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LIVING THROUGH BECOMING:
An Ethnographic Study of Women-Loving Women's Subjectivity in the 2010s in Mainland China

Yiran Wang

Living Through Becoming:
An Ethnographic Study of Women-Loving Women's Subjectivity
in the 2010s in Mainland China

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Introduction: Grasping "Subjectivity" in Chinese Women-Loving Women's Experiences

A Personal Starting Point

In 2005 I was a new student at university, and for the first time I found myself, as a woman, attracted to women rather than men. It struck me like a thunderstorm with flashes of hilariousness and yearning, mixed with an ear-splitting "bang", as if a gavel was convicting me of "*tongxinglian* (homosexuality; homosexual)[1]". The world surrounding me suddenly appeared slippery; I feared falling "out of the closet (*chugui*)[2]" and being expelled from various relationships which were important to me. As an eighteen-year-old young adult who could persuade nearly everyone, including herself, that she had succeeded in being a "normal (*zhengchang*)" woman according to China's mainstream criteria, I was startled, although a little bit fascinated, by the feelings of "queerness" occurring in my life. In the following few months my body acted in a disorderly manner, alongside the emotional turmoil: menstruations did not happen, and acne spread over my face, which had never happened to me before. I was really looking terrible and felt awkward. I abruptly burst into tears from time to time.

Retrospectively, that period was scary but interesting. It was a period when I felt myself, and my "self", undergoing a phase of metamorphoses. I did not know what I was becoming or when this phase would end. I even felt pains physically; yet, my eyes noticed more colours than those I had ever seen, and my nose could trace more scents than those I had ever smelled. I could picture a future for my life which would make me happy even though it seemed different from the "happiness" defined by most of my family members, teachers and friends. But I dared not think about the cost of a pursuit of that future, the cost of a success, and the cost of a failure.

However, during those months nobody around me realised what was changing for me. No one knew what was "wrong" with me; no one knew that it was something unprecedentedly right for me, not "wrong", which made me so unfamiliar. An old high school friend asked me whether I was involved in an affair with a married man. I shook my head. She was puzzled and commented in the end: "I cannot think of anything else more deviant and worrisome than that." I smiled bitterly without saying a word. I kept silent, partly because

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1 "*Tongxinglian*" is a Chinese translation of "homosexual" or "homosexuality", a concept which was initially introduced into Chinese modern vocabulary in the early 20th Century. Now, "*tongxinglian*" is still the official term referring to homosexual(ity) in China's governmental documents. Regardless of the popularisation of other terms more welcomed among homosexual people themselves, such as "*tongzhi*", because the term "*tongxinglian*" has often been adopted in contexts that criminalise, pathologize or otherize people with same-sex desires.

2 "*Chugui*" literally means "stepping out of a closet". It is the Chinese translation of the English phrase "coming out of the closet". Detailed discussions about *chugui* are in Chapter 6.

of the abovementioned fear of becoming vulnerable and marginalised in a heteronormative society, but also because of the lack of a precise, reasonable and communicable language with which to express a non-heterosexual me, especially in front of the people who took their blind spots and biases for granted. At that moment, I realised that I needed to prepare myself with a possible language for breaking this silence and demonstrating myself/my "self" one day in the future, whether out of a good mood or out of a necessary responsibility.

Hence, for years after that, I had been searching for accounts about "my own kind", the people, especially Chinese women, with same-sex desires, in various textual and visual resources I could reach, as well as in everyday life. I hoped to figure out, from these accounts, a comfortable, lively, productive and inspiring way for understanding and expressing myself/my "self" and the people I felt close to. Reading the novels and essays and watching the films involving female same-sex desires, created by authors from Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China (e.g. Huang 1994; Qiu[3] 2006a, 2006b; Zhou 2002), I shared laughter and tears with the protagonists. I learned about the growing footsteps and creative practices of Chinese local *lala*[4] communities and activists (e.g. He 2009; Shanghai *Nvai* Lesbian Group 2008). I found resonances from autobiographic stories posted on internet forums by women-loving

3 In Taiwanese Chinese, Hong Kong Cantonese, and the standard Mandarin in mainland China, the Romanised spellings of the same Chinese name differ from one another. "Qiu Miaojin", "Chiu Miao-chin" and "Ciou Miao-Jin" actually refer to the same person. In my dissertation, I choose the spelling "Qiu Miaojin".

4 In *Notes of a Crocodile (E'yu Shouji),* an autobiographic novel authored by Taiwanese writer Qiu Miaojin, originally published in 1994, a lesbian protagonist is called "*lazi*", the pronunciation of which is similar to "les-", the first part of the English word "lesbian". As this novel had been popularly circulated and become a canon in Taiwan's lesbian communities, "*lazi*" was appropriated by local lesbians to identify themselves. Later, the term travelled to Hong Kong, and then mainland China. It has been transformed into "*lala*" in the women-loving-women communities in mainland China, and has become "a collective identity for women with same-sex desires and other non-normative gender and sexual identifications" (Kam 2013: 1) since the 2000s. However, according to my own observations, in most cases, the term "*lala*" is used to refer exclusively to female homosexuals or women in same-sex relationships, and thus is narrower than an inclusive term which identifies other non-heteronormative women. Besides "*lala*", some other terms are also used to identify same-sex attracted women in a non-negative way, such as "*les*" and "*leisi* (lace)".

women netizens (e.g. Hailan 2005[5]). Moreover, from 2009 on, I, as a postgraduate student trained in social science disciplines[6], stepped out of the classroom and participated in the activities organised by different LGBT groups in China, visited *tongzhi*[7] and *lala* bars, and, of course, communicated with the different people I met on these occasions. Combining my academic curriculum and my personal pursuit of finding a language for a young Chinese non-heteronormative woman to express herself, I did in-depth interviews with twelve of my peer *lalas*, who lived in Beijing at that time, about their understandings and practices of coming out/*chugui*, with which I developed my MA degree thesis (Wang 2012).

By 2012 I had already become a very different person from that seven years previously. I had found considerable empathy and solidarity from people of "my own kind"; I had come out to some family members and straight friends, from whom I received support and care; I no longer felt lonely and worried for being a woman attracted to women. However, while my personal project of "coming out/*chugui*" had almost been accomplished in a satisfactory

---

5 The autobiographic novel *Wode Tianshi Wode Ai (My Angel, My Love)*, authored by Hailan (a pen name) and published in 2005 by *Zhongxin Chubanshe* (the press's name) in Beijing, was advertised as the first formally published *lala* novel in mainland China. Before its publication, it had been circulated on online *lala* communities in the form of serial stories. Later, a sequel book titled *Name Aini Weishenme (Why Do I Love You So Much)* written by the same author was released and circulated, but this time not formally published.

6 From 2009 to 2012, I was a postgraduate student in Beijing Normal University, pursuing an MA degree in the major of social welfare (*shehui baozhang*). However, the institute where I was enrolled offered a number of general social science courses, and allowed students to sit in the classes offered to the students in all different majors.

7 According to the Hong Kong scholar Chou Wah-Shan (2000), *tongzhi* "is the most popular contemporary Chinese word for lesbians, bisexual, and gay people. The word, which has very positive historical references, was a Chinese translation from a Soviet communist term, 'comrade,' which refers to the revolutionaries who shared a comradeship…The term *tongzhi* was appropriated by a Hong Kong gay activist in 1989 for the first Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Hong Kong…The reappropriation is widely accepted by the community for its positive cultural references, gender neutrality, desexualisation of the stigma of homosexuality, politics beyond the homo-hetero duality, and use as an indigenous cultural identity for integrating the sexual into the social (p. 1-2)." According to some more recent works of Hong Kong scholars, the term *tongzhi* is similarly used in such a way (e.g. Kam 2013; Kong 2011). As I observe, however, in most discourses adopting the term *tongzhi* which are used and circulated in mainland China, *tongzhi* often narrowly refers to, and entails discussions and imaginations associated with, male homosexuals. Thus, to a large extent, the *nan tongzhi* (male *tongzhi*) have been made to represent the diversely non-heterosexual groups in mainland China. Because of this, in my writing I neither use *tongzhi* as a general term nor use *nü tongzhi* (female *tongzhi*) to refer to Chinese women with same-sex desires. Instead, I tend to use terms such as "*lala*", "same-sex attracted women", "women-loving women", "*les*", etc., as alternates of one another.

way, my academic project for my MA degree seemed to be just a starting point of an expanding journey of thinking and (re)searching. My research project about "coming out" seemed too limited, when it only focused on how one broke the silence and demonstrated oneself/one's "self". I wanted to look deeper and explore more broadly: what one's "self", itself, was actually like, when embedded in, and embodied through, various relationships between different "selves", in particular sociocultural and spatial-temporal contexts. I realised that "becoming and being a women-loving woman", in a society other than Euro-American countries and in the era of advanced globalisation, could define and be defined by many aspects of a woman's life, which might shape before, lie behind, contradict with, intertwine with, and/or expand beyond, the concept "coming out".

Later, in 2012, this quest eventually became concretised in my PhD project, in which I explored women-loving women's subjectivity in the 2010s in mainland China, through looking into five main themes: globalisation, heteronormativity, sexual orientation and gender expressions, love and sex, and finally, (a revisit to) coming out of the closet. My journey of doing this study spanned over seven years, which naturally became an important part of my everyday life and an important definition of my own "being".

Approaching "Subjectivity"

It took me some time to approach the concept of "subjectivity" before I decided to apply it as a main analytic concept in my study. After all, in the everyday language used by most Chinese people, including myself, there is no equivalent term for "subjectivity", a concept deeply rooted in the history of Western linguistics, politics and philosophy (Mansfield 2000; Strazzoni 2015). Even though "subjectivity" is commonly translated as "*zhutixing*" when it travels to China's academia (e.g. see how "*zhutixing*" is used in Martin 2010; Zhang 2009), it does not necessarily make sense to the Chinese informants in my fieldwork and the Chinese readers of my writing. In other words, "subjectivity" is a concept more "etic" than "emic" (Pike 1954) in my ethnographic study carried out in China. Since the concept "subjectivity" is about dealing with the issue of "self", a question strikes me sometimes: as an anthropologist, am I doing a strange job, when on the one hand I state that I am studying the "selves" of the "subjects" in my fieldwork, but on the other hand use "subjectivity", a concept hardly recognised by those "subjects", as my key analytic tool in the study?

In this section I dive into the scholarly literature on Chinese same-sex experiences, trying to find out where the concept "subjectivity" is absent and where it is located, through which lenses it has been explored (such as different same-sex sexual and gender identities), what limitations these lenses have, and why I think "subjectivity" is a useful concept in my study for enriching my perspectives, vocabularies, toolboxes and ethical reflections.

Among the early books about same-sex sexuality in contemporary mainland China, written in Chinese and published in the 1990s (Fang 1995; Li & Wang 1992; Li 1998a, 1998b; Zhang 1994), there is little analysis of the possibilities of particular forms of emerging subjectivity related to same-sex desires. Instead, from the very beginning in their books, the authors emphasise the universality of same-sex practices in human societies and the long-term existence of same-sex erotics and behaviors in Chinese history. In the social and academic atmosphere of the 1990s, where openly talking about sex and sexuality was largely taboo, this gesture on the one hand helped the researchers demonstrate a legitimacy of doing "scientific" research on (non-heteronormative) sexuality as an "objective" historical fact (Evans 1997). On the other hand, this approach confined these books' foci to the most ostensible fact-like aspects of the life of a same-sex attracted individual: his or her sexual desires and behaviours. Such an attitude towards sexuality has a limitation: to a large extent it essentialises same-sex desires and behaviours as merely biologically driven, uniformly performed, ahistorical and apolitical (f)acts. It neglects that such desires and behaviours are always being re-shaped in ever-changing sociocultural contexts, revised through the bodily practices of different generations, and are playing an important role in how one gives meanings to "life" and "being". Additionally, in these books, except one chapter which is specifically about female same-sex desires and practices (Li 1998b), most of the conclusions have been drawn from male experiences but generalised by the authors as the living situation of a monolithic group: "Chinese homosexuals". As a female reader and a women-loving woman, the androcentric perspective in these books make me feel more like a barely-qualified "research object" rather than a living person who can equally, mutually share life experiences with these authors.

In comparison, among the scholarly literature written in English and released since the turn of the 21st Century, which usually bridges same-sex experiences in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, the concept "subjectivity" has been explicitly spelt out and analysed in different directions by a number of authors (e.g. Bao 2012a; Chou 2000; Engebretsen 2014; Ho 2010; Huang 2008; Kam 2013; Liu & Ding 2005; Martin 2000; Rofel 2007; Sang 2003; Tang 2011). However, perhaps because writing in English makes the appropriation of the term "subjectivity" naturalised, before the authors unfold their specific findings from these projects, few of them have discussed how "subjectivity"—a rather "etic" concept for Chinese people—can be, and has been, understood and studied in their research projects. For some other scholars, maybe because of the absence of the word "*zhutixing*/subjectivity" in the narratives collected in their fieldwork in China, they explore how the "self" is understood and expressed among Chinese same-sex attracted people through examing Chinese same-sex sexual and gender identities, no matter whether they literally mention "subjectivity" or not in their writings (e.g. Chao 2000, 2001; Kong 2011; Qi 2013; Wei 2007; Wong 2011).

Compared with "*zhutixing*/subjectivity", "*shenfen rentong*", a Chinese translation combining the English terms "identity" and "identification", is usually believed to be relatively familiar to ordinary Chinese people; at least, the two words "*shenfen*" and "*rentong*" are commonly used in Chinese everyday languages[8]. Besides this terminological familiarity, the emerging local homosexual identities in contemporary China, such as "*tongzhi*" and "*lala*", have indeed been widely self-identified, especially by young, urban people with same-sex desires, which have created new understandings of "self", new aspirations of life, and new subjectivities (Kam 2013: 1-2). Nevertheless, gaps still lie between the meanings of "*shenfen rentong*" in China and the term "identity" in Euro-American cultures. First, simply adding together the most common usage of "*shenfen*" and that of "*rentong*" in Chinese does not equate with the definition of "identity" (Huang 2008), so it is problematic to use "*shenfen rentong*/identity" as a naturally "emic" concept in ethnographic fieldwork carried out in mainland China. Second, the individualistic and libertarian values, as well as the history of confrontational identity politics from which Euro-American gay and lesbian identities have emerged, do not necessarily share commonalities with the context from which Chinese homosexual identities have developed (Chou 2000; Kong 2016).

It is powerful when scholars point out such differences and refute the idea of a homogenised "global gay" identity and culture (cf. Altman 1996a, 1996b) spreading across the Global South. The objections remind Western scholars, who observe, define, and even bemoan this homogenisation, that they are in fact otherizing the so-called "Third World" and being blind to diverse forms of hybridity (Martin 1996). Yet, it will be another form of binarism, and an ignorance of hybridity, if we just point out such gaps only by stressing the differences between an essentialised "Chinese" culture and an imagined monolithic notion of "Euro-American" homosexual identity (Wong 2007b). Reflecting further on this question of language use, if authors who employ the term "identity" as a concept to analyse Chinese same-sex attracted people have to make a statement which admits that they realise the differences between "identity" in Chinese contexts and "identity" in Western contexts, this itself is a risk for reinforcing the "inherence" of these differences and creating an inertia to observe and interpret differences in an ever-changing world. Such a writing style also makes the application of the concept "identity" seem unnatural, as if this term is intrinsically imperfect in a study about Chinese same-sex experiences. This unnaturalness, as well as the naturalness when the concept "subjectivity" is applied in similar writings, limits the productiveness of concepts and languages per se.

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8 In Chinese, "*shenfen*" refers to one's social status (especially one's prestige) or is used together with the character "*zheng* (certificate)" and refers to an identification card. "*Rentong*" means "agreement", "acceptance" or "approval".

In my study of female same-sex desires and practices in the 2010s in mainland China, I try to give greater freedom of play to the productiveness of concepts and languages, to inspire more complicated understandings and more nuanced writing practices. I also keep reminding myself of the danger of treating the seemingly paired notions—"Western" and "non-Western", "same" and "different", "etic" and "emic", "bodily practice" and "understanding of the 'self'", to name a few—as binary opposites and essentialised fixtures, even though boundaries and limitations always exist in people's knowledges, languages and lives.

In my study, to analyse how Chinese same-sex attracted women understand and express themselves/their "selves", I draw on three concepts which are partly overlapping and work together: "subjectivity", "identity", and the "self" itself. I do not treat these three concepts as natural or easy, as if they have never caused me frowns, stammers and struggles, nor do I view them as unnatural, as if the Western origin of a term will only cause misusages and misunderstandings in negative ways. Among them, I apply "subjectivity", rather than the other two, as the basic and key concept throughout my study. I do also focus on "the centrality of ego-indexed notions of identity (Braidotti 2014: 171)", but I prefer to explore one's complex, ever-transforming knowledge and practices of her "self" when she is embedded and embodied in various relations with multiple others in a specific time span and space range—her life world.

In his book *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (2000), Nick Mansfield states:

> "'Subjectivity' refers, …, to an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and that encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience. In this way, the subject is always linked to something outside of it—an idea or principle or the society of other subjects. … [T]he self is not a separate and isolated entity, but one that operates at the intersection of general truths and shared principles" (Mansfield 2000: 3).

Such a description of "subjectivity" reminds me that what is no less important than my study of subjectivity is to include more background stories about this study: the meandering thinking processes, challenging fieldwork plights, difficult life choices, as well as the banality of everyday that may produce blind spots and indifference.

Encountering Rosi Braidotti's "Nomadic Subjects"

My analysis and writing about "subjectivity" have been shaped and profoundly inspired by the works of the contemporary philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti, though it was already in the middle of my research project, after I had finished my fieldwork, that I first read about her theories of "nomadic subjectivity" (Braidotti 1993, 2002, 2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2014). In this section I introduce why I identify with Braidotti's "nomadic subjects" and how I practise as a nomadic subject in my research project. My emphasis on the linkage between Braidotti's theories and my own study and life is not implying that the works of the other scholars I refer to are less important for my project; rather, putting this emphasis here better helps me explain my research questions, methodology, data analyses and conclusions that are to follow.

According to the autobiographic paragraphs in her academic book *Nomadic Subjects* (Braidotti 2011a), as well as in the non-academic writing project she has taken part in (Valmorbida 2014), Rosi Braidotti was born in the 1950s, in Italy's eastern border lands, where different cultures, ethnicities and languages co-existed and interacted. Later, as a teenager, she migrated to Melbourne, Australia, together with her family. Ultimately growing up as an "English native speaker", while loving reading books written in Latin languages (thanks to her uncle who still lived in the European continent and sent her boxes of books across oceans), Braidotti went back to Europe when the chance came to her, and accomplished her doctoral dissertation written in French, in Paris, France. As a "nomad", literally, Braidotti had experienced various trips and journeys all over the globe, until she met her Dutch partner, and then based her career and life mainly in the Netherlands for decades, despite her explorations for the "nomadic theory" never stopping.

One day in the dull summer of 2014, when I was manually transcribing the recorded interviews I had done in my fieldwork, I encountered the lively personal stories written by Braidotti at an interval between some excruciating working hours. In those weeks, every day I sat at my desk in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, played, paused, (re)played, and paused again, transcribing one audio file after another, and trying to catch something that deserved to be analysed "academically". However, on many occasions I found myself sinking into the most private sentiments which my fieldwork had created: I was attracted to one of my informants, with a thrilling desire. I met this informant, a Chinese woman living in Australia, when she had a temporary stay in Shanghai. The interview with her was the most impressive, pleasant and beckoning episode in my whole fieldwork. I had an affection for her, and I could tell that, in return, she had it for me as well, though neither of us had spoken about this affection aloud. Later, as I went back to Amsterdam while she back to Melbourne, I thought it almost impossible for us to meet each other again,

unless intentionally arranging a journey across different continents and oceans—and, furthermore, across the boundary between "the researcher" and "the researched". When I read Braidotti's autobiographic paragraphs, suddenly the magical coincidence between Braidotti's life stories and my own memories in terms of geographic locations—Melbourne, Australia, and the Netherlands—grasped my attention and made me feel specially connected to her works. From that day on, I started to read Braidotti's books and articles more carefully.

Braidotti's "nomadic subjectivity" is not only an "analytic tool" but also a "creativity project" (Braidotti 2014). It criticises the conventional, dominant, common-sense visions about subjectivity, knowledge and meanings—epistemologically, methodologically, politically and ethically; and it calls for more creativity and adequate cartography to find out new visions in the contemporary globalised world (*ibid.*). About "subjectivity", Braidotti roots her understandings especially in the French scholars who contributed to the philosophies of difference, such as Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray (Braidotti 2002, 2011b, 2014). She criticises the dualistic thinking about Sameness/Difference and refuses to link difference to negativeness. Instead she applauds affirmative, positive interpretations about differences. She is opposed to viewing subjectivity as a unitary, inward and inner truth about individual(ism), but argues for a non-unitary and multi-layered vision of a subject (*ibid.*). Braidotti gives special significance to the active and creative feature of "power (*potentia*)", which is opposed to the restrictive, institutionalised "power (*potestas*)". According to her, subjectivity is a process of becoming that "consists in stringing the reactive (*potestas*) and the active instances of power (*potentia*) together", "made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire, that is to say, entrapment and empowerment" (Braidotti 2014: 168-169).

Elaborating on philosophical nomadism (see Deleuze & Guattari 1987) as well as following her own multi-cultural, multi-lingual and migrant experiences, Braidotti chooses "nomad" as her preferred figuration for understanding, expressing and embodying "subjectivity". Here, for Braidotti, who has been nourished by the feminist politics of location and figurations, a "figuration" is "a politically informed image of thought that evokes or expresses an alternative vision of subjectivity" (Braidotti 2011a: 22), is "a living map, a transformative account of the self; it's no metaphor. Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather materialistic mappings of situated, i.e. embedded and embodied, social positions" (Braidotti 2014: 179). Inspired by Spinoza's monistic understanding of matter and human desire (see Gatens & Lloyd 1999) and Deleuze's assemblage theory (see Deleuze & Guattari 1987), Braidotti combines the figuration "nomad" and the concept "subjectivity", for emphasising the external and material dimension in the process of becoming, and for

pointing out the non-dualistic relation between "Self" and "Other", between "body" and "mind", and between "inside" and "outside" (Braidotti 2014: 167-172).

Braidotti also depicts subjects as relational and collective assemblages of various elements, which do not exclude but rather intertwine with one another, such as time and space, imaginations and memories, reading and writing, critique and creativity, mind and body, multiple languages, multiple cultures, etc. (*ibid.*) Hence, for Braidotti, a nomadic becoming process defies any original, displaces dominant knowledge, proliferates heterogeneous unfoldings, destabilises centres and margins, identifies "lines of flight (see Deleuze & Guattari 1987)", and desires to transform.

Although, at first glance, Braidotti's "nomadic subjectivity" is embedded in the genealogy of European continental philosophy and in the history of post-colonial feminist, anti-racist politics, which is "a critique of Euro-centrism from within" (Braidotti 2014: 179), it not only provides a suitable tool for my study about the subjectivity of women-loving women in 21st Century China, but also sets a brilliant example of a creativity project for me.

Linking the previous two sections of this chapter to the current one, I have gained alternative understandings about some dilemmas I had faced when I decided to study "subjectivity" in Chinese contexts. Firstly, Braidotti's practices of nomadic writing help to alleviate my anxiety caused by the assumed impossibility of translating and studying "subjectivity" in an ethnographic project in China. As the nomadic writing itself is multilingual, a succession of "translations without originals" (Braidotti 2011a: 21), the above "impossibility" means neither an imperfection nor an inapplicability, but is a productive opportunity for vitalising both Chinese and English, both academic discourses and everyday-life languages, both institutionalised knowledges and grassroots alternatives.

Secondly, the feminist interpretation of "figuration", an embodied cartography of the geo-political, historical, socio-economic and symbolic locations in which one is rooted, or among which one is floating, helps to actualise a "visionary epistemology" (Yaeger 1988: 31, cited in Braidotti 2011a, 2014) of subjectivity. Rather than employing abstract concepts in order to achieve a representative and conclusive theory about humans' "being", Braidotti teaches me to precisely draw the ever-transforming, ever-unfolding, non-linear, non-unitary, multi-layered and sometimes paradoxical "becoming" process of a subject in her or his day-to-day lives, memories and imaginations. In my study of Chinese women-loving women, although I do not claim that Braidotti's "nomad" is necessarily the most suitable figuration of these women's subjectivities, the very practices of developing accurate, sensible, suitable "figurations" for tracing the vital, subtle, ever-becoming subjectivity, which I have learned from Braidotti's nomadic theory, do enrich my methodological toolbox. Moreover, just as Braidotti treats her "nomadic subjectivity" as both an analytic

tool and a creativity project, I apply the embodied cartography for analysing, and also see my study itself as an exact "figuration" of how my own subjectivity—as an anthropologist, and a Chinese women-loving woman subject, among many others—is becoming.

Thirdly, through developing nomadic theory, Braidotti has been resisting methodological nationalism, and has been calling for studies on the differences, not only between the geo-political "centres" but also within one of these "centres"—namely, in Braidotti's works, the Euro-centric Europe (Braidotti 2014). So far, the mainstream discourses within mainland China tend to describe China as "a country in the Third World (*disan shijie guojia*)", outside the Western centres, rather than as a centre among many others. However, researchers working on Chinese same-sex experiences run the risk of simplification if they only apply the rubrics of "Chinese experiences" to refer to the differences between Western homosexual cultures and Chinese same-sex practices (e.g. Chou 2000), instead of referring to the differences among various subjects with same-sex desires within China. This attitude will to a large extent essentialise the heterogeneity between the so-called "Western" and "Chinese", assume homogeneity among the Chinese, and oversimplify China's involvement in globalisation as merely facing the threat of being Westernised.

More recent studies of course pay attention to the hybridity of Western and Chinese languages, cultural identities and meanings in the everyday lives of Chinese same-sex attracted people (e.g. Kong 2011; Wong 2007b, 2011), and stress the diversity within the Chinese local *tongzhi* or *lala* communities even just within one city (e.g. Kam 2013). However, what has been less discussed is the multi-unfolding and further-transforming differences, which are taking place after or beyond certain Western-Chinese hybridisations. About the notion of "difference", Braidotti on the one hand unties "difference" from the conventionally believed dualistic opposition of sameness/difference, while on the other hand alerts us that not all forms of pluralism, hybridity and difference taking place under advanced capitalism and globalisation are (equally, or adequately,) creative and empowering for the subjects embedded in them (Braidotti 2014). Inspired by Braidotti's arguments, and intending to be sensitive to the differences emerging among women-loving women within Chinese contexts in the rapid and deepening diversity of globalisation, I de-centre my discussions on "Chinese" same-sex experiences from discussing Western/Chinese differences, including the hybridity between these two sides, and view China as a centre—albeit a non-Western one—in order to reflect on "Chineseness" more critically and creatively from within.

Research Themes: Picturing the Chinese Women-Loving Women's Subjectivity

The main quest of my study has been shaped by the above: my personal journey of expressing myself/my "self"; my review of the scholarly literature on the "selves" of Chinese same-sex attracted people; and my understanding of the concept of "subjectivity", with the help of—but not limited to—the feminist philosophical "nomadic theory" developed by Rosi Braidotti. My quest is to picture figurations of subjectivity that are lively, accurate, difference-sensitive and affirmative but non-binaristic, materialised but non-essentialistic; the non-linear, non-unitary, multi-layered processes of "becoming" which are experienced by Chinese women with same-sex desires. This quest of picturing "subjectivity", which is especially difficult to be directly talked about in Chinese language and with Chinese people, requires me to find suitable canvases, brushes and pigments for transforming lingual gaps into room for creativity—the figurations. In my project, I choose five specific and yet intertwined themes for detailed analyses: (1) globalisation; (2) heteronormativity; (3) sexual orientation and gender expressions; (4) love and sex; (5) coming out of the closet.

These analytical themes are suitable resources for my figurations of Chinese women-loving women's subjectivity because, first, they together cover both the core features of female same-sex desires and the environments in which female same-sex desires are located. A study of subjectivity should be a study of how the "self" of an individual is materially (re)shaped through, organically connected to, and porously exchanging with, other selves and the "outside" world. These five themes can provide different but synergistic lenses for studying individuals, intimate relationships, families and homes, the sociocultural surroundings, and the transregional and transnational flows of objects, subjects, information and imaginations.

Second, since these five themes are not brand-new topics for scholars, activists, and other individuals who have been researching or participating in same-sex relationships in Chinese contexts, certain conventional knowledge and accepted common sense, no matter how innovative when initially developed, need to be critically and creatively reflected upon in the rapidly-changing world of the 2010s.

Third, and not least, personally, these five themes are immediately pertinent to the "becoming" journey of my own "self", alongside the unfolding of my research project. This ongoing journey is by no means easy and smooth, but brings me great happiness, deep ruminations and unexpected adventures. I choose these five themes, following my own preferences, for displaying my research findings and expressing myself/my "self" as a Chinese women-loving woman.

The rest of this section summarises how I approach these five themes in the following chapters. I also briefly review specific findings from existing studies that shed light upon Chinese female same-sex desires, relationships, identities and communities in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other diasporic Chinese communities (Chao 2000, 2001, 2008; Engebretsen 2014; Huang 2008; Kam 2013; Martin 2010; Qi 2013; Sang 2003; Tang 2011; Wieringa 2007; Wong 2012). I also clarify what points I will explore further and in which directions I will carry out different analyses.

Globalisation

Globalisation is a grand phenomenon which has been theorised, investigated and depicted in numerous social scientific studies in many parts of the world, especially where its increasingly rapid pace is being sensed through emerging novelties and tensions (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Bauman 2000; Bhabha 1994; Hall 1997; Tsing 2005). A consensus among scholars and activists who pay attention to the emerging local *tongzhi* and *lala* communities in contemporary mainland China is the popularisation of the internet and personal computers since the 1990s, which has brought great impacts upon the everyday lives, shared language, common knowledge, and collective memories and belongings, of female individuals with same-sex desires (Engebretsen 2005, 2014; Kam 2013, 2014; Martin 2009; Shanghai *Nvai* Lesbian Group 2008; *Tongyu* Group 2009-2012[9]). Besides providing chances for Chinese local women-loving women to learn about the existence of "their own kind" all over the world, and for them to build social spaces regardless of geographic limitations, the internet enables the globalisation of various notions, values and interpretations related to gender

9 So far, I have read two collections of *lala* oral history, narrated and written in Chinese, documented by Chinese local *lala* groups. They were respectively done by Shanghai *Nvai* Lesbian Group and Beijing *Tongyu* Group. The former collection contains a dozen personal stories of Shanghai *lala* individuals with pseudonyms, and several articles written by local activists. It is entitled *Talking about Their Love: An Oral History of Women Who Love Women in Shanghai, Volume I (Tamen de ai zaishuo: Aishang nüren de nüren, Shanghai, Koushushi, I)*, which was released online in 2008 and can be accessed for free. In this oral history project, Lucetta Y. L. Kam had involved and gave training to the narrative collectors. The latter collection is a series of transcribed interviews with some key persons in *lala* activism mainly based in Beijing, under the title "*Oral History of the Development of Beijing Lala Communities, Personal Stories (Beijing Lala shequ fazhan koushushi, Geren gushi)*". This series is now being released by the organisational account of *Tongyu* Group on "WeChat", one of the most popular social network APPs in China, and can be accessed for free. Most of these interviews were originally done between 2009 and 2012. Besides these two collections, I have also heard that a few other *lala* oral history projects have already been done or were going to be done, for example an oral history workshop for elder *lalas*, organised by the local *lala* activists in the city of Chengdu, Sichuan Province. However, I have not yet got a chance to learn more about them.

and sexuality, which once originated from and were only used in certain historical and sociocultural contexts.

Compared with the "nostalgic views of a tolerant Chinese tradition prior to experiencing Western influence" (Engebretsen 2014: 17), held by earlier studies of Chinese (male) same-sex practices (e.g. Chou 2000; Hinsch 1990), scholars who have specifically studied female same-sex desires in Chinese history, literature, and everyday lives, emphasise more the selective, uneven, hybrid constructions and re-constructions of the knowledge about "the West" and Chinese "traditions", as well as of the symbols of "progression" and "backwardness", in the age of rapid globalisation (e.g. Chao 2000; Jiang 2016; Sang 2003; Martin 1996). Hence, they look into the dynamics between Western and Chinese notions, values and meanings, without essentialising "Western" and "Chinese". At the same time, they also point out that it is problematic if we uncritically regard the ideas and strategies that are currently salient in Chinese *tongzhi* and *lala* communities, for example the practices of "cooperative marriage (*xingshi hunyin*)[10]", as unquestionable life choices, in the name of "Chineseness" (e.g. Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013).

However, in the abovementioned studies, although "careful descriptive research on same-sex cultures have [sic] now emerged that show [sic] us the complexity in the meeting between the global and local" (Engebretsen 2005: 3), a distinction is still implied between "globalisation" as the sociohistorical background of a research project, and what is happening "against" this background. In other words, these studies focus more on the becoming of the various concepts, practices, identities, communities and aspirations that are salient among the Chinese women-loving women in the flows of globalisation, but less on the becoming of the specific forms of "globalisation" through their studies. If the carrying out of such research projects per se—including the research logic, language, topics, methods, and even the presence of the researcher in (and the disappearance of the researcher from) the ethnographic occasions—has concretised "globalisation" moments, in both the researched subjects' lives and the researcher's life, how should we study and write about globalisation, as well as Chinese women-loving women's subjectivity, in such a situation of entanglement?

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10 The term "*xingshi hunyin*", or "*xinghun*" for short, combines the words "*xingshi* (form)" and "*hunyin* (marriage)". A *xingshi hunyin* usually refers to a marriage between a male *tongzhi* and a *lala* woman, no matter whether having a legal marriage certificate or not. Sometimes, such a marriage can also be called a "*hezuo hunyin*", in which term the word "*hezuo*" literally means "cooperation". There are different English translations of "*xingshi hunyin*" appearing in scholarly writings, such as "cooperative marriage" (see Kam 2013) and "contract marriage" (see Engebretsen 2014). Personally, I prefer to use "cooperative marriage" to refer to "*xingshi hunyin*" in my studies.

In her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Karen Barad, a physicist and feminist theorist, describes her understanding of the situation of "entanglement":

> "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (Barad 2007: p. ix).

As two prominent contributors to "new feminist materialism" (Van der Tuin 2011a), Barad and Braidotti echo each other's explorations on feminist epistemology and methodology, despite being through quantum physics and nomadic theory respectively. Applying Barad's perspective, we should not perceive globalisation as something already there, which will "meet" the people in a place where it sweeps over. Rather, it is the very "meetings" among different subjects and objects that make us recognise globalisation in mind and actualise globalisation in practice. Hence, in Chapter 2, I experimentally write about the "becoming" processes of women-loving-women subjects, including myself, in "globalised" entanglements, such as my research project itself; and also the other way around, the analyses can be about the becoming of globalisation in the entanglements of women-loving women subjects.

Heteronormativity

"Heteronormativity", as a compound of "hetero(sexual)" and "normativity", refers to the privilege lying in the "heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society", which "thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (Warner 1993: xxi). The discussions of heteronormativity have been greatly inspired by, and contribute to, the emergence of queer theory, which casts light on "the necessarily and desirably queer nature of the world (*ibid.*)" and powerfully de-constructs the hegemonic and normalised form of heterosexuality. For any academic, activist or everyday effort which goes beyond a mere calling for tolerance of non-heterosexuality, "heteronormativity" is necessarily and inevitably a bull's-eye for critique, because without bridging a so-called "subculture" to the mainstream, dominant, normalised culture, we cannot really learn how and why this culture has become "sub-"—which implies "lower", "secondary", "inferior"—in a society, and neither can we creatively infuse some other meanings into this "sub-", for example "substitution" and "subversion".

However, the limitations imprinted on the concept "heteronormativity" should not be neglected, when we employ it, especially when we discuss it in non-Western sociocultural contexts. First, explicitly adopting "hetero" in its word formation, the concept "heteronormativity" in the first place assumes heterosexuality as a universal, ahistorical sexual orientation with a uniform definition. However, in fact, the coinage of the term "heterosexual" was not earlier than the coinage of "homosexual" and "bisexual" in Europe; and these terms did not enter English medical discourses until the late 19th Century (Sedgwick 1991; Takács 2004; Weeks 1977). Second, directly connecting "heterosexual" to "normative", the concept "heteronormativity" emphasises the already-existing structure of gender and sexual hierarchy, but provides much less space for further probing the possible fragility and fracture in this "hetero-normativity" connection, which may in return de-construct the very connection itself. Moreover, mainly focusing on the general line between what counts as "normal" and what counts as "abnormal" in the dominant values of a society, the concept "heteronormativity" is not a tool sensitive enough to study the aesthetic pursuits that are more complicated and paradoxical than the normal/abnormal binary. As a result, ironically, against the grain of the queer endeavours that undermine the current hegemonic discourses and re-interpret traditional knowledges and principles, the concept "heteronormativity", by itself, can hardly bring queer studies more inspirations and strength than what it already did when it was coined. Only when we invite and invent more concepts without a single and strong assumption of the "hetero-normativity" connection, can our critiques on heteronormative realities be more productive.

For this reason, in my study I introduce and elaborate the concept "passionate aesthetics", coined by Saskia E. Wieringa (2012, 2015), in order to analyse the heteronormative phenomena salient in the lives of Chinese women-loving women beyond the binaristic framework about heterosexual/homosexual and normative/non-normative. According to Wieringa, "passionate aesthetics" refers to "a mix of institutions, dynamics, motivations, codes of behaviours, (re)presentation, subjectivity, and identities that make up the complex structure of desires, erotic attractions, sexual relations, and kinship and partnership patterns that are salient in a given context (Wieringa 2015: 34)". In comparison with "heteronormativity", "passionate aesthetics" as an analytic tool allows us to ask more open-ended questions rather than either-or ones, and leads us to find out what is—and why it is—considered by people as "better", "more beautiful", "more desirable", "closer to perfection" in the life aspects relevant to sexuality and gender. "Passionate aesthetics" is sensitive to the subtle changes, partial subversions and unexpected potentials that are embedded in seemingly unchallenged heteronormative realities; meanwhile, it is also sensitive to the ignorance, discrimination and violence in the name of chasing after a "finer" life style.

In contemporary China, the compulsory heterosexual marriage, the combination between "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980) and compulsory marriage (see Kam 2013; Engebretsen 2014), is one of the most salient forms of heteronormativity, not only for non-heterosexual people but for all members in society within the age range that is commonly believed as "proper" for getting married—especially for young women in their twenties (Fincher 2014; Gaetano 2014; Kam 2015; To 2013). The shaping of women-loving women's life choices is largely influenced by the pressure of compulsory marriage, from their original families (especially from their parents), their everyday social networks, the public opinions spread and reinforced through various media, and even an internalised moral sense (Chen 2009; Engebresten 2009, 2014; Kam 2007, 2013; Wang 2012). Under this pressure, one's successful or failed fulfilment of the marriage imperative measures whether she is a "good" *lala/tongzhi* and "good" citizen (Kam 2013, 2015). In her book *Queer Women in Urban China* (2014), Elisabeth L. Engebretsen finds that a considerable number of *lala* women living in contemporary Beijing identify with normative ideologies about "good" conducts and "good" life, not despite but because they are clearly aware of how different they are in a heteronormative society as women-loving women. She uses the term "different normativities (see Yau 2010)" to describe such phenomena.

Sharing similar research interests with the abovementioned studies, I, in Chapter 3, also analyse how the heteronormative marriage ideals impact Chinese women-loving women's everyday lives and the becoming of their "selves". Yet, as I have stated earlier, my approach is to look into the subtle, conditional, and/or paradoxical, passionate aesthetics of not only women-loving women but also the so-called "majority"—the heterosexual people living (seemingly) normal lives. By paying attention to the volatility of the complicated relations between "normative" and "desirable" when people experience the mechanism of passionate aesthetics, I try to find out how predominant and mainstream forms of heterosexuality are being transformed, how certain normative ideas change, how new discourses and embodiments emerge to become more desirable than "normalcy". Moreover, learning the affirmative, positive and sensitive attitudes towards "differences" from Braidotti's nomadic theory, I prefer to call the aspirations for a "better" life among Chinese same-sex attracted women—no matter how much they resemble the heteronormative ideals on the surface—as "different differences", rather than "different normativities".

Sexual Orientations and Gender Expressions

"Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression", abbreviated as "SOGIE", has recently become a preferred term utilised in international official wording on LGBTQ+ issues and relevant human rights campaigns (e.g. UNDP and China Women's University

2018). The adoption of such an abbreviated but inclusive term is accompanied by the emergence of more and more distinguishable and denominated sexual orientations such as "asexual[11]" and "pansexual[12]", and gender identities such as "genderqueer[13]". In my dissertation, however, rather than pushing my discussions of sexual orientations and gender expressions towards such a frontier of keeping up with newly emerging categories, I look into the *T-P* relationships in contemporary mainland China. The terminology of *T*, *P*, and *T-P* relationships, originated from Taiwanese "*T-Po*" female same-sex culture, which emerged in Taiwanese gay and lesbian bars in the 1960s (Chao 2000, 2001). Later, the *T-P* lexicon travelled to mainland China and has been popularised over the last two decades. *T*, derived from the English word "tomboy", and *P* (short for its Taiwanese original term "*Po*"), which means (a *T*'s) "wife", respectively refers to the masculine and feminine part in a female same-sex relationship (Engebretsen 2005; Huang 2008).

However, the *T*- and *P*-identifications and the *T-P* relationships, as well as the historical and cultural contexts where they are embedded, are different from the butch-femme histories in Euro-American societies (cf. Harris & Crocker 1997; Kennedy & Davis 2014; Nestle 1992). As gender-dyad practices, butch-femme relationships in some Western countries, such as America, had been practised by generations of lesbians, but later were harshly criticised by many feminists in the 1970s as an imitative reproduction of heteronormative sexual and gender relationships. Not until the 1990s did a new generation of lesbians start to re-appropriate and re-study the butch-femme dynamics in a "queer" context (Harris & Crocker 1997). Compared with this historical line of butch-femme practices, what the *T* and *P* identities have undergone, after they had been introduced to mainland China from Taiwan via the internet around the turn of the 21st Century, are not

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11 "Asexuality", in its entry on Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asexuality, cited on March 8, 2017), is briefly described as "the lack of sexual attraction to anyone, or low or absent interest in or desire for sexual activity", referring to some published research, such as Robert L. Crook and Karla Baur (2016). *Our Sexuality*. Cengage Learning: p. 268.

12 "Pansexuality", in its entry on Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pansexuality, cited on March 8, 2017), is briefly described as "the sexual, romantic or emotional attraction towards people regardless of their sex or gender identity", referring to some published research, such as *Sex and Society, Volume 2: Generations—Pill, The.* (2010). New York: Marshall Cavendish Reference, p. 593.

13 "Genderqueer", in its entry on Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genderqueer, cited on March 8, 2017), is briefly described as "a catch-all category for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine—identities which are thus outside of the gender binary and cisnormativity", referring to some published research, such as Usher, Raven, ed. (2006). *North American Lexicon of Transgender Terms*. San Francisco: GLB Publishers.

chronological ups and downs. Instead, along with the introduction of the *T-P* lexicon and identities, many other concepts from Euro-American countries and neighbouring Chinese societies were introduced as well, such as "feminist", "gay", "lesbian", "bisexual", "*tongzhi*", "*lala*" and "*ku'er* (queer)[14]". These terms are being mixedly, alternatively, and sometimes confusedly used (if there are authoritative definitions of these terms), while sometimes creatively used, in Chinese women-loving women's everyday languages. At the same time, these terms are being studied, reflected on and debated among scholars and activists, processes which have inevitably—but sometimes selectively—been influenced by discourses that are disseminated transnationally and filtered through sociocultural conditions. As a result, the *T*- and *P*-identifications sound like something already "outdated", compared with the other abovementioned identities, before they could be appreciated by scholars and activists as living and lively cultures of female same-sex desires in today's China, due to the similarity between the *T-P* relationships and the butch-femme relationships that had been stigmatised in Europe and America as early as the 1970s. However, in fact, the *T-P* lexicon and practices are being commonly expressed and are highly visible in Chinese women-loving women's everyday lives, which contain rich figurations about the becoming of these women's subjectivity, and spark rethinking and innovations for the conventional knowledge of sexual orientations and gender identities.

With only a few exceptions (e.g. Huang 2008; Kam 2014), most academic works about the female same-sex desires and practices in mainland China have only mentioned "*T*" and "*P*" simply as two terms in the Chinese female same-sex subcultural glossary, rather than analyse in detail the *T-P* relationships and the sociocultural meanings they imply. In some brochures made by *lala* activist groups for clarifying the "correct" and recommended knowledge about sexual minorities, the *T* and *P* identities are not even included in the content (e.g. *Tongyu* Group 2010). In comparison, the identity "*lala*" has drawn more attention from scholars. Turning the first pages of *Shanghai Lalas* (Kam 2013) and *Queer Women in Urban China* (Engebretsen 2014), the two book-length monographs about mainland Chinese women-loving women that have been published so far, we can notice that the term "*lala*" is printed either on the book cover or on the head page. For many scholars and activists, "*lala*" is a collective and inclusive identity with which homosexual women, bisexual women, and female-to-male transgender persons can identify (e.g. Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; *Tongyu* Group 2010). However, I have observed in many

14 "*Ku'er*" is the Chinese translation of the English term "queer", firstly used in Taiwan and then introduced to mainland China. Having a similar pronunciation of "queer", "*Ku'er*" can also be understood as "someone who is very cool", according to the literal meanings of the two characters composing this word.

circumstances in the everyday lives of my informants that it is not rare for the term "*lala*" to be appropriated to refer to homosexual women exclusively. At the same time, some terms other than "*lala*" are also frequently used among my informants to refer to women with same-sex desires, for example "*les*", short for the English word "lesbian", and "*nütong*", short for "*nü tongxinglian* (female homosexual)". Although the term "*lala*" seems more Chinese-localised than "*les*", more subjectively creative than "*nütong*", and more "advanced" than "*T*" and "*P*", it could be a new overrepresentation and imposition, if a study of female same-sex subjectivity conflates all women with same-sex desires into the category of "*lala*" but does not note the nuances and tensions among them. In Chapter 4, I specifically analyse the *T*- and *P*-identification, and the *T-P* relationships, not despite but because the inclusive and feminist rubric "*lala*" in the existing scholarly and activist discourses does not care too much about the gender-dyad identities and relationships in female same-sex practices.

