a journey of sexual discovery for rural gay men and nourish the later development of spatial tactics to resist heteronormative norms in China. Secondly, we have provided an analysis of how married gay men use forms of technology such as smart phones along with rural-urban distinctive tactics to construct their sexual agency in urban China. Our findings highlight the hidden voices of these men to better understand the complexity of sexual pluralities in China.

As James Scott has argued, the key to the resistance of the weak lies in their ability to survive in the shadow of, rather than necessarily rebelling against, dominant power structures. By focusing on resistant tactics developed by married gay men in their everyday life experiences, we provide insights into how migration history and everyday urban experiences interweave to help gay men resist marriage pressures in state-dominated workplaces.

The decline of SOEs and the *danwei* system has transformed the state's surveillance of individuals into a paternalistic relationship, but with growing marketization and individualized autonomy for people to maneuver within. This change has created space within SOEs for gay men to negotiate their sexualities by employing distancing tactics that divert unwanted interactions at work and create an appropriate space for their individual sexual agency. Such tactics are similar to what Erving Goffman called "civil inattention"⁴⁴ to describe urbanites using social distancing tactics to preserve their private lives in cities full of strangers.⁴⁵ Weakening state power in China over citizens' private lives provides more space for gay men to maneuver in their sexual practices. However, the boundary between private sexual intimacy and public governance over sexuality is never clearly drawn; there remains a disjunction between the public and private in a state in which the ruling party still insists on the socialist engineering of social change.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Goffman 1966, 83.

⁴⁵Simmel 1950, 402.

⁴⁶Yan 2003, 235.

In summary, we have examined the relationship between rural-to-urban migration, the construction of individual sexuality in urban areas, and resistance to heteronormativity. Our findings echo a key point found in sexual migration literature: migration does provide space for rediscovering personal sexuality, albeit with conditions. Domestic migration in post-socialist China influences heterodox sexuality in three ways: as a resource for preserving sexual identity; as a process for sexual re-discovery; and as a rural-urban distinction against heteronormative values and marriage. With the enormous increase in citizens' mobility in post-socialist China, heterodox sexual practitioners have more space to maneuver.

Our interview findings illustrate how marriage practices and sexual pluralities can be understood as everyday life dynamics situated in a lifelong migration process. Mixed-orientation marriage is an institutional consequence that is tightly interwoven with Chinese filial piety, institutional constraints, and a heteronormative patriarchal socio-political system. While scholars have recently focused on women in these marriages, we have chosen to focus on men's experiences, thereby contributing to the literature on how gay men spatially maneuver to deal with their everyday social-sexual troubles in China's post-socialist urban context.

Migration scholars have called for a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of how different factors intersect and interplay in the migration process. In addition to contributing to the literature on gender and sexuality in China, we have shown how migrants' social and cultural capital can help them construct urban social networks via spatial differentiation. Social networks usually help migrants access information and economic resources but can be a double-edged sword. In this case, our informants relied on their social capital to find jobs in urban areas, like Wong did. But they also used their cultural capital to maintain separate personal living space to protect their intimate sexual lives.

Finally, public discussions in China of "marriage fraud" that label gay men involved in mixed-orientation marriage as cheaters and liars fail to deepen our comprehension of the intricate dynamics within rapidly evolving marital relationships in Chinese society. Nor do these complaints help us to recognize how the Chinese institution of marriage and traditional gender norms significantly contribute to the suffering of both men and women. In an interview, a female founder of a *tongqi* NGO, drawing from her own painful experiences in a mixed-orientation marriage, reminded us that heterosexual women and gay men are both victims of the patriarchal system. If the societal pressure to marry were to decrease or even disappear, many tragedies faced by *tongqi* individuals could be prevented. Although sexual norms have become much more tolerant in China since the 1990s, more tightened controls on sexuality have occurred in recent years. This suggests that the prospects for a more tolerant sexual environment and policies is not optimistic.⁴⁷ We hope this paper contributes to the discussion of mixed-orientation marriages in China by showing an under-examined aspect of sexual plurality in a post-socialist Chinese context.

⁴⁷Government officials implicitly banned any feminine male image and gay-related topics in the mass media since 2017. For example, in 2016, the gay online drama 'Addicted' was forced to go offline. In 2018, a female online novelist was sentenced to ten years because of her online gay fiction 'Attack and occupy'. The sustainability of the liberation of sexual plurality is majorly driven by the direction of the present political leadership. See Ellis-Petersen 2016 and Wang 2018.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Professor Susanne YP Choi, Professor Jonathan Unger, Professor Yiu-tung Suen, the anonymous reviewers, and the CAS editor, Robert Shepherd, for their valuable comments. We also thank those who accepted our request for interviews, as well as NGO staff and volunteers who contributed to this project.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

N/A

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