Inspired by an amazing performance given by a pair of *T-P* lovers I encountered during my fieldwork, I use the metaphor of a "dance duet" for describing the *T-P* dynamics, in which desires and tensions are paradoxically but organically embodied, half following the rehearsed scripts while half emerging from improvisations. I especially track the notion of "pureness (*chun*)", and its different definitions on different occasions and among different groups of women. The question about who are the "pure"—which means "real"—lesbians has been debated for decades in Euro-American butch-femme and lesbian communities (e.g. Kennedy & Davis 2014). Since various female same-sex gender and sexual identities started to emerge in Chinese societies, similar debates have never ceased. In Chapter 4 I explore how, revolving around the notion of "pureness/*chun*", the day-to-day languages and practices in *T-P* relationships in some contexts persistently emphasise the boundaries and hierarchical relations between different sexual orientations and gender categories, while in some other contexts actively undermine these very boundaries and relations. Embedded in the larger maps of Chinese women-loving women's subjectivity, my task in Chapter 4 is to develop a "thick description (see Geertz 1973)" of how the women-loving women understand and express—through the *T-P* lexicon and *T-P* practices—sexual orientations and gender identities of themselves/their "selves" and of the "others".

Love and Sex

I discuss "love" and "sex" as one research theme; but such a juxtaposition does not mean that I view love and sex as two distinct areas. This theme is not special at all, because, without doubt, it is the very basis of any study on same-sex desires, relationships and subjectivity. With regard to female same-sex experiences in contemporary mainland China, a number of studies have elaborated at length and in detail how various aspects of *lala* women's lives

are being shaped and reshaped (e.g. Engebretsen 2005, 2008, 2009, 2014; Kam 2013), which are topics I discuss in the other chapters; yet, female same-sex love and sex per se are often mentioned in an abstract and general tone, as if, compared with the other life aspects, love and sex are facts that have already existed and been fixed prior to the formation of the other life aspects. As a result, when the becoming processes of same-sex attracted women are being explored, the becoming processes of their same-sex love and sex are ironically under-reported to a large extent. In Chapter 5, I try to report on such becoming processes, though academically talking and writing about love and sex is a challenging task that makes the researcher extraordinarily vulnerable, especially when the researcher is also a women-attracted woman.

In order to talk about and write about love and sex in my study, I have been struggling with a multi-fold lack of academic vocabularies, from my fieldwork to my writing process. For one thing, love is a kind of universally shared but highly personalised experience, so it has been seldom regarded as a suitable and reliable source for theorisation. Although some prominent Western scholars have touched on the theme of love in their works, for example Anthony Giddens (1992), they often have bigger goals of researching the situations of (Western) modernity, so "love" is studied more like an epitome or indicator of this modernity rather than the ultimate research theme per se. For another thing, "sex"[15] pushes the academic frontier into the upmost private parts of people's lives—not only the lives of the researched subjects but also the lives of the researchers. Most of the existing works on female same-sex relationships in China tend to generalise the emotions, practices and understandings about sex of the research subjects. They basically define a female same-"sex" relationship under the abstract, distant, impassionate term "sex" rather than providing vivid, subtle and empathetic depictions. Regarding the sexuality of the researcher, from the time of the great anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who discussed his own sexuality embedded in fieldwork in his personal diary (Malinowski 1967) but not in his academic publications on human sexuality (cf. Malinowski 1927, 1929), to more

15 The term "sex", as both noun or verb, has several mutually relevant but nuanced meanings. As a noun, "sex" can refer to people's sexual activity, especially sexual intercourse, or can refer to either of the two main categories of humans—male or female—according to their biological characteristics and reproductive functions. As a verb, "sex" can refer to determining which sex category someone belongs to. Here, when I describe the research theme "love and sex", as well as when I elaborate on this theme in Chapter 5, I use the term "sex" mainly to refer to various sexual practices including sexual attractions, sexual intimate contacts, sexual fantasies, masturbations, and so forth. Nevertheless, because what I study is the sex between women, I do not narrowly and heteronormatively assume a heterosexual "intercourse" as the only qualified sexual activity.

recent decades, during which a number of anthropologists have tried to analyse their own sexual orientations, erotic desires and sexual encounters in their fields (e.g. Blackwood 1995, 2010; Chao 2001; Kam 2007; Kulick & Willson 1995; Lewin & Leap 1996; Nestle 1992; Newton 1993; Wekker 2006; Wieringa 1999), in general it is still taboo to openly include the researchers' sexuality and desire into academic writings.

Nevertheless, feminist and queer scholars have often proposed alternative understandings about "academics", "science" and "theory" which are different from conventional ones. Rosi Braidotti, for example, points out the "phallo-logocentrism" in white, male-centred, Western traditional philosophy, re-defines philosophy as "simple" as "the love for, the desire for, higher knowledge" (Braidotti 1993: 6), and argues that feminism per se is philosophy that empowers every woman to become a philosopher *(ibid.)*. In Braidotti's tone, not only the words "love" and "desire" can be adopted in and directly define philosophy, but a non-Western, non-white, non-heterosexual woman can also theorise "love" and "desire" from her own everyday experiences. As a response to this idea, I change my negative attitude towards the abovementioned "lack" of academic language, which I had once blamed for causing me failures in translating love and sex in both fieldwork and writing, and instead start to let go the idea of "original" and see the capability of re-creation of "a translation without originals" (Braidotti 2011a: 21; see also Enke 2014). In Chapter 5, I theorise "love" and "sex" through depicting the ever-proliferating meanings and the multiple "trans-" processes (including translation, transformation, transcendence, transparency, transgender, and the symbolic and embodied "penetration" that traverse across body and soul when having sex) in my informants' and my own experiences of first love, romance, passion, and sexual behaviours. During such a writing process, I feel myself becoming not only a translator of the themes of love and sex, but also a translation itself; and the "lack" of academic language that I had felt can be in itself a vivid expression.

Coming Out of the Closet

The last theme of my study is "coming out of the closet", or "*chugui*" as it is popularly translated in Chinese; but, in fact, this theme was the first clearly shaped theme prompting my academic quests since I recognised at an undergraduate level that I was attracted to women. For a long time, I had been haunted by a typical anxiety shared by most Chinese

LGBT people[16] around me: "How can I make it possible to come out to my parents, telling them that I am *tongxinglian* (homosexual) and I am not interested in dating or marrying a man?" Before long, this anxiety had become the biggest motivation that urged me, a post-graduate student in 2010, to base my MA thesis on a study of the coming out choices of my peers—young *lala* women living in urban China. I believed that, through collecting coming out stories in real life I could learn about the typical scenarios and possible solutions, as well as the proper discourses and strategies, during a coming out process. Later, as an extension of my MA thesis, my PhD project got started in September 2012.

Since 2010 I have learned a lot about coming out/*chugui*, from various academic studies that theorise coming out, and from the life stories included in books and narrated by the informants in my fieldwork. At the same time, I myself have practised coming out on different occasions, in different ways, and to different people including my parents. Nevertheless, this is by no means to say that, for me, coming out is now a solved problem or an answered question, which can be removed from the list of my research interests. Instead, my academic project and personal life keep making me review, rethink, revise, and sometimes return to, what I have earlier found and believed about coming out. The once haunting anxiety has transformed into an assemblage of conceptions, standpoints and sentiments, which I often revisit, through non-linear and non-exclusive routes.

Inspired by and following up these experiences, in Chapter 6, the chapter focusing on the theme of coming out/*chugui*, I revisit Chou Wah-Shan's book *Tongzhi* (2000) after considerable critiques of it by different scholars (e.g. Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; Liu & Ding 2005; Wong 2007b; Wei 2012), including myself in my MA project (Wang 2012, 2014). In *Tongzhi*, Chou has specifically elaborated a string of arguments that constitute influential discourses in both social scientific studies of Chinese same-sex experiences and LGBT activism in contemporary Chinese societies, including Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China (Chou 2000). He argues that "coming out" as a rite of passage, which marks the self-acceptance of homosexuality, is not a universal ideal but a culturally specific politics; the identity politics of homosexuals have been developed from the values of individualism, the discourse of "right", the prioritisation of sex as (part of) the core of one's selfhood, and the Western metropolitan life style (*ibid.*). In this sense, according to Chou, the action of

16 "LGBT", the initialism standing for "lesbian", "gay", "bisexual", and "transgender", has already been familiarly used among many urban Chinese non-heteronormative people. The frequency of using this term sometimes even surpasses that of using the term "*tongzhi* (comrade)" among relatively young people (around or younger than thirty years old), even though "LGBT" is usually a combination of concepts with Western origins. However, in comparison, the ever-extending versions of "LGBT", such as "LGBTQ" or "LGBTQ" plus other initials, are much less used among these people.

coming out is actually going against the Chinese family values of "filial piety (*xiao*)"[17] and Chinese collective identity based on kinship, since homosexuality means a threat to the continuity of a family's line and the loss of face for family members (*ibid.*). Furthermore, in the book *Tongzhi*, Chou proposes the idea of "coming home", as an alternative to "coming out" which is based on a Western confessional model (see Foucault 1990; Sedgwick 1991) and confrontational identity politics. The practice of "coming home" refers to integrating one's same-sex partner into his or her (original) family/kin network, without verbally coming out as "homosexual" or threatening the harmonious family atmosphere (Chou 2000; see also Kong 2016; Wong 2007b). Chou believes that such an alternative is more compatible with, and more desirable in, Chinese sociocultural contexts.

Although many studies (see the references listed at the beginning of the previous paragraph) criticised Chou's abovementioned arguments as essentialistic and binaristic thinking about "Western" and "Chinese", Chou's conclusions about same-sex desires, subjectivity and the wider living environment of Chinese non-heterosexual people to a large extent highlight the common perspectives and foci of the academic and activist discussions about how to understand and practise "coming out" (or not) in China. In Chapter 6, I discuss in detail three (more) limitations of Chou's original study. Firstly, I point out the risk in our coming out/*chugui* studies of otherizing the Chinese non-heterosexual individuals' parents as insulated, impenetrable and innocent beings, who, when facing challenging facts and ideas, care only about whether the "filial piety" is performed by their children in a uniform and superficial way but are completely unable and unwilling to self-reflect and adapt. Whether analysing "filial piety" as an important Chinese value from an essentialistic perspective or doing that from a constructivist perspective, if we do not see the parents as creative and capable subjects who "become" themselves through life experiences just like their children do, we risk otherizing them anyway.

Secondly, I stress the importance of tracing the new roots the notion of "coming out/*chugui*" has produced, as well as the new shapes that "coming out/*chugui*" can take in China, even beyond its usage and inspirations within LGBT communities and issues. Rather than viewing "coming out (of the closet)" as a concept having a Western origin and undergoing a relocation in a non-Western society like China, I prefer to view it as a figure of speech, as it was initially used, without a single and canonical "origin". A figure of speech is always open to new stretches, new transformations, and new richness created by new complications. Revisiting "coming out/*chugui*" as such a figure of speech is especially important and interesting, when the then-current reality stated in Chou's *Tongzhi* in 2000,

17 *Xiao* (filial piety), means that one tries one's best to take care of and obey one's parents.

about the incompatibility between Western notions of "coming out" and Chinese family values and social norms, has changed dramatically itself after nearly two decades, but yet still constitutes a hegemonic discourse within today's *tongzhi* and *lala* communities.

Finally, I consider how Chou's attention to the notion of "home/family", as well as his assumption about people's original families as uniform, monolithic fortresses of heteronormativity and patriarchy, have in fact led later discussions about coming-out-related experiences in China to be obsessed with the role a home/family can play, and yet be veiled by limited imaginations about what a home/family can possibly be. In Chapter 6, by illustrating some non-(stereo)typical cases, I try to spot the unexpected queerness or the precarious heteronormativity within a home/family, and meanwhile de-centre the biological and normative form of home/family from the maps on which we experience our longings, belongings and "becoming" journeys.

Methodology: An Ethnographer at Work in the 2010s in Mainland China

In this section, I introduce the methods I have applied in this study, as well as the methodological experiments and struggles I became entangled with when I wrote up the study. Under each sub-title below, I describe the making of my study (e.g. time, places, people, numbers, techniques, procedures), the incidents and accidents in my personal life which significantly impacted my study, and the subjective reactions I have experienced while enduring—and enabling—my study and my life. Besides this section, more specific analyses of methodology can be found throughout the following chapters, because they are an important part of the data as well.

Fieldwork Period and Locations

The main part of my ethnographic fieldwork was intensively conducted for five months, from the beginning of September 2013, to the end of January 2014. The first half of this field period was spent in the city of Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan Province. Being located in mountainous southwestern China and being the place of residence of different ethnic minorities[18], Yunnan Province is often believed to be an economically "*luohou* (backward)" place but filled with exotic folk customs (Bossen 2002; Fei & Chang 2010; Mattison et al.

18 Yunnan Province is located in southwestern China and adjacent to the Tibetan region, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam. Besides *Han* people, the ethnic majority in mainland China, members of twenty-five ethnic minorities inhabit Yunnan Province, either mixedly living with other ethnic groups or compactly living with their own ethnic communities. (see: http://www.yn.gov.cn/yn_yngk/index.html, accessed on August 28, 2018)

2014). Two weekend trips to two other places nearby also enriched my data: a focus group carried out in a smaller city in Yunnan Province (see the analysis in the third section of Chapter 3) and an opportunity for participatory observations in a neighbouring province (see the analysis in the first section of Chapter 4).

The second half of the field period was spent in the city of Shanghai, one of the most economically developed and culturally globalised metropolises in the contemporary world. Shanghai is usually relished in mass media as a setting for the nostalgic sentiments of the late Qing Dynasty (around the turn of the 20th Century) and the Republic of China (1912-1949) (Des Forges 2007), and at the same time is believed to be ambitious for a prosperity representing futuristic aesthetics (Greenspan 2014). In January 2015, one year after I finished my fieldwork there, I stayed in Shanghai for a week and met face to face with four of my informants again, which were more like casual catching-up visits rather than formal follow-up interviews. In addition, occasional interactions between some of my informants and me, via various instant messaging applications, have been continuing until now.

Choosing Kunming and Shanghai as the two main fieldwork locations, I was concerned with my practical situations and even my "selfish" pursuits at that time, as well as with a reasonable design for an academic project. It was of course meaningful to compare the lives of non-heteronormative people in Shanghai with those in Kunming; the former has drawn considerable international attention through English-written academic works (e.g. Bao 2012b; Kam 2013) and the annual "ShanghaiPRIDE" LGBT pride event since 2009[19], while the latter has had a limited number of studies. It was also meaningful that, after doing my MA thesis about the young *lala* women living in Beijing, I could extend my work to two other cities and bridge the data collected from different locations. However, actually, an important reason why I chose Kunming as one fieldwork location was that my then-current girlfriend was living there. Having endured a long-distance relationship with her for a couple of years, and pretending to be a heterosexual young woman not involved in any romantic relationship, I found the idea of doing fieldwork in Kunming perfect because I could visit my girlfriend without being questioned by my parents. The main reason why I chose Shanghai as the other fieldwork location was that, as a granddaughter of a native-born Shanghainese woman, I could easily find accommodation for free from the relatives of my grandmother's extended family in Shanghai, which did save money.

What I did not expect, however, was that as soon as I arrived in Kunming, I found a breakup between my girlfriend and me awaiting me. Suddenly, my fieldwork plans were totally disrupted. Losing the most important source of support in a strange city, and facing

19 See the official website of ShanghaiPRIDE: https://www.shpride.com/?lang=en

a ruined intimate relationship, I had to cope with extra amounts of depression besides the various challenges in my fieldwork. In spite of my endeavours to manage data collection, this condition lasted for the whole fieldwork period, including the later months in Shanghai. So, I will not say that my private experiences, (re)actions, moments of self-control or being out of control, including my love and anger, desire and fear, fights and surrenders, memorisation and oblivion, ambivalence and ambiguity, etc. have not fuelled, exhausted or delayed me as a researcher in my academic quest. Then, unexpectedly, as I mentioned earlier and will mention somewhere in other chapters, I fell for an informant I met and interviewed in Shanghai (we reunited and started our relationship one and a half years later). Furthermore, another year later, we no longer lived overseas and moved to Shanghai. Thus, my fieldwork location became where I found home eventually, whereas some of my informants had instead moved to other cities or even other countries.

It is therefore hard to say that my study is purely about women-loving women living in Shanghai and Kunming. Although my informants were either born in these cities and happened to be still/back there when I did my fieldwork, or were born somewhere else but moved to these cities, they did trips and journeys in their lives before/after my study. It is also hard to distinguish clearly a "field period" from my personal life, because my work in the "field" triggered and also enabled the most unexpected things in my personal life. Moreover, my stay in the "field" turned out be as long as—or even longer than—my informants' stay there. These are the reasons why I have not done many general comparisons between the data collected in Kunming and the data collected in Shanghai. I do not want the uniqueness in each life story to be reduced through categorisation and flattened through comparisons based on a same/different oppositional binarism. My study responds to the call for redefining the concepts of "location/space" and "time" (e.g. Braidotti 2011a; Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Foucault 1986b; Halberstem 2005; Rich 1984; Sedgwick 1994), rather than simply following the predominantly nationalistic, capitalistic, patriarchal and heteronormative definition of them.

Sampling and the Informants

In order to find informants, I mixed different sampling methods, including purposive sampling, snowball sampling and convenience sampling (see Bernard 2011). Since homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) is still stigmatised to a certain extent in today's mainland

China, regardless of the official de-criminalisation and de-pathologization of it[20], I largely relied on the anonymous internet to reach out for the most "qualified" subjects as possible. In the early stage of my fieldwork, I drafted a post inviting *lala* women in Kunming or Shanghai to have a cup of coffee/tea and share their life stories with me[21]. In the post, I gave a brief introduction of myself and my study, and I especially admitted that I was self-identified as *lala* too. I indicated the ways to contact me, such as my *Sina Weibo* account, *Douban* account, *Weixin* account, *QQ* number, etc[22]. Then, I searched among the "*xiaozu* (topic groups)" based in Kunming and Shanghai on the *Douban* website, for those which explicitly appropriated the words like "*lala*", "*les*", "lesbian" in their names or implied female same-sex romance and/or erotics in their names. I joined these groups and released my

20 "Mainland China is often said to have decriminalised homosexuality in 1997, when the amended Criminal Law dropped the umbrella crime of 'hooliganism' (*liumang zui*) that covered anal sex, … However, the trajectory of homocriminality in China is more ambiguous and inconsistent than linear progression" (Zhu 2018b: 28-29). In the medical area, homosexuality has been de-pathologized in the latest version of The Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD-3) released in 2001. However, this version still includes Sexual Orientation Disorders in the section "Psychosexual Disorders (Sexual Perversions)", which refers to individuals "who are not willing to be homosexuals or feel unsure and, on account of this, who may experience anxiety, depression, and mental anguish"; "some may seek treatment to change their orientation" (Zhu 2018b: Chapter 6).

21 See the full translation of my invitation post in the Appendix. Although I tended not to conflate all women with same-sex desires into the category of "*lala*", no matter how popular the term "*lala*" has become, as I argue in the earlier section about my research themes", I still chose to use "*lala*" when drafting this post in order to be in accord with the wording style in those groups.

22 *Xinlang Weibo* (Sina Weibo), which literally means "Sina mini blogs" on https://sina.com.cn, has been one of the most popular Chinese-based social network websites since the mid-2010s, and works similarly to how Twitter works. *Douban* (https://www.douban.com) has been one of the most popular online platforms since the 2000s, providing in Chinese information about a global range of books, films and TV dramas, music albums, etc. It also allows its users who share similar interests to form online groups and communities, some of which extend to offline activities. *Weixin* (its English version is called "WeChat"), literally "mini messages", has been one of the most popular Chinese-based APPs in the 2010s for smartphone users to make contact via text messages, voice calls or video calls. Additionally, *Weixin* provides a space named "*pengyou quan* (literally "friend circle", while formally "Moments" in *Weixin*'s English version "WeChat") for the users to post texts, images and mini videos, and to "like", comment and re-post each other's posts. In the last couple of years, *Weixin* has developed the function of wireless shopping, payment and money transfer. *QQ* has been one of the most popular Chinese-based softwares for the user to chat, in the form of text messages, voice calls or video calls, as a one-on-one contact or as a chatting group, since the early 2000s, which works similarly to how Skype works. Both *QQ* and *Weixin* (WeChat) are developed by *Tengxun* (Tencent) Company.

post. Through the software *QQ*, I did similar things, but the access was a bit more difficult because in every *QQ* chat group there was a "*guanliyuan* (administrator)", without whose permission I could not join the group. On *Sina Weibo*, I released the abovementioned post as well, and regularly posted my study's progress and "reposted (*zhuanfa*)" the news relevant to my study, and kept an eye on my private message box in case any potential informant appeared. In the *Weixin* APP on my smartphone, I dealt with the requests of becoming "friends (*pengyou*)" from the people who reported that they had read my invitation and wanted to meet me. Not all of these request senders were reliable; some of them appeared to be uninterested in participating in my study but in something else. I selected the ones who seemed sincere by my own judgment, and carried out follow-up communications.

Such a method of finding informants through online communities meant that the data in my hands were mostly collected from subjects who habitually used internet-connected computers and smartphones. To compensate for this, I also contacted some of the founders and active members of the local *lala* and/or feminist groups in the fieldwork locations, interviewed them as key informants (Bernard 2011: 150), and asked them to introduce to me some potential informants whose narratives might heterogenise my data. At the same time, some of the informants whom I had interviewed earlier recommended their *lala* friends to me. As my fieldwork was coming to a close, some general findings gradually emerged. Rather than collecting more obviously homogeneous cases, I intentionally invested the very limited remaining time in those who would probably "maximise the chance of finding at least a few that will jar our ideas, make us question what we think we know" (Becker 1998: 8).

Eventually, I collected narratives from forty-one women in total, aged between their early-twenties and mid-forties. Among them, twenty-three women were living in Yunnan Province (fifteen women among them were living in the urban area of Kunming, while eight in neighbouring towns or other cities in Yunnan), and eighteen women were living in Shanghai. Five out of the twenty-three women in Yunnan Province were from families of ethnic minorities; and the rest of the informants were *Han* people, the ethnic majority. Two out of the informants were self-identified heterosexual, one of whom had a few women-loving women friends while the other had none; I interviewed them in order to learn about how female same-sex relationships were understood and imagined in their

eyes[23]. Except one informant, with whom I only had an online conversation by exchanging text messages[24], the rest provided their information when they met me face to face.

Data Collection and Analyses

Besides the invitation post mentioned above, prior to each conversation that would become a source for my analysis, I introduced my study and myself again to the informant(s) and answered any questions from them. Printed consent forms were showed to the informants, and I gave some explanation about what a consent form was used for. Some informants signed the form, most of whom used their nicknames rather than formal names; the others politely refused and expressed that they were just willing to participate in my study but signing a form was not necessary.

According to my research design, the interviews should have been digitally recorded. Practically, however, on certain occasions the presence of digital recording devices made some informants retreat, hesitate or obviously uncomfortable. A similar problem has been mentioned in Engebretsen's book *Queer Women in Urban China*, based on her ethnographic fieldwork about *lala* communities in Beijing between 2004 and 2006 (2014: 24). For Engebretsen, besides "unsettling" the informants, formally structured and recorded interviews have also generated rehearsed stories and information catering to what the researcher is supposed to want to hear (*ibid.*). Her solution was to spend more time and energy on casual conversations, "over a beer, a meal, or when walking down the street shopping for clothes or food (*ibid.*)", as well as in various bars, private parties, regular gatherings organised by local *lala* groups, from which she collected information and did observations at the same time. Inspired by Engebretsen's experience, I did not cling

23 These two self-identified heterosexual women were close old friends of my then current girlfriend who lived in Kunming. So, they were also my acquaintances. The interview with them was unplanned, since at that moment we were having dinner together. However, our conversations later became a two-hour interview, digitally recorded. Although my dissertation has not included any direct quotation from this interview, their words have enriched my perspectives.

24 This informant was living in a small town not very far from Kunming. She invited me to visit her in the small restaurant where she was busy working every day, but I could not make it because of my already full agenda. I proposed a voice or video call, but she refused gently, saying that it was not convenient for her to speak on her phone while greeting and serving the customers. Another reason for her refusal, I guess, was that, since she was in a *xingshi hunyin* (cooperative marriage) and kept her same-sex relationship and orientation as a secret from her family, she might feel insecure to leak any digitalised voice or visual details of herself. In the end, we reached consent that we would communicate in the form of text messages.

stubbornly to my recording devices throughout the fieldwork; rather, I appreciated every moment that lead to comfortable expressions.

In my fieldwork the narratives of twenty-two informants were collected by digital devices, while the narratives of nineteen informants were not digitally recorded but described in my field notes right after the interviews were done[25]. I took my semi-structured interview outline with me and bore it in mind when I collected narratives, but usually rearranged the order of the questions and paid attention to any additional question emerging from a specific context. A few informants were very interested in my interview outline and wanted to have a look at it. I showed them the outline, and they actively answered the questions but sometimes asked questions, through which mutual inspirations emerged unexpectedly. Although I intentionally let my informants be in charge of the flow of the conversations, I was willing to share when they expressed curiosity about my own experiences and ideas.

The places where the narratives were collected varied from cafés, restaurants, karaoke lounges, shopping malls, streets, and the private living space of some informants, such as a dormitory room, a shared apartment or their parents' home. In most cases I asked the informants to select the places where to meet me and tried to respect their suggestions. The conversation with each informant lasted no less than one hour.

In addition to individual interviews, one focus group with five informants, as I have mentioned earlier, was done in a city smaller than Kunming in Yunnan Province. Participatory observations were also conducted in a *lala* night club ("*la* bar") in Kunming, a *lala* night club in a city located in one of Yunnan's neighbouring provinces[26], and a gay and lesbian night club in Shanghai. Nevertheless, since I had been seriously alcohol-allergic and had no habit of hanging out with friends in bars and night clubs, I felt quite awkward and shy when I was in such places. Although I took a few pages of observation notes afterwards, little information from these observations—except the description of a

25 In the following chapters, the quotations from those narratives which are excerpted directly from the transcriptions of digitally recorded conversations are formatted with a separate indented paragraph in a smaller font size. The quotes from interviews embedded in the main text with quotation marks are either segments, excerpted from the transcriptions of digitally recorded conversations, or full sentences, excerpted from my field notes, in which I tried my best to restore the precise details my informants had provided.

26 I do not specifically indicate the name of this city or the province in which it is located, in order to enhance the anonymity of the event and the individual(s) I am describing. Throughout my writing, such "ambiguous" depictions about certain locations, dates, personal traits, and details of one's life story, are deliberately chosen for the same reason.

hot dance, analysed in the beginning of Chapter 4—was as thick as the data collected from one-to-one interactions.

The digitally recorded conversations were manually transcribed and coded by me. This task of transcription occupied the March, April and May of 2014, and that of coding took me even longer. However, compared to relying on the help of computer software, I found this "old fashioned" method gave me enough time and vivid atmosphere to revisit and rethink my fieldwork again and again. It also to a large extent secured the confidentiality of my informants' and my own privacy.

In addition to the transcribed conversations and my field notes, I included a variety of first-hand and second-hand information for analyses, such as my own personal experiences, life anecdotes told by my friends and former informants (when I did my MA thesis study in Beijing), and literary and visual works (whether popular all over the global mass media or just showed to a small circle of women).

Learning Ethico-Onto-Epistem-Ology

Regardless of the combination of different methods listed above, all along my journey of doing a PhD, I have felt the challenge of how to grasp a concept, observe a phenomenon, and reflect on the part I take in my study, when my analytic tools—my knowledge, body, and feelings—are not independent from that concept, phenomenon or my part in the study. What is more challenging is that these analytic tools are by no means already developed before a study starts, but keep (trans)forming as a study is unfolding.

For example, to what extent can I analyse globalisation, if I myself, a member of the generation born in the late 1980s in mainland China, am an embodiment and a product of the processes of globalisation? I recognised myself when reading through the first pages of C. Nadia Seremetakis's book *The Senses Still* (1994), in which the author describes how the disappearance of a delicious indigenous kind of peach in Greece, and the introduction of fruits from foreign markets (such as the kiwi), influence different generations of local people, differently, in respect of "the senses that are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence (Seremetakis 1994: 1-2)". Rather than an "older peach rememberer" as Seremetakis is, I am sometimes one of "the younger generation" whose "remembered first peach exists on the same exotic plane as the kiwi", and sometimes even one of the "the generation that follows", for whom the kiwi is "no longer exotic" but a local fruit (*ibid.*). In other words, before I can—(even) if I can—see and research any phenomenon of globalisation in my home country, the contents of the so-called "local" and "foreign" have already hybridised with one another for many rounds, and the boundaries between "local" and "foreign" have also been revised for many rounds.

Rather than causing me frustrations, recognising myself in this peach-kiwi story actually helps me realise how I can and should understand, do, and give meanings to, my study. The entanglements, tensions and gaps I am undergoing—through the bodily, affective and everyday experiences of my own, the concepts, theories and methods I have been taught, and the subjects, objects and phenomena involved and evolved in my fieldwork—are not "problems" which my study aims to or necessarily can "solve". Instead, it is these very entanglements, tensions and gaps that constitute my study itself.

Such a realisation also plays an important role in the stages of data analysis and writing in my project. I have decided not to confine the descriptions of the abovementioned "entanglements, tensions and gaps" within this section titled "methodology" and never revisit them again. Rather, I tend to dismiss the division between the analyses of my research methods and the analyses of my data, and not to narrowly call the former methodology while the latter sources of knowledge.

Methods themselves are knowledge; and in an anthropological and feminist study such as mine, neither knowledge nor methods are irrelevant to ethics. Since Donna Haraway's discussions of the metaphor of "diffraction" (Haraway 1992), something which can "move our images of difference/s from oppositional to differential, from static to productive, and our ideas of scientific knowledge from reflective, disinterested judgement to mattering, embedded involvement" (Kaiser & Thiele 2014: 165), the scholars who bridge new materialism and feminism have developed and keep calling for methodologies with which we can study the differences emerging in the processes of subject formations as non-essentialistic, non-binary, discursive-material entangled, and forever becoming (e.g. Barad 2007; Braidotti 2011a; Geerts & Van der Tuin 2013; Puar 2007; Van der Tuin 2014). Along such a genealogy, the feminist philosopher-physicist Karen Barad elaborates "diffraction" in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* and theorises "onto-epistemology", and further "ethico-onto-epistem-ology", which reveals the entanglements of the nature of ethics, knowing and being (Barad 2007).

Learning feminist "ethico-onto-epistem-ology", as well as letting my study be inspired by it and contributing to it, is a journey in which myself and my study are co-evolving, and even becoming one—at least during these years since this study was initiated. In the following chapters, I try to make this journey manifest in my writing. Learning from Rosi Braidotti, I am experiencing "writing as a nomadic subject", as "living in intensively and inhabiting languages as a site of multiple others within what we call, out of habit and intellectual laziness, 'the self'" (Braidotti 2014: 164).

Studying Globalisation and Subjectivity as "Entanglements": Time, Space, Imagination and Reality

McDonald's and Nostalgia: A Glance at Globalisation

It was the end of 2012, and it had been six months since I had started living in Europe. After visiting a friend in Paris, I took a train back to Amsterdam. I cast a casual glance out of the train window at a nameless town in the dusk, and caught sight of a huge yellow "M", the logo of McDonald's, towering deep in the town. Unexpectedly, this huge yellow "M" triggered a turmoil of nostalgia in my heart. I was very much surprised that, in Europe, it was neither a moment when I went for a Mandarin-language film nor a moment when I ate in a Chinese restaurant with a pair of chopsticks that made me homesick. Instead, such a typical Western, or more precisely, "American", symbol ironically reminded me of "hometown".

Indeed, the huge yellow "M" played an unforgettable role in my childhood. In the 1990s, my hometown, a small town on the southeast coastline of China, was still too "backward" to have a McDonald's. I had only tasted a Big Mac once or twice in larger neighbouring cities, such as Shanghai. McDonald's represented a "luxurious" consumption at that time, because the Western-style food menu and store decoration, the standard service system and hygiene quality, and the higher price than most local restaurants, meant a modernised life style and a privileged socioeconomic status. Enjoying the feeling of being connected to the wider world and participating in international business, I wished that there could be a McDonald's opening in my own hometown.

During the first decade of the 21st Century, my wish did come true. The huge yellow "M" stood up in my town, and countless copies of it also mushroomed all over China. However, in this process McDonald's gradually became no more than an ordinary and cheap brand of fast-food chains, buried by more and more luxurious Euro-American brands for the middle- and upper-classes, appearing in shopping malls in cities and towns, which constituted monotonous urban landscapes in China. I had witnessed "globalisation (*quanqiuhua*)" growing infinitely and occupying nearly every corner of the local community where I once lived, and could hardly recognise my hometown among so many towns resembling one another. Thinking of the huge yellow "M" glowing in the centre of my small, old Chinese town when I was a young girl, I was emotionally triggered to be nostalgic; however, unfortunately, because the "small, old Chinese town" itself had long since faded away from my memories as it also disappeared from the real world, there was only the huge yellow "M" still clearly standing for my nostalgia.

Not until the moment when I caught the glimpse of the "M" from the train running across Western Europe, and when I was struck by the sudden nostalgia in such an unlikely way, did I realise that this homesickness was poignant and relieving at the same time, because for me, my hometown seemed nowhere but yet could be anywhere in the end.

The glance at McDonald's also struck me with a sequence of questions, which repeatedly came back to me again and again: "If I become unfamiliar with the place where I was born and brought up, while feel at home when I pass by a strange place, how can I define 'home(town)' and pinpoint it on the map? Is the nostalgia I am carrying unreal, if I cannot remember clearly 'my small, old Chinese town' (except the huge yellow 'M')? Can an 'unreal' memory be in fact extraordinarily important to me, since it has shaped my happiness and pain, my belonging and solitude, my private life and academic research? If the logo of McDonald's reminds me of China, is McDonald's only Western (or American) according to the origin of this international corporation, or possibly equally Chinese in the eyes of a Chinese little girl? What had happened to the world, to China, to a specific city or town, and to me, between the years when McDonald's represented a 'modern', 'Western-style', 'privileged' space in a Chinese town and the years when McDonald's became a place for the local working-class community there, between the moment when I mourned for my hometown in my memories and the moment I found it again out of the train window?".

Although I had no perfect answers to these questions, I realised that it was not a single element—the running train, the still landscape, the huge yellow "M" in somewhere of Western Europe, the huge yellow "M" in my Chinese hometown, or my old memories and my fresh questions—that independently formed a personal or sociocultural background of globalisation "against" which my life stories took place. Rather, it was the entanglement of all these elements that constituted the becoming of my life stories and the becoming of me, as well as the becoming of globalisation in my life and in the lives of many other people who shared similar experiences with me. In other words, that very glance out of the train, and all the sentiments and contemplations enfolded into it and unfolded from it, was "globalisation" per se.

I learned from Karen Barad about "entanglement" (2007). The feminist-philosopher and quantum physics scholar describes the nature of an "entanglement" in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

> "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. …[T]ime and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future (Barad 2007: ix)."

Such an understanding about "entanglement" helps me think about how to observe and analyse "globalisation" as an important theme in my study of the women-loving-women's subjectivity in contemporary China. I tend not to view globalisation as merely the "contemporary China" in the title of my study, a series of descriptions of the extensive background against which my informants are living and my study was carried out. Rather, I view (1) the entanglements of my informants' stories about the transregional and transnational mobility of various elements in their lives, (2) my fieldwork in which my informants met me, and (3) my on-going ruminations about the narratives I have collected and the encounters I have had along the stretch of my own life, as different moments and locations that shape globalisation through the becoming of women's subjectivity. Simultaneously, the same processes in return shape women's subjectivity through the becoming of globalisation.

Globalisation is regarded by Arjun Appadurai, in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, as entanglements of time and space, rather than merely geographical phenomena; just as the book's title indicates, "globalisation" is analysed side by side with "modernity" (Appadurai 1996). Appadurai does not believe that there was a single moment breaking the "past" and the "present" into "tradition" and "modernity"; instead, he proposes a theory of "rupture" to study how the world in which we now live breaks with the past, in which sense modernity is irregularly self-conscious and unevenly experienced during "the work of imagination", under the joint effects of electronic media and mass migrations (*ibid.*: 1-23). This theory of modernity and globalisation helps to grasp the meanings of change and the politics of "pastness", and also helps to observe the construction process of new (imagined and actual) worlds and new subjectivities on both collective and individual levels (*ibid.*).

Revisiting the glance I cast out of the train window, under Appadurai's and Barad's lenses, I found it important, both epistemologically and methodologically, to write about globalisation and women's subjectivity as entanglements of space, time, imagination and reality. In the following sections, I continue to revisit some moments and locations in my fieldwork and my personal life. They teach me lessons about how globalisation takes shape in and acts as entanglements, and challenge me about how to understand and study globalisation in today's world. Not separating methodological and ethical discussions from data analyses, I turn my writing about globalisation into a practice of entanglement as well.

The Missing Colour on the Rainbow Flag: Encountering Globalised LGBT Symbols in China

As early as when I went to kindergarten around 1990, even before my first memory of encountering a real rainbow, I was taught by children's books and by adults that a rainbow

consisted of seven colours: red (*hong,* or *chi*), orange (*cheng*), yellow (*huang*), green (*lü*), turquoise (*qing*), blue (*lan*), violet (*zi*)[27]. Before long, on a summer afternoon, I saw rainbows bridging across the sky with my own eyes. I was amazed that the so-called "seven colours" were in fact a spectrum without clear-cut distinctions among colours, and thus I could find countless different colours on this spectrum, no matter whether a colour had been assigned a specific name or not. Years later, as an undergraduate student, I learned, from my *lala* and *tongzhi* peers, that the rainbow was an internationally famous symbol of the pride and solidarity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. From then on, every time I saw something with the rainbow pattern, I was excited as if it was a secret summon, echoing with my inner yearning to touch this "pride" and "solidarity". I had collected various objects with rainbow pattern, for example a bottle of Absolut Vodka with a rainbow-coloured special design, even though I was seriously allergic to alcohol.

However, I had also noticed that the Rainbow Flag used in the LGBT pride parades in Euro-American big cities commonly—and officially—contained only six colours (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet). It was designed like this in order to reflect the diversity of the LGBT communities[28], but I then started to differentiate the rainbow-like images I encountered in my everyday life into two kinds: the LGBT symbol, which contained the six colours on the Rainbow Flag; and ordinary rainbows, which included more or wrong colours and so was hardly associated with LGBT issues. Gradually, the six colours on the Rainbow Flag replaced the seven colours found in Chinese common knowledge, and became the most preferable and perfect version of a rainbow in my eyes. Since the sky did not show rainbows often, there were not many chances for the amazing spectrum to cross above my head and remind me that a real rainbow contained nearly all colours rather than merely six or seven of them.

As a result, under the Rainbow Flag, such narrow symbolisations and interpretations sometimes prevented me, as well as many of my LGBT peers in China, from recognising enough the sexual and gender diversity in everyday life. An interesting example was that I was once puzzled by the name of an LGBT choir in China: "*Sanleng Jian Yi* (Prism Minus

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27 This is one of the most common sayings among Chinese people. Another saying is that the seven colours are: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Indigo, in Chinese called "*dian*", refers to dark blue, compared to "blue (*lan*)" which is relatively light. Such a description of rainbows can be found in a number of Chinese literary works. For example, the first lines of "Pusaman, Dabaidi", a poem by Mao Zedong, are "Red, orange, yellow, green, turquoise, blue, violet. Who is dancing in the sky with colourful satin (*Chi cheng huang lü qing lan zi, shui chi cailian dangkong wu*)?" (see: http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0727/c85037-28587355.html, accessed on June 11, 2018)

28 See documents such as: https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2015/06/17/moma-acquires-the-rainbow-flag/ (accessed on June 19, 2018).

One)"[29]. Wondering why an LGBT group called itself such a name, I tried to search for an answer from the organisers, and then found it in the Q&A section on the official blog of this choir: "A triangular prism can filter the sunlight into seven colours, and if we subtract one colour—turquoise (*qing*)—from them, the remaining six colours constitute the Rainbow Flag, which is the symbol of *tongzhi*.[30]" For a second, the phrase "Prism Minus One" together with the explanation given by the choir's organisers sounded ridiculous to me. How come we need to erase certain colour(s) from a rainbow/spectrum in order to let it fit in a symbol that allegedly represents "diversity"? Moreover, reviewing the history of the different versions of the Rainbow Flag prior to the current version used by worldwide LGBT groups today, we can find that the additions and subtractions of colours in each version to a large extent depended on the limitation of materials in specific historical contexts[31].

Of course, I could not simply laugh at this ridiculousness in other people's practices, because I myself performed such ridiculousness in my fieldwork too. On an autumn evening in 2013, I visited my informant *Tea*[32], with whom I did my last interview in the city of Kunming, Yunnan Province. I preferred to meet *Tea* in a café, whereas she

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29 "Prism Minus One (*Sanleng Jian Yi*)" was founded in 2008. It is the only LGBT/*tongzhi* choir in Beijing which gives open performances and takes part in some international events (see: https://site.douban.com/beijing-queer-chorus/room/39557914/, accessed on June 19, 2018). Online search results also show that the choir "Prism Minus One" changed its name into "Beijing Queer Choir (*Beijing Ku'er Hechangtuan*)" about five years after it had been founded, yet the reason for the name changing is not explicitly mentioned. Nevertheless, I still think it important for me to pay special attention to the original name of the Beijing Queer Choir in my analyses.

30 The original texts are in Chinese. See: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_631f38360100fnt5.html (accessed on June 19, 2018).

31 See documents such as: https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/Flags/qq-rb_h.html (accessed on October 5, 2018).

32 Throughout my dissertation, I give pseudonyms to all of the people who have provided materials to my study, in order to protect their anonymity and privacy, even though most of them had already used nicknames when communicating with me. However, I do not want to completely efface the images, metaphors, connotations or homophones in those nicknames, because giving oneself a (nick)name is an important part of de-constructing and re-constructing one's self. Therefore, I give up pseudonyms made up by *pinyin*, the phonic spelling system of Chinese, which makes little sense to readers, especially to those who do not speak Chinese. I also give up casually giving a commonly-used English name as a pseudonym, such as "Mary" or "Anne", in order to keep the readers and myself reminded that we are talking about Chinese women. I specifically choose an English word for each informant as a pseudonym, mixing the meaning of her nickname, the impressions she gave me, the life stories she told me, and my own interpretation/creation, the composition of which exactly resembles an anthropological study per se.

insisted on inviting me to her home, a 15 meter squared room, without a private toilet or indoor kitchen, in an old factory dormitory building. I guessed that *Tea*, as a *T*[33] in her forties, thought it the necessary politeness to lead a young and feminine woman like me to somewhere and pay for the bill; however, patronising cafés was obviously neither affordable nor familiar for her. *Tea* seemed relax and relieved when she hosted me in her own "territory (*dipan*)". She cooked a vegetable soup and some rice for me, unskilfully but carefully. Saying that she was not hungry, *Tea* lit a cigarette, contentedly watching me having the dinner served by herself, and started to tell her life stories. *Tea* mentioned the three women to whom she devoted all her love, care and hope, even though with them she "had never done anything beyond kissing and hugging". *Tea* saw any sexualised behaviours between two women as "doing bad things (*zuo huaishi*)". She emphasised to her first girlfriend—a "straight woman (*zhi nü*)"—that her affection was "only 'liking (*xihuan*)' but not 'loving (*aiqing*)'", which were "different from each other", because of the fear of being repelled by her girlfriend. She endured huge sorrow and served on her second girlfriend's wedding as bridesmaid, and later took care of this girlfriend's child as a nanny, which was understood by her as her own "responsibility (*fuze*)". *Tea* had never thought of searching for information about homosexuality or LGBT movements on the internet; neither did she feel herself belonging to any local or online "*lala* circles (*la quan*)". In *Tea*'s own words, she was quite satisfied with holding the romantic memories with the three women she had ever loved—"just like holding three dreams"—for the rest of her life, even though she also admitted that living in dreams was more or less melancholic.

I could not ignore the distance between *Tea* and me in respect of time, space, imagination and reality. I was a trained anthropologist, a woman twenty years younger than *Tea*, a self-identified lesbian who was also fascinated with queer theory, and a PhD candidate in a university in Western Europe. We sat face to face, using the same language, willing to listen to each other, and showing support to each other; however, we both knew that we lived in different life-worlds. Looking around *Tea*'s dormitory room for any evidence of the overlap between our life-worlds, I discovered a trouser belt hanging on the wall, and it was a rainbow belt. I could not help but point at it: "Wow, a rainbow belt! You especially chose this pattern for yourself?" *Tea* answered: "No. The shop only had this belt left when I went there, so I bought it. It does not look bad. I like this pattern." I continued to ask: "You know what the rainbow means, right?" *Tea* thought for a moment, and smiled:

33 *T*, as I have briefly introduced in Chapter 1, derives from the English word "tomboy" and refers to relatively masculine women among women-loving women, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4.

"Now that you've repeatedly emphasised it, I can guess a bit. Once I saw a rainbow-coloured flag in *Starlight*'s place"[34].

Not until I waved goodbye to *Tea*, in that autumn night, did I suddenly realise how ridiculously I had clung to the pattern of the rainbow, tied it on the globalised symbol of LGBT pride and solidarity, and interpreted it as the only bright colours in that old, dim, grey dormitory room. *Tea* was by no means a well self-accepted *lala*/lesbian/*tonghzhi*/queer; neither was she familiar with the key words and fashion codes an urban and globalised non-heteronormative person usually knew. She was not actively fighting for a better world for "her own" community or chasing "dreams (*mengxiang*)" in the future, but rather lived in her "dreams (*meng*)" of the past. Such a woman could be easily left behind by a young, urban, middle-class lesbian researcher who was receiving education in Western Europe and was used to living under the Rainbow Flag. Compared with the six colours representing the vibrant, positive, harmonious ideas on the Rainbow Flag, *Tea*'s small grey room barely counted as a colour; or rather, this grey, together with many other colours, whether named or unnamed in a language, had been subtracted from the Rainbow we are willing to see and to recognise.

The rainbow with six colours is a symbol of LGBT pride and solidarity, which has travelled from the marches for gay and lesbian freedom in 1970s San Francisco to various objects and ideas all over the world today. It is an epitome of emerging "global gay" identities, life styles and politics (Altman 1996a, 1996b, 2004), fleshed out by "the work of imagination" (Appaidurai, 1996: 3), which is not a fantasy but a quotidian practice in the everyday life of the people with same-sex desires in different societies, not only on an individual level but also on a collective level (*ibid.*). However, while this work of imagination is creating a(n) (imagined) community on a global scale, certain individuals and groups are being marginalised, forgotten, ignored or excluded by this community, because they have no chance to, are not ready to, or are unwilling to embrace certain knowledges, values and life styles, such as owning various Rainbow objects which are products of European and American brands, or being used to patronising stylish cafés and consuming dainty foods and drinks there. During the interview with *Tea*, when I imposed the Rainbow for an imagined but selective LGBT community upon the rainbow for everybody, when I repeatedly induced *Tea* to associate a rainbow printed on her trouser belt with the Rainbow Flag that symbolised a specific pride and solidarity which she had hardly experienced, I was not only tracking a globalised symbol but also making this symbol globalised. But such a realisation of globalisation was in a direction that reinforced

34 *Starlight*, *Tea*'s close old friend, was the founder of a *lala* grassroots group in Kunming. *Starlight* was also one of my informants.

the western-centric knowledge, and would render the meaning of the rainbow symbol to be more normative, rigid, narrow, shallow and exclusive, instead of as free as a metaphor.

Today, about six years after the interview done with *Tea*, when I recall that night again, I feel sorry for nearly labelling *Tea* as an old-fashioned, pathetic and cowardly person, who neither realised nor fought back against her tragic life but yet maintained it with a smile. At the same time, I wonder if the conversation with me has resulted in even a little bit of change to *Tea*'s thoughts and, if yes, how her life has been affected by our encounter. I still remember how *Tea* described most of the conversations between her friend *Starlight* and her, about LGBT activism. *Starlight* had founded a *lala* activist group in Kunming, but often suffered from misunderstandings and isolations from other *tongzhi* and *lala* individuals and groups. *Tea* said to me: "Usually, *Starlight* talks, I listen. About what I do not understand, I don't ask much; but I listen carefully, and I support her. At least, she'll feel better after pouring everything out." Anyway, *Tea*'s words make me relieved more or less. I have to say that the people like *Tea* can be the warmest colour(s) on a rainbow, albeit missing from the Rainbow Flag.

"Have You Ever Tasted Authentic Russian Borscht?" Meeting Globalised Subjects in the Field

In the "Preface and Acknowledgements" of her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad states: "[T]his acknowledgement does not follow (and does not not follow) the tradition of an author reminiscing about the long process of writing a book and naming supporters along the way that made the journey possible. There is no singular point in time that marks the beginning of this book" (Barad 2007: ix). More than agreeing with Barad, I even want to extend her paragraph to describe my ethnographic fieldwork: "This fieldwork does not follow the tradition of a researcher paying visits to the location(s) where her informants permanently live and documenting the daily routines these informants repeat. There is hardly a bordered area—in respect of geography and of knowledge—that marks an informant's world, or rather "globe", of imagination and reality." In other words, in my study I have experienced that I, the researcher, am in fact no more globalised than many of my informants; and to a large extent it is the globalisation embodied by these informants that makes my study an embodiment of globalisation. In this section, by montaging a variety of scenarios scattered in my fieldwork, I explore how the imagined realities and realised imaginations experienced by my informants have challenged me and shaped my study.

In my fieldwork, I often hesitated about how to buffer the power inequality between a researcher, who was more used to Euro-American terms, knowledges and life styles, and

an informant, who was supposed to be one of the "local", "ordinary" people. However, my informants often expressed highly globalised minds and showed highly globalised lives; they even overturned—whether intentionally or accidentally—the usually-assumed form of power relationship between the researcher and the researched. One of the scenarios most frequently replayed was that an informant would talk about how *The L Word*, an American TV series, had influenced her self-identification as a lesbian/*lala*, and ask me: "You must know *The L Word*, you must have watched it, right?" I would feel ashamed but admit: "Yes, I heard about it. But to be honest, I have never watched it carefully." My informant would be surprised: "What? You have never watched *The L Word*? Are you kidding? How come? That's unbelievable! You should watch it, especially as a researcher doing this study! You should catch up as soon as possible! I will check out whether you've done so or not!" At such moments, I felt half excited and half embarrassed to find that my informants corrected my stereotypical assumptions about them and that I failed to fulfil their expectation of a *les*(bian)/*lala* scholar who was doing a *les*(bian)/*lala* study. Indeed, not long after the six seasons of *The L word* were originally aired between 2004 and 2009 in North America, benefiting from pirate DVDs and free online sources, many urban women-loving women of my generation in China regarded the lesbian stories in Los Angeles depicted in *The L Word* an enlightening guide for ideal ways of self-identification, lesbian community and life style. Chinese subtitles burned upon DVDs or circulated by "fansub" groups[35] helped the audience to access the TV series without language barriers. Thus, the audience was familiarised not only with the "L" word ("Lesbian") but also with the "L-words" (the terms, concepts, argots, figures of speech, ways of expressions, etc.) circulated among the lesbians living in Los Angeles. Having missed this "must-see" lesbian TV series, I was almost seen by many of my informants as an unqualified lesbian and unqualified scholar doing lesbian research.

Such a judgment of non-qualification does not frustrate me much, since "embarrassing" experiences can equally enrich my fieldwork data. However, what I am concerned about is how such an embarrassment might influence the women-loving women who had never heard of *The L Word* and other globally circulated LGBTQ figures and icons. One afternoon, I sat together with a female same-sex couple of my age, *Silver* and her girlfriend *Dream*, in a café in Kunming. They were on the edge of breaking up. *Silver*, a professional in the local financial industry who went to IELTS training classes every weekend in order to

35 A fan-subtitled, or fansub, usually refers to the version(s) of subtitles of foreign films, TV series, and other video files, translated by a group of fans rather than any professional or authoritative organisation.

apply for an MA programme in the UK[36], asked me to share some findings of my study and some personal experiences of my own, especially those relevant to how to manage an ideal female same-sex relationship. On the one hand, *Silver* was fascinated about how colourful and joyful the LGBT people's lives were in societies more "progressive" than China (she meant Western European and Northern American countries); on the other hand, she was eager for an answer from me, who had collected many cases of female same-sex relationships in China, to questions such as: "Is there any hope and future for a female same-sex relationship in China? Can a female same-sex relationship last long and well on earth? How can one achieve an equal, free, reciprocal intimate relationship?" *Dream*, *Silver*'s girlfriend, a graduate who was struggling under fierce competition in the job market, was silent with a sullen face, sitting beside *Silver* and me but seemingly aloof. I felt awkward because I was reluctant to judge or intervene in *Silver* and *Dream*'s relationship, especially as it was only half an hour after we had met for the first time and perhaps for the only time. I repeated that I was not a consultant for intimate relationships, and avoided giving out arbitrary answers.

Just then, *Silver*'s smartphone rang with a ringtone of the music of *Sherlock*, a BBC mini TV series popular across the world since 2010. Adapted from the classic detective stories created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the late 19th Century, *Sherlock* as a post-millennium TV series transfers the setting of the stories to the 21st Century and introduces a Sherlock Holmes who uses various high-tech means for detection. At the same time, because the homosocial relationship between Holmes and Dr. Watson in the original fictions has been depicted with homoromantic brushstrokes, in an intentionally "ambiguous" way, in this TV series (especially in the first two seasons), *Sherlock* is very much welcomed among young Chinese people who have more or less non-heteronormative taste. At that very moment, I intended to grab this chance to change the topic, and said to *Silver*: "Hey, you're also a *Sherlock* fan! I'm crazy about this TV series too." Unexpectedly, my words triggered *Silver*'s complaint about *Dream*. Regardless of the presence of *Dream*, *Silver* said to me: "Look, you know me so well, you understand such details in my life without the need for explanation. But *Dream* will never say what you've said just now. She has hardly known any '*meiju* (American TV series)' and '*yingju* (the UK's TV series), and she's not interested in them at all. *Dream* and I, we share nothing with each other." I realised that I had lit a fuse. *Dream* finally burst into fury, and a quarrel started between the two of them, despite, I hastened to add, that in fact I had never watched *The L Word*.

36 Nevertheless, *Silver* has still not started her application, according to our catch-ups and her updates in her social network account. It seems that she still holds the hope of studying in the UK one day, but has not put it on her recent agenda.

I sat there, returning to the role of a stranger; but a stranger is by no means an outsider in a scenario. No matter how hard I tried to be neutral and keep a distance from the private dispute between *Silver* and *Dream*, my unmindful reaction towards *Silver*'s smartphone ringtone allied me with *Silver* whereas it alienated me from *Dream* (at least on the surface). It was an alliance based on imagined global LGBTQ cultures and ideal LGBTQ communities, which were selectively constructed by the images on screen of middle-class, young, white, tasteful people (including gay men, lesbians and queer-identified people) living in Western big cities, such as Los Angeles and London. Hence, someone who did not share such imaginations and ideals was easily judged to be less desirable as a lover and life partner. What created more complication for *Silver* and *Dream*'s relationship crisis was meeting with me, a peer who had seemingly achieved *Silver*'s ideal life, which was far from *Dream*'s reality. For *Silver*, meeting with me face to face was further actualising the entanglement between her imagination of a desirable future and her reality of the disappointing present. For *Dream*, what was further actualising in the same meeting was the entanglement between unfamiliar language, knowledge, notions, and the habitual daily life she was living. Here, my involvement was both the catalyst of these entanglements and the tension making the contradictory elements in these entanglements more sensible. One week later, I heard that *Silver* and *Dream* had broken up, with no subsequent reunion.

On other occasions, however, the globalised experiences of some of my informants went beyond those of mine. It is of course common that what an anthropologist has found in fieldwork is quite different from her or his expectations or assumptions; but I use "beyond" here, instead of "different from", in order to stress how those differences between some informants' narratives and my life knowledge have redefined the researcher-researched power relationship. Although these moments caused me challenges during the fieldwork, I appreciated them because they were the moments when my informants redefined their "selves" too, by defying the assumptions and expectations of academia. Furthermore, these moments also probed sensitive issues for myself, and thus provided me with chances to re-think my habitual styles of thinking, studying, and living.

I remember the first time I met *Petal*, a successful business woman in her forties, who took me to a Thai restaurant in Kunming and insisted to pay for the bill. As soon as we sat down, *Petal* proudly and loudly shoved her rich experiences of travelling around the world at my face. Before taking a pause, she asked me: "Have you ever tasted authentic Russian Borscht?" I shook my head and admitted that I had never visited Russia and had never heard about Russian Borscht before. Swallowing a sip of tea, *Petal* started to talk about her trip to Moscow and other different Russian cities, as well as the anecdotes and tips she had collected on the road. *Petal* completely ignored that I was doing PhD in a famed university in

Europe, though I had introduced myself. Neither did *Petal* recognise me as a woman sharing similarities with her in respect of same-sex experiences; even when I mentioned my own romantic history with women, she did not utter a single word. After a long conversation, throughout which I was almost silenced, *Petal* concluded: "I don't believe a woman as young and inexperienced as you can understand a woman like me. I don't think your study will achieve many meaningful findings."

I was irritated by *Petal*'s arrogance. Why should a scholar's horizon and depth of thought correlate to whether she had tried a particular foreign dish or not? How could *Petal* arbitrarily underestimate me just because I was young and not rich enough to have consumed some ostensibly fantastic experiences? Why could an individual not try to communicate and understand another, even though many differences existed between them? Being frustrated, I gave up the thought of interviewing *Petal*, and I even complained about this unhappy experience to my supervisor[37]. Nevertheless, when I wrote my field notes that night, I realised that even though *Petal* refused a formal interview, what she said at the dinner table had already provided much information about her life and ideas. To connect these pieces of information together, *Petal* had ten years of married life with a man, until she asked for a divorce in order to pursue a romantic relationship with a woman. At the price of giving up the custody of her son and half of her own property, *Petal* divorced "peacefully", but later she experienced two heartbreaking same-sex relationships which ended in separation. *Petal* then focused her efforts on her career and became a competitive business woman. At the time I met *Petal*, she was in a stable relationship with a middle-aged woman, with whom *Petal* expected not only romantic affection but also business cooperation. However, *Petal*'s partner often disappointed her because of poor professional support. *Petal* was always very proud, tough, sometimes defensive about every aspect of her life. She had never left chances for other people to look down upon her—a middle-aged, divorced, single woman who was suspected of being homosexual.

Throughout *Petal*'s narratives scattered various incidents in her trips around China and overseas, such as "tasting authentic Russian Borscht". I could detect that in front of me *Petal* built her pride and toughness as the figure of a "global traveller", which implied a middle-

37 During the fieldwork period I had regular communications via email with my supervisor, Prof. Saskia E. Wieringa, from whom I received advice and support. In an email I sent to her not long after I met *Petal* for the first time, I complained about *Petal*'s hostility. Saskia's response reminded me that not every same-sex attracted woman could gain or had gained an "gay" life as smoothly as I did. Rather, for some women, especially those from an older generation, it could be even harder to make a same-sex relationship survive when they had to make painful sacrifices to strive for a life. Saskia suggested that I show more patience and empathy to informants such as *Petal*. I agreed with her.

class, cultivated life style and attractive personal charm. *Petal* defied the interpretations about herself imposed by a young woman and alleged lesbian who had hardly gone through the difficulties she had gone through, by a PhD student from a European university who had assumed her to be a plain local resident who had hardly seen the world outside her city. For *Petal*, being globalised by stepping into foreign lands in person and collecting first-hand stories during these travels was empowerment, which made her—an otherwise obscure "native" in an anthropologist's text—a character who questioned the qualification of a scholar and the meaning of a study that had originally targeted her as "the researched". For me, as an apprentice anthropologist doing fieldwork in strange cities, one of the female PhD candidates (*nü boshi*[38]) who had often been derogated and mocked by public discourses in China, a self-identified lesbian expecting mutual understanding and support from other women with same-sex desires, I was sensitive and vulnerable in front of a senior but indifferent—and even aggressive—informant such as *Petal*. In addition, calling myself an embodiment of "globalisation" while being unprepared for a "globalised" informant who had the experiences, knowledge and power which I thought I monopolised in my fieldwork, I felt unexpectedly embarrassed when my sense of "specialness" and "superiority" was dismissed by *Petal*. Recognising these facts, I stopped bearing grudges against *Petal*, but instead tried to understand her situations and actions.

Weeks later, I contacted *Petal* again, and expressed that, as a junior lesbian and scholar, I wished to learn more from her, and without these chances of learning I could not become mature and experienced. I was not sure whether *Petal* had also reflected on her words and gestures in our first meeting or had just switched to a different mood; anyway, this time, she agreed to be one of my informants. The next day I met *Petal* in another restaurant (*Petal* picked the place and insisted on paying for the bill, again), and she cooperated with me—if not led me—to do an honest and interesting interview at the lunch table, regardless of so many different opinions between us popping up during the conversation.

Studying both globalisation and subjectivity as "entanglements" is by no means seeing entanglements as necessarily harmonious and smooth processes. Instead, entanglements can be, and, most of the time are, wrestling. In our encounters, different subjects, including my informants and me, utilised our own ideas and experiences revolving around an imagined but also embodied theme of "globalisation", for competing, negotiating, or/and re-constructing the knowledge about a "successful", "empowered" and "desirable" self. It was from such "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference"—"friction" in Anna L. Tsing's words in her ethnographic study on the cross-

38 *"Nü Boshi"* is a derogatory and mocking term labelling women who hold a doctoral degree or who are doctoral candidates. I will analyse further the discourses about this in Chapter 3.

cultural, long-distance, contingent encounters producing and produced in globalisation (Tsing 2005: 4)—that marked the value of studying globalisation and subjectivity as entanglements. In the case of *Petal*, the frictions between *Petal*'s sentiments, perceptions and agencies, and those of mine, became a weight for bestowing symbolic values, a material for building up the selfhood, a weapon for defending ourselves/our "selves", as well as a tool for opening up oneself to others.

"Never-Land": Trapped Nomads Yearning for Home and the Deterritorialised Selves in "The Chinese Dream"

In Chapter 1, I depict how I found links between Rosi Braidotti's works on "nomadic subjectivity" and my own affective encounters during my study. Yet, sometimes certain sentimentalised liaisons between myself/my "self" and my imaginations about the "nomads" in the contemporary world turned out to be quite illusory. For example, after starting a long-distance relationship with my lover, who I had interviewed in Shanghai but who usually lived in Melbourne, Australia, I yearned for a physical reunion with her. So, in the summer of 2015 I planned for a trip from the Netherlands to Australia, which was supposed to be the most "nomadic" experience in my life, travelling across half the globe and different seasons to find a home ahead. I could not wait to experience in person the nomadic writing through geographical dislocation, as described by Braidotti:

> "…without such geographical dislocations I could not write at all, … I do have special affection for the places of transit that go with traveling: stations and airport lounges, trams, shuttle buses, and check-in areas. In-between zones where all ties are suspended and time stretched to a sort of continuous present. Oases of nonbelonging, spaces of detachment. No-(wo)man's lands" (Braidotti 2011a: 47).

Before long, however, studying the visa application process for Australia, I realised that it was not going to be easy for me to be a nomad freely enjoying dislocations. Holding a Chinese passport while residing in the Netherlands, I had no other choice but to post all my paper documents for my visa application to the Australian Embassy in Berlin, Germany. I then had to wait no less than one month to know the result of the application (in my case I actually waited for three months and nobody gave me any explanation). During this waiting period, because the telephone line to the Australian Embassy in Berlin was often busy, I had to enquire about my application's progress by sending emails to the Australian Embassy in the U.K., and it took at least one week for a response from them. In the end, despite the fact that I had tried my best to be patient and optimistic throughout the three-

month waiting period, I failed to manage my planned trip, which might have been much easier for a European, American or Australian citizen. This waiting period meant that I missed my lover's birthday, for which I had carefully designed a celebration. I made this up to her by ordering a birthday cake on a website providing international gift delivery services. On my lover's birthday, I just connected with her via Skype, watching her biting the birthday cake, sitting in another season ten hours away.

Without the experience described above, I would have over-romanticised and over-simplified the status of "nomad", and would even have assumed that being a "nomad" can be uniformly actualised by different subjects, which in fact goes against Braidotti's purpose for elaborating the nomadic theory when global hybridity and advanced capitalism are creating "perverse nomadism" or "pseudo-nomadism" in the second decade of the 21st Century (Braidotti 2014: 176-177). According to Braidotti, the figuration of nomadic subjects "should never be taken as a new universal metaphor for the human or posthuman condition"; however, "we need to provide, instead, accurate cartographies of the different politics of location for subjects-in-becoming" (Braidotti 2011b: 14). I ironically experienced craving for nomadism while waiting in reality; the more I desired to practise my imagined nomadism, the more I felt trapped by entanglements of space, time, imagination and reality. This repeatedly reminds me that "[b]eing nomadic is not a glamorous state of jet setting, integral to and complicitous with advanced capitalism"; rather, being nomadic "points to the decline of unitary subjects and the destabilisation of the space-time continuum of the traditional vision of the subject" (Braidotti 2014: 179).

Inspired by such a spirit rooted in the concept of "nomadic subjectivity", my lover and I later turned our bitter experience of being trapped by national identities, boundaries and customs that result in uneven freedom of mobility into an unforgettable journey. In the autumn of 2015, we simply went back to China from Melbourne and Amsterdam respectively, forgetting about my application for an Australian visa which had made us suffer from being separated. Then, we sat face to face at the very café table where we sat when we met for the first time in my fieldwork. We spent two weeks together in Shanghai, secretly; few people among my or her family members and friends knew about where we had gone. We ate, slept and wandered together. We looked back to the conversations we had had about two years earlier, and re-narrated our life stories, appreciating every added detail and every different interpretation about the "data" produced in the original interview. As a result, that two-week stay in Shanghai, which was an expedient alternative to my failed dream trip towards the land where my lover was living, made my mandatory "homeland" according to the nationality printed on my passport to be a privately created "home", harbouring the desires, hopes and dreams of my same-sex relationship. That two-

week stay in Shanghai was a revisit to my ethnographic fieldwork site and at the same time an exploration of "lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), "a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories" (Braidotti 2014: 179).

Of course, I am not denying that the abovementioned experience, from which I gained deeper understanding about "nomadic subjectivity", would not have come true if I or my lover were too poor to afford intercontinental flights and decent accommodation in Shanghai. Neither would I have confidently referred to this life anecdote in the chapter about "globalisation" if my lover and I had not resided in Western countries such as Australia and the Netherlands. In other words, the "dream" and the "home(land)" for me are by no means the same as how these notions are understood and depicted by a woman less privileged than me in terms of economic and social status. If the point of nomadic subjectivity is, as Braidotti states, "neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the very terms of their specification and of our political interaction (*ibid.*)", my frustration caused by a temporary barrier to my visit to Australia and the hilarity brought by an expensive dating trip in a Chinese metropolis are even far from being "marginal", but rather close to the homogeneous aspirations and sentiments produced by contemporary consumerist and touristic pursuits in the name of globalisation.

In China, the dominant and central discourses about "dream" and "home(land)" are in the first place associated with geographical and political territories marked with officially designated borders, namely sovereign nation-states, although "dream" and "home" are notions deeply entangled with personal emotions, desires, memories and fantasies so that they in fact can also become multiple paths for deterritorialising ourselves/our "selves". Since Xi Jinping became the president of China and the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in 2012, the term "*Zhongguo meng* (The Chinese Dream)" has been frequently applied in governmental and the Party's discourses and has been popularised in various other domains. "The Chinese Dream" has been described as a set of personally and nationally intertwined ideals in the People's Republic of China[39]. This term is adopted by journalists, government officials as well as commercial advertisements to define the role of individuals in Chinese society and the goals of the "Chinese nation

39 See "The Chinese Dream infuses Socialism with Chinese characteristics with New Energy". *Qiushi*. Central Party School/Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com. Retrieved 9 June 2013.

(*Zhonghua minzu*)"[40]. Promoting the idea of "The Chinese Dream", Xi encourages young Chinese people to "dare to dream, work assiduously to fulfil the dreams and contribute to the revitalisation of the nation[41]."

Obviously, "The Chinese Dream" is expected to be a nationally uniform aspiration, which should be actualised eventually, rather than what the word "dream" can also mean: a sweet fantasy albeit unreachable or illusory. At the same time, "Chinese", as the adjective attached to "The Dream", emphasises a nation-based distinction in terms of definition, content and goal of such a "dream". According to *Qiushi*, a journal of the Communist Party of China that discusses Communist theories in Chinese contexts, "The Chinese Dream" is about China's collective prosperity and national glory, so it should be essentially distinguished from the individualistic nature of "the American dream" (Shi 2013). In this sense, comparing "The Chinese Dream" with the life stories I have analysed in the previous sections of this chapter, I am afraid that *Silver*'s (in the third section) and many other informants' identification with an imagined global LGBT community, which is built on the Angelo-American, white, middle-class, urban gay and lesbian life styles depicted by globally circulated films and TV series, will be simply criticised as an "unpatriotic" and "Westernised" pursuit going against "The Chinese Dream". Neither can *Petal*'s pride (in the third section) at being a successful woman both inside and outside the local *lala* community, which is armed with a middle-class, professional, fine-quality life style, featuring travel in many foreign countries, be qualified as having enough "self-confidence" for holding "The Chinese Dream".

Then what about the "futile", "humble", "resultless", "deviant" dreams held by my informant *Tea* (in the second section)? I am afraid that the bitter-sweet same-sex romantic memories of a suburban, middle-aged, working-class, non-heteronormative woman, who might be more or less self-stigmatised, will hardly be recognised as a part of "The Chinese Dream", even though *Tea*'s dreams are actually being dreamed in an old factory dormitory building located in southwestern China. Nevertheless, *Tea*'s dreams survive and sustain her, regardless of the impossibility of them coming "true" within the limitations of time-space-reality where *Tea* is physically constrained. Facing a superior and normative "Dream" that marginalises her, *Tea*, instead of territorialising her dream/home in a land marked with the Rainbow Flag in six particular colours, has deterritorialised the meanings about being living

40 See "Chasing the Chinese dream," *The Economist* May 4, 2013, pp 24-26 (http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21577063-chinas-new-leader-has-been-quick-consolidate-his-power-what-does-he-now-want-his, accessed on October 7, 2018)

41 See, for example, the report titled "Xi urges youths to contribute to 'The Chinese Dreams'" (http://english.cri.cn/6909/2013/05/04/2361s763153.htm, accessed on October 7, 2018)

and being herself, and has planted them into a dreamland built on her precious memories and fantasies.

As I am going to close this chapter, I think of the slogan of the Beijing Olympic Games, 2008: "One World, One Dream (*Tong yige shijie, Tong yige mengxiang*)."[42] This slogan was once printed on various objects and shown in various places all over China. It was a loud expression made by the Chinese government about China's confidence and eagerness to participate in leading a world of solidarity and promoting international collaborations. I still remember what a friend said when we, two undergraduate students in 2008, saw this slogan appearing on the wall of our college canteen: "Oh no, I'm afraid that my dreams are not the same as the dreams of anyone else dining inside this canteen, and the different 'worlds' of the different subjects cannot be reduced to the 'One World' drawn by the authorities." Today, analysing themes like "globalisation" and "subjectivity" as entanglements of time, space, imagination and reality, I study how one explores a journey of sustaining and/or creating herself/her "self", regardless of imposed collective identities, social norms, mainstream values, rigid concepts and binaristic categorisations, such as the discourses that emphasise an essentialistic version of "Chineseness" and a Chinese/Western opposition.

In the following chapters, although my discussions focus on different themes other than "globalisation", my search for the homes and dreams that are shaped during the becoming journeys of today's Chinese women-loving women—including myself—will not stop. I put the word "never-land"[43] in the subtitle of the current section, as a pun and as a suspense, for I wanted to remind myself of the blind spots when I over-romanticise the image of being a nomad in the times of globalisation, while at the same time to keep myself optimistic about the journeys of "becoming" that I myself and my informants are undergoing. With or without physically limited "lands", our homes and dreams can grow roots and can also freely flow[44].

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42 In fact, for me, the English part of this slogan can be translated more precisely: "The Same World, The Same Dream", since the character "*tong*" means "(the) same(ness)", for example its usage in the term "*tongxinglian* (same-sex love; homosexual(ity)".

43 "Neverland" is a fictional location in a series of children's stories about the main character Peter Pan and his friends, created by the Scottish novelist and playwright J. M. Barrie (1860-1937). Many of the residents in the Neverland, such as Peter Pan, refuse to grow up.

44 In Rosi Braidotti's article "Writing as a nomadic subject" (2014), one of Virginia Woolf's sentences in her novel *The Waves*, is quoted at the beginning of the article: "I am rooted, but I flow". As the other parts of this article does, this quotation brings me poetic inspirations.

More than "Just Normal": The Passionate Aesthetics of Being Different from Banality, Superior to Ordinary, and Away from Stigmas

"Despicable Me": An Epitome of Conditional and Precarious "Loveliness"

"Despicable Me" is a computer-animated comedy film released in 2010 by the American film studio Universal Pictures. It has earned hundreds of millions at the box office, positive reviews from critics and fans all over the world, including me. At that time I was a postgraduate student in Beijing, who was hesitating about whether to submit a bold and risky research proposal on the topic of young Chinese lesbians' coming out experiences rather than any "traditional" and "safe" issues in the eyes of most of the professors in my institute. As a film produced by mainstream Hollywood and targeting people of all ages, including children, as its audience, the outspoken defiance and cynicism in its title had drawn my attention, and as a result I went especially to watch this film and even caught up with its sequel(s) every few years.

"Despicable Me" is a story about a "super villain", rather than a superhero, named Gru, a genius thief enthusiastic about the most impossible stealing quests of which he has accomplished many. In his everyday life, Gru is an unsociable, eccentric, vicious bachelor who annoys neighbours and scares kids, and very much enjoys doing so. However, as the story unfolds, a turning point changes the grim face of this non-mainstream anti-hero protagonist. Gru encounters three little orphan girls and begins to parent them, from reluctantly feeding them, just to use them in his schemes, to taking care of them with heart and soul as a father and loving them more than his ambitious pursuit of stealing the moon. At the end of this film, Gru becomes a gentle, kind, smiling guy living with three adopted daughters, primarily devoting himself to the peaceful family life.

"What a lovely villain!" The audience might cry. However, as a scholar studying the life experiences of non-heteronormative subjects, I can of course realise that the "loveliness" Gru possesses—the genuine human "nature" full of charming contradictions—is in fact a product of a carefully designed social recipe rather than an unexpected flavor brought by casual chance. "Despicable Me", among most fictional narratives in mainstream commercial films in America, China, and many other countries, elaborates a story ostensibly following "natural" flows and "random" possibilities, but in fact does so in particular ways, towards particular destinations, by particular discourses, based on particular value systems—and many of these "particular"s are heteronormative. Although "Despicable Me" narrates a fantasy story brilliantly, conveys great humour and warmth, and moves a lot of audience by universal values such as "love", Gru's loveliness may immediately become fragile, or at least fades largely, if I dare to make some changes to the story details. What if Gru does not steal the moon but only steals money, which is not that special but is done by so many "bad guys" every day in our real life? What if Gru is not interested in child rearing and never bothers to take care of

the three orphan girls? What if in the end Gru still gives more importance to his career as a thief than to his role as a father? What if Gru is a gay man? What if Gru is a woman? What if Gru prefers being single but enjoys casual sex? What if Gru is HIV positive? Would our Gru have been the same "lovely" in our eyes if any of the above situations took place? Would Gru have still been called by us "our Gru"? Obviously, not every "despicable" person can be viewed by a large part of the society where he or she lives as a "lovely villain" and embrace the self-mocking title "despicable me" proudly.

In 2013, the year I did my fieldwork in Kunming and Shanghai, "Despicable Me 2" was released. Curious about how the story could be continuously written under the same defiant rubric of "Despicable Me", after the previous film had finished in such a normalised "happy ending", I walked into the cinema again. There, I was disappointed and inspired at the same time. In summary, in this sequel our former super villain Gru is recruited by an organisation named "Anti-Villain League" to fight against the villains who are more avaricious, violent and immoral than Gru once was. Gru's step-daughters wish to have a mother and encourage Gru to court his female colleague. Meanwhile, Gru worries about his teenage step-daughter who dates the son of a wanted villain and tries his best to stop this dangerous relationship. During the mission of capturing that wanted villain (with a Spanish name and having a Mexican background), Gru successfully wins the heart of his female colleague, and they finally get married and make the family more "perfect". Thus, in "Despicable Me 2", the protagonist Gru still brilliantly shows his sense of humour, his skill of stealing, and his boldness when confronting the villains more villainous than himself, but only running counter to the flamboyantly rebellious self-identification, "Despicable Me", which once reminded me of the re-appropriation of the term "queer" among non-heteronormative people. It turns out that even the highly selective characteristics of an anti-hero in the first film have further faded into a banal personality and a fate of "straight" man, both morally and sexually. No wonder that, after being introduced into mainland China and translated into Chinese, the adapted film title "*Shentou Naiba*" ("The Super Thief and New Dad"), rather than the literal translated version "*Beibide Wo*" ("Despicable Me"), has been widely accepted and officially adopted. Also, no wonder that the collective supporting role "Minions", a large group of tiny, yellow, cunning, clamorous, but mutually collaborative, fictional creatures who loyally and proudly serve their "villain" masters, have eventually become more popular than Gru himself among audiences, and have taken over the task of performing "despicable" in this sequel.

What disappoints me is the tendency that further banalises a "lovely villain". In comparison with Gru's achievement of a balance between being a "villain" and being "lovely" in the first film, no matter how conditional this very loveliness is, in the second film he simply surrenders the stance of a "villain" and becomes a dutiful agent of the "Anti-Villain League",

and a dutiful conservative father who fights for a heteronormative family. Ironically, Gru's conversion to a more obvious and more uncontroversial form of normativity—which seems closer to a more "normative" normativity—by no means increases his charm but instead undermines it. I remember that there was a teenage girl sitting beside me in the cinema who said to her companion: "Why does he [Gru] want to be a good man (*haoren*)? Isn't it better if he continues being a villain?" Among the comments on "Despicable Me 2" on one of the most influential Chinese film rating websites, "www.douban.com", many express reminiscences of the old Gru in the first film, such as "I miss the despicable Gru who steals the moon". Indeed, the reported ratings of "Despicable Me 2" based on the votes from mass audience on several popular film rating websites, whether international or Chinese ones, all drop from the higher ratings of "Despicable Me"[45].

What inspires me, interestingly, is exactly the disappointment itself. Since, usually, non-normative practices are punished and disciplined, marginalised and stigmatised, ignored and erased, by the predominant values and hegemonic rules, I once assumed that, accordingly, the closer we approach to the normalcy the more desirable we can become. However, among the audience of the "Despicable Me" series, I start to realise that the relation between being "normal" and being "abnormal" is much more complicated than a stable, binary division between two opposite sides which is demarcated by a clear-cut, non-flexible borderline and complied with by always rational, unambivalent subjects. And there exist much more diverse aesthetic qualities that embody various nuances and paradoxes so that they cannot be easily reduced either to "normal" or to "abnormal". In other words, these qualities such as "special", "enigmatic", and, of course, "both villainous and lovely", fall beside, between or beyond the "normal" and the "abnormal" in fictional and non-fictional narratives.

Hence, when we talk about approaching closer to a normalcy, we should first of all make sure, in the very specific context, what this "normalcy" covers, when it fades, and what it revolves or hovers around without stopping to produce ambiguity, contradiction and multiplicity. At the same time, we should also be aware that sometimes being "normal" does not promise to be the most desirable; instead, it is walking a fine line between some subversive specialness and some unique beauty that may make one closer to irresistible charm. It is worth studying, in terms of one's aesthetic perception and in the sociocultural environment one is embedded, what kind of subversive specialness can be acceptable despite being seemingly non-normative, what kind of unique beauty has indeed been desired by people, and how the "fine line" can be tenable in a precarious condition. What is very important in such a study is that the relation between "normal" and "abnormal" should not always be understood as a binary, hierarchical, uniform

45 For example, see https://www.imdb.com/find?ref_=nv_sr_fn&q=dispicable+me&s=all, or https://www.rottentomatoes.com/search/?search=despicable%20me.

evaluation between some pre-existing, monolithic, mutually-excluded, essentialistic "good" or "bad". Instead, it is the constantly volatile, contingent, fluid and multi-directional dynamics among realities, mass media and fantasies that trigger people's appreciations, affections, desires and pursuits for something relatively "better", as well as their efforts to escape from something relatively "worse". These dynamics construct particularly nuanced definitions and depictions of "normal" and "abnormal", in different scenarios and among many other discourses of evaluation.

In the summer of 2017, more than three years after I finished my fieldwork, I noticed the film posters of "Despicable Me 3" appearing on the street of Shanghai. I thought it interesting to track the latest plot and audience's comments of this series, in case they could bring new sparks to my dissertation, which was undergoing revision again and again. Some Chinese popular film critics and many ordinary audiences gave "Despicable Me 3" even lower ratings than the first and second films. One common critique was that the protagonist Gru had become too "normal" to excite the fans who were crazy about the "despicable" anti-hero in the first film. What constituted the "normal" image of Gru included his refusal to change back to a "villain" no matter how fervently his followers urged him to do so, his craving to prove his ability to the "Anti-Villain League" of being able to defeat villains, despite or because of being fired by this bureaucratic organisation, and his efforts to educate his family members about the importance of being a "good" man, to name a few.

I use these pages to discuss the three "Despicable Me" films because I see this series as an epitome of how the notion "normal" can be differently defined in different contexts, and how fast an attractive character can become banal for the same people when the context varies. In the rest of this chapter, my analysis focuses on how some particular but yet unstable trends of desirability emerge from—and open up potentials for—the multiple, inconsistent and non-essentialistic forms of normativity and non-normativity in today's China. These forms of desirability and non-/normativity, which are usually relevant to each other but not equal to each other, are together shaping and being shaped by various practices about sexuality, gender and life style among contemporary Chinese people, no matter how "non-normative" some appear according to the dominant values and ideals in the particular context in which they are embedded. In order to study women-loving women without separating them from the other subjects active in their lives, and without separating them from the complicated wider environment where they live, I insist on two principles in my writing: (1) I include the practices of (assumed) heteronormative people—not only their reactions but also their actions—that play a role in (re)forming the non-/normativity and desirability into my analyses of the non-heteronormative subjects and lives; (2) I include the fictional, creative, dramatised narratives and imaginaries (as I

have discussed the "Despicable Me" films), whether circulated in mainstream mass media or shared in certain groups, into my analyses of real-life experiences.

In the following sections, I firstly critically examine the concept "heteronormativity", although heteronormativity is one of the main themes of my study. I also elaborate on another concept, "passionate aesthetics", which infuses nuanced possibilities to an essentialistic understanding of heterosexuality and to the assumed linkage between heterosexuality and being normal, a tendency more or less implied in the term "heteronormativity". Secondly, I look into marriage, one of the most private locations as well as basic social institutions that for most of members of contemporary China produces both ideals and "abjections" (see Kristeva 1982), both rewards and punishments, hope and anxiety, and norms and stigmas, in subtle and complicated ways. Thirdly, I pay attention to some practices which do not directly revolve around marriage but create beautiful visions, colourful lives and meaningful aspirations for the individuals who have tried out these practices. Although the issue of marriage has been traditionally studied as an extraordinarily salient element that constitutes a key struggle among non-heteronormative subjects in contemporary China, I insist on putting discussions about marriage aside, even for a short while, in order to prevent myself from only concentrating on heteronormative institutions when criticising heteronormativity.

The Art of Walking a Fine Line Through Paradoxes: Analysing Heteronormativity by Analysing "Passionate Aesthetics"

Alongside the "Despicable Me" series, many incidents and "accidents" happened during the course of my study which not only echoed with the disappointments and inspirations I got from the "Despicable Me" films, but also raised more questions and called for more answers than an animation series. As a non-heterosexual researcher doing research on female same-sex desires, I inevitably have "normativity", especially "heteronormativity", to be one of my main research themes, and at the same time my own understandings and explorations about "walking a fine line" in order to gain some "loveliness" have zigzagged throughout my everyday life and theoretical thinking. In this section, I juxtapose some of my personal experiences side by side with the discussions about how we can study "heteronormativity" beyond its own conceptual limitations.

"Heteronormativity", as its name literally indicates, consists of two parts, "hetero(sexuality)" and "normativity", which shows the core meaning of this concept: heterosexuality is regarded as the only normal sexuality, while other forms of sexual preference, desire and practice are regarded as abnormal. Gayle Rubin, in her article "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory

of the Politics of Sexuality", maps out two figures to illustrate the hierarchies of sexual values in Western societies through history (1984). One figure is "the charmed circle", and it shows a general version of a sexual value system which distinguishes "good" sex from "bad" sex (*ibid.*: 13). It emphasises that "good", "normal" and "natural" sexuality should be ideally heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial, while homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial sex are "bad", "abnormal" or "unnatural" sex. Another figure is "the struggle over where to draw the line", indicating "another aspect of the sexual hierarchy: the need to draw and maintain an imaginary line between good and bad sex", and any particular version of sexual judgment has to, albeit strugglingly, "determine on which side of the line a particular act falls" (*ibid.*: 14). Here, Rubin reveals the logic of binarism behind a heteronormative value system, such as the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality, of normal/abnormal, and of good/bad. She also points out the compulsion of making positive, exclusive, stable links associating these binaries in the judgements given by such a system, for example the "heterosexuality-normal-good" nexus and the "homosexuality-abnormal-bad" nexus.

Furthermore, the abovementioned judgements determined by marital status, the purpose of having sex, the number of sex partner(s), the emotions attached to sexual behaviours, etc., are not only about sexual practices but related to various aspects in human beings' social lives. As Saskia E. Wieringa comments in her book about how heteronormativity works in two Asian societies, Indonesia and India:

> "Heteronormativity is more than a reference to a normalised sexual practice; it informs the normativity of daily life, including institutions, laws and regulations that impact on the sexual and reproductive lives of members of society as well as the moral imperatives that influence people's personal lives" (Wieringa 2012: 518).

Similarly, for non-heteronormative people in contemporary China, one of the predominant forms of heteronormativity rooted in their everyday lives, as discussed in Chapter 1, are the discourses revolving around compulsory (heterosexual) marriage. Even the studies on Chinese urban heterosexual women show that most of these women are under the moral pressure of being "filial" daughters, and influenced by the ideal of "fulfilled" womanhood, namely getting married at a proper age and having children (e.g. Gaetano 2014). Many of non-heterosexual women in China have employed the strategy of "cooperative marriage" to comply with normalcy (at least on the surface), and have identified with the normative ideology about "good" conducts and a "good" life (Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013). Such actions are to a considerable extent reinforcing the existing value hierarchy of "good" and "bad", both

within and outside Chinese *lala* communities, despite also opening up possible spaces for queer interpretations and practical benefits (*ibid.*).

The concept of "heteronormativity" and the theorisation of the social reproduction of heteronormativity reveal how the hegemonic, discriminative and oppressive "norms", "customs" and "values" about sex and gender are stubbornly maintained in many societies. Yet, the concept of "heteronormativity" is not necessarily sensitive enough for the following tasks: (1) when it examines the sexual and gender practices which make the boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality ambiguous rather than clearer; (2) when it examines moral norms which are contested and under dramatic debates or transformations; (3) when it examines how people reach out for something "better" (often also connoting "more special") than merely "normal", and for something closer to an appropriate desirability that transcends ordinariness or banality; (4) when it examines some subtle stigmas in relatively micro contexts, which are not as "bad" as "abnormal" but inferior to those "better" conditions and "lovely" figures.

To summarise, there are two broad limitations which underlie the concept "heteronormativity". Firstly, it assumes an always-existing, clear-cut, monolithic "heterosexuality", and an equally always-existing, clear-cut, monolithic "non-heterosexuality", which in most cases is simply represented by "homosexuality". Secondly, this concept provides little space for exploring the ambiguous, paradoxical, multiple and ever-changing roles that a specific sexual practice, gender performance or life style plays in what non-/normativity can be, in a specific context. So, without other lenses, the concept "heteronormativity" can hardly provide us with senses for observing how the boundary between "normal" and "abnormal", between "good" and "bad", is being challenged, undermined, or broken up. Neither does "heteronormativity" provide rich sense for us to detect some nuances between "good" and "better", some paradoxical loveliness such as "a lovely villain" discussed in the previous section, and some undesirable forms of being "normal" because they are too banal.

In order to break through the above limitations, I bring the concept "passionate aesthetics" (Wieringa 2012, 2015) to work together with "heteronormativity" in my study on how contemporary Chinese people—especially women, and no matter how "non-heteronormative" they are believed to be in most occasions—understand nuanced forms of beauty, ugliness, charm, dullness, virtue, evil, success, failure, happiness, misfortune, and especially the various in-between, paradoxical situations. According to Saskia E. Wieringa, "the concept of aesthetics is generally employed by art but also refers to establishing definitions of sensory impressions and a set of principles that underlie distinctions in morality" (Wieringa 2015: 33). She adds an adjective "passionate" to "aesthetics" in order to "stress a system that regulates erotic desires and sexuality" (*ibid.*: 34). In other words, "'passionate aesthetics' is a mix of

institutions, dynamics, motivations, codes of behaviours, (re)presentation, subjectivities, and identities that make up the complex structure of desires, erotic attractions, sexual relations, and kinship and partnership patterns that are salient in a given context" (*ibid.*). In such an analytic structure, the binaristic divisions and fixed linkages connoted in the concept "heteronormativity" are dissolved. Without ignoring the prevalent forms of heteronormativity in the broad social environment of today's China, analyses looking into "passionate aesthetics" try not to reduce a person's subjective, complex pursuits of being "better" and "closer" to a desirable situation in her/his life trajectory to an oversimplified heterosexuality-normal-good"/ "homosexuality-abnormal-bad" division.

A contextualised example is my own ambivalent and painstaking struggles over how to survive smoothly in "the heteronormative world" I felt and imagined during my fieldwork period, which would have been otherwise depicted in a much less thick way if I had first of all interpreted these experiences as "being defeated by heteronormativity". However, through the lens of "passionate aesthetics" and bearing the existence of "heteronormativity" in mind at the same time, I look back to the days when I sought to "walk a fine line" to be a "lovely" woman, in a way safe enough but also impressive, in the eyes of as many people as possible. Then, I can see so many non-binary, paradoxical details unfolding in my processes of be(com)ing and (under)standing, which I would have missed or ignored if I only emphasised an either-or classification of "normative/non-normative".

Around the autumn of 2013, I finished my fieldwork in Kunming and moved on to Shanghai. Living on a modest allowance, I compromised with this expensive city by lodging with the family of a distant relative. This family was nice, but I still carefully kept myself "closeted", as "normal" as possible, just as I had done in front of most family members since I sensed my "different" sexual orientation. Busy dealing with the challenging tasks in the field, I could not afford any unhappy conflict in my living environment. Unfortunately, however, even though I kept my non-heterosexual traces secret, I could not pretend that I was not an unmarried woman near the turn of her thirties, doing her PhD and quite satisfied with this life status. I became a conspicuous object, and the people I was staying with, among many other acquaintances of mine and my family, could not wait to teach me a lesson about "doing the right things at the right age (*shenme nianji zuo shenme shi*)", a doctrine widely believed among Chinese as respect to the "nature" of a human being's—especially a woman's—life circle.

"*Shengnü* (leftover woman)" and "*Nü boshi* (doctress)" were two stigmatised labels I inescapably slipped into. "*Shengnü*", literally "leftover woman", is a term which emerged in the last decade and is applied by the mass media and even in China's official discourses

(Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2007)[46]. It generally refers to urban, educated, professional women who have reached their late twenties (usually 27 years old[47], seven years older than women's legal marriageable age in China), the commonly agreed perfect age range for women to get married, but remain single and/or unmarried (Feldshuh 2017; Fincher 2014; To 2013). "*Nü boshi*", an otherwise neutral term referring to women who hold a doctoral degree or who are doctoral candidates, has become a derogatory and mocking label over recent years. A negative stereotypical image of these highly educated and professional women has been popularised in China's mass media and everyday discourses. A "*nü boshi*" is often depicted as an unattractive woman (especially according to the aesthetic standards popular among Chinese heterosexual men) who buries herself in dull academic research while she has poor knowledge and naïve thoughts about real life. Since "*nü boshi*" are regarded to be unaware of the trendy performances of femininity and a lack of appropriate skills to please others (especially to please heterosexual men who seek romantic and/or sexual relationships), they are also jokingly called "the third gender", compared to "men" and "women" as the two normal genders (e.g. Feldshuh 2017). Those fieldwork months in Shanghai made me realise that I was pinned up at the intersection of the above two derogatory labels; and as I grew older and my academic career lasted longer, I would be more and more stigmatised as sexually and socially "undesirable". In comparison, my sexuality and intimate life as a "*nü tongxinglian*[48]

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46 In 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Education released *The Annual Report on the Languages in the Lives of Chinese People (2006)*, which included 171 novel Chinese words and terms which had been emerging and popularised in the previous year. "*Shengnü*" was one of them. (See http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_1551/200708/25472.html, accessed on March 26 2019)

47 According to the entry "*shengnü*" in *The Annual Report on the Languages in the Lives of Chinese People (2006)*, "*shengnü*" refers to "those 'three S women'—'Single', 'Seventies', and 'Stuck'". "Seventies" means that most of these women were born in the 1970s. It is probably because, in 2006, the youngest women born in the 1970s, namely born in 1979, were 27 years old that, in many of the later entries of "*shengnü*/leftover women" in Chinese mass media and academic articles, such as those I have cited here, being at or older than the age of 27 but still "single" is commonly believed as an important indicator that defines a "leftover woman".

48 *Nü tongxinglian* refers to homosexual women or female homosexuality. The concept "homosexuality" was firstly introduced to China in the early 20th Century, translated into "*tongxinglian*", or "*tongxing'ai*", which literally means "same-sex love". Since "*tongxinglian*" is a gender-neutral term, in order to indicate gender, a character "*nü* (women; female)" or "*nan* (men; male)" can be added prior to it.

(homosexual woman; lesbian)", a *lala*, could hardly be recognised and imagined among those people who "worried" about me.

It was the same year as I saw "Despicable Me 2", and I was seized by a whim of learning from Gru, who tried to walk a fine—despite delicate—line between normalcy and oddity in order to be a "lovely villain", though in my case I was not quite sure what kind of "villain" would neither offend the others nor disgust myself. For several weeks, in front of those who saw me as a "*shengnü*" and "*nü boshi*", I made myself not only "normal" but "special", in a "good" way. In other words, I tried to perform better than an ordinary and banal "normal" woman in every scenario. For example, I carefully performed a young woman who was patient, elegant, considerate, generous, and tender, characteristics a "good" woman was expected to possess, but I also showed that I was able to think quickly, act efficiently, and know where and when I should be obedient or resistant, naïve or intellectual, optimistic or realistic, quiet or social. As a female scholar, I behaved appropriately smart and yet modest in front of male seniors; as a single woman, I behaved appropriately self-confident and yet self-aware of my imperfection. When I was asked again and again by my acquaintances what study I was carrying out, especially those who were senior and living in the "traditional" (namely, heteronormative, at least seemingly heteronormative) life style, my answer was: "I am doing a social-scientific study among urban single women, about why they remain single, about what their lives are like." I rehearsed and repeated this sentence, usually in an indifferent tone, pretended to agree with the askers' subsequent responses even though some of them sounded sexist, patriarchal, misogynistic or compulsory heterosexual, and changed the topic of conversation as soon as possible. Thus, cunningly, I disguised my real research topic and detached myself from my study, as if I was not one of "those" research objects and I had limited empathy with "them". After all, only one year older than 27, on the way of rapidly accumulating potential capitals from pursuing professional training in a European university with good reputation, I can easily act as an elite woman waiting for the best opportunity to find myself a perfect husband, rather than an unpopular "leftover woman" or a Chinese local "doctress".

This experiment of "walking a fine line" worked out smoothly, until one day when I received praise from the senior male host of the Shanghainese family with whom I lived: "You're such a lovely young woman! Unlike those ordinary, typical, Chinese women of your generation, you have some good qualities usually only found in excellent young men. But at the same time,

neither are you one of those '*nü hanzi* (manly women)[49]'. You just represent the perfect charm of a young woman in today's society, no more and no less." It was a compliment given to a person who was not "just normal" but different from banality, superior to ordinary, and meanwhile away from various stigmas—a person who had walked a "perfect" line. I smiled for a second, thinking that I had performed a difficult art even better than Gru had; but after that, however, I frowned for the rest of the day. I was not pleased at all by such a compliment, which forced me to realise the high price of walking this so-called "perfect" line. I lost the solidary stance I actually (but secretly) shared with the people who were marginalised because of either not being normal or being all too normal; and my strategy for scrupulously crawling under the radar of heteronormativity was "mis"interpreted as an ambitious chase after a hegemonic form of desirability. No matter how "lovely" I seemed in the eyes of the others, I became a "villain" I could not tolerate anymore.

In the same period I also realised that, during the becoming process of the power dynamics of a particular scenario, the discourses which become normative and which become marginalised are often unpredictable and contingent. In other words, sometimes the normative atmosphere I detected in a scenario eventually turned out to be the result of, rather than the cause for, my endeavour to pass as a member of a supposed normative majority. Once during my fieldwork, in the time slot between two interviews, I dropped by the university office of a brother of my grandmother, a history professor with snowy hair who was very nice but meanwhile old-fashioned in my eyes. He shared a tiny office room with a middle-aged female colleague. After my arrival, they stopped working and greeted me by making tea and, inevitably, asking what my research project was on. When introducing my project topic, I feared I would cause troubles for myself, so I gave out the prepared and rehearsed answer, as I mentioned earlier, about "those" single women and "their" lives, in a "professional" tone, sympathetic but not empathetic. Then, I sensed the atmosphere becoming a bit awkward. The old professor turned his back to me and concentrated on making tea, silently, without giving any response. Maybe he did not hear my words because of his slight deafness, I thought wishfully; however, suddenly I recalled that his daughter was over forty years old and unmarried, who was living abroad but still could not escape from being problematised among her Chinese relatives. I felt so ashamed and sorry for preventing

49 *Nü hanzi* is a recently popularised term widely used in informal conversations and writings, whether online, offline, or in many varieties of TV show. It refers to a woman who does not care much for the standards of traditional femininity, but who has a masculine personality and behaves in a masculine way. In everyday language, *nü hanzi* can carry negative meanings or positive meanings, depending on the specific context where it is used. Sometimes, *nü hanzi* is banteringly translated as "wo-man", vividly describing the surprising finding that under a female appearance there is in fact a man.

myself from being otherized in the big family by otherizing another family member. Then, the female colleague of the old professor broke the silence and asked curiously: "Well, the life styles practised by single women are quite diverse. Does your research also look into the lives of female homosexuals? What are they popularly called? Something '*lace*'[50]?" I was surprised by the scope of knowledge she had reached and her tone, which sounded like that she was talking about something quite natural and common. "Yes, '*lace*'. Correct. Yes, I may study them. Possibly."

I did not provide more details other than these few fragmented sentences and left this conversation unexpanded, which is how I treated many other topics in that short visit. I regretted my rehearsed posture; I did not know whether this posture counted as "defensive" or "offensive" in such a scenario. But meanwhile, as a lesbian grappling with her closet, I hesitated to risk changing this posture and bravely admit my cowardice. That day, I was taught a lesson that I should never assume a pre-existing, monolithic, seamless "(hetero) normative world", vastly and forcefully out there, resolutely oppressing the atomised non-normative individuals. Rather, the contour of "normativity" would not be drafted out until a specific interaction—or rather, "intra-action" according to Barad (2007)—happened, during which the participants gingerly or arbitrarily probed one another's frontiers, defensively or compromisingly tested their own bottom lines, skilfully or stumblingly performed their boundaries between "normative" and "non-normative", but only to find these lines by no means consistent or mutually coherent, despite entailing concrete results.

For this reason, I prefer the concept of "passionate aesthetics" to "heteronormativity" as an analytic tool for observing the rich, diverse, complicated, contingent phenomena of the rigid but yet fragile status of being "normal". However, there is a need to ethically analyse the practices of "walking a fine line" because the boundaries between "good" and "bad", "better" and "worse", "normal" and "abnormal", "normative" and "non-normative", are so tricky anyway. The analyses of normativity and aesthetics are of course about ethics, even though what we walk through is in fact never a "fine line" but countless paradoxes. For a researcher, it is extraordinarily important to keep that very trickiness in mind, in order to carry out thick, precise, contextualised analyses on those never-universal and ever-changing

50 In the local LGBT vocabularies in Shanghai, "*les*", abbreviated from the English word "lesbian" is one of the most popular terms referring to women with same-sex desire. Because the pronunciation of "*les*" is similar to that of "lace", the Chinese word directly transliterated from English—"*leisi*"—has become an alternative to "*les*". Besides the pronunciation, another reason why the word "lace/*leisi*" has been popularly used is that the image of lace can be associated with women and femininity. According to my observations, the term "les", together with its variant "*leisi*", is used by self-identified lesbians and bisexual women in Shanghai even more often than they use the term "*lala*".

boundaries, in which the researcher should not neglect or disguise her own value preference, should not be self-centred or narrow-minded.

Here I briefly explain how I treat the concept "aesthetics" in my study. The concept "aesthetics" is rooted in the history of Western philosophy. The 18th Century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who lived during the Enlightenment, contributed greatly to the development of the notion, field, and discipline of "aesthetics". Kant argued in his works on aesthetics and teleology that "it is our faculty of judgment that enables us to have experience of beauty and grasp those experiences as part of an ordered, natural world with purpose"[51]; following his line of thinking, aesthetics are the "subjective" judgements of beauty based on a believed ground of "common sense". Wieringa, in her study on the life experiences of three different groups of non-heteronormative women in contemporary India and Indonesia (widows, female sex workers, and women-loving women), critically extends Kant's original work on "aesthetic judgment" (Kant 2000) to more recent scholars' theories about the symbolic power of a heteronormative regime (e.g. Bourdieu 1991, 1998; Foucault 1986a). Wieringa develops the concept "passionate aesthetics" in order to explore how heteronormativity as symbolic power is at work in these women's everyday lives as both material and discursive forces (Wieringa 2015). According to Wieringa, with the concept "passionate aesthetics", we can not only efficiently analyse the already-existing dominant gender regime that disciplines individuals with "normative" forms of ethics, but can also actively "understand defiant desires and transgressions into the non-normative (*ibid.*: 33)".

I do not think it problematic to adopt, in my writing, a Western-originated concept "aesthetics", which was imported into China around the turn of the 20th Century and translated as "*meixue*" (literally "beauty studies"). Braidotti, as a feminist philosopher, points out that the discipline of philosophy in Western academia is often "phallo-logocentric"; she encourages female scholars, feminist activists and every ordinary woman to dis-identify themselves from this institutionalised, male-dominated philosophy (Braidotti 1993). Braidotti innovatively defines philosophy as "simple" as "the love for, the desire for, higher knowledge", and further defends that feminism per se is philosophy, which empowers different women to become different (feminist) philosophers (*ibid.*). Just as Braidotti calls for, Wieringa's study theorises "aesthetics" as "passionate", fleshes "passionate aesthetics" out by empirical data from Asian contexts, and actually lets the non-heteronormative women living there become philosophers. Inspired by Braidotti's understanding of philosophy and Wieringa's empirical explorations on philosophical ideas, I also regard my study as a journey in which both my informants and I myself embody feminist philosophies.

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51 See the entry "Immanuel Kant: Aesthetics", written by Douglas Burnham, on the website "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy" (https://www.iep.utm.edu/kantaest/, retrieved April 7, 2019).

"Different Normativities" or "Different Differences": Different Forms of Marriage Carry Nuanced Meanings Other than "Normalcy"

It is a common finding, for scholars and activists who work on issues relevant to Chinese LGBTQ, *tongzhi*, and/or *lala* groups, that heterosexual marriage as a compulsory normative life "choice" in mainstream discourses and value systems fuels the biggest pressures, fiercest conflicts, deepest anxieties, bitterest sacrifices, subtlest negotiations, the most persistent insistence/resistances, the most challenging communications, and also the most innovative practices and ideas, in the lives of non-heterosexual people in contemporary China (Chou 2000; Kam 2007; Li 1998; Rofel 2007; to name only a few).

A variety of articles and books, from different perspectives and based on different disciplines, spend lengths discussing how Chinese non-heteronormative people live with and cope with such a huge and stubborn marriage pressure, and on how this marriage imperative is reinforced, reproduced, and sometimes reformed, in China's broad sociocultural environment. Some writings have analysed China's Marriage Law, or policies related to marriage and family planning, and also real-life legal cases; they have examined how the explicit language in formal, official, legal discourses, together with the flexible but also limited interpretations of them by different groups of people, are shaping the confinement of actions as well as the horizon of imaginations in the currently heteronormative mainstream culture (e.g. Guo 2007a, 2007b; Zhu 2018b). Some have looked into Chinese literature, operas, films, TV dramas, newspaper reports, and other documented information, tracking the fates and agencies emerging from same-sex erotics and behaviours, whether inside or outside the institution of marriage, whether in the past or the present, from perspectives sensitive to sexual and gender differences (e.g. Hinsch1990; Kang 2009; Martin 2010; Sang 2003). Some have explored local same-sex practices, knowledges and subjectivities in contemporary China, which are alternative to, despite simultaneously impacted by, the Euro-American, rights-based, globalised, more or less essentialistic "L, G, B, T" identities, the "out and proud" value orientation, the urban, white, middle-class gay and lesbian life styles, and the aspiration for the legalisation of same-sex marriage and family, in order to highlight and theorise the latest non-Western, non-heteronormative experiences that can dialogue with and inspire the identity politics and mainstream queer theories prevailing in Western activism and academia (e.g. Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; Kong 2011; Wei 2012; Zhu 2017, 2018a).

Among the above studies, the analyses about marriage in Chinese *tongzhis*' and *lalas*' lives are often inevitably intertwined with analyses about the difficulty—and sometimes the inapplicability—of "*chugui* (coming out of the closet)". The alternative strategies to

coming out under the pressures of marriage, for example the "cooperative marriage (*xingshi hunyin*)" between gay men and *lala* women, have been analysed and debated by scholars (Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; Wei 2010; Zhu 2018b). As for my study, I did not intentionally collect primary data for detailed discussion about "cooperative marriages", although I do think such life experiments to a considerable extent de-construct the core of the traditional heterosexual marriage and queer this heteronormative institution. The starting point of my academic quest was my own painstaking struggle over "what to do under that marriage pressure", and a Masters degree thesis based on interviews with a dozen of my peer *lalas* on the topic of "coming out". However, as the journey went on, I became more interested in the life stories containing diverse plots that might lead to conclusions more nuanced than the ones emphasising the fortress of compulsory marriage and the necessity of finding an "alternative" (such as the "cooperative marriage") to the inappropriate coming out. While my explorations on the theme of "*chugui*/coming out" are presented in Chapter 6, my reflections on the relation between marriage and (hetero) normativity—based on the life stories of my informants, friends and myself—are presented here in this section.

For every generation of Chinese women, the forms, functions, expectations, meanings, possibilities and aesthetics of marriage are not only determined by individual preferences but also largely constructed by the popularised, institutionalised and authoritative discourses about social life of that time (e.g. Evans 1997; Honig & Hershatter 1988). Below, the materials for my analyses range from the significant moments and occasions in a marriage, such as the proposal, wedding ceremony and divorce, to the ordinary, routine, "trivial" moments in day-to-day married life, in the lives of different women who were living in the 2010s in mainland China.

Among my informants, the idea of getting married to a beloved woman abroad was a fascinating topic, filled with the imagination of a formal and open commitment, a romantic and deluxe wedding tour, and an officially released marriage certificate, even though this marital relationship would not be legally recognised in China as long as the married persons were still Chinese citizens. Yet, only one of my informants and *les* friends, *Kite*, had actually practised getting married abroad. One day in the autumn of 2013, before I could arrange a catch-up meeting with *Kite*, I heard rumours about her from another informant, who asked me: "Do you know that *Kite* is going to divorce (*lihun*)?" I was surprised: "*Kite* has married a man?" "No, she has married a woman." I indeed knew that *Kite* and her then-current girlfriend, both of whom were Chinese citizens, had got married in North America a few years earlier; but I did not expect that a symbolic divorce based on what was actually a symbolic marital relationship when in China could be talked about as big

and serious news. "Wasn't such a 'divorce' similar to a breakup (*fenshou*, literally "splitting the hands") of a same-sex relationship?" I wondered secretly.

Several days later, I had a cup of coffee with *Kite*, and turned our conversation into a formal interview. *Kite*, in her mid-twenties then, who had come out to most of the people around her including her parents, talked about the years she had spent overseas. *Kite* went to North America for study, and there she met another Chinese girl and they fell in love with each other. Soon, they moved in together. Without a deliberate plan, one day *Kite*'s lover just proposed in a very casual way: "Hey, shall we get married?" After a quick thought, *Kite* answered "OK" happily. Then the couple got married in a local registry office. When *Kite* talked about her marriage in the interview, she did not give much solemnness or irreplaceable meaning to the marriage, though she did cherish the happy memories this event had brought her. She laughed and said:

> "You know what, we even missed the first appointment for the wedding ceremony. Not until the second appointment could we successfully get married. … Of course, the marriage certificate is not recognised in China, which means that if I marry [again with] a man here in China, there is no legal problem as long as I don't move abroad. … For me, 'I marry you' means 'I am together with you (*wo heni zaiyiqi*)'. But does getting married promise to help to improve an intimate relationship? I don't think so."

About two years after they got married, *Kite* graduated and moved back to China whereas her lover continued her academic pursuits in North America. The long-distance relationship caused a lot of difficulties for the couple, who tried different methods to work it out, only to find themselves tired and frustrated. Eventually, they decided to divorce. I realised that the rumor of *Kite*'s divorce that I had heard was in fact spread by *Kite* herself. She did not keep this decision as a secret at all among acquaintances; rather, she told this news to many people and shared her experiences with them. When I asked *Kite* why divorce was a big deal to her, even if her marriage was not legally recognised in China, she answered:

> "For me, it [the divorce] is important and not important at the same time. … I think I won't marry again to anyone else… Whether I have to go [to North America and go] through the official divorce procedure? I don't care, because I don't need to be free for another marriage. … For her (*Kite*'s then-current wife), she even often questions the institution of marriage itself. So, I don't think she needs a quick divorce either. … Of course, if she spends the rest of her life there [in North America] and wants to marry someone else one day, we should finish

> the divorce procedure after all. … Now, I talk about my divorce with friends [as if it's a big deal], it's more like a self-satirising banter (*xixue*) [rather than a serious announcement]. It [my divorce] is actually just a breakup (*fenshou*). … To me, the divorce is mainly a feeling of emotions (*yizhong ganqinshang de ganjue*). …"

From *Kite*'s experiences of marriage and divorce, we can see that the marriage is largely casualised, no longer a rational action, a planned procedure or a sacrosanct status—the usual impression a heteronormative marriage gives us. Instead, *Kite* and her then-current lover practised the marriage as an experiment: they picked it up at a passionate moment, then gave it up without much insistence. This is not a "mature" relationship according to the marriage counsellors who instruct couples and single individuals about how to build a "successful" intimate marriage. Moreover, the idea of getting married was confirmed quickly between two persons, which seemed like playing a game, without truly holding a belief that the marriage was a meaningful and reliable social institution. In other words, they questioned the institution of marriage itself, but at the same time got married; *Kite* thought her non-legalised marital relationship and divorce "important", but at the same time talked about her "broken", "failed" marriage casually.

In *Kite*'s own eyes, it was probably this very casualness, which connoted a rash, ephemeral and irrational approach, and which would be disapproved of by instructors of "how to start and maintain a successful marriage", that exactly defined her marriage as a cluster of unique, beautiful and precious "feelings of emotions". It was the very casualness that actualised the serious meaning *Kite* gave to her marriage. Thus, for *Kite*, her own marriage became quite different from how ordinary heterosexual people understood "the marriage". In fact, I even doubt whether *Kite* would have married a woman—let alone divorced her later—if same-sex marriage had already been legalised in China, which would make her wedding and divorce less personalised but more institutionalised. Obviously, if her own marriage became as ordinary—if not banal—as the "normal" ones, all those love secrets it kept (not guessable for others), all those passionate moments it dramatised, all those performative and subversive practices it opened up, and the enchanting ambiguities between satiric banters and serious "feelings of emotions", would be largely flattened and reduced into the stereotypical images of "the marriage" that we have already learned too much through normative discourses.

In her book *Queer Women in Urban China* (2014), Engebretsen elaborates how the *lala* women in contemporary Beijing embody the ethical principle of "different normativities", which was proposed earlier by Ching Yau as a conceptual lens for analysing the diverse and contradictory ways through which Chinese individuals with same-sex desires negotiate

with normativity, including the yearning for normativity (Yau 2010). Engebretsen's informants emphasised the "difference" and "specialness" in their subjectivity in terms of their non-heteronormative sexuality, while at the same time expressed their aspiration for a respectable, face-preserving "normal life", the landmark of which is having a married life (Engebretsen 2014: 34). Engebretsen reviews studies on the marriage and intimate unions practised by non-Western, non-heteronormative people. She summarises that although the globally circulated discourses about marriage equality and same-sex marriage rights originally emerged from Euro-American progress in formal domains (e.g. laws, public policies), which have already been criticised by Western queer practitioners as a process of normalisation (or "homonormativity", e.g. Puar 2007), researchers should also see how local and everyday socioeconomic factors are shaping the intimate practices and marital ideologies among non-heteronormative individuals (Engebretsen 2014: 82-83). As Antonia Y. Chao reviews Engebretsen's findings about "different normativities", and states a *lala* woman "eagerly pursues a 'normal' lifestyle precisely because"—not despite—"she is aware of her integral difference from 'regular' folks; while it is impossible to renounce her homosexuality, it is at least probable to achieve a 'good' (read: middle-class) life" (Chao 2017: 433).

Based on my fieldwork data, I agree that the lens of "different normativities" allows us to recognise the seemingly paradoxical combination between "being different" and "being normal", and reminds us not to simply label any appropriation of a conservative form of life status or social institution—for example the marriage—as a complete surrender to hegemonic normativity. However, what I sometimes want to further question is this: before we can defend the differences between a specific move towards normativity and another, do we first have to admit that all the practices we name (for the moment) with the rhetorics of "marriage" must be a move to normativity? Is it possible that, in a living environment, where same-sex relationships have not been publicly recognised and same-sex couples (and single persons) are less respected, a woman uses her own relation to the marriage, mixed with solemnness and jokes, lawful and unlawful practices, customary rituals on the surface and original meanings unaccounted, to mark the difference between a "special" herself (at least in her own eyes) and the ordinary (or even "banal") others—just as *Kite* did?

In other words, when we employ the lens of "different normativities" in debates over whether one's aspiration of a "normal" life, by using a (symbolic) same-sex marriage, should be simply criticised as a conspiracy with normativity, can we also imagine a lens of "different differences", which views the marriage less as a monolithic landmark of a monolithic normativity but more as an old stage, not despite but because of its creakiness,

that one can utilise (by renting, borrowing, stealing, or even seizing) to display one's unique, special, never ever "just normal" subjectivity?

The analytic concept "passionate aesthetics" allows a researcher who studies issues about "normativity" to sense the paradoxes between "banal normalcy" and "stigmatised specialness". It is not always according to the most dominant hierarchy of "ideals" in a society, but also according to the hierarchy of "ideals" in a micro social atmosphere, that one maps out a "fine line" or a "finer line" in one's subjective thinking. It is not rare that, for some of my friends who agree with critical feminist thinking or who are self-identified "queer" persons living in countries where both heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage have been normalised as "good", "healthy", "right" life styles, marriage can be criticised as a conservative, discriminative, oppressive social institution. However, just because of this, in such social circles these friends often appear hesitant and unconfident, or even a little bit ashamed and sorry, when they "confess" that they in fact have got married or are going to marry someone. A friend with a brilliant and sharp feminist critical mind once said humbly and with concern before she told me the news that she had got married: "I'm afraid that I didn't completely escape the conventions (*weineng miansu*)." Another friend who showed excellent insights in her studies on homoerotic literature blushed at her long-term heterosexual relationship and motherhood when we casually talked about our personal lives, but meanwhile emphasised that she still insisted on not getting married formally because she questioned the institution of marriage.

In the two cases above, I could clearly sense the pressure my friends felt, caused by the presence of me, a lesbian woman and a researcher of LGBT studies who obviously knew well the concept "heteronormativity" and knew well how to criticise it with academic discourses. My two friends were facing the possibility of being labelled as "banally normal" persons in front of a "queerer" and "less normative" peer, and were even facing the risk of becoming "stigmatised special" if their marital status was gossiped about among a group of "non-heteronormative" peers who were familiar with playing with the critiques on heteronormativity. In comparison, for my informant *Kite*, her marital status in real life did not count as a (completely) serious indicator of her political attitude towards the marriage, let alone how she personally imagined or redefined an ideal marriage. In other words, for *Kite*, the paradoxes in her playing with the concept of marriage and her playscripts of marriage practices were her "fine line" which she was artistically walking in order to reach a better specialness.

Putting aside the above cases of *Kite* and my two friends, all of whom have received rich information about Euro-American feminism and the LGBTQ movement, I find that, in the imaginations of many of my other informants, the meanings brought by a

same-sex marriage are quite different from those brought by a normative heterosexual marriage. For example, for some of them, a real-life heterosexual marriage, filled with pressure, reluctance, sorrow, guilt, anger and yielding, is essentially different from an unattainable but strongly craved, happily imagined same-sex marriage, which represents freedom, longing, joy, relief, peace and achievement. In these cases, the two kinds of marriages—heterosexual ones and same-sex ones—cannot be categorised under the same rubric "marriage". For these individuals, an (impossible) same-sex marriage does not even count as a marriage. This situation reminds me of Monique Wittig's claim, "lesbians are not women" (Wittig 1992). According to Wittig, the category of "women" only exists when the category of "men" and heterosexuality as a political regime exist, so to be a lesbian means to be outside of the heterosexual norms for "women". Similarly, for some informants in my study, the concept "marriage" in their everyday lives only narrowly refers to the heterosexual marriage institution binding a man and a woman. Thus, the idea of same-sex marriage is by no means a simple pursuit of "being normal", an adaption of the heteronormative ideal or an appendix to the heterosexual marriage, but rather a subversive desire which can define a brand-new beautiful life. Below, I elaborate the story of my informant *Jade*, a working-class *T* living in southwestern China who had not received much formal education after middle school. Her bitter experiences from her heterosexual marriage taught her essentially different lessons about different kinds of marriage.

In the middle of my fieldwork in Kunming, I spent a weekend in a smaller city about two hundred kilometres away from the border between China and Vietnam, in order to visit the family of a local friend. Before setting off for the trip, I joined a *QQ* chat group based in that city to check out whether any *lala*/*les* woman in the group would be interested in a face-to-face conversation with me. It turned out that the administrator (*guanliyuan*) of that chat group, *Jade*, was willing to meet me very much and wanted to introduce me to several *T* and *P* friends of hers. Thus, I spared an afternoon in that city for doing a focus group with five local women, either at my age or a bit younger than me, whose socioeconomic and educational background was more working class than most of my other informants. They narrated their hard life experiences and heart-breaking romances: frequent unemployment; being short of money; being entrapped in the illegal activities of *chuanxiao*[52]; owing money in order to buy gifts for girlfriends; helplessly seeing girlfriends entering heterosexual marriage; attempting suicide after breaking up with girlfriends; ceding the custody of their children due to the former husband's coercion based on his economic superiority and "moral superiority" (he was the parent more "normal" in terms of

52 *Chuanxiao*, literally "spreading sales", works similarly to Ponzi schemes.

sexuality and gender); being hurt by difficult same-sex relationships and doubting whether there was a future for same-sex love; but inevitably falling in love with women again.

Jade, sitting among her friends, shared with me her experiences in a marriage. Although being a masculine woman who always preferred a very short haircut and men's clothes, *Jade* could not escape the marriage pressure imposed by her parents. At twenty-three years old, she married the son of one of her father's old comrades-in-arms (*lao zhanyou*). Preparing for the wedding ceremony, *Jade* spent half a year growing her hair long, and on the wedding day she wore a bride gown and make-up, which made the bridesmaids laugh (one of them was in the focus group too). Rather than enjoying the wedding night (*dongfang huazhu ye*, literally "the night of flowered candles in the bridal chamber") privately and romantically with the groom, as every Chinese new bride is supposed to, *Jade* spent the whole night in a karaoke lounge with a crowd of her *T* and *P* friends. During the first several months of her married life, *Jade* planned to act in a way completely opposite to what a normal wife was supposed to do at home, in order to provoke her husband to file for divorce, which usually meant a failure and shame in a woman's life but would be a relief for a *T* like *Jade*. Nearly every day after the wedding, during the daytime *Jade* bought some beers and snacks and invited her friends home, at night she hung out with friends in bars until the dawn; and when she came home—often drunk—in the morning, her husband had gone to work. Thus, *Jade*, on the one hand, avoided any chance of being alone with her husband so that he could ask for sexual contact with her, and on the other hand tried her best to upset her husband by performing as a bad wife.

To *Jade*'s surprise, however, three months passed but her husband did not complain about her and kept silent about where he expected the marriage to go. Instead, *Jade* had become exhausted by her own performance and could not help but initiate a divorce herself. Going through several refusals from her husband, several mediations from the husband's family, and three informal strategic refusals by the officers working in the local civil affairs bureau (*minzhengju*)[53], *Jade* finally divorced her husband after the four-month marriage. After she finished the divorce procedure, she immediately rushed to her ex-girlfriend's workplace and said: "I've divorced. I'm free. Let's be together again!"

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53 There are a variety of reports saying that, in many local civil affairs bureaus over mainland China, strategies have been used in order to "save" the marriages of the couples who visit there for divorce. That is to say, the officers working in these bureaus create excuses, additional requirements, or inconvenience caused by a specially designed timetable, etc. Such controversial strategies are appreciated by some reporters, but are criticised by others as violations of people's right to get divorced freely. In *Jade*'s case, she had obviously been subjected to such strategies during the process of divorcing her ex-husband.

After the above experience in a heterosexual marriage, *Jade*'s attitude towards marriage pressure from her parents changed. When her mother mentioned that she expected *Jade* to marry again, *Jade* responded firmly: "Stop expecting that. It is impossible (that I marry again). I have done it for you once, but there will not be a second time." At the same time, *Jade* disclosed to her mother that she was one of "this kind" (*zhezhong*, here implying homosexual people)[54], not concerned whether her mother accepted this fact or not. She even pointed out to her mother, who also divorced *Jade*'s father, that a twenty-year marriage would probably end up in divorce anyway, and she did not want an unhappy marriage and a divorce happening to herself again. When she talked about her ex-girlfriend's marriage pressure and marriage choice, *Jade* said:

> "If she chooses to marry [a man], that's all right. After all I married [a man] too. It's unfair for her if I don't allow her to marry. She also needs to fulfil the obligation for her family (*gei jiali yige jiaodai*), you understand."

However, later, when we moved to the topic of same-sex marriage and artificial insemination, the group became immersed in serene and jolly dreams all starting with the word "if (*ruguo*)". After I asked: "Would you marry your beloved girl if same-sex marriage was legalised in China?" Without hesitation, the several *T*-identified women in the group rushed to answer "yes". *Jade* said:

> "As long as the woman dating with me is willing [to marry me], I will too. In fact, I'm thinking that, if same-sex marriage was legalised in China from tomorrow, probably the local civil affairs bureau (*minzhengju*) would be jam-packed tomorrow. I guess there would be many same-sex couples going for marriage registration there."

The group laughed, and another *T* younger than *Jade* followed: "If any [female same-sex] couple among my friends dared to marry, I would dare too." Then, a *P*-identified woman, who had had a difficult divorce from her ex-husband and meanwhile had suffered from breaking up with her ex-girlfriend, affirmed: "Who does not want to wear the wedding gown at least once in her life?" Interestingly, it sounded as if none of them had worn the wedding gown yet. In contrast to their habit of narrowly associating the notion "*hunyin*

54 The focus group done with *Jade* and her friends was carried out in a café restaurant. We occupied a private compartment, but still our conversations could be heard by other customers and the waiters. I found that the informants intentionally lowered their voices when they were saying something obviously relevant to same-sex practices, or replaced some sensitive words such as "*tongxinglian* (homosexual)" with a general pronoun, like "this" and "that".

(marriage)" to heterosexual marriage, as if a same-sex marriage did not count as a marriage, as mentioned earlier, at this very moment it seemed that their history of being legally, formally married to men suddenly meant nothing at all, in comparison with a flash of imagination for holding a wedding ritual with their beloved women.

In *Queer Women in Urban China*, Engebretsen gives a thick description of two *lala* symbolic wedding ceremonies she had witnessed between 2004 and 2006 in the West Wing Bar ("*Xixiangfang*"), which was one of the most popular *lala* bars in Beijing (Engebretsen 2014: 84-96). As Engebretsen argues, her first-hand observation and detailed narration of these two events "enables us to comprehend a wider range of rationales for marriage among *lalas*, one that offers alternatives to the hegemonic discourse and cultural logic underpinning most scholarship and activism that validate the assimilation/transgression paradigm, and instead focuses on the close-to-normal complicities and negotiations of normativities" (*ibid.*: 83). Yet, comparing the *lala* symbolic weddings depicted by Engebretsen with what I myself have seen and heard about "normal" wedding ceremonies held by urban heterosexual couples in today's China[55], I find that the elements of "Chinese tradition" were especially emphasised by these *lala* couples in a wedding ceremony.

Around the beginning of the 21st Century, the wedding ceremonies held by urban, middle-class Chinese families had begun to develop and normalise a series of wedding customs, which not only hybridised Chinese traditions and Western traditions but also created new ritual cultures about auspiciousness and taboos, varying with different local features. The main and the most formal part of a wedding ceremony is the wedding banquet attended by hundreds of people sitting at big round tables, according to the host families' arrangement. Throughout the banquet, a ritualised repertoire, rehearsed speeches and interactive games are organised in a half-formal-and-half-entertaining way, operated by a professional wedding planning agency and hosted by a professional emcee. In such normalised and streamlined wedding ceremonies, the Chinese traditional wedding ritual of "*sanbai*" (three bows)[56], which was performed by the first *lala* couple at their wedding

55 Although I have never studied the wedding customs in contemporary China for academic purposes, I have attended more than a dozen wedding ceremonies of my relatives and friends.

56 According to Engebretsen's explanation, the *sanbai* (three bows) refers to the newly married couple performing three deep bows, first before the *tiandi* (heaven, earth, and ancestors), and then before their parents and in-laws, and finally face to face before each other (Engebretsen 2014: 88). In Engebretsen's description of the first *lala* wedding ceremonies she observed, the *lala* couple performed "*sanbai*" in the middle of their wedding banquet and in front of all the people who were in the bar, regardless that they made some friends represent the position of the bride's parents.

banquet in Engebretsen's book, is in fact seldom performed by heterosexual couples and their parents in front of the guests during the banquet.

At such a wedding banquet, the most important and the most necessary moment is instead that all the guests witness the bride's father leading the bride down a red carpet towards the groom, who waits with the wedding ring in his pocket at a flowered arch on a stage in the centre of the banquet hall. Meanwhile, the emcee is waiting to lead the couple to read the wedding vows and pronounce that they are formally married from then on. For this important moment, the background music is usually Wilhelm Richard Wagner's "Wedding March". The popularisation of such a procedure on wedding ceremonies in today's Chinese societies, such as mainland China and Taiwan, has been largely influenced by the traditional and religious form of wedding ceremony in Western countries (Chen 2018: 3), but in China this custom is a lately normalised tradition and quite secular. Even though the wedding ritual of "three bows" may be performed in some cases, which is held in more private circumstances and witnessed only by close family members and friends, it will appear outdated and inappropriate if it is performed at a wedding banquet. So, in this sense, I do not think that that *lala* couple in Engebretsen's book held a really "close-to-normal" wedding ceremony.

The second *lala* symbolic wedding ceremony analysed in Engebretsen's book, however, was more like an advocacy for encouraging more *lala* couples "to marry each other, to put love first, and to ignore their problems and lack of recognition in society" (Engebretsen 2014: 93): the couple saw themselves as an example for Chinese women-loving women but refused to have close contacts and bonds with *lala* individuals in their real life. Following the detailed description of this symbolic wedding ceremony, Engebretsen points out that the "normal life" appreciated and emphasised by this *lala* couple in fact "did not include affinity with the *lala* community" (*ibid.*: 95). More than agreeing with Engebretsen, I further doubt to what extent we can be sure that the "normal life" as an abstract notion in the words of this wedded *lala* couple, who were almost strangers to the attendants and gave only a one-off performance about their life and thoughts, has actual resemblance with the "normal life" in the dictionary of any attendant at the wedding. After all, different people intentionally or unconsciously select different languages, knowledges, images, logics about what is "normal (*zhengchang*)"—as well as what is "more normal" and what is "less normal"—in order to justify their arguments, actions, aims, emotions, and standpoints, in specific contexts; it is arbitrary to presume that people agree with one another about what should be put in a box with the label "normalcy".

There are two anecdotes that keep reminding me of what I have argued above. In late 2010, when I did fieldwork for my MA thesis about the coming out experiences among

young *lalas* living Beijing, one of my informants repeated her sister's spiteful comment after finding out about her homosexual orientation: "Even if you became a Buddhist nun (*nigu*) and refused to get married all your life, that would be absolutely better than what you are doing now [referring to being a homosexual]." Ironically, from a friend of mine who was once determined to become a Buddhist nun but later gave up this idea because of her parents' strong objection, I heard about how her mother pleaded in tears: "I would rather you were a drug addict. Being a drug addict, you would at least stay home and stay with the family; but being a Buddhist nun, you would '*chujia*' (literally 'stepping out of home', referring to formally becoming a Buddhist monk or nun who lives in a monastery) and go beyond my reach." After hearing these sayings which make comparisons between homosexuality, religious monasticism and drug addiction, three kinds of more or less stigmatised situations in contemporary mainland China, I often wonder: What would the family members of a drug addict possibly say? Would they allege that "being a drug addict is much worse than being homosexual" when they tried to demonstrate their detestation of the existence of this abnormal individual in their family?

Mentioning these anecdotes and revisiting the cases depicted in Engebretsen's book (2014) as this section reaches a close, I want to reiterate that when we analyse the "different normativities" pursued by Chinese non-normative subjects, sometimes we should not be satisfied with just the word "normal (*zhengchang*)" spoken by the subjects themselves, or with finding the behaviours ostensibly normative—namely the ideas and the ideals about "the marriage" in this section. Rather, I prefer to modify the phrase "different normativities" into "different differences", on the one hand to emphasise the very importance of any possible subtle difference that cannot be simply reduced to "normativity" anyway, and on the other hand to emphasise the very importance of continuing to map out the differently and paradoxically contextualised, situated, materialised figurations of "being normal". Moreover, as the cases I have analysed in this section indicate, through re-defining, re-imagining and re-aspiring a seemingly "normal" thing, one—whether normative or non-normative according to an already-existing yardstick—can create unique and original meanings which make one a little bit different from being "just normal", "ordinary" and "banal" (or at least which can persuade one that they are so). These practices of "different differences" in the becoming journey of a subject echo with Braidotti's call for practices of "affirmative differences, or creative repetitions, i.e. retelling, reconfiguring, and revisiting the concept, phenomenon, event, or location from different angles (Braidotti 2011b: 225)".

The Passion in "Extra-Marital Affairs[57]": Revising the Dominant Aesthetic Standards Outside Marriage-Centred Discourses

In this section, I cast light upon some practices which fall outside the marriage-centred discourses that have occupied various scholars who study heteronormativity. I look into some thoughts and efforts in the lives of some women with same-sex desires, which are not immediately intertwined with concerns and struggles about marriage, whether heterosexual marriage or same-sex marriage. Here, I jokingly appropriate the phrase "extra-marital affairs" for naming these efforts and practices that de-centre the significance of the marriage in their lives (whether as a human right, a civil status, a symbolic ceremony, an everyday routine, or as an ideal aspiration). These practices usually build up bonds, meanings and influences outside or without a married life (i.e. monogamous intimacy, private space, gender division of labour, nuclear family priority, etc.). However, I also like the connoted liaison between passionate encounters and public business in the word "affair", which perfectly indicates a vague and porous boundary between one's personal life and communal participation.

In this section, I pay attention to how some of my women-loving-women informants and some of my female friends, through their professional or amateur endeavours, try to survive, and thrive, in a heteronormative society and at the same time revise the dominant aesthetics in their own ways. This section is also a reminder for scholars who want to reflect on heteronormativity, including myself, not to limit their attention to marriage simply because women face hegemonic discourses and pressures of compulsory heterosexual marriage.

In Chapter 2, I portrayed my informant *Petal*, a successful business woman in her forties. Among my informants, she was not the only one who enjoyed being her own boss. Since I carried out my fieldwork, more and more of my informants have started their own business as a part-time or full-time job. Generally speaking, the generations born in the 1970s and the 1980s (and now the 1990s) in China indeed tend to accept, imagine and practise the possibility of starting one's own business more than their parents did, under the influence of a developing market-oriented economy as well as the decline of benefits brought by working in the governmental system, state-owned enterprises, or big

57 Here, the term "extra-marital affair" is a joking appropriation and does not refer to the romantic and/or sexual liaison between a married person and someone other than his or her legal spouse. As this section unfolds, I will make clear how and why I use this term in my discussions.

hierarchical companies[58]. However, my informants and my non-heteronormative female friends do show great motivation and vibrant impetus in finding a freer way to both earn a living independently and escape the scrutiny, discipline and marginalisation they (probably) face in many governmental, bureaucratic organisations because of the prevalence of heteronormative values. In these business practices, innovations have been carried out along with commercial pursuits which embody an aesthetic preference with respect to gender and sexual diversity, as well as feminist ideology.

One of my informants[59] founded her own trademark and designed jewellery for urban women. The main products she crafted constituted a rainbow series, which connoted the beauty and pride of non-heteronormative subjects. According to the introduction she posted on her personal page, the greatest inspirations she received from and gave to her rainbow series were the diverse and intersected identities embodied in every girl or woman. Another informant, together with her girlfriend, ran a yoga/martial-art training project for women in which she coached the trainees in person. She believed that her project could help women improve strength as well as self-confidence in embracing and expressing a female selfhood different from society's gendered expectation for a delicate and docile woman. Having moved to New Zealand, another informant was preparing to start her own business and especially provide photography services for the Chinese female same-sex couples who were on a wedding tour in New Zealand. As another example, a café named "Rooms (*fangjian*)" was set up in Shanghai by some local feminists and LGBT activists, inspired by the book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf. They turned the café into an activity/activist space, with a tiny library of feminist reading materials, a projector for screening films, and walls for exhibiting artistic works, making the whole space friendly for women, feminists, and non-heteronormative persons. Although "Rooms" closed a few months after I finished my fieldwork in Shanghai, I often reminisce about

58 See, for example, the annual report on the potential of starting up a business among different groups of Chinese people in 2015, released by *Tengxun* Company on "Chinese Internet Data Center" (http://www.199it.com/archives/322571.html, accessed on October 6, 2018).

59 In this section, I intentionally make the protagonists in the cases completely anonymous, even without giving them pseudonyms, because, even though I keep the identities obscured, describing a specific project a woman is working on can possibly render her identity recognisable.

the free, secure and cosy atmosphere that "Rooms" provided for me to carry out several interviews.[60]

Besides running relatively formal businesses, some other informants were enthusiastic about intellectually creative work. One of them wrote fictional stories, including but not limited to GL (Girls' Love) stories, and posted them on online communities. She had even become fairly famous among certain readers' circles and was followed by a group of fans, after she had released serialised novels about female same-sex romance in one of China's most popular net literature forums. I was very surprised when this writer told me that she got only 3 *fen* (about 0.005 US dollar) from the forum for uploading 1000 Chinese characters, and she could earn no more than 300 US dollars per month if she spent all her time on writing except for sleeping and eating. With such a small income she could barely afford a frugal life in the city where she lived, and she admitted: "Writing those stories must be a 'true love (*zhen'ai*)' of mine, otherwise I would have found any other job and earned much more." Then she described the titles and themes of many of her works, with great pride. I learned that her own favourite novel among her works was a fictional historical story with a non-heteronormative female protagonist; and in order to make it more "real", she had carefully studied both formally published books and informally circulated information about the dynasty, which was the setting of her fictional stories. The novel her fans loved most was a story of crimes in the setting of contemporary China; and the two female protagonists, a policewoman and a female criminal, were romantically and sexually attracted to each another. This kind of writing, which fictionalises the usually heteronormatively narrated "History" and "Present" in so-called "serious" literature and "non-fictional" research, creates spaces and languages for brand-new imaginations and interpretations about the "facts" we had once learned from standard textbooks.

Some other informants tried to combine their positions in the institutions where they worked, whether their dull everyday jobs or their highest career ambitions, with efforts to help women having similar experiences find one another, and to make gender and sexual diversity visible in public. One of my informants, whose job was related to the IT domain, was the founder and administrator of several popular online *QQ* chat groups (*QQ qun*) for local women-loving women in her city. Another young informant in her early-twenties

60 When I did fieldwork in Shanghai, the manager of "Rooms" told me that she was rather tired of having local policemen making frequent inquiries. Some events planned to be held in "Rooms" such as film screenings were aborted by the local police station, and the manager was officially given the reason that "Rooms" did not meet the fire safety requirements for public gatherings. However, she believed that another important reason was that "Rooms" was a place catering for LGBT and feminist activities. As a result, the profit of "Rooms" decreased and, before long, it closed.

was determined to study psychology after getting her undergraduate degree in medicine, in order to prepare herself to provide LGBT-friendly consulting services in the future. Feminist perspectives were openly applied and sharply discussed in both the published journal articles and the personal blog essays written by another informant, a post-graduate student receiving academic training in the discipline of economics.

A female friend of mine, a young professional screenwriter in her late-twenties, took part in the team which created a historical TV series, released in 2014, about Wu Zetian (623-705 A.D.), the only female emperor (*nü huangdi*) in China's history. In one of her personal but yet open blogs, she mentioned that she was very excited and inspired that a young audience imagined and discussed the same-sex "CP" (CP, short for "coupling" or "couple" in the current popular culture in China) of two female characters in the TV series, even without any explicit "evidence" of a same-sex relationship in the screenplay. And she also disclosed that, as long as she worked as a professional screenwriter, she would try her best to create possibilities, even if only ambiguous hints or leaving a little room for imagaination, given the strict censorship, for the visibility of non-heteronormative subjectivities and life stories.

However, ironically, the abovementioned TV series, "The Empress of China (*Wumeiniang chuanqi*)", was banned by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of The People's Republic of China (usually known as "*Guangdian zongju*" among Chinese netizens) after only a few episodes had been broadcast. It was alleged that some viewers had sent complaints about some over-sexualised costumes and images[61]. The Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), which covered the years of Wu Zetian's sovereignty, was well known for its aesthetic trend of appreciating plump women dressed up with half-nude breasts[62], the "over-sexualised costumes and images" in the TV series' original version referred to the scenes in which the actresses' breasts were not covered enough and made to protrude. After a round of re-editing, the broadcasting resumed, and the audience found that in almost every single frame the body parts of female characters below the shoulders were not shown. For weeks, this news was a hot topic among China's

61 See, for example, a report released in 2015 (http://history.sohu.com/20150104/n407503329.shtml, accessed on October 6, 2018)

62 See, for example, the entry named "Ancient Chinese Beauty—Blessings and Curses" (http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/special/13/6219-1.htm, accessed on October 6, 2018), released in 2011, in the section of "Historical Changes in Chinese Women" on the website www.womenofchina.cn.

netizens, many of whom satirically called this edited version a purikura (*datoutie*, literally "big head photo stickers") album[63].

What I have described above are just a few examples of how today's Chinese women, especially the young, urban, well-educated, professional, non-(hetero)normative ones, consciously create opportunities in personal, communal and public space to negotiate with institutionalised norms and even cha(lle)nge these norms. In cases such as the TV series "The Empress of China", such women who participate in commercially and politically cultural projects, whether as creators or as the audience, deploy various subtle politics, including just allowing the hints of non-heteronormative possibilities and recognising them. By doing so, they move through the tensions and gaps between the aesthetic standards defined by authoritative, top-down, formally formulated discourses and the aesthetic try-outs that are actualised in assembling collaborations, rhizomatic growths, and ongoing revisions. These practices are exactly how "passionate aesthetics" work, processes which are not insulated from the currently salient forms of heteronormativity but create "diffractions" in meanings, implications, imaginations, derivations, and thus create "symbolically subversive" moments (see Wieringa 2015). Although the steps in such processes do not always constitute "fine lines" that promise a fame or a fortune, and sometimes even instead lead to dilemmas, distractions or dead ends, these passionate efforts are embodying "beautiful", "meaningful" and "unique" selves and lives. Seeing the deeds done by these informants and women friends, I cannot help but imagine how the stories about the "super villain" Gru, which I reviewed and criticised in the first section of this chapter, would be continued or completely re-written, if these women could team up in a creative project.

63 See, for example, a report released in 2015 (http://ent.qq.com/a/20150104/004495.htm, accessed on October 8, 2018).

Not "Purely" Rehearsed: The *T-P* Dance Duet

Centring *T-P* Relationships on the Stage of SOGIE (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression)

In 2013, I travelled from Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan Province and one of my fieldwork sites, to a city in a neighbouring province for a couple of days. There I met some local same-sex attracted women in a participatory training workshop for the purpose of disseminating basic feminist theories and developing local LGBT activism. The trainers of this workshop were young feminist activists in their early-twenties who had graduated from universities in some of the biggest Chinese cities or Euro-American countries, while the trainees were local young women-loving women of a similar age, who had little "knowledge" about what they were going to learn in the workshop, such as the concept "gender (translated as "*shehui xingbie*", literally "social sex-distinctions", in Chinese)"[64]. These local women came as single individuals or as couples, and appeared to fit perfectly into the categories of "*T*" and "*P*". According to common knowledge among most Chinese women who are same-sex attracted and more or less self-identified as *lala*/*les*(bian), "*T*" and "*P*" are respectively defined as masculine and feminine women involved in same-sex relationships, and *T* and *P* are supposed to be paired in romantic and/or sexual relationships. To be specific, *T*, short for the English word "tomboy", usually refers to a woman with same-sex desires who appears and/or behaves in a masculine way; and *P*, short for "*po*", which means "wife" in Chinese, refers to the feminine partner of a *T* (Chao 2000; Engebretsen 2008; Huang 2008). Both the terms "*T*" and "*Po*" were originally used and popularised in Taiwanese gay and lesbian bar culture in the 1960s (Chao 2000, 2001), and then introduced into mainland China as the internet developed in the 1990s, though here "*P*" was habitually used rather than "*po*" (Huang 2008).

The trainers of the workshop, however, seemed not to pay much attention to this *T-P* lexicon in the formal "lessons" they gave. I guessed it was because, in the eyes of these trainers, the *T-P* lexicon, similar to the butch-femme lexicon, could be associated with the reproduction of heterosexual and heteronormative behaviours in female same-sex

64 My role in this workshop was neither a trainer nor a trainee. I was not involved in desiging the content of this training project, and I did not even plan to do a participatory observation at this occasion. I helped there as a facilitator, who led the whole group to play some icebreaking games, in order to create a smooth and amicable atmosphere for the workshop, since I had had relevant experience in a variety of activities. Except the scenarios I have discussed in the main text, which was so inspiring for my study, I decided not to include any further detail about this workshop as part of my "data", in order to protect the anonymity and privacy of both the trainers and the trainees. Although my experiences during this workshop have triggered many of my reflections, I still and always appreciate the individuals and groups who are taking actions to make our society more sensitive to gender equality and diversity.

relationships, even though the definitions of *T* and *P*, as well as the erotic codes attached to *T-P* relationships, were in fact different and proliferating among various individuals. Similar situations had also happened among Euro-American feminists, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, which I will discuss later. Anyway, in this workshop, the trainers mainly wanted to assist these local trainees to reflect on the hegemonic heteronormative gender division of masculinity and femininity. They made considerable efforts to familiarise the trainees with the concept "*shehui xingbie* (gender)", defined by them as the socioculturally constructed characteristics of men and women, which usually carried patriarchal and double-standard implications, respectively imposed upon the two biological sexes, male and female. Perhaps the trainers were wary of causing too much confusion among the trainees, who were probably hearing the term "gender" for the first time, they did not introduce much of the sociohistorical contexts from which the concept "gender" emerged and what roles it played in various cultures when it had become globalised. Some other similar strategies—if not neglects—took place here and there throughout the whole workshop. The training was structured along the lines of the English letters: "L", "G", "B", "T"; and then it touched a little bit on "I(ntersex)", a little bit on "Q(uestioning)", and eventually a little bit on "Q(ueer)". Role-play games were designed for the trainees in order to make sure that they did not misunderstand these letters or mistake one letter for another[65]. Although it was a participatory workshop and the trainers did try to give space for the trainees to actively express themselves and argue, I noticed that some trainees still got confused by so many terms originating from English words and phrases, some got bored and even fell asleep, and some were distracted by mobile phones, even though they indeed showed respect to their peers who were training them. In comparison, the rich and vibrant dynamics among the *T* and *P* trainees themselves, which fuelled the intense and subtle desire flows in the workshop, were largely under-discussed.

Nevertheless, later in a scenario some days after the workshop, such dynamics got a chance to be displayed in a flamboyant way. One night after the workshop, some of those local women took the whole group to a *lala* bar where they often hung out. There, they treated us to a well-prepared party: a large space without "no smoking" signs, several dozen beers, and a series of performances of songs and dances, for showing thanks in their own way to their peers from metropolises and famous universities. I was surprised that the local women, who seemed clumsy when they were learning the abovementioned knowledge about sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE), were in fact brilliant artists, and the bar was their perfect stage. For me, the most unforgettable performance was actually half

65 The trainees were divided into groups, and each group was assigned to create and perform a mini play to represent the typical experiences of one particular category from LGBTIQQ.

rehearsed and half improvised. A *T* with brush-cut hair and in a man's suit amazingly sang a popular song, which covered a wide range of notes, so that only singers versatile in both male and female voice registers were believed to be capable to perform it successfully. A little bit nervous, the *T* succeeded stunningly, despite afterwards saying that she had sung it even better in the rehearsal. Before we could applaud for the *T*, her *P* girlfriend, a girl about twenty years old who wore long hair, delicate makeup, a leather jacket, a pair of leopard-print skinny jeans, and a pair of high heels, jumped to the centre of the stage, seized a chair and pushed the *T* into it, straddled on the lap of the *T*, and asked the DJ for some hot dance music. The *T* was so surprised, because this was not a part of the rehearsal at all; she immediately became shy and frozen in the chair. The *P* girl started to dance, in a confident and sexy way. She stroked her *T* lover's hair, caressed her cheeks, leant against her very intimately, or stepped away but performed a dramatic tension. The *T*, who was embarrassed by this sudden reverse of power in front of so many *lala* peers but meanwhile proud of the charm of her own *P* girlfriend, could not do anything but looked up at her lover as if worshiping a goddess. In return, the *P* looked back at her lover with a loving smile and appreciated the applause from the crowd with a victorious gesture, totally different from her performance in the workshop—quite timid and always failing to master the knowledge being imparted by the trainers.

This breath-taking scene, which was only a single glimpse among the countless colourful moments throughout that night, showed the lively beauty, intense erotics and complicated power flows in the dynamics between *Ts* and *Ps*. During the workshop, these local women were asked to learn various concepts representing sexual and gender diversity, but they still could hardly play with them "correctly" and "smoothly" even after so many exercises. However, ironically, in their everyday life, these women had already embodied the richness and nuances of sexual and gender differences, even without making the English letter queue ("LGBTIQQ") longer and longer.

This situation reminds me of the fate of the butch-femme relationship, which is described as "lesbian erotic dance" by JoAnn Loulan (1990), a gender- and sexual-dyadic form of female same-sex relationship in Euro-American societies that usually consists of a masculine party and a feminine party. Studies have analysed the practices of butches and femmes (e.g. Butler 1990, 1993; Halberstam 1998; Harris & Crocker 1997; Kennedy & Davis 2014; Nestle 1992; Newton 1984). The gender roles and bodily practices of "butches" and "femmes" had existed for a long time. For example, as early as the times of Radclyffe Hall in the 1920s in Britain, the subjective writing by a butch had reached a considerable range of readers and inspired social debates (Hall 2005, original work published 1928). In America, butches and femmes have surfaced from underground into (semi-)public spaces since the mid-Twentieth Century, and in the 1940s and 1950s butch-femme couples were

the core vitality of lesbian bar culture before the gay liberation movement that started from the late 1960s (Kennedy & Davis 2014). However, later, in the 1970s and early 1980s, butch-femme relationships and transsexual practices were harshly criticised by mainstream feminists as imitations of heterosexuality, which contained patriarchal gender inequality (Rubin 2010). Practitioners of lesbian feminism valued the affection, romance, solidarity, reciprocity, and eroticism between androgynous women in an egalitarian, non-violent relationship without influence from patriarchal heterosexuality (Halberstem 1998). In this sense, the butch-femme dyad, strongly based on sexual attractions and tensions in which it seemed that masculine butches carried out sexual power while feminine femmes were sexual objects, was simply regarded as "backward" (Harris & Crocker 1997; Levitt et al. 2003). Nevertheless, since the 1990s, new generations of lesbians who grew up in the 1980s or later started to re-appropriate the identities of "butch" and "femme", see butch-femme relationships as a rich resource for queer practices, and gave the two roles new meanings (*ibid.*).

Along the historical line reviewed above, the mechanisms of masculinity and femininity, as well as the erotics and power relations emerging between them, have been important axis of most arguments and debates. Here, two strands of conclusion have been given by the abovementioned authors, with which I agree. Firstly, the "female masculinity" embodied by butches is neither the same as male masculinity nor an imitation of male masculinity. Rather, the figurations of female masculinity in butches demonstrates the disconnection between masculinity and male bodies, debunks the essentialised and binarized "natural" gender categories and differences, de-centres the thinkable sexual desires and pleasures from heterosexuality, and contributes to broader discussions on intersected power dynamics among different genders, races, and classes, in a particular society (Butler 1990; Halberstam 1998). Secondly, the femininity embodied by femmes is different from the femininity in heteronormative aesthetics, which is constructed by and in return reinforcing patriarchal values. Rather, femmes in fact have been the desire motor and solace source in a butch-femme relationship, and thus have played a central role in the building of African American and European American working-class lesbian communities throughout the 1940s and 1950s (Kennedy & Davis 1993). Femme is a sustained gender identity, a model of "critical reshaped femininity and assertive sexuality" (Harris & Crocker 1997: 1), and even considered as the "queerest of the queer" (Davis 1992: 270).

In non-Western societies, gender-dyad identities and practices among women with same-sex desires have also been studied, such as the *tom-dee* in Thailand (Sinnott 2004), the *tomboi (cowok)-cewek* in Indonesia (Blackwood 2010; Wieringa 1999), the *TB-TBG* in Hong Kong (Tang 2011), the *T-Po* in Taiwan (Chao 2001, 2008), the *mati work* relationships

in Surinam (Wekker 2006), and other female same-sex relationships comparable to the butch-femme relationships in Latin America, Africa and other regions (Blackwood & Wieringa 1999; Morgan & Wieringa 2005; Wieringa 1999). In these studies, we can also find descriptions about how the localised Western feminist lesbianism and young queer-identified communities marginalise these gender-dyad relationships and downplay the revolutionary courage in such relationships (e.g. Chao 2000; Wieringa 1999).

Nevertheless, the *T-P* practices in mainland China and the existing studies on these have some specific traits, despite sharing some similarities with the findings in the abovementioned literature. Firstly, gender identities of "butch" and "femme" in Euro-American histories had already coined their names, formed their dress codes, surfaced from private spaces and made some role models known at least two decades prior to the emergence of different rounds of feminist debates over it. In contrast, in mainland China the import and popularisation of the terms "*T*" and "*P*" (mainly from Taiwan female same-sex erotic cultures) took place together with the introduction and discussions of Euro-American feminism, LGBT activism and queer theories in the 1990s. Thus, even though certain gender-dyadic forms of female same-sex practices without a popularised name had been existing in China for a long time, in the history of the specific terminology about *T-P* relationships in China, the dimension of time was largely condensed, with the processes of defining, adopting, criticising, rejecting and redefining *T* and *P* happening at the same time.

A second difference is that in contemporary China, various kinds of social movement, including feminist and LGBT activism, are still under strict political surveillance. Meanwhile, heteronormativity is still salient both in party-state discourses and in consumer discourses, even though at an individual and familial level more and more reflections are emerging on the existing figuration of heteronormativity in day-to-day practices and aspirations (see Chapter 3). In this context, "feminist (*nüquanzhuyi zhe*)" itself is a non-normative—if not taboo—political identity, which is no less stigmatised than a label of sexual deviance such as "homosexual". As a result, in today's China, it is hard to identify a strand of "mainstream" feminism that publicly unites and represents the ideas and values of middle-class elite women.

I do not mean that there is no tension between feminism and lesbianism in general in China. The Chinese middle-class, professional women-loving women, who have been informed by globalised news about the achievements of LGBT movements (such as the legalisation of same-sex marriage) in many parts of the world, and benefit from improved individual economic status that enables travelling, studying or even emigrating overseas, have gained more and more opportunities to (imagine to) identify with Euro-American middle-class and elite lesbian communities. However, because of the stigmatisation of the

collective "feminist" political identity in China, these women seldom openly associate themselves with the label "feminist", regardless of whether they more or less agree with some feminist thoughts or not. Moreover, although among the most visible feminist activists in mainland China there are non-heteronormative persons, issues about female same-sex sexuality are seldom specifically emphasised in these persons' public activities. Perhaps this is a strategy: when many urgent problems which exist for the "majority"—heterosexual people and their relationships—have not yet been alleviated (e.g. domestic violence inside heterosexual marriages and sexual harassment in public spheres), if female same-sex relationship issues, which are still beyond most people's understanding and imagination, ask for disproportionate attention, both the reputation of "feminists" and that of "homosexual women" will probably become more flawed in public discourses. So, in such a context, one can imagine that *T-P* relationships are being practised and discussed in the everyday lives of women-loving women in China, but are largely absent from the most heard voices of different groups of Chinese feminist activists, scholars and women elites.

According to the above comparisons, although I have reservations about whether "*T*" and "*P*" have become, or will become, sustained gender categories with a solid historical line and relatively stable configurations in the *lala* cultures in China, as "butch" and "femme" do in Euro-American lesbian cultures, I have decided to give *Ts* and *Ps* the centre stage in my study since I saw the wonderful performances given by the *T-P* lovers as described earlier. Half-rehearsed and half-improvised, the dynamics between that couple were like a special dance duet in which the dancers were simultaneously serious choreographers, adept performers, and playful rule-breakers who (intentionally) forgot the script or slipped when making a step. They challenged common understandings about "harmony", by redefining it in an embodied way. In this chapter, my analyses focus on *T-P* dynamics; yet, this is by no means an ignorance of the experiences of the women-loving women who fall—or choose to be—in between or beyond the *T-* and *P-*identifications. Instead, I believe that, compared with merely playing with the English letters such as "LGBTIQQ", looking into the abovementioned "dance duet", which in my study is a metaphor and a figuration of the *T-P* dynamics, is an important way—and maybe one of the best ways—to observe and imagine the rich possibilities of female same-sex gender, sex and affection in China.

In my study, I do not view *T* and *P* as pre-existing and stable genders with uniform definition and expression, which can easily confine both the people who feel like identifying with them and the people who do not. Instead I see them more as a whole set of creative, flexible but non-arbitrary vocabularies, behaviour codes and passionate aesthetics, embodied in women-loving women's desires and subjectivities. However, I am not saying that all the popular "knowledge" about *T* and *P* prevailing in Chinese *lala* communities is necessarily

self-reflexive and free of oppressions; in fact, in the rest of this chapter, cases from my fieldwork and my personal life will be analysed for understanding how some parts of such knowledge reinforce the stereotypical, biased and (hetero)normative "common sense" while some other parts of such knowledge are challenged and reshaped at the same time. I follow a thread woven by the notion of "pureness (*chun*)", which plays an important but also subtle role in the existing *T-P* cultures in China and entails debates over the knowledge about female masculinity, femininity and female same-sex practices. By examining how the notion "pureness/*chun*" is simultaneously being emphasised, distrusted and dismissed in various understandings and expressions of sexual orientations and gender identities, just like the rehearsed and improvised parts in a *T-P* "dance duet", we can observe how the dissonances, tensions, paradoxes, which seemingly undermine coherent understandings of "self" and "other", are in fact making female same-sex desires ever vital and fresh.

"My (Ex-)Girlfriend is Straight": "Pureness" as Superiority

I heard the paired terms of "*T*" and "*P*" for the first time from my first girlfriend, thirteen years ago. Unlike my girlfriend, who had known herself as "inborn lesbian" from an early age and self-identified as a "pure" *T*, I was totally inexperienced and about to learn to be a lesbian. At the very beginning of our dating, she threw me a website link which listed the typical features for distinguishing a *T* from a *P*, and told me: "Look, I am a *T*, and you are a *P*. Get it?" On the list of "what a *P* is (or should be) like", I saw phrases like "long hair", "high heels", "dresses and skirts", "pink as her favourite colour", "lipstick always in her handbag", "longing to be protected and coaxed by a *T*", "acting passively in bed as the 'receiver' rather than 'giver' when having sex", etc. Indeed, at that time, my hair was long, I occasionally wore dresses, I had some pink stuff and a pair of high heels, I once bought a lipstick (though I had never used it before I threw it away; neither did I have a lady's handbag). However, I had thought that taking care of each other and creating pleasure for each other was the basis of a loving relationship, which should not be simply reduced to a "giver-receiver" relationship[66]. After learning about this list, I felt myself trapped in a dilemma: on the one hand, I enjoyed being more or less qualified as a desirable *P*, at least on the surface, which must have been pleasing for my *T* girlfriend; on the other hand, because this qualified desirability seemed so

66 Similar lists were often stuck as must-read posts in many online *lala* forums. However, I failed to find the very lists my first girlfriend showed me thirteen years ago. The typical characteristics of a *P* enumerated in the main text are paraphrases according to my memory. Among the online discourses about *T* and *P* nowadays, however, there are more and more emphasising the ambiguity, fluidity and persistent complicacy of the boundary between *T* and *P*, which were still not quite common in 2006.

close to a stereotypical femininity (according to the dominant heteronormative aesthetics), I was often questioned by my girlfriend, and sometimes by myself, whether I was a "real" lesbian or not. My girlfriend was more suspicious about my interactions with men than on my interactions with women; any trace of amity I emitted towards my male classmates was simply understood by her as a signal of romantic or sexual attraction, which connoted that I was probably a temporary lesbian while a permanent straight woman, or, maybe even worse, a dishonest bisexual woman. Even some female classmates of ours, who self-identified as heterosexual and admitted that they knew little about homosexuality, warned my girlfriend that I was probably playing with her serious feelings and would finally marry a man and break her heart.

I was frustrated by these hostile assumptions attached to the more feminine party in a female same-sex couple, and I found "*P*" no longer a subjective self-identification practised by some women themselves but an imposed stigma labelling some women as "fake" and "treacherous" homosexuals. To protest, I started to reject the identity "*P*". I cut my hair short, threw away my pink stuff, and all through the year I refused to wear dresses and skirts. I emphasised my independence and gentility. Following what most of the *T* girls around me did, I tried on tomboyish clothes and learned the typical daily behaviours of a gentle and/or cool *T*, such as opening doors for other girls, smoking with an elegant but masculine posture, or paying bills for female friends. Furthermore, I tried my best to steer clear of my male acquaintances, but meanwhile behaved with adequate polite when I had to interact with them, because I needed to find an appropriate balance between "a woman not interested in men" and "a normal and decent human being" in order to declare silently to my girlfriend and to all the others who knew our relationship: "I am a lesbian, though you may not believe it." Living like this while at the same time carefully keeping myself closeted in a wider environment, I felt my life exhausting and vain.

Now thirteen years have passed, and for more than five years I have not seen or talked to my first girlfriend, so I do not know whether her understanding of *Ps* and femininity remains the same or not. But I have collected narratives from the informants who self-identified as *T* or "inclined *T*[67]" about their understandings of their feminine girlfriends and ex-girlfriends. Interestingly, in many *Ts*'s narratives, they tended to call their feminine (ex-)girlfriends as "straight women" rather than "*Ps*". For example:

67 In everyday use, the term *T* can be used not only as a noun but also as an adjective. So, even in the accounts given by those women who do not strictly or consistently identify themselves as "*T*", they just tended to describe themselves as "inclined *T* (*pian T*)" in certain circumstances.

> "How did I find out I was homosexual? A girl and I got together (*zaiyiqi*) when we were sophomore classmates. From then on, I realised it [my homosexual orientation]. But I knew she was straight (*zhiren*). … Later, I dated with several other girls. With each of them, I slept, kissed and hugged and [had sex] … But they were all straight as well."

The quotation above is from the interview with my informant *Brook*, who was born in the late 1980s in north-eastern China and just started living and working in Shanghai when the interview was done. Yet, regardless of the specificity of her personal background, *Brook*'s account of having "straight" (ex-)girlfriends resembled those provided by many other *T* or *T*-ish informants. Responding to them in the conversations, I usually asked a further question: "Since this girl did fall in love with you, how can you say that she is straight?" However, insisting on their earlier opinion without second thoughts, these informants provided their own definitions of a "straight" woman. For example, *Deer* (an informant in her late-twenties, whom I met first in Kunming and later in Shanghai, since she flew regularly between the city where her girlfriend lived and the city where she worked), defined several women she had dated as "straight", because:

> "I'm the only woman among the people they have ever dated. Before me, they dated men, and after me, they dated men again."

Another informant, *Twelve*, who was born and raised in Shanghai and in her mid-twenties, echoed *Deer*'s perspective:

> "…I'm always popular among straight [women]. I've never dated any *P*[68]. Even those [of my girlfriends] who declared they were *P* were actually very, very straight before [we started dating]. One day they met me and became bent (*wan*)[69] suddenly. Later, after we separated, they straightened back again."

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68 I have already given the commonly shared definition of *P* in the main text of the previous section. However, the definition of *P* varies among the informants. For example, here, for *Twelve*, obviously *P* only refers to the feminine woman who consistently dates women and has never dated a man.

69 During recent years, the phrase of "being bent" (*wan*) has been popularly used within and even outside LGBTQ communities in China, referring to the situation of being attracted to someone of the same sex, as an opposite to the phrase of "being straight" (*zhi*).

Voices similar to those in the above quotations have constituted a very typical strand of narrative in *lala* cultures. Back in 2011, when I was a post-graduate student in Beijing, I saw a stage play entitled "*If Only* (*Ruguo de shi*)[70]", based on Bejing's *lala* communities and labelled in advertising as a "*lala* play (*lala huaju*)" or "*les* play (*les huaju*)". This play was staged in a Beijing independent theatre, and in it a love triangle unfolds between two women and a man. A young woman named *Summer* (*Xiaoxia*) unexpectedly falls in love with another young woman named *Winter* (*Dongdong*), but eventually decides to marry a man under the pressure from her family and peers. In the publicity conference (*xinwen fabuhui*) for this play, held in Beijing LGBT Centre (*Beijing Tongzhi Zhongxin*) prior to the play being staged, the creative team stressed that "*If Only*" was inspired by, and could represent, *lalas*'s real lives in today's China. Meanwhile, the creative team disclosed some of the key plots of the play. In their narratives, *Summer* was described as "who was once straight (*cengjing shi zhiren*)", *Winter* as "an ideal *T* (*T zhong de dianfan*)", and the man *Summer* eventually marries as "a straight man who knows about the affair between *Summer* and *Winter*"[71]. Later, in the theatre, sitting among a *lala* audience, I was impressed by the last act of the play "*If Only*". In this act, when entering the wedding site, *Winter*, who is the "bridesmaid (*banniang*)" but wears a man's suit and a mask, takes the hands of the bride *Summer*, spinning and dancing, until the "bridesmaid" is replaced by the groom who is in an identical mask and suit. When *Summer* finds out that the person dancing with her is no longer *Winter* but the groom, she cries and tries to call *Winter* back, only to find that *Winter* has long since gone. In the end, *Summer* takes the groom's arm and steps into the wedding hall with mixed emotions, only hearing *Winter* singing a love song for her again and again in her memory/imagination.

In *lala* communities, the women (ostensibly) conforming to normative femininity, especially the ones with a heterosexual romantic history, are easily categorised as simply "straight". This process of categorisation is usually intertwined with *Ts*' narratives about their love stories, since *Ts* are the most likely subgroups among women-loving women who are exclusively and consistently attracted to women. These narratives often give a superiority to "pure" *lalas*, which implies a definition of "pureness" that only recognises an exclusive and stable situation. In other words, only when a woman consistently chooses love and sex

70 I personally translate "*Ruguo de shi*" into "*If Only*", as I cannot find an official English title of this play. Actually, "*Ruguo de shi*" is the title of a Chinese pop song released in 2005, written by a Malaysian woman *Lanyin Wang*, and performed by two Taiwanese female singers—Christine Fan (*Fan Weiqi*) and Angela Chang (*Zhang Shaohan*). It is usually believed that this is a song depicting female same-sex intimacy and love.

71 The news was released online (http://www.danlan.org/disparticle_33743.htm, accessed on December 1, 2017).

partners of the same sex without any ambiguity or exception can she be a qualified as a "pure" *lala*, i.e. a "real" *lala*. However, here, the mechanism of "pureness" does not work as equally in defining somebody as heterosexual as it works in defining somebody as homosexual. Obviously, "the only" same-sex lover in a woman's lifetime can hardly be interpreted as the one-vote veto to her "straightness" in the eyes of her *T* girlfriends. Following this logic, the category "bisexual (*shuangxinglian*)" is not "genuine". Since bisexuality implies the fluidity of desires and the possibility of consecutive or co-existing different orientations of sexual attraction, and embraces such a possibility of crossing boundaries (Diamond 2008), it goes against the essence of the cultural notion of "purity", which usually excludes any practice of transgressions as something dangerous (see Douglas 1966). When many *Ts* appreciate the notion of "permanent lesbianism", the women who accept or practise the possibility of being attracted both to women and to men are easily viewed as deceitful and immoral. For example, my informant *Twelve* reported:

> "… in Shanghai, among the [*les*] people around me, … the concept of bisexuality is very much repelled. They [the ones who repel bisexuals] believe that the 'lesbian part' in a bisexual woman is fake."

Searching for alternative discourses, I explored the experiences of those informants who appeared more "feminine". Although these informants were involved in same-sex relationships when I carried out my fieldwork, many of them had engaged in heterosexual relationship(s) before or showed openness to future heterosexual relationship possibilities. In contrast to their *T* counterparts, these women emphasised and appreciated the trueness of the "lesbian part" in themselves. Regardless of their actual or potential liaisons with men, most of them tended not to identify themselves as "straight". For these women, the determinant of being a non-straight woman was their unique feelings towards women—especially tomboyish ones—and the unique characteristics of female same-sex relationships, which they failed to or did not expect to find in a heterosexual relationship. This to some extent echoes with Engebretsen's finding in her book *Queer Women in Urban China*. Her feminine *lala* informants reported that they had never thought themselves any different from other girls and women until they fell in love with a genderly unconventional woman (Engebretsen 2014: 34). In other words, the same-sex lover(s) in these women's lives become(s) "the only" not in a quantitative sense but in a qualitative sense.

When I asked *Desert*, who was in her forties and had finished a ten-year heterosexual marriage, how she defined her own sexual orientation, she claimed without hesitation:

> "Homosexual. One hundred percent homosexual."

Then *Desert* admitted that she preferred having sex with women to having sex with men.

Similarly, *Petal* was also in her forties and had divorced a man after their ten-year marriage. In the interview, although *Petal* used the word "straight" to describe her situation in the past, she emphasised more on the straightness of the relationship—a heterosexual marriage and a normative nuclear family—than on the nature of herself/her "self" as a subject of desire and love. Although some of her thoughts about men and women were tinged with gender binarism and essentialism, which can be detected from her account quoted below, *Petal* was honest about her feelings about her bodily intimacy with men and women respectively, which fuelled her courage to pursue desirable same-sex relationships: "After experiencing a relationship with a woman, it is impossible for me to retreat back to heterosexual relationships again. … Women are more clean, easy, soft, considerate [than men]. Women are driven by emotions, while men by profits."

Scarlet, who was in her early twenties and a college student in Kunming, had once tried dating a boy for half a year and then had a *T* girlfriend for nearly two years. She was single when I interviewed her. Although she repeated that she was hardly attracted to any girls other than this *T* ex-girlfriend, and did not refuse another heterosexual relationship in the future, she still tended to link herself to "homosexual" rather than "heterosexual":

> "I think I'm homo[sexual] (*tong[xinglian]*). … When I see a handsome *T* (*shuai T*) in the street, I cannot help but exclaim: 'Wow, so gorgeous!' But if there is a handsome man, I won't be like this, I'll give no more than an ordinary glance of a passer-by."

For these women who might be simply labelled as "straight" by their *T* counterparts, it was the "uniqueness" of female same-sex attraction (no matter whether the "uniqueness" was reserved in the same-sex sexual pleasure with a woman or in the characteristics, appearance and demeanour of a woman), rather than the consistency and exclusivity of the sex of the lovers they choose, that weighed the most in defining their non-heterosexual orientation. In other words, unlike the logic that tends to identify a woman as "straight" because her same-sex lover is "the only" female lover in her lifetime, for these women themselves, "the only" same-sex lover per se counts as unimpeachable evidence and an affirmative demonstration for their non-straightness.

Looking back on the *lala* play "*If Only*", I recall a key line that the protagonist *Summer* says to her female lover *Winter*: "I am not your only beloved woman, but you are my only beloved woman." Or rather, according to the context in "*If Only*", *Winter* is not only "the

only beloved woman" but also "the only beloved person" in *Summer*'s life, since *Summer* precisely expresses in the play that she is "not in love with" her groom. Reflecting on this play now, I cannot help but want to ask the creative team some questions. Why did they claim that *Summer* was straight, when this fictional character created by them had already made such a statement? Why did the screenplay writer not give *Summer* a chance to express aloud on the stage and to the audience how she defined herself? Why did *Winter* quit or give up the love between herself and *Summer* without hearing *Summer*'s cry and struggling? Asking these questions, I am not only reflecting on a stage play script but also reflecting on a popular logic in *lala* communities about who to include and exclude, since the creative team had claimed that "*If Only*" was an epitome of *lalas*' real life experiences in contemporary China.

Furthermore, another important question I want to ask is: "Is it only the sexual orientation (*xing qingxiang*) that determines a same-sex attracted woman to be a 'permanent/pure' or 'temporary/fake' lesbian?" In fact, under marriage pressure from the original family and facing the unfriendly social discourses imposed upon unmarried women (see Chapter 3), Chinese women in their twenties and thirties, whether heterosexual or not, are urged to "do the right things at the right age", namely entering a heterosexual marriage. Among Chinese women there are even self-identified *Ts* voluntarily choosing to "transform to straight" in order to fit into the society's and family's expectation of what a woman should be like according to heteronormative standards. *Twelve*, the *T* informant who said that bisexual women were repelled in Shanghai *les* communities, also talked about her *T* friends who "transformed to straight":

> "Recently, especially this year, many *T* friends around me got married, and some others transformed to straight (*zhuanzhi le*) as well. Well, a young *T*, … I asked her: 'why did you transform to straight?' She answered: 'Now I'm working in a hospital'—because she was trained as a nurse—'if I act like that [tomboyish], I'm afraid that some aged patients will mind it. Besides, now I'm at the proper age [to get married]. For having the good future in my career, for the sake of my parents and myself, I should marry [a man] anyway. I'm thinking about to find a boyfriend."

Shall we call this *T* in *Twelve*'s narrative a "fake" lesbian, too, because she is thinking about dating a man and no longer a "pure" homosexual? Will this *T* be described as one's "straight (ex-)girlfriend"? Or does she deserve the (derogatory) label "bisexual"? I am asking these questions not because I am seeking to condemn *Ts* and *Ps* evenly when they fail to keep a "pureness" of sexual orientation. Instead, what I want to stress is that, in a society

where non-heterosexual desires and relationships are still viewed as abnormal and inferior, the identification of one's sexual orientation is neither an objective categorisation nor a subjective free choice, but a mixed experience of personalised wills and sociocultural contexts. In my fieldwork, most of my informants, including those who appeared feminine and had a heterosexual romantic history, avoided identifying themselves as "bisexual", probably because they wanted to stay away from the most stigmatised kind of sexual orientation inside and outside *lala* communities.

In this section, I have focused on certain controversies among women-loving women around who is a "real" lesbian or not. Many self-identified *Ts* believe that, compared with their feminine lovers, they are less likely to be attracted to men and enter a heterosexual relationship. *Ts* tend to distinguish the "pureness" of their own same-sex orientation from the "straightness" of their (ex-)girlfriends, to a certain extent belittling how uniquely these feminine women experience, feel and give meanings to their same-sex love and sexual relationships, no matter whether heterosexual relationships have also occurred in their own lives or not. Femininity on the one hand constitutes the salient characteristics of *Ps* and fuels the passionate erotics in *T-P* relationships, but on the other hand undermines the gender category "*P*" and causes tensions for *T-P* couples, because according to the hegemonic heteronormative figuration of femininity—usually a stereotypical, oversimplified and flattened depiction of women—*Ps*, bisexual women, heterosexual women, and other women who self-identify diversely, can all be interpreted to be some kind of so-called "straight" women.

I do not mean to criticise *Ts* as the "separatists" among women-loving women; on the contrary, it is usually *Ts* who persistently refuse to conform to sexual and gender normalcy and thus bear the main risk of being separated from their same-sex lovers, being misunderstood by their families and friends, and being marginalised by heteronormative values and aesthetics. Bittersweet life stories were narrated by the *T* informants in my fieldwork, many of whom long for a genuine, brave and life-long relationship with their beloved woman, only to find it is really difficult for this to come true. Quite a few informants as well as some of my *lala* friends, especially the *T*-identified ones, have "consulted" with me about similar questions: "Do you think same-sex relationships have a bright future in China? If yes, why don't I see any hope? Where can I find a long-term partner, who won't marry a man eventually, who can share all the difficulties and happiness with me for the rest of my life?" They suppose a researcher like me, who has met many women-loving women from different places within and outside China, must be able to draw some conclusions about the future of Chinese *lalas*. Unable to give any certain or precise answer, I often propose that we can recognise the uniqueness that our same-sex

experiences possess, rather than cling to the pursuit of a narrow understanding of the "pureness" of one's sexual orientation and a "permanency" defined by a linear consistency and an objectivity on the surface.

Impossible "Pure *P*" and Legendary "Iron *T*": "Pureness" as Stigma

"Pureness" also carries different meanings in the debates about "what kinds of *Ts* and *Ps* are more, or less, desirable". In this section, I analyse the currently popular attitudes among Chinese urban same-sex attracted women towards "pure *P*" and "iron *T*", two categories that can count as "extreme" forms of "pure" *lalas/les*(bians), if we define "pureness" as consistency and exclusiveness, as discussed in the previous section. Through these analyses, I track the paradoxes—or rather, the two sides of the same coin—that take place in these women's understandings about "pureness". I also observe how, in different contexts, women-loving women make the boundaries between concepts flexible and adeptly slide from one gender identity to another, in order to gain appreciation and avoid being stigmatised.

First, let us have a look at the myth of "*chun P*" (pure *P*). According to the logic of the definition of "pure" I have described in the previous section, a "pure *P*" refers to a feminine woman who self-identifies as exclusively homosexual and claims to be only attracted to *Ts*. Compared to the reputation of "bisexual" women in many *lala* communities, who are often regarded as "fake" lesbians and in fact heterosexual women, women self-identified as "pure *P*" are often viewed as an impossible and unthinkable category of women. My informant *Gourmet*, a self-identified *T* in her mid-twenties who was born and grew up in north-eastern China, then attended college and worked in Kunming when my fieldwork was carried out, commented:

> "This is how I understand the categories of *T, P,* … I think *Ts* are 'inborn' (*tiansheng de*) homosexual [women] and innately love 'the women who are very feminine (*hen nüren de nüren*)'. *Ps*, they are inborn heterosexual [women] by nature but are involved in contextualised same-sex relationships, in which they play the feminine role. … I think myself tend to be *T*. In fact, I don't believe the existence of '*Ps*', I especially don't believe the existence of 'pure *Ps* (*chun Ps*)' at all. Every time when somebody tells me she's a "*chun P*", I feel it super ridiculous."

Facing *Gourmet*, I dared not tell her that I myself felt most belonging to the category of "*P*". I was predominantly attracted to *T-ish* lesbians and had never experienced any heterosexual romance, which had helped me escape the stigma attached to "bisexuals" and diminished the percentage of "straightness" in me. However, hearing *Gourmet*'s account, I was surprised

that, even though I had "fortunately" met the requirements of a "pure" same-sex orientation, this pureness would not necessarily make me welcome.

What *Gourmet* said was tinged with the Western medical discourses about homosexuality developed around the turn of the 20th Century (Jiang 2016; Sang 2003), such as those of Havelock Ellis (1915)[72], which had been introduced into China in the first half of the 20th Century (e.g. Zhou 1924; Pan 1999[73]). These discourses cast a rigid binary of nature/nurture upon homosexuality and viewed same-sex relationships as contextualised active/passive role playing. Although most of my *lala* informants and friends might not completely agree with *Gourmet*'s words, the existence of "pure *Ps*" is indeed doubted by quite a few *lalas*, including many *P*-identified women themselves. What impressed me very much was a conversation with a *T-P* couple, who were two or three years younger than me and had been together for half a year. At that moment, my then girlfriend and I were in a gay and lesbian bar in Kunming around 2010. My girlfriend told the younger *T-P* couple proudly that we had been together for several years. The couple showed their admiration, and the *T* girl voiced her doubt about whether their own relationship could last long, because her girlfriend "had dated men". Then, the *P* girl defended herself, shouting back:

> "Which *P* never ever dates a man?"

For a moment, the rest of us fell into silence. The *T* girl could not give a counter-example she knew about; I dared not to object, to avoid making the *P* girl more upset; my *T* girlfriend showed no objection, and maybe she also believed that I would date a man one day. Soon, the *P* girl appeared happy again and we moved to another topic.

In this scenario, the *P* girl more or less revised the boundaries between *Ps*, bisexual women and heterosexual women. She skilfully distinguished herself from straight women, on the one hand, while on the other hand slid between the category of bisexual women and the category of *Ps* by totally dismissing the boundary between the two and equating

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72 According to Sang's review, Havelock Ellis "attributes women's same-sex desire to 'sexual inversion,' or the inversion of gender. … Operating with a rigid, conservative definition of sexual difference, prescribing what either femininity or masculinity is, this theory of sexual inversion conflates erotic object choice with gender identity. Being phallocentric, Ellis regards all desire for women as masculine (Sang 2003: 24)."

73 Zhou and Pan were just two of the Chinese intellectuals and elites who initiated, during this period, a series of active and selective introductions of Western "advanced" ideas in sexology, psychology and eugenics, in order to explore a way of modernity for China (Sang 2003; Huang 2013).

one with the other. In addition, she strategically chose "*P*", rather than "bisexual", for identifying herself aloud, avoiding linking herself to the notorious bisexuals. Then, by emphasising that all *Ps* would probably date men, she defended the pureness in herself as an explicitly self-identified *P*—the "*P*-ness"—and tried to invite me to show common ground with her. Nevertheless, I, who in fact felt I was losing common ground with any of the three persons sitting around me, chose to secretly slide from the impossible "pure *P*" to the bisexual-like "*P*" in that *P* girl's dictionary, in order to appear to be a "possible" and "normal" *P* in front of my peers. But then again, that moment also helped me realise my own inner emphasis on the adjective "pure" adhering to "*P*" and on the distinction between *Ps* and bisexual women; I started to question myself whether this emphasis was my own version of superior "pureness/*P*-ness" that excludes and devalues others.

After this encounter, I personally turned to another gender category more and more popularised in the online and offline *lala/les* communities in China—"*H*". *H*, also known as "*bufen*", literally meaning "no division" or "do not divide", refers to women with same-sex desires who somehow cannot, or refuse to, completely fit into the category *T* or *P* (Huang 2008; Kam 2013). On some occasions "*bufen*" is used to describe those genderly androgynous *lala* women, and in some other occasions "*bufen*" is used as an anti-label label. As a feminine *lala* tired of being either doubted by or internalised with the discourses of different versions of "pureness", I appropriated the identity "*H*" for learning to value and demonstrate the "impureness" in me. But before long, I was confused again; when I read about the terminology in Hong Kong lesbian communities, I found that the category referring to those genderly androgynous and sexually versatile lesbian women—the counterparts of *Hs* in mainland China—has the name "*pure*" (e.g. Tang 2011). In other words, in Hong Kong, regardless of any contextualised complication, the word "pure" implies that the counterparts of *Hs* are the "purest" lesbians[74], rather than *TBs* (short for "tomboys", the counterparts of *Ts*) or *TBGs* (short for "tomboy's girls", the counterparts of *Ps*). Thus, another question emerged: "Since the *tongzhi* cultures in Hong Kong and in mainland China usually share many similarities, how come the tomboys who have a reputation of exclusively loving women have not got the title '*pure*'?

Not knowing much about Hong Kong lesbian cultures, I put aside the above question for future exploration; however, the emergence of this question urges me to look into

74 According to Hong Kong scholar Dennis T. Tang, among Hong Kong lesbians, "[a] *TBG* (tomboy's girl) refers to a girl or woman who is usually attracted to a masculine woman, but also includes androgynous woman. A *TB*, or tomboy, refers to a masculine or androgynous woman. A '*pure*' describes a gender identity in between a *TBG* and a *TB* with multiple erotic possibilities not restricted to *TB* and *TBG* coupled relationships (2011: 3)." First-hand narratives about TB, TBG and *pure* lesbians in Hong Kong can also be found in Chou Wah-Shan's *Tongzhi* (Chou 2000: 225).

the "*tie Ts*" (iron *Ts*) in mainland China, the group which has been supposed to be the "purest" *lalas/les* in my eyes. *Tie T* (iron *T*), or sometimes "*chun-T*" (pure *T*), is a particular category of tomboy among Chinese women-loving women, which is similar to (but by no means the same as) the "stone butch" in American lesbian culture (e.g. Engebretsen 2009; Huang 2008). One of the most determinant characteristics of an iron *T* or a stone butch is "untouchability". In the book *Female Masculinity* (1998), Judith Halberstam described the untouchability of a stone butch as follows:

> "Historically, the term 'stone butch' has been used for a butch lesbian who would make love to her femme partner but would not allow herself to be 'touched'. I put 'touched' in quotation marks because there are of course many ways of being touched beyond direct genital manipulation, and in general the untouchability of the stone butch refers to a lack of *unmediated* genital contact. Although some stones chose (and choose) not to orgasm with a partner, others have and do receive pleasure from their partners through a variety of sex practices such as tribadism (also known as 'friction' or 'dyking') or dildo wearing. Historically speaking, however, 'stone' referred to those butches who were unmistakably masculine in appearance and felt compromised by being made love to as women. (Halberstam 1998: 124)"

Although we should not fully apply Halberstam's description above to all counterparts of "stone butches" from different areas of the world and from different periods in history, the similarity in terms of the untouchability between a Chinese "iron *T*" and an American "stone butch" is obvious. When many of my informants and *lala* friends mentioned "iron *T*" to me, they seldom defined this term before further discussions, as if this was common knowledge; neither did I have any difficulty in understanding and communicating in such occasions. Contextually, when we talked about "iron *Ts*" we usually referred to those *T*-identified women-loving women in masculine appearance, demeanour and clothes, who insistently did not allow their feminine partners to sexually touch their bodies, especially the commonly sexualised body parts such as the breasts and genital area. Among us, a joking but vivid saying about iron *Ts*' sexual experience was the "spiritual orgasm" (*jingshen gaochao*), which meant that an iron *T*'s sexual pleasure was spiritually felt through satisfying her partner instead of through receiving physical stimulations done to her own body.

Based on my fieldwork, I have found that the category of iron *T* is more like a "legend" rather than an actual existence within reach. For one thing, in front of me, a *lala* researcher with a feminine appearance, most *T*-ish informants frankly admitted and expressed their *T*-identification but seldom related themselves to "those iron *Ts*" explicitly. Moreover, in some cases this "iron-ness" (once) proudly emphasised and self-proclaimed among *T* circles

turned out to be more like a sense of peer pressure under specific aesthetic values, rather than a rigid rule maintained in these *Ts*' real lives. *Twelve*, the Shanghainese *T* informant I mentioned earlier, narrated her experience from her college life to the first couple of years after her graduation, which in my eyes implied the "legend" I described above.

> "[When I was younger,] most *Ts* around me acted like they couldn't wait for holding a cardboard with the words on it: 'I'm an iron *T*!' You know what 'iron *T*' means, right? [It refers to] those who never ever let their partner do [the sex behaviour to] them. At that time, I found there were so few *T* fellows who admitted that they were not that iron. If somebody asked me: 'Are you an iron *T*?' I also nodded affirmatively. Now, looking back, I find those years very ridiculous. … After I grew up, I found out that—because I was curious about this issue so I had done research among my *T* friends, and they answered me—in fact few of them counted as an iron *T* [if iron *T* is defined by the 'untouchability'] while they were proclaiming that they were. So, it was the environment [of *lala* communities] that made us have to follow the trends (*genfeng*). … A very mannish *T* (*hen man*[75] *de T*) once said to me: 'I also have physical [sexual] needs (*shengli xuqiu*). What can I do [to satisfy my own sexual needs if I don't allow my partner touch me]?' I myself also feel it normal [to be touched]. During recent years, [*les*] people have become 'enlightened (*kaihua*)', and nobody says 'I'm an iron *T*' any more. I love you is I love you, whether you have long hair or short hair, whether you're *T* or *P*. If you're tired today, you just lie down and let me 'conquer (*gong*)[76]' you. If another day I have [sexual needs], I seduce you and you come to 'conquer (*gong*)' me. Like this, [*les* women today] no longer have to divide themselves [into categories], people's thoughts gradually manage to follow [the new times]. Ten years ago, we couldn't find any information about foreign lesbians [in Western countries]. But now we can find much, and we find that many foreign lesbians [in Western countries] don't divide themselves into *Ts* and *Ps*. …"

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75 Here, *Twelve* used the English word "man".

76 *Gong*, literally meaning "to conquer" or "to occupy", is usually used along with another term *shou*, literally meaning "to receive". *Gong* and *shou* derive from Japanese BL (boys love) culture, which depicts male same-sex love and desire in literary and manga works. *Gong* and *shou* respectively refer to the active party and the passive party in a male same-sex relationship, similar to "top" and "bottom" in English. However, recently the term *gong* is increasingly appropriated among female same-sex relationships and even among heterosexual relationships, in order to describe sexual behaviours in a relative sex-positive attitude. At the same time, *gong* and *shou* are increasingly becoming something like gender and sexual identities rather than merely sexual behaviours, although here in the excerpt from *Twelve*'s narrative, *gong* only refers to the behaviour of taking initiative in the performance of sex.

In *Twelve*'s narrative, the aesthetic appreciation of iron *Ts* was an outdated phenomenon, which went against the "progressive", globalised (or rather Western) trend of being a lesbian without being exclusively and consistently labelled as one gender category. From *Twelve*'s perspective, it was vain to identify herself as an iron *T*, because none of her *T* fellows—including herself—had strictly maintained the "untouchability" of how an "iron *T*" is defined; and discarding the legend of "iron *T*" is a step forward and a kind of "enlightenment" for many Chinese women-loving women. During the whole interview, *Twelve*, like other informants younger than me, emphasised several times the "generation" differences among Chinese *lalas*, in which discourse "generation" was not measured by biological parent-child relations but divided by only three- or five-year periods[77]. Following this logic, I felt myself excluded by these informants, consciously or unconsciously, from "the most progressive generation" of *lalas*, and I was assumed by them as more or less "old(-fashioned)", even though I was only twenty-seven years old at that time. In the narratives of the informants who denied any association between their own lives and the category of "iron *T*", "the legendary iron *Ts*" (*chuanshuo zhong de tie T*) represented an extreme figuration of outdated, undesirable and unhealthy "*T*-ness" that is incompatible with the latest aesthetic standpoint a new generation should hold. As a result, in my fieldwork I barely met a self-identified iron *T*, and the category "iron *Ts*" has also become derogated as "others".

The importation of the concept "transgender" also plays an important role that renders certain *Ts* with "iron-ness" not qualified to be a homosexual woman. In China, for a long time, there had been no clear-cut boundary between tomboyish female homosexuals and female-to-male transgender people, and no popularised category exclusively for female-to-male transgender people to identify themselves (Huang 2008). However, as the concept "transgender" travelled to China as part of the "LGBT" compound over the last two decades, the distinction between female homosexual (*nü tongxinglian*) and female-to-male transgender, as well as the identity of "transgender" (*kua xingbie*), have been more and more emphasised. For example, I often hear *lalas* talking about the American film *Boys Don't*

77 Among young people in China there is a common saying that three years of age difference may cause a small "generational gap (*daigou*)", and five years of age difference may cause a large "generational gap", i.e. "*sannian yi xiao (dai)gou, wunian yi da (dai)gou*".

Cry[78], which is based on a true story of Brandon Teena/Teena Brandon: "It's not a *lala* film (*la-pian*), it's a film about female-to-male transgenderism." As a result, *Boys Don't Cry* may not be qualified as a suitable film for screening in a local *lala* event. In the conversations with various people, I often hear harsh comments on the "iron-ish *Ts*": "If a woman loves such a mannish *T*, is it different from directly dating a man?" Such a question ignores the subtle boundary between iron(-ish) *Ts* and female-to-male transgender persons, as well as that between female-to-male transgender persons and so-called biological men, though sometimes this boundary is indeed subtle and flexible to some extent. Meanwhile, such a question, contradictorily, points out the "sameness" between a man and a female-to-male transgender on the surface but in fact implies a negative, essentialised difference between the two. Thus, such a question denies the possibility that a woman can be attracted more to an iron *T*, or to a female-to-male transgender person, than to a "born" man.

In this section and the previous one, I have analysed how the notion "pureness (*chun*)" is differently interpreted among women-loving women in *T-P* relationships, to either draw boundaries or blur boundaries between different sexual orientations, in order to make certain people superior and others marginalised. In some cases, "pureness", as an ideal situation of women-loving-women's subjectivity and female same-sex relationships, stresses the consistency and exclusivity of one's choices of female romantic/sexual partners, but in other cases "pureness" stresses the capability of being flexible, inclusive, versatile and androgynous in sexual practices and gender expressions. However, because in common sense and popular knowledge "masculinity" is necessarily associated with biological men, and "femininity" necessarily associated with women, who are usually presumed to be heterosexual, some particular sexual orientations and gender identities—such as bisexual, iron *T*, female-to-male transgender, and *P* (especially pure *P*)—are understood to be either a lie or a joke. As a result, the women who face the risk of being stigmatised by their *lala/les* fellows have tried to find their own ways to defend their legitimacy as genuine and desirable women-loving woman.

78 *Boys Don't Cry* is an American biographical film released in 1999, directed by Kimberly Pierce and written by Kimberly Pierce and Andy Bienen. This film is based on the real-life story of Brandon Teena (born Teena Renae Brandon, December 12, 1972, killed December 31, 1993), an American trans man "who adopts a male identity and attempts to find himself and love in Nebraska but falls victim to a brutal hate crime perpetrated by two male acquaintances" (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boys_Don%27t_Cry_%28film%29, accessed on October 6, 2018).

Emerging "Masculine *Ps*" and "Feminine *Ts*": The Revolutions and Limitations of "Impure" Women

In recent years reflections on masculinity and femininity have been creatively taking place inside Chinese *lala* or *les* communities, despite the popular constructions of sexual orientation and gender identities I have discussed in the previous sections. In this section, I pay attention to how an increasing number of women-loving women disconnect *T* from masculinity, disconnect *P* from femininity, and reconnect *T* with femininity and *P* with masculinity. I argue that these discourses and practices have opened up new possibilities in *T-P* relationships, although they still do not completely shake off the patriarchal thinking that values masculinity over femininity.

In my fieldwork, I learned an important lesson from my informant *Glory* about *T*- and *P*-identification. I met *Glory* for the first time at a metro station in Shanghai, and before that moment she had not provided me with much detailed information about herself. At first glance, *Glory* appeared obviously feminine to me, because of her long hair, light but delicate make-up, women's clothes and high heeled shoes. I could not conceal my excitement, because before her I had already interviewed quite a few tomboys but only a couple of self-identified *Ps*. I commented aloud: "Good! Finally, a *P*!" While *Glory* stared back and responded: "Oh, really? But I'm afraid I'm a *T*." I stammered "sorry" and blushed for my arbitrary judgement based on appearances. Later, in the interview with *Glory*, she described herself and her girlfriends as follows:

> "The girls I am fond of are usually very feminine. They all have long hair, and soft temper. But here lies a contradiction: I cannot get along with them well. They need someone to please them; while I'm tough, and yet a feminine way of toughness, which means that I do not have much patience [to please those girls]. … So, my last girlfriend was a *T*. We were kind of *TT*-Love (*TT lian*[79]). It was from then that I started to grow my hair long. Talking about her, she has a very tender heart, you can never tell that it's a *T*'s heart. But her appearance is super 'man'[80], …"

79 *TT*-Love (*TT lian*), as it literally implies, refers to the love and/or sexual relationship between two *T* women. Another term is "*PP*-Love (*PP lian*)", referring to the love and/or sexual relationship between two *P* women. As far as I have heard in my fieldwork and seen online, although many *lalas* claim that they do not understand how *TT*-Love and *PP*-Love work out, there are indeed *lala* couples who identify their relationships as *TT*-Love or *PP*-Love.

80 Here, *Glory* used the English word "man".

Various contradictions exist in above excerpt, but I do not see these contradictions as a personal failure of *Glory*'s. Instead, I see them as evidence which betrays the inconsistency between her ideal imaginations, stereotypical understandings, and real expressions, of "*T*-ness" and "*P*-ness". *Glory*'s "failure" to give out a coherent depiction of masculinity and femininity, and her "failure" to take a firm stand on the side of masculinity or femininity, proves that the configurations of "masculinity" and "femininity" are always under revision without an original or ultimate definition (Butler 1990). I am reminded that I once rejected self-identification as a "*P*" and changed my feminine appearance, in order to protest against the stigmatised stereotype of *P* (see the first section of this chapter). When I reflect on this action retrospectively, I find that, though I "successfully" made myself detached from being misunderstood and devalued, I in fact helped to essentialise the link between *P* and femininity. Furthermore, the very expressions of femininity I rejected then were just the most stereotypical and the least creative forms of femininity.

Usually, Euro-American scholars who study female same-sex relationships tend to assume female masculinity as a typical characteristic of "butches" (e.g. Halberstam 1998), while "femmes", as the term "femme" indicates, are discussed under the rubric of "femininity" (e.g. Nestle 1992). Although, for different women, the purposes and meanings of being feminine are not necessarily the same, the very form of femininity that has been emphasised as the core feature of women's portraits and demeanours is quite familiar to ordinary people living in heteronormative societies. In the introductory chapter of the book *The Persistent Desire*, Joan Nestle enumerates some typical codes of American femmes' femininity in her times: "lace and silk, high heels, and lipstick" (1992: 15). According to Nestle, unlike the butches, who can at least be seen as subversive heroines in the lesbian-feminist world, femmes have "no place to hide" because of these normative feminine features they bear (*ibid.*). Many femmes even "learned to pass as a 'dyke' in public while in their homes and in their beds, they flew their flags of colour and sensuality (*ibid.*)." In spite of Nestle's conscious empathy for the femme fellows, behind these words we can find a connotation: butches' (female) masculinity is often viewed as authentic, which has been persuasively claimed as "not pretending", while femmes' performances of (female) masculinity are "passing".

However, in my analyses of *T* and *P* experiences, I choose to put aside the rectification of names for *Ts*' masculinity and *Ps*' femininity, and raise a question first: "Do *Ps* (have to) think of themselves as 'feminine' and see 'femininity' as salient and determinant characteristics of a *P*?" Alongside this question is another: "What will happen when *Ts* shed off their masculinity but still want to be a *T*?" In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam criticises the essentialised equation between masculinity and maleness in dominant academic studies on masculinity (Halberstam 1998). To extend this critique, I further question the

naturalised connection between female masculinity and butches, or tomboyish women, when we talk about butch-femme relationships. Of course, being always enmeshed in the limitations of language, I realise the dilemma of "naming" and "giving meaning" which I face here. On the one hand, it is particularly interesting and important for me to discuss these two questions above in Chinese contexts, where "femininity" and "masculinity" have still been dominated by forcible and uniform heteronormative discourses. On the other hand, I do not want to make up a funny scene in which *Ps* are rivalling with *Ts* for the title of "masculinity". Trying my best, I look into the women-loving-women life stories I encountered in the second decade of the 21st century in China, and observe the elements of "masculinity" and "femininity" which are already being or need to be revised among *Ts* and *Ps* and other diversely self-identified women, without denying individual aesthetic preferences and bodily limitations.

During recent years, two new terms have emerged and been popularised among *lalas* in China, demonstrating the changing relations between "*T*" and "masculinity", and between "*P*" and "femininity". They are the "feminine *T* (*niang T*)" and the "masculine *P* (*ye P*)". Regardless of ongoing rounds of controversy online and offline about the definition of and distinction between these two terms, it is the first time that the core features respectively represented by "*T*" and "*P*" are being shuffled. In the accounts of my informant *Kite*, we can find her ease and freedom in playing with the labels of *T* and *P*, in mapping out her complex desires, and in enjoying both the masculinity and femininity in herself. During this process, *Kite* is neither an essential *T* nor an essential *P*, or rather is both *T* and *P* and even something else temporarily and/or simultaneously. In the interview, *Kite* said:

> "I don't care too much, really. For example, if someone says that I'm very *P*, to be honest I'm happy to hear that. That's because, usually, the ones who call me *P* are *Ts* themselves, and their words imply that I'm very elegant[81], right? Anyway, recently I'm in the mood of dating *Ts*. Then, if someone says that I'm *T*, I also feel happy, because it means I'm very handsome and tough enough. Then, some others instead say that I'm *H*. I don't deny it. That's right, I like the girls with long hair, and I also like those with short hair. I like to '*gong* (conquer)' somebody, and also like somebody to '*gong* (conquer)' me. Finally, [if someone says that I'm] queer[82], it's also OK. I don't care there's no longer an identity for me. When 'queer' is used as an adjective, I'm attracted to those queer stuff."

81 Here, *Kite* used the English word "elegant".

82 Here, *Kite* used the English word "queer".

Kite might be the most "outed" among the informants. She had already disclosed her same-sex orientation to her parents, relatives in her extended family, and her colleagues and boss in the workplace; at the same time, from these people she had received considerable tolerance and even support. So, I tend not to interpret *Kite*'s feminine and masculine moments as completely strategic "passing" in order to decrease the risk of disclosing her non-heteronormativity. Rather than searching for a "place to hide", *Kite*'s explorations of masculinity and femininity are true expressions and bold demonstrations.

Alongside "feminine *T*" and "masculine *P*", there is another saying becoming popular among *lalas*: "If you are a *lala*, you have at least thirty percent *T-ness* (*shi la sanfen T*)." In my eyes, this saying is revolutionary, because it declares the non-necessity of the binary either-or between *Ts* and *Ps*, as well as the non-necessity of the equation of "*P*=femininity". Many of my informants who tended to identify themselves as *P* or "inclined *P* (*pian P*)" eagerly distinguished themselves from the (stereo)typical femininity usually related to heteronormative women, and at the same time stressed that actually there was no essential difference between themselves and *Ts*. For example, in the interview with *Scarlet*, she used a phrase—"pure women (*chunzheng de nüsheng*)"—to refer to her heterosexual female friends and relatives, but not to herself.

> "Interviewer: Do you think yourself a 'pure woman'?
> *Scarlet*: No, I don't think so.
> ……
> Interviewer: What do you think about those 'pure women', and how do you differentiate yourself from them?
> *Scarlet*: A 'pure woman' must be soft (*wenrou*)…No, [this is not accurate, because] I'm also soft. How can I put it [properly]? … Well, let's say, a 'pure woman' is like my sister-in-law. [My sister-in-law] hasn't received too much higher education, …, employed in a restaurant in my hometown, beautiful, with a not bad family economic background. She was introduced to my brother by my mother, then they married, and she gave birth to her first baby at twenty years old. Since then, she has become a housewife. Every normal woman is like that. … But I don't want to be like that. …"

Meanwhile, when *Scarlet* talked about the daily life of herself and her ex-girlfriend, a *T*, she refused to admit an essential difference between *Ts* and *Ps*:

> "She [*Scarlet*'s ex-girlfriend] is a *T*. You may suppose that she would protect me, but I am much braver than her. She even dares not to watch a horror movie. 'She's a *T*, I'm a *P*.' Yes. But in spite

> of this saying, actually we lived our everyday life similarly. If there was some housework, either of us would do it, just depending on who had spare time. Except that she has more physical strength than I do, in fact she is really like a 'little woman (*xiao nüsheng*)', …"

Narratives similar to *Scarlet*'s were not rare among the accounts provided by the feminine informants who mainly dated *Ts*, especially among those who embraced the gender *P* for identifying themselves. For them, even though sometimes they indeed seemed feminine in appearance, according to people's common sense, they by no means admitted that their personality, habits and abilities were related to the normative femininity. For these *Ps*, the "at least thirty percent *T-ness*" weighed significantly in their self-worth, and they were proud of themselves for being no less subversive than *Ts* in gender performativity. In *Scarlet*'s case, despite the fact that she wore long hair, make-up, a skirt and high-heel boots, she defined what femininity and a "pure woman" were by describing the gender roles, economic resources and social status of a woman, rather than the woman's appearance, clothes, demeanour and sex preference.

Scarlet's refusal to call herself a "pure woman" echoes with Monique Wittig's radical claim, "lesbians are not women" (Wittig 1992), when the concepts "women" and "femininity" per se are produced from a heteronormative discursive system. Here, the notion of "pureness" works again to help mark boundaries and distinguish one group of women from another. Yet, the difference between *Scarlet*'s narrative about "pure women" and the discourses revolving around "pureness", discussed in previous sections, is: *Scarlet* stands firmly against the situation of being "pure" and is proud of her "impureness" as a woman. She does not emphasise a "pure" self who is superior to the "impure" others, or strategically slide towards a "purer" label in specific scenarios to avoid being stigmatised.

Sexually, a similarity shared by the *P*-identified informants in my study is the desire for a possibility of being active when having sex with their *T* partners. Here, I use the word "possibility" subtly to distinguish these *Ps* from the *les*(bians) pursuing highly egalitarian and reciprocal sex. These *Ps* to a large extent enjoy the passion derived from a *T-P* relationship as well as the relatively active sex performance done by *Ts*. However, what these *Ps* care about is whether they can weaken or even conquer the so-called "iron-ness" of their *T* lovers—of course in a consenting and pleasant way. In fact, during my fieldwork, I often heard proud talks among *Ps* about how their *T* lovers, who had been very "iron" in bed (with other girlfriends), became less "iron" when dating with them, because they provided their *T* lovers with deeper love, more security, and better sexual skills. One of the most exciting experiences for a *P* is that she is capable of actively making her *T* partner physically orgasm and that her *T* partner accepts it and enjoys it. This kind of experience does not necessarily happen every

time when a *T-P* couple have sex, and usually a *P* does not coerce her *T* partner to passively receive sex performances against her own will, but the possibility of this sort of interaction happening, even just once, will be of great significance to a *P*. Studies on Euro-American butches' masculinity embodied in their active sex performances argue that, different from many men who focus on their own sexual pleasure and orgasm during sex, butches care more about and enjoy more from sexually satisfying their femme partners (Halberstam 1998). Based on my own study, I further argue that sometimes the most desirable aspect of *Ts*' masculinity that can sexually satisfy *Ps* is the *Ts*' surrender of their masculinity.

Nevertheless, in spite of the revolutionary aspect of the "thirty percent *T-ness*" in *Ps*, I cannot give a simple conclusion without any critique. First, I think that the specific expressions of "masculinity" among *Ps* to some extent still arises from the mainstream patriarchal value system, which symbolically relates the title of "masculinity" to power and prestige, even though the configuration of masculinity is reshaped in *T-P* relationships. Second, moving on to the possibility of disconnecting masculinity from the gender category "*T*", is it acceptable and thinkable to turn the popular saying around: "If you are a *lala*, you have at least thirty percent *P-ness*"? Although the emergence of the term "feminine *T* (*niang T*)" has to some extent answered this question, for my informants who defined themselves as *T*, it is far more difficult to (partly) shed off the burden of being masculine (as a female) and meanwhile still hold the pride of being a *T*; after all, the construction of *T*'s masculinity is embedded in the salient forms of social stratification and consumerism of current Chinese societies (e.g. Chao 2018). For some *Ts*, their female body features cast a shadow over their legitimacy to be a masculine woman and a beautiful *T* in the eyes of their *lala* peers. *Olive*, a *T*-identified informant in her early thirties, whom I interviewed in Shanghai, recalled how one of her ex-girlfriends commented on her breasts:

> "What made me most unhappy was that she [*Olive*'s ex-girlfriend] compared me with boys. … Once upon a time, she praised my beauty when she looked at me from my back, but when I turned around, she commented: 'The [protruding] breasts should not be there.'… In fact, I enjoy my body very much. … The tomboys like me…are actually very beautiful."

For some other *Ts*, their "too masculine" appearance prevents them from keeping some characteristics that are usually supposed to be essential for femininity, and hence prevents them from expressing their empathy with other women. *Hermit*, a Shanghainese *T* in her

early thirties, who described herself as "maybe more like a [female-to-male] transgender person"[83], shared with me:

> "In this society, your gender is determinant and influential in nearly all aspects of your life. For example, we all know that those women with soft and tender outside but tough inside can still survive in [a heteronormative] workplace smoothly. But for me, who has a tough outside but a less tough inside, the male colleagues target me as an equal competitor as one of them. It is good enough if they do not intentionally make me some trouble, but I don't expect them to give me any kind help. Sometimes, …they even make me embarrassed, when they don't see me as a woman and want to make [dirty] jokes [about women] together with me. As men, they often don't share the same viewpoints with mine, so sometimes I feel 'violated' by them. I don't know whether I should communicate with them as a woman or as a man."

For some other *Ts*, the legitimacy of being a *T* can be undermined by one's limited economic capability and "responsibility". As my informant *Twelve* complained:

> "…I was commented by some *les* friends as 'feminine (*niang*)'. …They [many other *Ts*] tended to confine themselves in a series of rules. If you were a *T*, you shouldn't be like this, you shouldn't be like that, you should do this and that, you should be responsible for…blablabla. In fact, at my age [at that time], as a college student, there were not much real responsibilities I should shoulder or I was able to shoulder. …"

To summarise these abovementioned experiences of *Ts*, although their female masculinity is no longer viewed as "pretending to be a man" in an era when female same-sex relationships have become relatively visible and de-pathologized, they are still more or less expected by the wider society, their partners, and their *T* peers, to be "consistently" masculine throughout their body, personality, capability, responsibilities, and even attitudes towards women (except themselves). Although the term "feminine *T*" has made some space for *Ts* to be relatively non-masculine, it is more welcomed as an aesthetic category among women-loving women rather than embraced by self-identified *Ts* themselves in their everyday lives. Since the fixed definition and binarization of

83 Because *Hermit* only described some parts of herself as "maybe more like [female-to-male] transgender person" (for example, in sexual fantasies she usually fantasised herself as a male body and role), and because she also insisted that there was no clear-cut boundary between being *T* and being female-to-male transgender in her personal experiences, I decided to include *Hermit*'s case in my discussions about *Ts* here.

masculinity/femininity, and the hierarchical value that appreciates masculinity over femininity, are still salient in dominant gender discourses in contemporary China, being partly masculine and having some *T*-ness can be enjoyed by many feminine *lalas*, while being partly feminine may become a single, powerful barrier to the legitimacy of a *T* and degrade her pride.

Nevertheless, I am of course not saying that we are doomed to being trapped in the existing mechanisms of gender reproduction, even though we indeed cannot break down this fortress completely overnight; otherwise, those self-contradictions of *Glory* and the harmonisation of self-contradictions in *Kite* would not have become possible. It is also the very reason why I insist on paying attention to *T-P* dynamics in my study. Some readers may question the suitability of discussing some cases, such as *Kite*'s case, in the *T-P* framework. Indeed, obviously *Kite* welcomed the term *H*—"no division"—and even talked about "queer".Yet, I insist on not viewing *T-P* relationships, the emergence of the term *H*, and the importation of the Anglo-American concept "queer", as mutually excluded practices that follow a linear, "evolutionist" process of human beings' understandings about gender and sexual diversity and fluidity, during which more "advanced" concepts will de-construct the "backward" ones. Instead, from my perspective, the birth of new concepts only reminds us of the complexity and vitality in the old concepts that we have not yet fully realised. It is not the *T-P* dynamics themselves, but the essentialised, binaristic understandings about *T/P* identities, masculinity/femininity, man/woman, and the hierarchical values that rank masculinity higher than femininity, that should be battled with by the ever-emerging new concepts (such as *H*, "queer", and the upcoming ones). In this sense, one can (partly) identify with *T*, *P*, *H*, and queer at the same time, literally or metaphorically, without any "passing". Only then will the concepts of *T*, *P*, *H*, "queer", and whatever else is being newly created, become alternates to the monopolistic paired concepts born out of the heteronormative system of naming and meaning—such as "masculinity/ femininity" and "men/women".

Finally, I want to acclaim again for the special "dance duet" practised in *T-P* relationships. Thanks to the performance by the *T-P* couple I encountered when I was doing my fieldwork, which I depicted at the beginning of this chapter, I am reminded of the resemblance between the features of a dance duet and that of a *T-P* relationship. Even though it has a form which is a seemingly perfect (re)presentation of dyad, the dance duet is in fact much more complicated than binary, because the two ever-interacting parties, who do not always embody "harmony" but simultaneously constitute the whole, imply co-existence: the co-existence of passion and tension, of defending and surrendering, of move and stay, and of difference and similarity. The notion of "pureness (*chun*)" is being defined or

redefined, pursued or rejected, distorted or ignored, in the dance duet that is half rehearsed and half improvised. No matter how much the status of "pureness" is worshiped among a considerable number of women-loving women in today's mainland China, whether among *T*- and *P*-identified ones or among the ones holding other identifications, it is the "impureness", a series of forms of co-existence, that makes a stage for the languages, knowledges and embodiments of female sexual orientations and gender expressions.

Recreating (in) Love and Sex: Becoming Vulnerable Translators, Becoming Powerful Translations

Facing a Multi-Fold Lack of Academic Vocabularies when Studying "Love" and "Sex"

The first motivation for me to start an academic journey of research on female same-sex desires was my personal experiences of same-sex love and sex. But "love" or "sex" were never the main focus of what I discussed and wrote about before my PhD project. Actually, except for a few articles and books (e.g. Chao 2001; Martin 2010), in most academic texts on Chinese female same-sex experiences, "love" and "sex" are seldom analysed as unfolding and open-ended processes that are still meandering, expanding, ongoing and becoming. "Same-sex love" and "same-sex sex" have of course been written down as simple and monotonous phrases, countless times in different studies, because they are the research topics; but compared with elaborate explorations of Chinese women-loving women's life situations, predicaments, choices and aspirations that are deeply influenced by their non-heterosexuality, far fewer words have been woven for picturing and grasping how this non-heterosexuality is both crystallising and diffusing in these women's love and sex experiences. Although some documented historical anecdotes and phenomena are referred to by some scholars as evidence for the long existence of female same-sex practices in ancient and modern China (Blackwood & Wieringa 2003; Ruan & Bullough 1992; Sang 2003; Wieringa 2007), such as "mirror-rubbing (*mo jing*)[84]", the "hairdressing ceremony (*zishu*)" and "Orchid Societies (*jinlan hui*)"[85], descriptions with accuracy and sensibility—"figurations" (Braidotti 2011a, 2014)—about how women love and make love with women in contemporary China are rare.

What kind of affective connections and sexual practices do today's Chinese same-sex attracted women pursue and experiment or struggle with? How is "love" and "sex" understood, valued, and emotionally and bodily felt, from every encounter to good-bye

84 At the end of Qing Dynasty, the emerging "tightly woven women's communities" such as the *zishu nü* (self-combing women) in Canton and "the man-despising *mo jing dang* (mirror-rubbing gang) in Shanghai, had been recorded in documents, though by some male commentators who criticised such communities as being "at odds with male-female relations" (Sang 2003: 17). The (nick)name of "*mo jing* (mirror-rubbing)" was "based on a slang word for female-female sex (*ibid.*: 104).

85 "From around the middle of the nineteenth century so-called 'Orchid Societies' existed in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong (formerly spelled as Canton), a province in Southern China. Women who joined these anti-marriage associations were mostly silk workers. Due to their income they could afford to live independent lives… The sisters vowed never to marry a man and instead engaged in relationships among themselves. The ceremonies in which they pledged loyalty to each other knew several elements that also took place in heterosexual marriages, such as the hairdressing ceremony (Wieringa 2007: 4)." The women who practised the hairdressing ceremony were called "*zishu nü*", literally "self-combing women".

(or the other way around), through every anniversary and breakup (with or without a reunion), no matter whether based on one night or a lifetime (most cases are in-between)? Until how far and how close do we begin to or no longer call something love, or sex? In other words, what is love/what can love be, and what is sex/what can sex be, according to everyday female same-sex experiences in contemporary China? By asking these questions, I am not suggesting that academic writings about love and sex should be like sentimentalist literature or sex skill manuals, but I want to stress that female same-sex "love" and "sex" are by no means pre-existing facts, which we can take as "control variables" when we analyse other aspects of these women's lives.

Having decided to spend a full chapter figuring out some possible answers to the above questions in a so-called academic work, however, I immediately realised a big challenge: what kind of language counts as "academic"? Braidotti, a scholar born and raised in different languages, once wrote that the switches from one language to another once rendered her with a lack of "a whole vocabulary to express emotions and desires" in her life (Braidotti 2011a: 34). Comparing what I have experienced in my academic research to this saying of Braidotti's, I am afraid that I felt a multi-fold lack of vocabularies, both theoretically and methodologically, to talk with my informants during fieldwork about their and my own emotions and desires relevant to love and sex, and I continue to do so when writing about them in my dissertation.

For one thing, I often doubt whether my research interest about "love" is "academic" enough. The notion of "love" seems rather unqualified for being a theory among other (social) scientific theories which are formulated in precise, objective, rational expressions in order to conclude some general, abstract ideas. Although the theme of love has been chosen for analysis in a number of studies which theorise human lives and societies in modern or post-modern eras (e.g. Bauman 2003; Giddens 1992; May 2011; Seidman 1991), reading these works I can hardly find close connections between the "love" written about in these well-organised, coherent and eloquent English texts, and the "love" narrated by my informants in Chinese sentences which were ambiguous, emotional, contradictory, broken or unfinished, along with unspeakable silences and concealments, in which the "trivial" life fragments per se are the most profound core of a subject.

A further complication is that gaps also exist between any two usages of the word "love". Is the love committed, denied, constructed and de-constructed by different people, for different purposes, through different discourses and practices, the same thing? To what extent does the meaning of love stretch, even if under another name, and until when and where does love fade away even if without changing its coat? Is love an inclusive and flexible concept or an exclusive and strict concept? In front of these questions, I wonder

whether love will be a theme too complicated, subtle and personal for theorisation; or rather, I doubt whether normative academic language can help much in feeling and understanding "love".

The next difficulty is that "sex" plays a sensitive role in people's everyday lives in China, including among academics. A number of local scholars in mainland China working in the domains of biology, medicine, psychology and sociology have made efforts to make the topic of "sex" possible within a "scientific" and "objective" academic discursive framework (e.g. Fang 2007; Huang 2013; Li 1998b; Liu 1992; Pan 2006; Pei 2013; Wang 2010), however this does not mean that sex is no longer a non-stigmatised and non-marginalised area in China's mainstream academia. Neither does it mean that it is easy for Chinese people in general to openly, comfortably and safely talk about their own sexual experiences. In my fieldwork, I myself felt the difficulty of finding adequate and appropriate words for initiating topics about sex, and I was often hesitant in fear of causing the informants discomfort or failing to behave like a professional researcher. Although it turned out that most of my informants were not offended by my questions too much, many of them facing these questions became shy to some extent, unsure and stammering. The words "having sex" were usually not spoken but replaced by some "you-know-what" hints according to different contexts, such as "*nage* (that)" or even a space of silence in the middle of a sentence. When the informants asked me sex-relevant questions, I also failed to ease my struggle with what could be disclosed, in what words, and in what tone, because I wanted to appear less seductive and meanwhile less indifferent. Thus, knowing that in an ethnography "the precise use of language is a significant part of conveying a community's culture" (Kennedy & Davis 2014: 6), I often doubt whether my performances in researching sex, and the data relevant to sex provided by my informants, are qualified for "academic" analyses. I am not sure whether the language used and reproduced in my fieldwork has created more barriers than opportunities for my informants and myself to understand and trust each other on such a sensitive topic as "sex".

As a result, the more I clung to (perhaps imagined) academic standards, the more I was trapped by the abovementioned multiple lack of vocabularies, until I learned a lesson from an intimate entanglement between me and an informant of mine, which I mentioned and reflected upon in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. This personal journey of exploring love and sex within my academic journey helped me to open up new perspectives on this dilemma, broader than verbal languages, which transform me from a translator, who tries to bridge the collected love and sex stories and the academic interpretations, into a series of translations—the embodiments which do not just wait for verbal interpretations but

bear and create specific shapes, weights, materials, as well as different forms of can and cannot, pleasure and pain, loss and gain.

Just as A. Finn Enke links the nature of "translation" with "transgender", one of the most complicated phenomena of human sexuality and desire, using the feature of "bringing across", both translation and transgender are infinitely challenging the idea of "original" and creating something new, which is a process of knowledge production (Enke 2014). This argument echoes with Braidotti's projects of becoming "a translation without originals" (Braidotti 2011a: 21), and teaches me that, as a researcher, I should not separate the speaker from the listener or separate the speaker from what is spoken (and unspoken) in fieldwork; neither do I have to extract something and some words from life in order to name them "academic". Also echoing with Barad's critique of the classical "reflexive" methodologies in science and social science and her emphasis on the indivisible entanglements between "knower" and "known" (Barad 2007: 86-88), I see and experience any scenario as a whole, in which both the researcher and the researched become themselves and each other, together with the socio-historical-personal imprints on the both of them. Thus this scenario is a "translation" already. Such a "translation", which is also a process of knowledge production and an act of bringing new perspectives into life, can be academic anyway. Hence, we are not only "loving 'in translation'" (Braidotti 2011a: 34) and working on translation, but also living as translations; this is a lively and living language for me to study sex and love.

Of course, for anthropologists, such a language is not a brand-new language. Anthropologists have been encouraged to become research tools themselves, i.e. "anthropologist as measuring device" and "anthropologist as key informant" (e.g. Devereaux 1967; Cassell 1977; Hennigh 1981). Many beautiful and brave ethnographic works with autobiographic elements have been written to discuss the researcher's own love and sex intertwined with their studies (e.g. Blackwood 1995, 2010; Kulick & Willson 1995; Lewin & Leap 1996; Newton 1993; Wekker 2006), even though such attempts are by no means easy. Just as Ruth Behar describes in her autobiographic anthropological work *Vulnerable Observer*, "anthropology has always been vexed about the question of vulnerability" (Behar 1996: 4). In the intimate relationship with my "best informant[86]" (see Newton 1993), I have experienced how an anthropologist's life and her informants' lives can be mutually engaged, conflicted, fuelled, disturbed, and even become one life; and I feel the challenge of seeking a balance between being transparent—another "trans" besides "translation" and "transgender"—and being vulnerable. But, at least, I regard the journeys of seeking such

86 In her article, "My best informant's dress: The erotic equation in fieldwork (1993)", Esther Newton discusses the female same-sex erotic dynamics between her, an anthropologist, and her key informant. Here, I borrow Newton's expression.

balances, namely the journey of seeking possible and comfortable ways for expressing love and sex, as a suitable vocabulary for the academic analysis in this chapter.

This chapter is my subjective version of translations about female same-sex love and sex in present-day China, and I am both the translator and the translations at the same time. In the following sections, I "translate" several notions, including "first love", "romantic", "passionate", and "penetration (penetrative sex)"; and I explore how Chinese women-loving women recreate in love and sex and how they meanwhile re-create the notions of "love" and "sex" per se. Here, the verb "recreate" refers to both meanings of the word: "to amuse oneself"[87] and "to create again or in a new way"[88]. Always on the journey of seeking a balance between transparency and vulnerability, I include some of my personal stories relevant to love and sex in the following sections, but do not promise that there are no secrets, no leaving things unsaid, or that no other versions of translation possibly exist. Before I move on to the next section, I also want to make clear that my focus on themes of sex and love in this chapter does not mean that I reduce sexuality and intimate relationship to these two aspects only. Neither does my juxtaposing sex and love side by side mean that I fit them into a soul/body binary.

First Love Without Articulation

During my fieldwork, to warm up the atmosphere for an interview, I designed several icebreaking questions. After a few interviews, I found the "magic" icebreaking question that could elicit the most spontaneous and rich narrative flows from the informants: "Could you say something about your 'first love (*chulian*)'?" As a result, this question became my favourite starting point of an interview, no matter where the conversations would head and end up. For me, the magic as well as the beauty of this question was that my informants reacted relatively confidently and undefensively, compared to when they were asked other questions. They never asked back: "Wait a minute, you should first let me know how you define 'first love'." Instead, they just started to talk naturally as if this question had made them leading roles on the stage, a setting with which they were familiar, even though the notion of "first love" was in fact diversely understood and interpreted among them.

Every time I listen to the recorded interviews or read again my field notes, I am amazed that most of my informants define first love in a very open way. Talking about their first

87 See online Oxford English Dictionary entry "recreate, v. 1": explanation No. 6. (http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/159950?rskey=r6uqbM&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid)

88 See online Oxford English Dictionary entry "recreate, v. 2": explanation No. 1. (http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/159951?rskey=r6uqbM&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid)

love, many informants told stories about their attraction, affection or erotic desire towards another teenage girl or woman, and how they had never revealed this feeling to the other party in explicit words. In return, the other party—even though in many cases she had never consciously taken "part" in the love affair—also responded in an ambiguous or ambivalent way beyond the preciseness of verbal language.

My informant *Shore*'s accounts perfectly illustrate this situation. *Shore*, who was born in the early 1990s and grew up in Kunming, was "not well experienced in dating girls". However, *Shore* had cherished her continuous special attachment to a girl, *Seagull*, since they were in primary school. Neither *Shore* nor *Seagull* had touched on the word "love (*aiqing*)" when they expressed the special feeling they had for each other, even though they had together celebrated several years of the "*Qixi* Festival[89]" and May Twentieth[90]—the counterparts of Valentine's Day in Chinese popular culture—and seriously exchanged gifts for remembrance. *Seagull* had dated several boys alongside the "friendship (*youqing*)" with *Shore*, but had tried her best to understate and trivialise these dates in front of *Shore* in fear of hurting her. *Shore* recalled a short message *Seagull* texted her:

> "… she [*Seagull*] said that if I [*Shore*] was against her dating with that boy, she could absolutely give him up."

For *Shore*, unexpectedly, it was the moments when she faced *Seagull*'s intimacy with boys that she questioned whether her feelings towards *Seagull* were friendship (*youyi*; *youqing*) or love. Then, *Shore* finally confirmed with herself that it was love rather than friendship. As *Shore* admitted,

> "… from a friend, I heard of this news [that *Seagull* had started dating a boy]. … I had never faced this kind of situation before. To my surprise, at the moment I heard of it, I—it was through experiencing this very incident that I understood myself more—I totally couldn't

89 *Qixi* Festival in China, is on the Seventh of July in the Lunar calendar. According to Chinese myths and legends, the fairy *Zhinü*, represented by the Vega, and the cowherd *Niulang*, represented by the Altair, are a loving couple separated by The Milky Way, who can only meet once a year on the date of *Qixi* Festival via a bridge built by magpies in the heaven. In China, *Qixi* Festival is viewed as a traditional festival for lovers and has become highly commercialised during recent decades as a Chinese version of Valentine's Day.

90 May Twentieth, "5.20", the three numbers of which have a homophonic pronunciation of "I love you" in Chinese—"*wo ai ni*". Thus, during the last decade, this day has also been celebrated by couples and commercialised as a festival for lovers.

> accept this fact [that *Seagull* dated a boy]! It was not because she didn't inform me about it. It was not because that boy didn't match her. Not at all. Later, I realised what I was furious about and why, … But I didn't think I had any right to reproach her. …"

Even in a narrative so close to the possibility of spelling "love" out, *Shore* did not do so. Rather, when she described another scenario, in which she met a young man who was courting *Seagull* at that time, *Shore* gave me a metaphor:

> "To be frank, it felt like a meeting between two 'rivals in love (*qingdi*)'."

In many experiences remebered by my informants as "first love", including *Shore*'s, being openly homosexual in front that beloved person, and letting the love between them have a possible future, were not compatible with each other. For *Shore*, only under the name of any other status but "love" could her love for *Seagull* survive. And the moment when the word "love" was clearly uttered actually marked the point when love itself was put away into the past tense.

Shore talked about the most "explicit" revelations between her and *Seagull* about their feelings towards each other. One was about a "breaking up (*fenshou*)"—ironically, a "breaking up" without a recognised "being together"—between them after *Shore* found out that *Seagull* had started dating a boy:

> "… We broke up… but later we made up again. … [When we got in touch again,] I didn't completely admit [about my homosexual orientation and that I love her]. *Seagull* said to me something similar to what I said to her. She's good at playing with words. She said that I was such a good friend and played such an important role in her life that she didn't want to lose me. …"

As *Shore* remembered, at another time *Seagull* was drunk and confessed that she knew *Shore*'s (love) feelings towards her, and that she also "liked (*xihuan*)" *Shore*, but did not know how to handle this emotion. However, the next day, becoming sober again, *Seagull* insisted that she could not recall anything at all about the previous night, including her own words. Finally, just before *Seagull* left China to attend college in the U.S., *Shore* received a text message from *Seagull*, and considered it the frankest expression *Seagull* had ever made about their relationship in more than thirteen years, after which they finally "broke up" without making up again:

> "She [*Seagull*] sent me a message, a long paragraph. That was the most explicit expression she had ever made. But how sorry did I feel! At that time, we were apart already. In her message, she said that she had not been very clear [about the nature of our relationship] earlier, … but looking retrospectively at those years [as a past], she could see and understand much more clearly. …To summarise her words, it was that when I loved her, she also loved me. I still remember the last sentence of that message, which broke my heart. She said: 'Typing these words above has already exhausted all of my courage.' … "

In the interview, even before she had told the whole story, *Shore* had already commented on her first love conclusively:

> "Between my first lover and I… you can say that we have loved each other, but you can also say that we have never loved each other. It's too complicated. She [*Seagull*] is too complicated."

Here, based on *Shore*'s narrative about her first love, among many others, I use a phrase, "love without articulation", to depict a common feature often salient in early love experiences among my informants. As the word "articulation" has different meanings, including "the state of being jointed" and "the utterance of distinct elements of speech"[91], the phrase "love without articulation" means that, for one or both of the two women involved in love, it is unbearable to explicitly name their connection as "love/*aiqing*", unless when it is no longer possible to maintain this connection.

In her book *Backward Glances* (2010)[92], one of Fran Martin's main findings is that, among the representations of female homoeroticism in contemporary Chinese fictional works in literature or on screen, female same-sex love is universalised in, and at the same time

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91 See the entry of "articulation" on the website of the Oxford English Dictionary: http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/11196?redirectedFrom=articulation#eid

92 In her book *Backward Glances* (2010), Fran Martin analyses the female same-sex romantic plots in popular literature, films and TV dramas in contemporary Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China, alongside the readers' and audience's reactions towards these plots. Coining and elaborating the concept "female homoerotic imaginary", Martin theorises the "dominant ways of both representing and conceptualizing the female homoerotic within contemporary Chinese public cultures" and considers "the activity of imagining in both personal and collective senses" (Martin 2010: 17). Although my study, different from Martin's, pays more attention to the everyday lives of Chinese women-loving women than to fictionalised stories about female same-sex erotics, it is not meaningless to make some comparisons between the "reality" and the "imaginary", since "the imagination plays a crucial role in enabling the whole process of becoming-minoritarian and hence of conceptual creativity and ethical empowerment" (Braidotti 2014: 172).

confined to, the youth of women's lives, whether there is a conscious identification of particular sexual orientation or not. In these fictional works, female same-sex love stories are usually narrated from a retrospective angle, the "backward glances", and the reminiscences of these past romantic or sexual relationships are often carried out by adult female characters who have already reconciled themselves with a more heteronormative lifestyle (e.g. in a heterosexual marriage). This implies the impossibility of a lesbian future in female adulthood (Martin, 2010). However, when Martin investigates those fictional narratives, she finds that, paradoxically, under the surface of a rupture between the female protagonist's same-sex affairs in the past and the impossible lesbianism in her present and future, her nostalgic narratives about the past in fact prove the continuous existence of this homoerotic sentiment in her later life. It is difficult—if not vain—to dismiss the homoerotic past in her present, no matter how heteronormative her present life is (*ibid.*: 15-16).

Similar to Martin's arguments, for many of my informants the "first love/*chulian*" is a significant part of their later life, no matter how much it was a "love without articulation" or an anecdote of the past. For example, as I mentioned in *Shore*'s case, the formation of *Shore*'s understanding about her own same-sex orientation would not have been sharpened and deepened without her "fruitless" first love; from then on, *Shore* could not ignore her own craving for same-sex intimacy any more. However, in terms of the relation between the past and the present, while Martin emphasises the actual continuous existence of the past in the present under the surface of ruptures, I also find that these ruptures are of significance and power for the subjective perspectives of my informants. Still taking *Shore*'s case for example, throughout the interview, *Shore* commemorated and re-narrated the past, and finally clearly spoke out about what kind of love and lover she would pursue in the future. She stressed the "equality (*duideng*)" as well as the "pride (*zunyan*)" that an ideal love relationship would bring to her. *Shore* also stated that, whether she found a long-term partner or not, she wanted to come out (*chugui*) to her parents one day, which, in my opinion, re-iterated her expectation for a future lover who could consciously appreciate the same-sex life style. In other words, through allowing a rupture from the past, *Shore*, among other informants, created for herself a brand-new journey starting from the present towards a more desirable future. These informants finally embraced their own non-normative sexuality by reaching for a more explicit same-sex identification and love relationship; and those memories of "(first) love without articulation", no matter how precious they still were, marked these women's conscious choice to break from the impossibility of a lesbian past, instead of marking their reluctant acceptance of "the impossibility of lesbian futures" (*ibid.*: 6).

In Chinese, to indicate both "first love" and "first lover" we can use the same word, "*chulian*", although "first love" refers to an experience in which "I" am engaged while "first lover" refers to a person whose existence is independent of "me". I had not noticed the beauty of this overlapping translation until I was annoyed by it. Experiencing a love relationship with my current lover, which I unquestionably believe to be much deeper than any of my past relationships, I feel that my sense, knowledge and ability of love have been reborn. It seems to me that my current relationship becomes the true "first love" while my past relationships have to a large extent faded away from my accurate memories. However, I still have the habit of using the word "*chulian*" to refer to the college girl for whom I felt "love" for the first time, and every time when I utter this word in conversations with friends or with my current lover, it ironically reminds me of all the overlaps and disjunctions between me and a person who is no longer connected to me at all. Sometimes it is painful, sometimes it is funny, sometimes it causes trouble, sometimes it brings relief. Finally, the meaning of the phrase "first love without articulation" even multiplies: "first love without articulation" and "first love with articulation" are not necessarily either-or options in our lives, and "ruptures" between the past, present and future do not necessarily take place only in the form of destruction or erasure.

Translating "Romantic" and "Passionate", Transcending Heteronormative "Love"

> "The nature of 'love (*aiqing*)' is a strong, pure, and single-minded affection, between a man and a woman who have gained certain social relations and material supports and share the same ideal of life, entailing mutual admiration and yearning for building a life-long partnership."[93]

This paragraph is printed in the official guide of the subject "The Theories of Ideology and Politics (*Sixiang Zhengzhi Lilun*)", one of the compulsory subjects in China's national post-graduate entrance exam, regardless of the discipline and the programme an examinee intends to enter. It counts as the standard answer designed by the Ministry of Education of China to answer the question "how to define the concept 'love'". To a large extent, this definition of "love (*aiqing*)" represents the authoritative knowledge and the

93 In *Sixiang Daode Xiuyang Yu Falü Jichu (Ideological and Moral Cultivation and Basic Law Education) (the Edition of 2015)*, published by *Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe* (Higher Education Press), which is commonly used by most Chinese universities and colleges as a textbook for the compulsory courses of undergraduate students, *aiqing* is defined as this quotation. This paragraph is located at the beginning of Chapter 5 in this book, under the rubric of "*Jiating Meide* (Family Virtue)".

governmentally advocated ideal of love in contemporary China. Unfortunately, same-sex love is obviously excluded from the category of "love" according to this very definition, although "homosexuality" is translated as "same-sex love (*tongxinglian*; *tongxing'ai*)" literally in Chinese.

In this section, I discuss the translations and transformations of the notions of "romantic", "passionate" and "love" among Chinese women-loving women, as well as their efforts to transcend the limitations of heteronormatively defined "love", precisely because the affective feelings and emotions that spark and blaze in the various encounters and associations among these women are not formally coded by hegemonic powers.

I start my analysis by comparing how the concept "romantic" is depicted in Western mainstream academic texts and how it is understood in Chinese contexts, since "romantic" is a notion originating from Western sociocultural contexts which then travelled to China and was translated into Chinese. Among Western scholars whose work on theorising love is influential, I reflect mainly on Anthony Giddens's book *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992). It is not because I think this book is the most authoritative one or the only important one that deserves reference. Instead, it is because, from my perspective, this book represents the dominant understandings about the modern history of love, sexuality and intimate relationships among Western, mainstream, male academic elites, and meanwhile represents the typical limitations of these very understandings. Giddens's analyses of both "romantic" and "love" are based on a Western-centric perspective, which precludes the ancient love stories and traditional literary genres in non-Western histories from the resources available to make comparisons and inspire questions in his study. Although Giddens states in his book that the emergence, popularisation, definition and utilisation of the term "romantic" in Western histories has been deeply embedded in specific Western sociocultural structures, such a Western-centric tendency should still be pointed out before I proceed. Hence, the main aim of my analysis in this section is not to use Chinese local knowledges and experiences to supplement or challenge Western mainstream knowledge and experiences; rather, I intend to observe the travels, translations, transformations and even transcendences taking place when some seemingly uncontroversial concepts are used through embodied ways in the love experiences of my informants.

As Giddens discusses in *The Transformation of Intimacy*, since the late 18th Century the term "romantic", which originated in the literary genre "roman" in medieval France (mainly depicting stories of "courtly love" in chivalric times), has been combined with the notion "love" and made into "romance" or "romantic love" in Western cultures (Giddens 1992). According to Giddens, unlike those more universal and natural love phenomena such as "passionate love", which are relatively independent of social institutions, "romantic

love" was instead something culturally specific, which emerged alongside the emergence of "modernity" and merged itself into the modern ideals of individualism and family form (*ibid.*). Hence, "romantic love" and "freedom" have become the two normatively desirable states of a modern individual, and they both directly contribute to the project of self-realisation, which emphasises the importance of "reason" and the potential control of the future, even though on the surface romantic love has highly emotional features (*ibid.*). For example, the emotional expressions of romantic love can be organised into symbolic scripts or practical functions, after everyday reiterations, for helping one to engage in a "wise" relationship and maintain it as long as possible, which represents the perfection, completion and self-realisation one can achieve from an intimate relationship.

In China, however, "romantic" was once a completely "rootless" term, imported to China around the time of the May Fourth Movement (*Wusi yundong*) in the early 20th Century (1915-1927)[94]. According to Jiang Yongzhen, who has studied the contents of the most popular women's magazine in China between the 1910s and the 1930s, the localisation of a word, a concept, or a discourse, is not the opposite side of—but an important part of—the globalisation of it (Jiang 2016). In the early decades of the 20th Century, many terms and much knowledge were translated from Euro-American countries to Japan, then translated from Japan to other East Asian countries such as China, and later translated back to Europe and America (*ibid.*). Since the May Fourth Movement, "romantic" has been transliterated in Chinese as "*langman*" (and less often "*luomandike*"), and usually has been discussed together with the notion of "*ziyou lian'ai* (free love)" (e.g. Lü 2011). "*Langman*" is constituted by two Chinese characters, "*lang*" and "*man*"; these two characters together can be found in Chinese ancient poetry but have a different meaning from that of the "*langman*/romantic" translated from English[95]. Also, in the usages of "*langman* (romantic, romance)" among the May-Fourth intellectuals in modern China as well as among people living in contemporary China, the two Chinese pictographic characters "*lang*" and "*man*" convey multiple connotations and inspire multiple imaginations, which are free from—despite partly overlapping with—the Western sociocultural features and functions of "romantic love" described by Giddens. For example, in Chinese, "*lang*"

94 Early applications of the word "*langman*", transliterated from "romantic", can be found in a number of literary works of some important intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Lu Xun (e.g. 1932), Bing Xin (e.g. 1926) and Lao She (e.g. 1939).

95 For example, in a poem, "*Yu Mengzhen tongyou Changzhou sengshe* (On an excursion to a monastery in Changzhou, together with Mengzhen)", written by Su Shi, one of the most famous poets in the Song Dynasty (960 AD-1279 AD), "*langman*" was used but just as a juxtaposition of two words rather than as one word. In ancient and modern Chinese, usually one character can be used as an independent word, and can also form words by being combined with other characters.

literally means "waves" and extendedly means "being indulgent and uncontained"; and "*man*" means "to overflow", "to permeate" and extendedly "being casual and wandering". In early 20th Century China, the idea of romantic/*langman* love, compared with the social institution of arranged marriage and polygyny, which maintained the patriarchal and paternalistic family form, reproduced gender inequality, and confined people's accessibility to alternative life courses (Sang 2003), even appeared non-normative, untameable and even unrealistic (see the various discussions in the articles included in Deng et al. 2011; Wang & Gao 2016). In this sense, differences exist between the English "romantic" and Chinese "*langman*". The former has already been institutionalised into (hetero)normative ideals, navigated to a control of the future, and guaranteed a long-term intimate relationship (usually in the form of marriage), under the name of "freedom". However, the latter represents an indulgence in unconstrained longing and desire for another person, fuelled by a chase after idealised freedom, but by no means promises a certain future or a self-realisation. Hence, in Chinese contexts, "*langman*", because of this very feature, often implies uncertainty and unrealisticness; the freedom in "*langman*" does not entail "reason", and the core ideals of Western romantic love do not necessarily exist in the Chinese notion of "*langman*".

Let me pull in another concept—"passionate love"—into the discussion. Giddens positions passionate love against romantic love, seeing the former as driven by nature while the latter as interpersonal relationships which can be and should be nurtured. According to him, passion is expressions of the generic connection between love and sexual attachments, and passionate love is not part of routines and duties, or the necessary and sufficient basis of a marriage (Giddens 1992). He continues to compare passionate love and romantic love, and argues that, although both of them detach individuals from wider social circumstances, this detachment is actualised in different ways: passionate love "uproots erratically", while romantic love provides a long-term life trajectory which gives special primacy to the marital relationship above any other aspects of the family organisation (*ibid.*: 44-45). However, as I have observed, if we temporarily put aside Giddens's tendency of binarily categorising passionate love and romantic love as two different categories, in Chinese contexts the core of "*langman*" is in fact very closer to the "passionate love", rather than the "romantic love", depicted by Giddens.

When I looked back to the narratives I heard in my fieldwork, I found that some of my informants did not appreciate "*langman*" very much, because they viewed "*langman*" as naïve, useless, shallow expressions of love coated by sweet words and acts, which actually contributed little to the success of a long-term intimate relationship. Some other informants, despite holding a fantasy of "*langman*" love, admitted the vanity and fragility caused by being unrealistic, which was destructive to their life and hope. As an example

of the first situation, my informant *Twelve* announced that she did not want to indulge in an intimate relationship filled with a "*langman*" atmosphere and isolating the couple from everyday social life:

> "If I have a girlfriend, [I will tell her:] 'you can be clingy to me, sometimes I might be clingy to you as well, … You can invest some energy to build up a *langman* atmosphere for cooing, and if I have time, I can also join you. But don't expect me to spend all of the 24 hours [of each day] on you, and don't expect me to report to you where I have been and what I'm doing.' … I don't cling to my lover when I'm in a relationship."

Another informant, *Shore*, recalled the disagreement between herself and her first lover *Seagull* on the meaning of being "*langman*":

> "She [*Seagull*] was unhappy about my disbelief for those special meanings attached to some numbers, for example '5.20'[96]. She thought I was too… [realistic]. Although she also knew that those meanings [attached to special numbers and dates] were unreal, sometimes she still wanted to be *langman*. But I was honest and I told her: 'I don't believe these things, they are boring. This is my strong belief.'"

As an example of the second situation, *Brook*, in a tone mixed with self-mockery and cherished nostalgia, mentioned a fruitless long-distance online love between herself and *Grass*, a Chinese girl living in the U.S., whom she had never met before their breaking up:

> "… I saw the private messages between *Grass* and *F* [, a mutual friend of *Grass* and me]. … [in those messages] *F* tried to persuade *Grass*: 'You and *Brook*, …, you are too *langman*. You're separated by such a long distance, and what you've got are only beautiful impressions. But only being together with a person nearby can you experience what love is.' … In my heart, *Grass* was always beautiful and good, … [I looked at her] from a completely poetic, *langman* perspective, which created for me an imagined *Grass*, rather than the real her. … For me, she was unreachable; she gave me a vague shape and some fragmental information, and then I assembled them together with fantasies, …"

From the above narratives, regardless of the nuances with the attitudes and emotions of these three informants, we can see clearly the difference between Chinese "*langman*" and

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96 See the footnote about the commercialised date "May Twentieth" in the second section of this chapter.

English "romantic", even if "*langman*" is indeed the official translation of "romantic" in Chinese.

In addition, to criticise Giddens's binarization and essentialisation of passionate love and romantic love further, we can look into the common translation of the English word "passion" in Chinese—"*jiqing*"—and investigate what kind of role it plays in people's intimate relationships. The word "*jiqing*" literally means "strong affection", and is not a transliteration of "passion" or pure importation of the concept. However, the link between the Chinese term "*jiqing*" and the meaning of passionate love—"expressing a generic connection between love and sexual attachment" (Giddens 1992: 37)—has only been formed in recent decades, driven partly by popular cultures and consumerism.

Besides "*langman*", some of my informants also mentioned "*jiqing*", for example *Scarlet* talked about the necessary function performed by "*jiqing*" in her ideal relationship, from which we can observe what "*jiqing*" can be in a context different from Giddens's assumptions:

> "I have discussed with my parents about our 'attitudes towards love and marriage (*hunlianguan*)'. They believe that the love (*aiqing*) on campus is unreliable, and only [a relationship between two persons who have] similar family background (*mendang hudui*) and [who have found] stable jobs count as a real 'affection (*ganqing*[97]). Only a relationship like that can maintain the 'day-to-day life (*guo rizi*)'. But I don't like [that kind of relationship]. Without *jiqing*, I guess I cannot even live through the day-to-day life, I will run away from home (*lijia chuzou*). Their ideal [of intimate relationship] is fine, …, I think that's warm and sweet (*wenxin*), but I think I need some *jiqing*, some ups and downs (*qifu*), which is better for me."

Later, however, when I raised a follow-up question, asking: "What kind of affection counts in terms of *jiqing*?" *Scarlet* gave an answer which seemed to go against the quotation above:

> "'… Well, I think for me the more important thing is the feeling that I am living a stable day-to-day life (*guo rizi*) [together with my partner] … For me, maybe the most important thing is affection (*ganqing*) after all, if there is affection, there follows *jiqing*."

The contradiction in *Scarlet*'s narratives provides me with a vague contour of the role of "*jiqing*" in an intimate relationship, which is more nuanced than how Giddens understands

97 "*Ganqing*", literally meaning "affection", can be used broadly to refer to the affection between family members, friends, lovers, etc. Here, in Scarlet's narratives, according to the contexts, she used "*ganqing*" as equivalent to "*aiqing*", referring to affection between lovers.

"passionate love". According to Giddens, "passionate love is specifically disruptive in a similar sense to charisma; it uproots the individual from the mundane and generates a preparedness to consider radical options as well as sacrifices" (*ibid.*: 38). In this sense, passionate love "is marked by an urgency which sets it apart from the routines of everyday life" and leads individuals to "ignore their ordinary obligations" (*ibid.*: 37-38). This is also the reason why Giddens, in his book, argues that passionate love is very different to romantic love. However, in *Scarlet*'s narratives, "*jiqing*" refers to the piquant seasoning made of strong sexual joy and dramatic emotional turbulences, which can (re)vitalise an already built intimate relationship from inside rather than destroy it by a competitive affair from outside. Thus, unlike "passionate love" in Giddens's discussions, "*jiqing*" plays a role which brings fresh expressions of love and sexual attachments in a relationship and maintains it as stable as possible in the couple's day-to-day life, which is to a large extent similar to the role of romantic love in Western cultures according to Giddens. In other words, the interpretations and practices of "*jiqing*" among my informants, and among many contemporary Chinese people, break down Giddens's binary of passionate love/romantic love. The notion of "*jiqing*" infuses the form of "passion" into the project of "romance". To summarise, after travelling to and being localised in China, the Chinese translation of the English word "romantic"—"*langman*"—almost becomes a resemblance to what Giddens calls "passionate love", while the Chinese translation of the English word "passionate"—"*jiqing*"—instead becomes a desirable way of what Giddens calls "romantic love".

Here, I am not saying that in contemporary China there is no institutionalised and (hetero)normalised form of love which—just as "romantic love" in Euro-American cultures—not only represents but also reproduces the dominant structure of self, family and social life; rather, I am saying that in China such a form does not reside in the concept "*langman*". Where does such a form reside, then? My answer is that it resides in the concept "love/*aiqing*" itself. Let us go back to the paragraph I cited at the very beginning of the current section—the official and standard definition of "*aiqing*" designed by authorities and taught to large groups of young Chinese people who take exams to progress to post-graduate education. This version of *aiqing*/love echoes with many elements of Giddens's description of "romantic love" in modern Western histories and societies: reason, control of the future, maintenance of a life-long intimate relationship, socially based and materially premised, embracing sex but also institutionalising it, etc.

In today's China, contradictory attitudes towards love and marriage held by different generations, such as those held by *Scarlet* and her parents respectively, are becoming more and more common and visible (e.g. To 2013). However, in contrast to heterosexual women, whose love experiences are recognised as "love" in dominant sociocultural discourses

and whose marriages are recognised in national legal structures and in various social institutions, same-sex attracted women who refuse to marry men are often (forced to be) trapped in the heteronormative discourses of "*aiqing*/love" when they express and imagine their affective feelings towards women. When being "*langman*" often seems unrealistic and being "*jiqing*" often seems of no help to gain a legally secured and socially supported long-term relationship, the heteronormalised "*aiqing*/love" cannot satisfy many of these women either. No matter how frequently and obsessively my informants talked about their same-sex love stories, in which narratives they indeed used the term "*aiqing*", I still noticed a couple of times their "failures" to fully express their affective feelings with the word "*aiqing*". The most impressive example was the account of *Brook*, who had used "*aiqing*" for so many times throughout the interview but in the end reflected on the possibility to create a new word to enrich or even replace "*aiqing*":

> "… [rather than] the existing definition of … '*aiqing*', maybe [there is] a word we haven't created yet, a feeling we haven't put into words. … I think love should have an inclusiveness [more inclusive than '*aiqing*' does]."

For me, this broken sentence and unsettled question from *Brook* is extraordinarily intriguing. I, as a *les*(bian) woman, also conceive the yearning for a new language to describe my feelings of love that cannot be fully represented by the term "*aiqing*", since it has been used for so many times in particular ways and entails limited images and imaginations which are regarded as the default version of love. If love is only translated into "*aiqing*" and bound to the uniform heteronormative definition, I want to ask: does female same-sex love count as "love"? I guess this is the reason why currently some Chinese feminist and queer activists are questioning and renouncing the notion "*langman ai(qing)*/romantic love". I do see the significance of these anti-romantic ideas and practices, since the imported "romantic love" implies cultural imperialism, heteronormativity, and institutionalisations of love and sex which benefit monogamous marriage and "loyal" couples. Yet, after all the discussions above, I want to point out that, in the specific cultural and political contexts of contemporary China, "*langman*" sometimes goes against the Western notion of "romantic", and "*aiqing*" is usually narrower than a notion embracing non-heteronormative expressions of love.

Personally, I prefer the idea proposed by *Brook*. Even though the task of creating a brand-new term, or language, or narrative, is difficult, an awareness of the need for and possibility of this kind of creation is the opportunity for us to reflect on, enrich, and revitalise our existing knowledges. Thus, we can doubt "*aiqing*" but still love, we can love

but without naming it with a specific term in a hurry. In this sense, the implication of "love without articulation (utterance)", what I have discussed in the previous section, can also be extended from a negatively repressed expression of love to an actively reserved expression of love—if the very context, in which love is lively, burgeoning and sprawling, tries to simplify, flatten, rigidify and confine love in a box, such as a narrow definition of the word "*aiqing*" that refuses re-creations.

To give this section an open-ended end, I call for a de-centring, from the tasks of defining "love", from the search for the answers to the question "What is love?" I have seen and heard this question on various occasions—posted on online forums, printed on book covers, asked by friends or (ex-)girlfriends, etc. Many times I only ended up by admitting: "I can feel and recognise love, in my own life or when I am looking into somebody else's life; but I find it really difficult to reach a generalised and conclusive verbal definition of love once and for all." Such a failure has urged me to look for alternative questions more suitable and productive for studies on love. My alternative is not to ask "what is love" but to ask "how does love feel", which encourages different depictions of love's figurations in subjective ways: "a cartography of love", inspired by Braidotti's nomadic theory (2011a, 2011b, 2014), even though we still need particular vocabularies, grammars and narratives to talk about love.

Having Sex: Penetrating the Body and the Soul

Compared with the long narratives spontaneously and fluently spoken by my informants after I asked about their love stories, their first reactions to my questions about sex were often stammering sentences and awkward smiles. Of course, I am not implying that Chinese women-loving women have rich love experiences but poor sex experiences; according to my informant *Starlight*, the founder of a grassroots *lala* group in Kunming, sex is constantly a hot topic—if not the hottest one—within the circles of close *lala* friends. Looking back on my fieldwork, it was a pity that I made more efforts to meet new informants in order to collect more stories, rather than revisiting "old" informants time and again in order to reach for deeper stories, such as those about sex. It was also a pity that I assumed sex to be a difficult topic for Chinese people to talk about openly in front of a stranger. As described in the first section of this chapter, it was not only the taboo of talking about sex but also the anxiety of finding a proper language to talk about sex that entailed those stammering sentences and awkward smiles. Retrospectively, I found that sometimes the awkwardness of my informants was not the result of their reluctance to answer my questions, but from their reluctance to embarrass me, a young, feminine, shy scholar. The most extreme example was the interview with my lover-to-be; when we recalled that interview a few

years later, she admitted that the reason why she more or less evaded discussing sex with me was that she did not want to make me feel she was seducing me or taking advantage of me, especially when she was a *T* who was older and more-experienced than me and was fond of me. Likewise, as I remembered, during that interview I was also reluctant to touch on the topic of sex, because I did not want to dig out her detailed sex stories and take advantage of an informant I was attracted to—in the name of doing research.

Although not all interviews turned out to be like this special one, during my fieldwork I did often feel challenged by both the limited content my informants and I had spoken about and the rich information escaping from our spoken words. I did not even know which kind of subtle atmospheres and feelings surfacing in an interview could count as "useful" research data—rather than my own unsettled issues—and should be recorded as field notes. As a result, when I searched back for certain impressions in scenarios I could still remember, I was often frustrated that I could not find anything about these in the interview transcriptions and field notes. Now, I have to admit that, when I tried to collect narratives about sexual practices in my fieldwork, I also lost a considerable amount of non-verbal details taking place in the interviews when the topic of sex was discussed.

However, I still decided to develop a section about the sexual experiences of Chinese women-loving women, with the limited and fragmented data in my folders and memories, and I believe that the shortage of data situation per se indicates how precious these data are. In the rest of this section, I think and write more like a learner and explorer who has only seen small aspects of female same-sex sex in contemporary China, rather than like a professional who can skilfully cope with a large amount of information from fieldwork and can speak to the accomplished theories. Actually, in this section I only want to focus my discussions on one sexual act—"penetration".

"What can count as 'having sex (*fasheng xingguanxi*)' between women?" When I asked this question for the first time in my fieldwork, I expected an answer at least different from "penetration (*charu*)", because I was interviewing women with same-sex desires, and we were talking about practices without a biological penis, right? Anyway, the first answer to this question I had received, which was from *Shore*, was:

> "I think my answer is just the same as the answer of the other people. … Between a man and a woman, the [penis-vagina] penetration (*charu*) [counts as sex]. Between two men, as he [a gay man friend of *Shore*'s] once told me, [what counts as sex is] the same, anal sex (*gangjiao*).

> Between two women…they use fingers, or tools (*gongju*)[98], [what counts as sex is] also the same."

Besides *Shore*, many other informants—though not all of them—gave similar answers with little hesitation after I raised this question, as if their answer was the standard answer known by everyone. One or two informants even laughed when they heard this question and asked back with surprise: "You really don't know the answer? You must know! No, I don't think you need me to teach you about it." Indeed, searching through all my interview transcriptions, field notes and personal memories, I cannot ignore the fact that most of my informants defined "sex" between women as the act of "penetration" or regarded the intimate experiences of penetrations as more qualified as "real" sex, no matter whether they themselves and their partners often did and enjoyed penetrations or not.

During my fieldwork, for a while, I was quite disappointed by their monotonous adoption of such a mainstream and heteronormative discourse to define sex, even though I of course knew that any kind of female same-sex behaviours should not be simply seen as imitating heterosexual behaviours as if the latter were the essential, authentic and "real" prototype. However, as more and more interviews and casual conversations were carried out, I gradually changed my attitude, because I realised that there was a gap between how my informants defined sex and how they experienced sex. For example, I found that "penetration" in fact played a much more complicated and contradictory role in these women's sex lives, according to the nuanced anecdotes they described in a less well-organised and less confident tone, after they had initially and confirmedly announced their "standard" understanding of sex. It was important to reveal polymorphous practices and feelings under a seemingly monotonous discourse.

I started my analysis of this abovementioned gap by looking into the sexual experiences in *T-P* relationships[99]. Among my *P*-identified informants and friends, quite a few disclosed to me that they did not enjoy being penetrated very much, even though they still defined sex by "penetration". My informant *Scarlet*'s experience is typical, and here is what she shared with me:

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98 Here, by the word "tool" *Shore* means sex toys such as dildos.

99 I have already elaborated in a whole chapter (Chapter 4) how *T-P* dynamics fuel the knowledges and embodiments of female sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions, and in it touched upon the topic of sexual practices. Here I touch upon *T-P* relationships in order to focus on how women-loving women understand sex and have sex.

> "My ex-girlfriend and I, we did have sex. But I didn't have much [pleasurable] feeling. … She said she had had no sexual experience before we dated each other, but she had consulted some [*T*] friends. … [For the first time we had sex] I was in a lot of pain, and she dared not enter [my vagina with her fingers] deeper. We were just halfway through, then we stopped and slept. … We tried several times again, but every time I didn't have much [pleasurable] feeling. We were both frustrated. She asked me: 'Why? Do you have sexual apathy (*xing lengdan*)?' I answered: 'I don't know. Maybe.' … Every time when I felt pain, I couldn't feel anything else, then I would be angry and complained, and she would stop. We went to sleep. … However, later, we both became less bothered about this fact, after all, this is not the most important thing [in our relationship], so we just let it be (*shunqi ziran*). …"

When I asked *Scarlet* what kind of intimate interactions with her ex-girlfriend she preferred and which could make her orgasm (*xing gaochao*), she answered:

> "No [orgasm]. [But] I felt that I was floating in the sky when we kissed each other. … [A]t the moments of kissing, I had pleasure, but when we did that [penetration], I had no pleasure at all. Besides, I enjoyed a lot when we cuddled and fell asleep together, I felt so secure. … With her by my side, we could hold each other's hand, I felt so warm."

However, when I asked *Scarlet* what counted as "having sex" from her perspective, her answer was:

> "It should be the finger [penetrating the vagina]. Kiss [doesn't count]… Many people can kiss each other, for example when we play the game 'Truth or Dare', we can be punished by having to kiss somebody. [My definition of sex between women is] still the finger [penetrating the vagina]."

Maybe one can interpret *Scarlet*'s experience as an unsuccessful, passionless sex life led by a young, inexperienced *T-P* couple, as a result of the monotonous representation of sex—heteronormative sex—in people's common sense. However, I am in fact impressed by her accounts: during the intimate interactions between *Scarlet* and her *T* girlfriend, the aim that *Scarlet* should gain sexual pleasure was always given prior importance, no matter whether *Scarlet* was actually pleased or not. Regardless of the pain that annoyed *Scarlet*, *Scarlet*'s *T* girlfriend approached or retreated in their sexual practices following *Scarlet*'s reactions and feedbacks, and *Scarlet* herself never downplayed or repressed her own negative feelings and emotions. According to the book *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians and Bad Girls*, edited by Laura

Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, in the mainstream feminist thoughts in the 1970s in the U.S., femmes—the American counterparts of *P*-identified women—were oversimplified as "sexual objects especially when they chose to be part of a clearly sexual dyad of butch-femme" (Harris & Crocker 1997: 3). Of course, such an understanding of butch-femme relationships or *T-P* relationships is problematic (see Chapter 4); furthermore, here I also want to stress that being a "sexual object" is more nuanced than being "sexually objectified". Besides the importance of consideration for femmes' (and *Ps*') feelings and the fulfilment of femmes' (and *Ps*') sexual demands in butch-femme relationships (and *T-P* relationships) (Halberstam 1998), I also argue that even though *Ps* are indeed sexual objects of *Ts*, they are by no means passively and unequally objectified by *Ts* in their intimate interactions. In other words, being a sexual object can be a conscious, egalitarian and participating process in which one actively embodies and creates her own and her sexual partner's desires; but being sexually objectified cannot.

Another impression from *Scarlet*'s accounts was that the bodily sexual feelings of *Scarlet*'s *T* girlfriend were largely underreported by *Scarlet*. Is the sexual pleasure of *Ts* really just "spiritual orgasm (*jingshen gaochao*)", as we have jokingly said? Stereotypically, a *T* is supposed to be the one who arouses, pleases and "serves" her *P* partner; but a *T*'s own sexual pleasure is usually assumed as spiritual rather than physical. Surfing the internet, I have easily found an enormous amount of enthusiastic posts in which *lalas*, most of whom are *Ts*, share the technical skills to make their female partners have orgasm, as well as the "knowledge" of the "G-spot" and "female ejaculation (*chaochui*)". However, concerning *Ts*' sexual pleasure, there are far fewer open and detailed discussions among *Ts* themselves; and the most visible and fervent debate among *Ps* is "Can a *T* be conquered (*gong*[100])? And how to make her surrender and enjoy sex?" Whenever a self-proclaimed *P* shares her experience of conquering her *T* partner and making her have a physical orgasm, this *P*'s tone is usually very proud and excited.

Comparing the above narratives side by side, it is easy to detect the possible tension, dissatisfaction and incapability about sexual life in a *T-P* relationship, if both the *T* and *P* strictly insist on defining sex between women as vaginal penetration and view orgasm either as only spiritual or only physical. What I want to make clear here is that I do not think that any feeling of tension in having sex is definitely worse than so-called "harmony" and "reciprocity". Just as Halberstam puts it, "whereas people may well invest in values such as equality and reciprocity in their political lives, they may not want those same values to

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100 See the footnote about "*Gong*" in the third section of Chapter 4. Here in this specific context, "*gong*" refers to actively performing sex upon the relatively passive partner, and especially refers to penetrating the partner.

dominate their sexual lives" (Halberstam 1998: 113). Sometimes it is the tension that makes a sexual practice "sexy". However, neither do I think that all tensions in sexual practices, fantasies and ideals are unproblematic. Popular passionate aesthetics about "real" and "good" sex still link "being physically penetrating" with a male body and male gender, links "being physically penetrated" with a female body and female gender, links vaginal penetration with "real" sex, and links a measurable physical orgasm with the success and the highest pleasure in sexual experiences. Confined by these links, both *Ts* and *Ps* may suppose that: *Ps* must enjoy being physically penetrated because they are female and feminine; *Ts* should accept and enjoy being physically penetrated as well, because they are biologically women; and a *P*'s failure in having physical orgasm is frustrating to both sides of the *T-P* couple. In *Scarlet*'s story, we can see how the deep-rooted heteronormative passionate aesthetics have greatly influenced a non-heteronormative couple, even if either of them meant to imitate hetero sex.

Fortunately, much other information was expressed in *Scarlet*'s narratives, despite in a relatively implicit and weaker voice, which suggested alternative understandings and embodiments of "sexual pleasure"—of how to "recreate (in) sex" in the specific lovers' own way—even though the dominant knowledge about (hetero)sex had already influenced them. Feminist analyses of the construction of the notion of "female sexual dysfunction (FSD)" have criticised the standard "script" of hetero sex (e.g. foreplay, leading to intercourse, leading to orgasm) and the power of medical "experts" to define sexual norms (Cacchioni 2007). In *Scarlet*'s accounts, at the beginning both *Scarlet* and her *T* girlfriend were frustrated because *Scarlet* felt nothing but pain when her girlfriend tried to penetrate her with fingers, and they even wondered whether *Scarlet* had sexual apathy.

Similarly, for many young women-loving women in China, although the finger-vagina penetration between two women is not a heteronormative sexual practice, some core elements of the standard hetero sex script are obviously influential in their sexual lives, such as the tendency to define sex as "penetration", the belief of the penetration-orgasm sequence, and the pathologization of women who have no obvious orgasm according to a uniform and "scientific" standard. In contemporary China, young people can barely receive any sex-positive sex education with gender sensitivity and awareness of sexual diversity in classrooms, families and the mass media (Wang & Wang 2012). Thus, being silenced by the taboo of talking about sex on campus and at home, being exposed to "compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980)", and being doubly excluded—as unmarried women and lesbian women—from "legitimate and autonomous" sexual subjects (Kam 2013), young *lala* couples like *Scarlet* and her girlfriend may easily appropriate a heteronormative attitude towards sex when they start to explore sex. Nevertheless, in the later parts of the interview

excerpt, *Scarlet* described how she lived in peace without so-called "orgasm" and enjoyed the pleasurable feelings derived from kissing and cuddling until falling asleep together with her girlfriend, which were often regarded as "foreplay" before sex and comfort after sex in the standard hetero sex script. Before long, this couple loosened the idea of penetration and "let it be", and tailored their own passionate aesthetics.

Besides *Scarlet* and her girlfriend, who "recreated (in)" a new ir/relevance between physical orgasm and a desirable sexual life, some of the other informants, whether they are self-identified as *T, P, H*, bisexual or queer, have "recreated (in)" other facets of sex in other ways. For example, *Gourmet* re-defined "sex" by de-centring the sex organ and extending it to the whole body, and even included sex toys and various erotic emotions into this concept as well:

> "I think, for a lesbian, any part of your body can become your sex organ. So, it counts as 'having sex' when you see a particular part of your body as your sex organ and use this part to touch any part of another person's body. Lesbians have very rich sexual experiences, … they can use some tools (*gongju*), ...and double their sexual pleasures. … Besides, in my sex practices, I have also tried some ways other than physical experiences, for example, with role playing. I like role playing very much. … I care about emotions a lot."

Kite had not enjoyed sex (with male partners) until she had had sexual experiences with female partners. In her description of "the best sexual experience so far" in her life, she disconnected the act of penetration from the most wonderful feeling of having sex, even if she usually quite enjoyed being penetrated:

> "The best [sex I have experienced] … I still remember it clearly, … Usually, either with my first girlfriend or with my second girlfriend…we fucked each other. That means we entered (*jinqu*) each other's body. But in the best experience, which happened between my second girlfriend and me, she even didn't enter me at all. That experience was really amazing in my memory."

Olive gave me an interesting and inspiring answer to my question of "what can count as 'having sex' between women". She answered: "Orgasm." I asked a follow-up question: "Then, in your case, how do you define an orgasm?" She replied: "As an experienced old man—sorry but I can't remember his name now—once said: 'The very moment of erection (*boqi*) is the orgasm per se." Here, three revolutionary points need to be pointed out. First, when defining sex behaviours, *Olive* did not focus on any specific parts of the body and the way these parts interact with one another. Second, when referring to sexual

organs to describe female same-sex sexual feelings, she freely appropriated the body parts usually belonging to a biological man without using "if only" or "just like"; for her, talking about her "erection" was by no means a metaphor or a yearning, even not an emphasised "fact" (because she was not a female-to-male transgender person). Third, when defining orgasm, she shuffled the commonly-supposed order of different stages of having sex, and gave the name and meaning of "orgasm"—a later stage of sexual practice and the mark of sexual satisfaction in common sense—to "erection", an earlier stage of sexual practice and the situation which awaited being satisfied in common sense. The short answers to my questions given by *Olive* almost re-created the connotations of the words she spoke, as well as the relations among different concepts and the images and imaginations brought by these concepts. Moreover, by thinking her body and sex as opening-up and open-ended, without assuming them to be either imperfect or versatile, *Olive* just went straight to what she was in her perspective and what she wanted for her own sake. She re-created herself in her re-created world of sex.

Finally, to close this section as well as this chapter, I return to myself and see whether I can say a little bit more about the journey of finding a language to talk and write about sex in an academic way. How have I translated sex, and what translations have I become? Personally, I do agree with the saying that "sex is penetration", though not according to the abovementioned heteronormative logic. For me, not only sex but also love is penetration—if the "penetration" is translated as a subjective feeling—rather than a particularly scripted physical (f)act—through both body and soul. Here, I suspend the philosophic and religious question about "whether there is a soul on earth", otherwise I should also ask whether the "body" is more real than the "soul", only because we can see, hear and touch it. I do not want to treat "body" and "soul" as two mutually-exclusive and binary notions, but I try to follow the routes of these two notions that are sometimes distinguished from one another and sometimes entangled, processes which can be expressed in various narratives or implied in the non-verbal ways. Let me develop the figuration—as well as the translation—of female same-sex sex in a personalised way based on my personal experience, as follows.

I still remember the moment when, on a winter's night in 2014 at a metro entrance somewhere in Shanghai, I said "goodbye" to the informant who made me unable to talk about sex fluently and willingly. She expressed that she already felt so happy even if we would probably not see each other again in this life. I thought the same in my mind; as a professional researcher, I would not allow myself to contact my informants as I wished, only for the sake of dating them. We hugged, but could not bear to touch each other for too long through our thick jackets. However, one and a half years later, when we both

travelled back to Shanghai from two places far from each other[101], I felt that this journey was not only physical but also spiritual, and I believed that we both stepped from despair to hope, from being isolated to being opened up, from the guarded but helpless us to the vulnerable but brave us—with huge difficulties, but finally overcoming them. This time, we hugged tight and long, in the summer daylight, with few clothes between our skins, but still trembling as if we were still in that winter night. Once our bodies connected, we did not want to be divided again, and we knew that we could not be divided again. We cried, we laughed, we spoke out one word at the same time: "home". We went/were home, towards and into each other's body, and soul. That was penetrating through both body and soul. That was sex, and love.

101 About the context of this incident, I have discussed in the fourth section of Chapter 2.

Revisiting the "Closet", Coming Out of "Home": Some Perspectives for Analysing Coming Out/ *Chugui*

"New" Stories Emerging from Old Tasks

Turn back to the first page of Chapter 1, and you will be reminded that my personal starting point of this study about Chinese women-loving women's subjectivity, which was to seek a possible language for expressing myself/my "self". Yet, the myself/my "self" who is typing these words in the lastest draft of Chapter 6 at this moment in 2018[102] is not exactly the myself/my "self" from 2005 described in the first paragraph of Chapter 1, who was for the first time surprised and tormented by her desire for women. What have also changed are the people to whom I once wanted to express myself but held back, and the people who once experienced the very same situation as mine. In other words, many old stories have become new ones, and such becoming processes have never ended.

My exploration of the coming out stories of Chinese women-loving women is also such a story that newly grows rather than grows old. When I heard the term "coming out of the closet" ("*chugui*"[103] in Chinese) for the first time, I immediately realised how vivid this figure of speech was. It was about thirteen years ago, one day in 2006, and my then-current girlfriend explained to me what "coming out of the closet" meant: "If someone has never known that you love girls (*xihuan nüsheng*) before, and you tell her or him about this situation now, it's your '*chugui*/coming out' to this person.[104]" Since then, many times I have imagined and rehearsed in my mind the scenarios of my coming out to different people and their possible reactions. I had mixed emotions of fear and yearning about "coming out", an "anxiety" you could name it. However, I did not take the initiative to come out explicitly to anyone for about four years.

In the autumn of 2010, as a second-year postgraduate student, I had to decide what topic I would research and write about for my MA thesis. At that time, I could not imagine anything else other than the everyday lives of my peers—the young, urban *lala* women—that would give me motivation to do academic research. Thus, in order to persuade my then supervisor to support my research proposal, I gathered the courage to send an email to her, explaining that I myself was homosexual and really wanted to base my MA thesis

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102 During the writing process, I have done several big revisions and countless small revisions to my dissertation, and have developed three or four versions of it, which are rather different from one other. The lastest version of Chapter 6 was written in the Summer of 2018.

103 As "*chu*" means "stepping out from something, somewhere or some situation" and "*gui*" means "closet", the Chinese term "*chugui*" has little literal difference from the English term "coming out of the closet", although the historical, cultural and political meanings and implications of the two are indeed distinct from each other, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

104 I remember that she mentioned both the Chinese term "*chugui*" and the English term "coming out".

on a study of "my own kind". The next day, I received my supervisor's reply, in which she expressed her support and promised to help me as much as possible. It was for the first time that I clearly sensed a moment of "coming out/*chugui*", and the friendly response brought me great warmth and strength. In the following two years, I set the first steps in my academic journey: I interviewed twelve *lala*-identified women, who were of my age (in their early-twenties) and living in Beijing at that time, and collected and analysed their opinions and experiences about "coming out/*chugui*". At my MA thesis defence, as the first student in the history of the college who had developed a degree thesis on the topic of homosexuality, I bravely defended my non-normative study and the non-heteronormative people I wrote about. But secretly I trembled with fear regarding being asked any questions by the committee about my own sexual orientation, because I was not sure of what kind of answers to give which would minimise my regrets later.

In the September of 2012, I went to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, to start a PhD which would span seven years. In my personal life, I had gradually come out to different people: several old friends, two cousins in my extended family, a few LGBT-friendly classmates and professors in China, many Chinese *lala* women I met on various occasions, and almost all my acquaintances in the Netherlands. During these processes, I had experienced and witnessed different kinds of talk and silence, ideas and emotions, preciseness and ambiguity, which did not always turn out to be what I had expected or within my control. Not until the summer of 2016 did I finally start to take the steps of coming out to my parents. Even though I had become an "expert" on LGBT issues then, a person who had collected many relevant academic findings, and studied media coverage, official discourses and peer narratives about sexual and gender diversity all over the world, I still found myself painfully grappling with mixed emotions which were by no means relaxed.

With transforming perspectives that had been reshaped again and again through the emerging new stories I had experienced in my life and collected for my studies, I have revised this chapter about coming out/*chugui* many times. I have witnessed how this chapter has been changed from being an addition to the storyline of my MA thesis to a challenge to it. When writing my MA thesis, I was obsessed about finding out the distinction between how the imported and translated concept "*chugui*" functioned in the lives of Chinese non-heterosexual people and how the concept "coming out" functioned in its original Western cultures. I compared the Western studies that had theorised "coming out" as gay and lesbian staged identity development processes (cf. Cass 1984; Coleman 1982; Plummer 1981; Troiden 1979) with works arguing that a sexualised identity was seldom applied by Chinese people with same-sex desires as their core identity (Chou 2000, 2001). For the conclusion of my MA thesis, I emphasised the separation between the process of a

lala woman's self-identification and the meanings she might give to "coming out/*chugui*". However, implied in such an emphasis, I neglected the essentialistic tendency of opposing "Western" against "Chinese", and opposing the "inner" self against the "outside" world. In addition, in my MA thesis I paid much attention to the notions of "filial piety (*xiao*)", "carrying on the family line (*chuanzong jiedai*)" and saving "face (*mianzi*)", which were believed to be not only the core of traditional Chinese family values, but also important elements constituting Chinese subjectivity (Chou 2000). Yet, even though I critically reflected on these abovementioned notions and the existing studies on these notions, I did not further question whether Chinese family values and individual subjectivity had been changing in recent years, and whether Chinese "traditions" had been selectively emphasised and reproduced by different strands of discourses for different purposes.

Hence, in the eyes of today's myself/my "self", my MA thesis has become a story too old to grow longer or thicker along its existing storyline. I therefore decided that in this chapter I would allow myself to rewrite my understandings about coming out and allow some new coming-out stories in Chinese women-loving women's lives to outgrow the "typical" ones I once read about in other authors' works and once analysed in my MA thesis. Here, I use the word "new" not to disconnect the "present" from the "past", not to value the experiences of "young" people over those of the "elders", not to argue that some ideas and practices are "outdated" while some other are "trendy". Rather, I use the word "new" to map out more diverse, complicated and zigzagging journeys of "coming out of the closet" embodied by the Chinese subjects in my ethnographic field and my personal life.

One of my main tasks in this chapter is to revisit the experiences of my informants and myself, and to deconstruct and de-centre the analyses of coming out/*chugui* in Chinese contexts from a commonly taken-for-granted assumption: the idea and pursuit of coming out is rooted in Western cultures and imported to China, so to a large extent goes against Chinese traditions, sociocultural realities and people's understandings about "self". But such a deconstruction and de-centring is not to oppose "Sameness" with "Difference" and argue that, in the rapidly globalising China, "Western" and "Chinese" are becoming the "Same". Instead, I refuse any form of simply making "Difference" and "Sameness" into a binary, because having to choose either side of the two would largely reduce the power of critique and creativity (see Braidotti 2014: 169-170) that the concept "difference" can and should possess. I am of course not the first scholar who has tried to do this. In more recent literature on Chinese same-sex experiences, more and more authors are criticising the knowledge which has been limited by opposing "Chinese" against "Western" in a dualistic framework (e.g. Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; Kong 2011; Martin 2010; Rofel 2007; Wei 2012). Nevertheless, it is always meaningful to revisit these debates and the

knowledges produced from different perspectives, along different paths and towards different directions.

In the following sections, I first pay special attention to the experiences of coming out to parents, which are usually regarded as the most critical part of *chugui* and the most difficult step in the *chugui* journeys for Chinese non-heterosexual people. I reflect on the popular argument that Western coming out practices conflict with Chinese cultural traditions and family values. I argue that, although "filial piety (*xiao*)" is indeed a supreme Chinese family value and rule that creates difficulties and struggles for non-heterosexual individuals when they think of coming out to their parents, it will not be analysing "filial piety" but otherizing the parents, if we preclude the parents' subjectivity from our studies that focus on the children's subjectivity in their coming out processes.

Then I examine how "coming out/*chugui*"—whether as a metaphoric expression or as an embodied practice—has already developed and is continuing to develop new roots, meanings, ways of empowerment, a capability of criticising and creating, and extending ground beyond LGBT issues, in today's Chinese sociocultural contexts. I emphasise the importance of allowing and enabling the idea of coming out to be differently and freely interpreted, defined, appropriated, and hence become constantly vital and pertinent in our everyday lives, instead of simply questioning whether the Western-originated idea of coming out can become a desirable life choice and life practice for a non-Western individual unless they are "Westernised".

After that, I further question the disproportionate focus on the notion of "home" and the limited imaginations about this "home" in existing studies on Chinese coming out/*chugui* experiences, including my own former study. These discussions revolving around "home"—such as "coming out", "coming home" and "leaving home"—have reflected on the heteronormative and patriarchal family values and family relationships in China; however, these discourses also help to construct one's original, biological family as the most unconquerable "closet" per se, and help to idealise the arrival at an ideal "chosen family" as the desirable destination of one's journey of becoming oneself.

Filial Piety or Otherization: The Parents of Our-"Selves" in Coming Out Journeys

One's coming out to parents constitutes the core of the concept "*chugui*" understood by non-heterosexual people in contemporary China. Here, I use the word "core" to refer to the most crucial part that determines the essence of *chugui*, and also to refer to the hardest part that makes the complexity of *chugui* difficult to unravel. In this section, I focus my analysis on this core; but before I go further, I want to stress that this core is neither unchangeable nor

unchanged. Just imagine the world when the generations of *90-hou* and *00-hou*[105], who are visibly more sensitive and tolerant to sexual and gender diversity in comparison with their parents and grandparents, become parents and grandparents themselves. At this time in the future, the history of the concept "coming out of the closet/*chugui*" will turn to subsequent chapters. Or, just observe what has happened even more recently. For example, although not very common, I have at least heard that one of my uncles in my extended family, who was born in the late 1960s, openly said to his teenage daughter: "Feel free to date someone (*tan lian'ai*), with a boy or a girl—it's just fine." I am not saying that people have over-exaggerated the current predicament faced by Chinese non-heterosexual people of coming out to their parents, neither am I claiming to make a prophecy of a better future for non-heteronormative life styles in China; but I do not view the difficulty of one's coming out to parents as a universal, uniform, ahistorical or constant "truth" both in my studies and in my personal life. In other words, the forms and the norms of the family change (Hu 2018). This is not only a general approach premising my discussions below, but also an important argument towards which my analyses will be navigated.

Among the scholarly works which have specifically discussed coming out/*chugui* in contemporary China, especially about one's coming out to his or her parents, Chapter 7 ("From Coming Out to Coming Home") of Chou Wah-Shan's book *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (2000) is a relatively early work, widely influential, and often cited and/or criticised by later studies. In that chapter, Chou points out the features of Chinese *tongzhi* issues, mainly generated by the Chinese understandings and evaluations of the notion "self", which is different from what is thought and done by their counterparts in Western societies (Chou 2000: 254). To summarise Chou's arguments, because Chinese individuals identify themselves first and foremost as members of a family and in a wider society rather than as homosexuals or heterosexuals, the Chinese "self" is not an atomic and individualistic "self" seeking personal liberation but a "self" deeply embedded in familial "*guanxi*" (i.e. "commonality of shared identification", *ibid*: 253). In China, "filial piety (*xiao*)" is one of the most important principles for being a person, so most Chinese *tongzhi* individuals cannot imagine, afford or bear hurting their parents by coming out to them. Thus, for *tongzhi* individuals, the biggest pressure is from the family, especially from parents. At the same time, the parents of those "outed" *tongzhi* not only have a problem to accept their non-

105 "*90-hou*" and "*00-hou*" respectively refer to the people born in the 1990s and those born in the 2000s. Here *"-hou"* means "post-", and combining a period of time (usually a particular decade, for example the 1980s) and "*-hou*" is a kind of popular expression in Chinese everyday language nowadays, referring to the generation born during this particular period of time (for example, the generation born in the 1980s are called "*80-hou*").

heteronormative children but also risk "losing face (*duilian*)" in front of other people because of their deviant and unmarried children. Based on this point, Chou argues that the Anglo-Saxon lexicon of "coming out" and "out and proud" goes against "traditional Chinese culture". Instead of "out", which makes Chinese people think of separating, isolating or excluding in everyday language, and implies "leaving the family, parents, and culture to become lesbian or gay", Chou proposes "an indigenous lexicon of Chinese *tongzhi* self-confirmation", "coming home (*huijia*)", as an alternative to the Western "coming out" and more suitable for Chinese *tongzhi* (*ibid.*: 259).

However, reading through Chou's book, we can see a contradiction between Chou's exemplifications of "coming home" and the implications he promises that "coming home" can bring. On the one hand, according to the life stories collected by Chou, the "coming home" strategy can be practised by integrating one's same-sex relationship—but in most cases in an ambiguous and tacit way—into one's original family by introducing the same-sex partner as a family friend or even a sibling-like member, in order to maintain a harmonious family relationship and non-confrontational interactions with the parents and the heteronormative family atmosphere (*ibid.*: 37). On the other hand, Chou also points out that *jia* (meaning both "home" and "family" in Chinese) is "a mental category that refers to the ultimate home and roots to which a person belongs", and hence "coming home/*huijia*" "means not only going back…to the biological family" but also "the 'chosen family' of *tongzhi* friends that is his or her second home of comfort and support" (*ibid.*: 259).

Obviously, even though Chou believes that the strategy "coming home" makes the boundary between "out" and "closeted" flexible, within which space various forms of negotiations can become possible (*ibid.*: 260), he underestimates the incompatibility and the non-equal power relation in Chinese society between patriarchal, heteronormative family values and "queer" experiments of companionship. A number of later studies have reflected on Chou's proposal of "coming home" and have set out numerous critiques: that it tends to de-sexualise same-sex relationships; it sacrifices individual voices under the name of "family harmony", limits the issues of "coming out" in the private sphere; it idealises Chinese historical tolerance towards same-sex behaviours; it neglects the intertwinement between "coming out" and "coming home"; it ignores the emerging new sexual subjectivities and the diverse usages of "Western" identities such as "gay" and "lesbian"; and it binarizes and essentialises "Western" and "Chinese" (Engebretsen 2014; Hu 2018; Kong 2011; Martin 1996, 2003; Sang 2003; Wong 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Wei 2012). Agreeing with these scholars, I have found in my MA and PhD research projects that many women-loving-women informants have chosen to leave their biological families for a temporary period of time, often on an odyssey, to leave their parents' homes or be far away from their hometown, no matter the extent to which they had

come out to their parents. For these women, it is leaving (their parents') home rather than the strategy of "coming home" proposed by Chou that has enabled them not only to explore same-sex desires and sexuality but also to explore many other aspects of life and the world, because they can be emotionally independent of their biological families and relatively free from the pressure of heteronormative family values (Wang 2012, 2014).

Nevertheless, in this section, I want to reflect even further and question the tendency of simply otherizing *tongzhi*'s parents as monolithically uncommunicable, impenetrable people without any ability or willingness to self-reflect themselves and react to challenges, assumptions made by Chou in his *Tongzhi* and also made in many other studies. These assumptions about parents cannot be easily avoided, because most academic studies to date on Chinese same-sex desires and relationships, including my own, have had much more access to the non-heterosexual individuals themselves than to their parents. The limited first-hand data about the parents has rendered their immediate emotions, thoughts and practices—whether fluid or stubborn—to be represented largely by their children; the parents' subtle and slow journeys, full of ambivalence and struggles, have barely been followed and observed by researchers. Yet, such limitations in our current studies should not be an excuse for otherizing parents—stereotyping them as conservative moralists who focus on the need for their children's absolute and uniform "filial piety", regardless of the multiplicity and constant changes to the shape and essence of "morality" in contemporary China. When we analyse "the Chinese concept of self" (Chou, 2000: 254) by studying the scenarios of *tongzhi* individuals' coming out/*chugui* to their parents, we should not forget that both sides are subjects experiencing "becoming" and playing vital roles in such processes, no matter how much bitterness, disagreement, misunderstanding and uneven power relations happen to emerge in the way.

My efforts to reduce such otherization in my study involve looking closely into the narratives provided by the informants who have already come out to their parents, and being cautious of any arbitrary assumption of my own that preclude the parents from the map I draw for grasping "subjectivity". An impressive interview revolving around the topic of coming out/*chugui* was with *Kite*, who had for years been "100% outed (*baifenzhibai chugui*)", in her own words. In the interview, *Kite* recalled how her mother accepted her same-sex orientation:

> "[When I was in high school,] I told my mother: 'I'm afraid that I have found myself a girlfriend." At that time, I didn't recognise this [same-sex love] is a group phenomenon. … But before long I realised [that under 'normal' circumstances] I should find myself a boyfriend. … Then, I started to explore, exploring whether the affection between that girl and me was friendship or something else. My mother followed up the whole process I had experienced. She was also exploring. At first, she thought the 'girlfriend' thing I told her was only a joke or a close friendship between

> two girls. Later, she gradually found out that it was not the case. She discussed this issue with my uncle [, her brother,] about whether this [same-sex attraction] was a problem and what was the possible reason causing this [same-sex attraction]. She even helped me recall back my history [of attraction towards females]. She recalled my special attachment to a girl when I was in middle school, and my special admiration for a female teacher, … Thus, my mother built up all these kinds of anecdotes. I think she was a little bit overstating it, I don't know how much those anecdotes were related [to my sexual orientation]. But my mother counts as a supportive kind of parent, if we categorise the parents with whom children try to come out. Of course, sometimes she still secretly asked me: 'Look, I know an excellent young person (*nianqing ren*), a PhD in physics who is working in Shanghai now. I know these PhDs are your type. Are you interested?' I asked back: 'Is that a man or a woman?' She said: 'A man.' I answered: "Oh, no, forget about it.' My mother never forces me at all, whether I want to meet that guy or not. She's afraid of stimulating my resentment. But sometimes she does remind me that maybe I'm just attracted to a certain type of person, but among these types of person there are more females than males. She thinks it easier for a woman to be together with a man. … So, my mother is the person who knows me the best. My father doesn't care for me; my mother is my closest family member. She has been accompanying me to explore, since I was young, so I think it's natural that she can understand me. …"

In the above excerpt, "explore[106]" is a key word, and the subjects who are exploring include both *Kite* and *Kite*'s mother. Regardless of whether the mother's active explorations, such as tracing back the daughter's childhood and teenage years to search for the "reason" of homosexual orientation, really make sense or not, she does find her own way to help herself understand and accept her daughter's non-normative sexuality and life style, even though she feels the pressures from the outside world. Additionally, *Kite*'s mother does not cast a clear-cut distinction between heterosexual and homosexual upon her daughter; instead, she believes that the "type" of person, a specific crystallisation of different characteristics rather than merely the biological sex, determines the density of attraction. Of course, the mother's sporadic recommendations of young men may imply more or less internalised

106 In the interview, *Kite* used several times the English word "explore" instead of any Chinese word. I attribute this to *Kite*'s habit of mixing Chinese and English expressions, having lived abroad for some years. The ability of *Kite*'s family to send her to study in a Western country and *Kite*'s experience there probably imply that both *Kite*'s and her mother's attitude towards same-sex relationships and coming out cannot well represent the situation of the parents and children who have had less access or direct contact with Western societies. However, I insist that the case of *Kite* and her mother is inspiring here. After all, I never pursue, promise or expect any perfect "representation" in my study.

heteronormativity, but because *Kite* has considerable space to make her voice heard and respected, the communications and negotiations between the mother and the daughter in fact go beyond the harmony/confrontation binary, both sides of which have constituted the classic debate over whether the Western confrontational coming out strategy is compatible with Chinese values of familial and social harmony.

What I should highlight here is that, among the informants in my MA and PhD studies who have tried to come out to their parents, *Kite*'s experience seems to have been the smoothest. Most parents have to differing degrees undergone difficult emotions such as being disappointed, puzzled, angry, worried, guilty, rejective, etc., especially during the short period right after a verbally expressed or clearly evidenced *chugui* incident/accident. Prejudice, stigma, ignorance and false information about homosexuality that are advocated and reinforced in mainstream knowledge, mass media and everyday life easily form in some parents' minds. It is not unusual that a parent's first reaction towards the child's coming out is to turn to treatments from medical organisations and authorities (whether they eventually do anything with these or not), despite homosexuality being de-pathologized in the latest version of The Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD-3) released in 2001. What follows is the coming out process experienced by my informant *Olive* and her mother. Some parts of their experience echoed with Chou's understanding of coming out and with the abovementioned typical parents' reactions after children's *chugui*, whereas some other parts did not. I describe this case in detail because it was the only case in which I had direct conversations with both the daughter and the mother.

When I interviewed *Olive* around the end of 2013, she was in her early-thirties and had not yet come out to her parents, although she was almost outed among her college classmates in China and her acquaintances abroad (*Olive* had experience of living in a foreign country). *Olive*'s mother had kept urging her to get married to a man and have a child, and had never appeared suspicious of her daughter's sexual orientation, even though *Olive* dressed up and acted androgynously. At the time when the interview was carried out, *Olive* was single and thinking about a cooperative marriage (*xingshi hunyin*), in order to alleviate the pressure from her mother and to be more filial with her parents. Half a year later, *Olive* updated me to say that she had discussed a cooperative marriage with a Chinese gay male friend, who was also interested in a cooperative marriage, and they planned to get married. *Olive* told her mother about the planned marriage. The mother was relieved and happy, and even expressed her willingness to give the new couple financial support to help them settle down in Shanghai.

However, later, *Olive* found that she could not easily face this plan. She was so depressed, she could not sleep well, and several times even cried in her nightmares. *Olive* could not help but confess to her mother that she was in fact unwilling to get married and was only doing it

to make her parents happy. Although being worried, the mother still stressed the necessity of getting married to achieve a fulfilling life, and asked the daughter to overcome these emotional difficulties and stick to the marriage plan. In the end, tired of suffering from the depression and also because of some disagreements with the gay male friend about certain practical arrangements for the marriage, *Olive* decided to follow her own feelings and gave up the plan of a cooperative marriage.

After another year, *Olive* updated me to say that she had started dating a woman but the pressure from her mother had never stopped. Gradually, communications between the mother and the daughter reached deadlock, because the mother would jump from any topic straight to a complaint that *Olive* had not got married, could not give her a grandchild and was "not filial (*buxiao*)". One day, during such a conversation, *Olive*'s mother asked: "Can it be that you are a homosexual (*tongxinglian*)?" And *Olive* admitted it verbally. The mother burst into tears, feeling disappointed and failed by her daughter, and claimed that *Olive* was abnormal and should go to see a psychological therapist. The mother said she felt sorry that she had no other child, otherwise she would have given up *Olive*, and even worried about whether *Olive* would become infected with HIV. *Olive*, also in tears, held her ground tightly and argued with her mother. For around two months, the arguments continued, sometimes in more calm ways while sometimes in more emotional ways. Several good friends of *Olive* also got involved to help console and persuade *Olive*'s mother, and the mother was gradually re-educated with much more LGBT-friendly knowledge and values from the younger generation.

In the end of 2015, *Olive* reported that her mother had finally accepted her sexual orientation and got along well with her girlfriend. Although *Olive*'s mother still emphasised that this issue should be kept secret from relatives and family friends, she seemed more relieved than before because she could see the happiness her daughter had gained from the love relationship. When I luckily had a chance to meet *Olive* and her mother in Shanghai in 2017, which was the only case when I directly interacted with one of my informant's parents, the mother seemed to be loving, caring for and proud of her daughter, because she thought *Olive* was a kind-hearted, genuine person. What she was scared of was the stigma imposed upon homosexuality by wider society. The mother still hoped that *Olive* and her girlfriend would adopt a child if there was any chance, and insisted that this hope was not for saving her own face but for securing *Olive*'s wellbeing in the future[107]. At the end of that conversation,

107 So far, the most common form of elderly care in mainland China is home-based care, and it is mainly the children of elderly people who have the responsibility of taking care of their parents, whether physically, economically or emotionally. So, if someone does not have a child, his or her old-age life is often seen as lonely, poor, and vulnerable to abuse in the nursing homes for the elderly without children (which are usually called "*jinglaoyuan*").

I was very much intrigued by *Olive*'s mother's words, which were uttered so casually but at the same time so sincerely: "Well, I've spent the larger part of my life living for others. From now on, I also want to live for myself, like young people do!" However, when I asked her what kind of life was "living for herself", she was stuck: "But I don't know yet. I need more time to think about it…" Then, talking about a trip she had taken to the foreign country where *Olive* once studied, the mother commented: "That trip was exciting and amazing. I've been imagining to leave the small town where I live and to move to a place far away, where nobody knows me and I can be myself. In my hometown, I cannot be my true self. Oh, the biggest regret in my life was that I failed to leave my small hometown."

The above case is long but still only depicts some of the segments and ripples in one person's coming out journey to her parent. Here, I want to reiterate that although *Olive* is the person who "has come out to her parent", this journey is also her mother's journey. In the words I have heard and the glimpses I have taken of both *Olive* and her mother, the understandings and practices of "self" were much more ambiguous, self-contradictory, multiple, knotty, and volatile, than "the Chinese concept of self" discussed by Chou (2000), especially when I include the parent as an active and malleable subject rather than otherizing her as a rigid and numb representative of so-called traditional Chinese culture. In Chou's analysis of the "scenario of *tongzhi* issues" (Chou 2000: 254), the children's ideas and practices which differ from their parents' expectations and common sense are interpreted as unquestionably hurting the parents, undermining kinship-based identity, violating the highest family value, and damaging the most important element constituting "the Chinese concept of self". From such a perspective, it seems that, in the name of "filial piety", only the non-heterosexual children are active—but meanwhile repressed—subjects who are capable and responsible for fulfilling "the Chinese concept of self", for themselves and for their parents, while their parents are incapable "others" who are exempted from this responsibility of maintaining or rethinking the concept of "self" for their children and for themselves. Ironically, if we understand and examine "self" in such a unilateral and double-standard way, we will lose a big part of the vitality, possibility and creativity of it, because, without the parents as equally active subjects to embody and explore "the Chinese concept of self", the non-heterosexual children are doomed to be so paralysed that they are either "betraying" a "Chinese self" by appearing too "selfish" or are keeping this "Chinese self" but not feeling themselves.

With *Olive*'s story I argue that we should allow—and also make—the parents step out from the aloof, isolated and confined position of innocent but impenetrable "others", and we should acknowledge—and also expose—how the parents actively take part in the configurations of the children's decisions and experiences about coming out/*chugui*, even and especially when a coming out process is being held back. We should see how parents embody and enable so

many subtle ways to approach different figurations of "the Chinese concept of self", even and especially when "subjectivity"—an analytic tool with which we can understand and express a relational "self"—is not a clearly defined and directly applied concept and term in Chinese. Similar to what their children might do to them, the parents might hurt, disappoint or irritate the children; but they might also try to heal, learn and contribute. The parents have selfish and cowardly moments; but they are altruistic and brave in other circumstances. The parents, together with their children, practise and search for the "self", even though they might get lost, or compromise, or never work it out, or forget about it in the end. In this sense, coming out/*chugui*, whether in Western or Chinese contexts, should not be understood narrowly as confrontations between the conservative parents and the rebellious children, but should be understood as interactions between subjects—or even as "intra-actions" within phenomena (Barad 2007; Geerts & Van der Tuin 2013)—in various ways.

This argument is neither to romanticise the experiences of one's coming out/*chugui* to parents in contemporary China, nor to advocate for it without contextualising it in any specific social, cultural, political and economic environment. Of course, some of the abovementioned interactions and "intra-actions" are by no means peaceful, elegant, smart and productive; but all of these ways enable people to express and receive, teach and get educated, self-defend and self-reflect, or just enable one to go through her or his own journeys made of knotted, twisted, rough, tough thorns but to know more about the others, especially about the ones she or he loves and cares about. Only with these interactions and "intra-actions" can a coming out process become a "coming home" journey, no matter whether the involved subjects share the same destination, or just travel together for a stretch of the path, or only communicate with each other at certain crossroads. Similarly, for the scholars and activists who work on LGBTQ issues, it is when the parents can be seen and analysed as full subjects that the children can be seen and analysed as diverse subjects, who feel, think, be and become themselves/their "selves" through different ongoing dynamics with different other; and this can be done without "otherizing" anyone.

The Next Metaphor, Rather Than the Canonical Original: Setting "Coming Out" Free From its Western Root

As one of the key concepts in my academic pursuits, "coming out/*chugui*" has been undergoing my continual examination, which previously was to find its precise but contextualised definition in terms of Chinese non-heterosexual experiences. Yet, such academic examinations had sometimes made me forget that the original coinage of the term "coming out of the closet" was a metaphor, a figure of speech. That is, any definition or use of the

term "coming out/*chugui*" is not meant to be the best or only version. Instead, the vitality of the concept "coming out of the closet" is its potential to be created again and again without an authoritative "original".

I was once reminded of the above by a conversation with a younger cousin of mine on a trip, which was the first time we had met without the usual crowd of extended family members surrounding us. On the last day of that trip, both of us had already felt comfortable and free enough to share some secrets with each other, and I wanted to come out to him that I was lesbian. I rehearsed the coming out "speech" in my mind, wondering whether this heterosexual young man was non-homophobic about gender and sexuality, and whether he could have any empathy with me. Surprisingly, before I could start my topic, my cousin broke the silence and initiated a conversation: "Actually, I have something to come out to you." He said this sentence in Chinese, and he used exactly the word "*chugui*". I was confused for a second, because, as far as I knew, he was straight and dating a girl. However, it turned out that, after saying that sentence, my cousin told me something that had nothing to do with his sexual orientation or a love relationship. He had found the courage to tell me something he had secretly done, which he had never told anybody else, because he was not sure whether disclosing it would cause people to judge him negatively. "Granny would kill me if she knew this," he made a face at the end. He did not know that my mind was drifting away because I was amused by his appropriation of the term "*chugui*"; he did not know that in this very anecdote he inspired me to stop seeking for one possible, proper and best meaning of "*chugui*" in my studies, which could clearly distinguish it from the Western "coming out of the closet". From then on, I have enjoyed discovering the various ways that "coming out/*chugui*" can be understood and utilised by different Chinese people, including some creative ways without strictly following how scholars and activists have described this concept.

To repeat Chou's argument, "coming out" is a notion developed alongside the values of individualism, discourses about equal rights, the creation of a "hetero/homo-sexuality" distinction in modern sexology, the high anonymity of urban lifestyle, and the appreciation of self-expression in verbal communications, in Western societies, which to a large extent goes against Chinese historical and sociocultural contexts (Chou, 2000). Although I agree with Chou that "coming out" is by no means the only desirable choice for Chinese non-heterosexual people, I tend not to link the notions such as "Western", "Chinese" and "coming out" respectively with exclusive and fixed conditions. In fact, in contrast to his book, published in 2000, in which Chou applied the Chinese translation "*zhan chu lai* (standing out)" when he referred to "coming out" (*ibid.*: 252), today the Chinese term "*chugui*" has been commonly used in mass media, internet language, academic research and activist discourses to refer to the disclosure of one's non-heterosexual preference and lifestyle.

Chou analysed some life stories written or narrated by Hong Kong gay and lesbian people, and found that they usually directly adopted the English term "coming out", as if they could not express it in Chinese (*ibid.*: 262). However, in my studies carried out in the early and mid-2010s, many of my informants who were born in the late 1980s and the early 1990s reported that they could not clearly remember when and where they learned about the term "*chugui*" for the first time, but they used it in conversations with me as frequently and freely as they used other everyday words with no need of special explanation, and they did not define "*chugui*" in the same way. Facing such changes, I argue that we should see the new roots of an "imported" concept; if an "imported" concept gradually becomes popularised and routinised in a local tongue, it in some sense has already been indigenised. In this situation, a debate merely focusing on whether the Western "coming out" is compatible with Chinese "realities" is unrealistic itself.

Below, I look closely at the very interesting but not unique experience of my informant *Starlight*, who has been fighting for her own ground when facing the abovementioned debate about coming out/*chugui*, both in her personal life and in her activist career. *Starlight* was born in the late 1970s in a small town near Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan Province. When she was eighteen, she was caught dating a girl by her parents and she did not deny her non-heterosexual preference. She called this accident the starting point of her *chugui* journey. Since then, for many years she has been on the one hand negotiating with her parents and on the other hand devoting herself to local *lala* and *tongzhi* activist groups.

In her personal life, *Starlight* was thrown out of home by her mother several times, was forced to break up from her girlfriend under her father's intervention, was deprived of financial and emotional support from her family when she desperately needed help, and every same-sex relationship of hers was intentionally ignored and denied by her biological family. However, facing such difficulties, *Starlight* had never given up communicating with her parents, although she smartly switched from one practical strategy to another, in order to protect her own interests. For a period, every day she read aloud to her parents assorted articles conveying LGBT-friendly information at the dinner table, regardless of the antipathy her parents showed. On another occasion, knowing her parents might stop supporting her to continue her studies, she temporarily promised to them that she would have a try to change to be a "normal (*zhengchang de*)" person, in order to win back some financial support. The negotiations from both sides—whether confrontational or compromising communications, whether verbal or tacit messages, whether genuine words or tactical lies—had lasted for many years. Very slowly, but after all eventually, *Starlight*'s parents changed their attitude towards their daughter, especially when they saw *Starlight* start her career, even though a part of her career was working in a lesbian and bisexual women's grassroots activist group.

Witnessing their daughter becoming mature and independent, and being moved by her constant dedication to the benefits of "her own kind", *Starlight*'s parents finally gave smiles to her and her *lala* friends. Later, her parents even helped her buy a small apartment in Kunming, which was used partly as her living space and partly as the office of her grassroots activist group.

However, *Starlight*'s persistent pursuit of *chugui* did not gain much appreciation from the *lala* women around her or from some activist elites who were more influential than her in Chinese LGBT activism. In the interview with her, *Starlight* described her own observations and understandings about "coming out/*chugui*":

> "Once, I initiated a discussion in an online *lala* group. I asked everybody who was active in the group at that moment to use one sentence to define what '*chugui*' was. It turned out that there were a lot of different sayings. Every *lala* had her own understanding about *chugui*. To summarise, I find that the biggest struggle of most *lalas* is the success and failure of *chugui*. Their understandings about 'success (*chenggong*)' and 'failure (*shibai*)' are in fact idealistic thoughts. In their eyes, 'successful *chugui*' refers to telling the family that they are *tongzhi* and the family immediately accept it. But in fact, standards for measuring 'success' and 'failure' vary from one person to another and depend on specific cases. … I myself understand *chugui* as the relationship between parents and children (*qinzi guanxi*), because I don't want to overstress this element (referring to the element of non-heteronormativity here) and the already-heavy pressure [caused by being non-heteronormative] in this concept. *Chugui* is the relationship between parents and children, it is to communicate with parents. In our everyday lives, we talk with friends about many things, right? For example, our understandings about love, our plans for future life, our plans for study, etc. We also need to learn how to communicate with our parents about this stuff. As such, being *tongzhi* is just one of various issues in our lives. How do we let the parents know about it, let them know our own choices about it, let them know our plans for our lives, etc.? They're all about the parent-child relationship, yes. Besides, I don't agree that *chugui* can be judged as either 'successful' or 'failed'. *Chugui* is a life-long process. …"

Then, *Starlight* mentioned the contradiction between her own understanding and appreciation of the practice of *chugui* and the evasion among the other *lala* women around her who faced the difficulties of *chugui*:

> "Self-identification (*shenfen rentong*) is a very broad notion. I realise that if we understand 'self-identification' as a process of re-labelling, it's in fact not good for an individual's development. [What is more meaningful is to think about] how to de-label [a person] (*qu biaoqianhua*). One

> should make her or his self-identifications more diverse rather than letting them be as simple as self-labelling. … Many people believe that one's self-identification is for the purpose of *chugui*. But I don't think so. In reverse, I believe that the process of *chugui* is one's self-identification itself. What I am advocating is that *chugui* is also an alternative road *lalas* can choose, and that this road is one's personal growth because in my definition '*chugui*' is just a constructive effort to build up a good parent-child relationship. … Unfortunately, many of the volunteers in my group only accept the idea of *chugui* when talking with me, but practically at least half of them prefer to choose 'cooperative marriage (*xingshi hunyin*, or *xinghun* for short)'. …"

Furthermore, some fellow activists in the LGBT groups in metropolitan cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, wondered whether *Starlight* had internalised Western ideas and ignored Chinese contexts in her daily work:

> "Lately, some LGBT group organisers in China, such as some in Beijing, are arguing that *chugui* is something Western, is not compatible with Chinese culture. They're debating over whether *chugui* is a proper strategy for [Chinese] *tongzhi*. But I myself always insist on and advocate for the idea of *chugui*, both in my personal life and in the grassroots group I organise. I have received a lot of criticisms from those organisers. They said 'you cannot order everybody to *chugui*', but the way I understand *chugui* is different from the way they do."

Reading *Starlight*'s words, I find several interesting points worth highlighting to help us rethink common knowledge about "coming out/*chugui*" in Chinese academic and activist discourses. First, from *Starlight*'s perspective, the definition of "*chugui*" is on the one hand narrowed down to "one's coming out to parents" without caring about coming out to other people, but on the other hand broadened to be about the wider "parent-child relationship" regardless of whether it is the closet of non-normative sexual orientations that one is coming out from. The narrowed aspect of *Starlight*'s definition of "*chugui*" has indeed been repeatedly stressed by the informants in my MA and PhD studies as well as my *lala* friends. Even when I participated in a local LGBT activity in Beijing, once upon a time, when I was standing right in the street, under the Rainbow Flag, sending flyers to passers-by, advocating for de-stigmatising LGBT people, and being ready to communicate with any of them as a *lala* volunteer if necessary, I was still asked by the other LGBT volunteers who met me for the first time: "Have you come out yet?" And without being surprised at all, I knew exactly that they meant whether I had come out to my parents or not.

The broadened aspect of *Starlight*'s definition of "*chugui*", however, is much more creative. Rather than understanding one's coming out to parents as a destructive experience for a

normative Chinese family because of its feature of being confrontational (Chou 2000), *Starlight* emphasises and even personally practises the constructive possibilities that coming out can bring to the different generations in a family. In Chou's analysis of the incompatibility of the notion of coming out within Chinese contexts, in his book *Tongzhi*, he connects gays' and lesbians' decision to come out to their parents with a decision to be economically and socially independent from their original family, an idea fuelled by the values of Western individualism according to him (*ibid.*). Emphasising the significance of being in relationships, especially within the family kinship, for "the Chinese concept of self", Chou advocates the strategy of "coming home", as I reviewed and discussed in the previous section. Here, however, similar to Day Wong's critique of Chou that he does not realise the intertwinement between "coming out" and "coming home" (Wong 2007b), *Starlight*'s definition of "coming out" exactly embraces a journey of "coming home". This journey of "coming home" heads towards *Starlight*'s biological family—her parents—as well as towards her "chosen family", the grassroots *lala* group she founded. Furthermore, it heads towards a materialised "home", a small apartment under her name but not completely in the sense of individualistic property, because she receives her parents' financial and emotional support and simultaneously shares this private space with other *lala* women for group activities.

The second point that needs to be highlighted is that only on the surface did *Starlight* seem to be sticking to an ultimate goal of "coming out/*chugui*", and imposing a Western middle-class, normative, gay and lesbian value upon Chinese local non-heterosexual people without concern for local contexts. In fact, however, in the Chinese local *lala* communities where *Starlight* lived, "coming out" was by no means normative; otherwise, *Starlight* would not have tried so hard to prove that *chugui* was "also an alternative road *lalas* can choose", but only to be disappointed. In comparison, for the LGBT activists in bigger cities such as Beijing and Shanghai who had access to more international platforms and discourses, the idea of "coming out", as a typical rite of passage in a Western homonormative life path, should be considered and reflected upon rather than thoroughly embraced in non-Western societies. As a result, *Starlight* was labelled as a Westernised Chinese activist by these peers, despite the fact that she did not have as much access to informational and material resources from Western countries as her peers did in Beijing and Shanghai. The power and value of *Starlight*'s attempts to (re-)appropriate and (re-)define "coming out/*chugui*", as well as the power and value of multiple definitions and practices of transnationally travelling ideas that re-root in local languages, knowledges and everyday lives, was to a large extent misunderstood, underestimated and confined by people's common sense and imagination about the power relations within, between and beyond Western and non-Western experiences.

The third point I want to highlight in *Starlight*'s case is that *Starlight*'s understanding about "*chugui*", especially the part about "self-identification", is neither the same as nor entirely different from the canonical Western interpretation about "coming out". In my MA thesis, I paid more attention to the finding of the separation between the formation of a *lala* identity and a *lala*'s practice of *chugui* to other people (Wang 2012). With this finding, I argued in my MA thesis that, if the self-identification of *lala* had been completed, it was unnecessary to come out to other people; and this was unlike the meaning of coming out in Western discourses, which saw the process of coming out as the process of gay or lesbian self-identification per se (cf. Coleman 1982; Troiden 1979). Now, according to *Starlight*'s narratives, "self-identification (*shenfen rentong*)" was on the one hand intertwined with *chugui* practices, while on the other hand not at all narrowly identifying oneself as *lala* or *tongzhi*. Instead, for *Starlight*, the process of self-identification could be and should be a process of untying oneself from one particular identity and allowing the "self" to become multi-layered and assembled. My interpretation is that such a seemingly ambivalent understanding about both the connection and disconnection between coming out/*chugui* and being homosexual actually frees the notions of "identification" and "identity" from precise, stable and authoritative verbal definitions, from the exaggeration of one or several segmented facet(s) of a person at the cost of ignoring other facets. Such a seemingly ambivalent understanding enables comprehensive and complex experiences of one's subjectivity.

To summarise, in this section I argue that we can put aside the assumption that "coming out/*chugui*" has been and should be officially defined in an exclusive way only in the LGBT lexicon, and we can and we had better keep using "coming out/*chugui*" as a metaphor, which is enabled—rather than weakened—through a series of transitions, transformations and translations. Otherwise, if we pay much more attention to where a concept comes from than to where this concept can extend, we will not dismantle the "closets" but only create more of them (to use our metaphor): this would confine not only the concept "coming out/*chugui*" but also the people who attempt not to lazily accept all the authoritative knowledges about this concept but to use it in a different and lively way.

De-centring "Coming Out" From a (Hetero)normative Familial Relationship: Beyond the Common Imaginations About "Home"

So far, my discussions about coming out/*chugui* in this chapter have revolved around the relationship between same-sex attracted individuals and their parents, which are mainly embedded in family contexts. This is a revisit to some important and influential theories relevant to the coming out/*chugui* practices developed within Chinses academia and activists,

especially a revisit to the *tongzhi* research carried out by Hong Kong scholar Chou Hua-Shan that has invoked not only inspirations but also debates and critiques. In the previous sections, I have reflected on Chapter 7 in Chou's book *Tongzhi* (Chou, 2000: 249-282) from different angles; in this section, I reflect more, starting from the title of that chapter, "From coming out to coming home". It is not surprising that under this title the issue of coming out is confined within the sphere of "home". Ironically, even though coming out within home is indeed challenging, Chou opposes "out" against "home" in this title and literally makes "home" the most rigorous closet and makes the parents the heavy and untouchable doors of this closet.

In order to go beyond this limitation, later studies have used their own data to dialogue with Chou's theories. Some scholars break the boundaries between "private" and "public"—between "inside home" and "outside home"—and allow the notion of coming out/*chugui* to come out of the closet of the "home" (e.g. Wong 2007b). Wei observes the "*tongzhi* space" in Chengdu, a provincial capital located in southwestern China, and points out the fluidity of private/public space and the fluidity of situations of closeted/out (Wei 2012). The two recently published books respectively about Beijing and Shanghai *lala* communities do not specifically concentrate on the topic of coming out/*chugui* in one single chapter, but disperse it throughout the whole book, intertwined with other topics such as LGBTQ activism, cultures and laws of marriage, emerging sexual selves from emerging *lala* communities, *lalas*' everyday politics, and so forth (Kam 2013; Engebretsen 2014). I myself, in my MA thesis, looked into the half strategic and half compelled choice of "leaving home" (moving out of the place where the parents and other biological family members live), taken by the young *lala* women living in Beijing who were not satisfied with the limited space in a patriarchal and heteronormative biological family that only allowed limited same-sex affection to remain, which were far from these women's ideal same-sex relationships and life styles (Wang 2012, 2014).

This time, however, instead of pushing the issue of coming out/*chugui* further beyond the confinement of "home", I look in another direction, back to the home. In this section, I revise the angle from which we have commonly observed and imagined "home". First, most of the authors of the existing studies of Chinese coming out/*chugui* experiences—including Chou and the ones criticising him—presuppose an essential distinction of sexual orientation between the same-sex attracted informants and the other members in their original families, who are taken for granted as "heterosexuals (*yixinglian*)". Second, the default coming out/*chugui* script in contemporary China has been described as that, in a family, a relatively young non-heterosexual individual is burdened with the struggles about coming out or not to the family members of older generation(s), who have more power, control more resources, and have the moral advantage over the younger generation (see also Hu 2018). In other words, when these studies are reflecting on the heteronormative and patriarchal family—

as a social institution—that creates non-heterosexual individual suffering, which is indeed a very important and necessary task, they tend to also assume and imagine every single family as a (stereo)typical representation of that heteronormative and patriarchal institution, rather than one specific complex of relationships different from another. As a result, the "home" per se has become a uniformly narrow and dull place anyway, no matter whether we "come" to it or "leave" it. Yet, what would happen if in a home there are unexpectedly other "*tongzhi*/comrade(s)"[108] ready to share their non-heteronormative experiences? What would happen if in a home it is the parent, rather than the child, who is struggling about coming out? The rest of this section is my analysis of some such non-(stereo)typical coming out/*chugui* stories, through which I de-centre the discourses, imaginations and figurations about "coming out" from our common knowledge and assumptions. Also, this section is a record of some different—though unrepresentative—realities about familial relationships, which are not necessarily heteronormative in a generally heteronormative society.

One of the cases was about the relationship between my informant *Kite* and her grandmother, which interwove how women of different generations understood and remembered female same-sex affection in different but non-contradictory ways. In the interview, when *Kite* was telling her smooth and successful coming out experiences in her extended family, she related her own same-sex romance to her grandmother's life stories:

> "I always think my grandmother is a *T*, seriously. When I came out to my grandmother, I described to her what kind of person my girlfriend was. Then she exclaimed: 'Ah, you two are exactly like me and *Orchid*!' *Orchid*, a woman, is her best friend from college times. You know what, my grandmother has told me a lot of stories about herself and that *Orchid*. Let me share some with you! …"

Then, with great relish, *Kite* vividly recounted several of her grandmother's anecdotes. She was obviously enchanted by the beautiful, dramatic, bitter-sweet details dating back to the old memories of her grandmother's past. Interestingly, *Kite*'s grandmother, in return, was inspired by *Kite*'s *chugui* scenario and turned it into a chance to give some precious life experiences some nuanced meanings, even though the grandmother and the granddaughter did not share the same "*les*(bian)" identification:

> "On many occasions, my grandmother stressed the resemblance between the relationship of me and *Jay* [*Kite*'s girlfriend] and that of her and *Orchid*. … Now my grandmother and *Orchid*

108 Here, I use the word "*tongzhi*" as a pun, since it originally refers to the (Communist) comrades, which I have explained earlier in a footnote at the beginning of Chapter 1.

> are both very old. Living in different cities, they're too old to take flights to visit each other. … But they make phone calls often. … What is super funny is that, recently, *Orchid*—I've never met her in person—told my grandmother on the phone: 'I have a granddaughter, and she is thirty-one now. But she hasn't found any date yet (*meiyou zhaodao duixiang*).' … Then *Orchid* started to describe to my grandmother how excellent her granddaughter was. … According to *Orchid*'s words, it seems to me that her granddaughter is completely not interested in having a boyfriend. Why, she's also homosexual? So funny! But this is just what I 'wishfully guess (*yiyin*)'. I often do so [wishfully guessing], it pleases me. Another wishful guess of mine is: my mother is especially attracted to 'sissy men (*niangniang de nanren*)'. And my father is indeed sissy. … He even once tried a red, silk, long dress!"

From *Kite*'s narratives, I see a motley picture of a family, far from a homogeneous, so-called heteronormative social institution. Drastically different from the parts quoted above, in other parts of the interview *Kite* told stories about how some family members judged her as psychologically abnormal and feared that her openly coming out would damage the reputation of the other young, unmarried women in the extended family. In this situation, I appreciate *Kite*'s active communications with the supportive family members and her "wishful guesses". I am not simply saying that *Kite*'s grandmother and her female friend *Orchid* are lesbians and a pair of same-sex lovers. However, I am greatly impressed by all the subtle ways of challenging and/or de-constructing the heteronormative surfaces of life, by humour, imagination, story-telling and listening, which are carried out not only by the person who is coming out at the moment but also by the family members who have a chance to relate the coming out to their own experiences of affection, love, and sexuality, with empathy and care. In this sense, there does not have to be a distinctly "heteronormative" original family for a non-heterosexual individual either to "come home" or "leave home". Rather, when there is one or a few family member(s) invoking the other members to rethink their own lives and to explore new connections between one another, we do not have to understand the seemingly heteronormative "home" itself as an airtight "closet" but can imagine it as an open location and an open-ended concept.

In some other cases, however, the "home" where my informants need to "come" or "leave" is neither the home of their original family nor their ideally chosen family. For example, my informants *Desert* and *Petal*, both of whom were in their forties when I carried out fieldwork, had married men for about ten years and then divorced. They both had children, who either lived together with them or were separated from them when they were exploring same-sex relationships. In their experiences, the complication of coming out/*chugui* was not the fulfilment or failure of performing filial piety for the parents.

Desert was born in the mid-1970s, in a small town in north-western China. From early childhood, *Desert* did not like her original family because of the domestic violence from her father and her mother's running away from home. She hoped to move out as soon as possible. Grown up, *Desert* could not wait to marry a man, because in her living conditions and environment at that time, it was the only way for her to get out of her original family and start a new life. Soon, *Desert* married a man in haste. However, after she got married, *Desert* gradually realised her same-sex orientation and found herself unable to enjoy living with her husband. *Desert* proposed divorce, but her husband did not agree with it. At the same time, *Desert*'s husband lent a helping hand when she coped with some troubles caused by her original family. For some time, *Desert* did not have the heart to insist on the divorce. After several years, *Desert* could not help but propose divorce again, in order to actualise a reunion with her same-sex lover at that time. But before her husband gave his answer, she found herself pregnant. Having no courage to have the baby directly aborted in hospital, *Desert* did harsh exercise every day, some not appropriate for pregnant women, and left the fate of her baby to chance. Anyway, she gave birth to a healthy boy. Later, after the ten-year marriage filled with bitterly verbal and physical conflicts with her husband, *Desert* finally divorced and got the custody of her son. From then on, *Desert* and her son mainly lived in her hometown, because of the constraint of their registered permanent residence (*hukou*), but they often visited *Desert*'s girlfriend in Shanghai and stayed with her for a while. The father of the boy had obligations to provide financial support, but often verbally humiliated *Desert* and even physically attacked her in front of the boy when they had to meet. Thanks to *Desert*'s excellent skill in free combat (*sanda*), her ex-husband was often defeated by her.

At the time when I interviewed *Desert* in her girlfriend's place in Shanghai, although the couple had not clearly named their relationship in front of the boy, the nine-year-old boy seemed quite satisfied with, and happy for, the new life of her mother and himself. When I carried out the interview with *Desert* and her girlfriend, the boy was playing computer games in another room without closing the door. *Desert* did not make any efforts to prevent her son from hearing our conversations. The boy came to us sometimes to ask for sweets. Hearing me mention the words "my girlfriend", he sighed with a smile: "Well, why do you all have a girlfriend, but I don't?" We laughed together.

For *Desert*, a middle-aged women-loving woman, "coming out to the parents" was not the most important and the most difficult part in her journey of be(com)ing herself. Instead, she had experienced different "homes", including a home simultaneously providing her with opportunities to explore her sexual self and creating obstacles for her to do so. In such a home, the husband disappointed *Desert*, instead of, as she had once expected, saving her from her parents' home full of violence; while the son brought *Desert* happiness,

instead of preventing her from pursuing a free life as she had once feared. This home was filled with contradictory facts and mixed emotions. Although it was neither her original family nor her ideal family, *Desert* "came" to this home and then "left" it, and during the ten years in between, she had experienced the most important and difficult journey in her life—becoming herself, rather than coming out to anyone else.

Another informant, *Petal*, shared many similar experiences with *Desert*. She was also born in the 1970s but in a town in north-eastern China, married to a man before she realised her same-sex preference, gave birth to a son, and got divorced after the ten-year marriage. However, different from *Desert*, *Petal* could not win her son's custody because her ex-husband threatened that, if she wanted the custody of the son, he would never agree with the divorce. So, *Petal* gave up the custody. After that, she kept contact with her son once in a while on the phone. *Petal* had not come out to her son, since she thought that he was still too young to know about this. She decided to come out to him when he turned eighteen. Looking back to the ten-year marriage with a man, *Petal* expressed her surprise in the interview that a period of ten years could feel like a blank in her life, and she could hardly remember any vivid details about what happened between her and her ex-husband. Unlike *Desert*, who entered a passionate and satisfying same-sex relationship after her divorce, *Petal* had broken up with several girlfriends during the five or six years after her divorce. Although *Petal* was involved in a stable relationship with a woman when I interviewed her, I could see that she was more or less disappointed by the previous and current same-sex lovers for various reasons. However, *Petal* devoted herself to her career and became a successful business woman. Flying all over the country and even to many foreign countries, *Petal* seemed proud of her own business accomplishments, while she complained that no life partner could help to make her life easier.

In *Petal*'s case, even though she chose herself a husband and took the initiative to divorce him, she had hardly "come" to this home in a deep sense, if that ten-year marriage had imprinted on her life little vitality. On the other hand, however, *Petal* had not yet "left" this home's shadow completely, because she was still prevented by her ex-husband from reuniting with her son freely. Besides such a "blank" but haunting home, there seemed no other home where *Petal* had arrived. According to *Petal*, the life of her and her current same-sex partner was just the same as a heterosexual married couple, only without a legal marriage certificate. Of course, put in another context this saying might be a sweet comment on a same-sex relationship; but put in *Petal*'s story line, this saying conveyed her disappointment and boredom.

In comparison with *Desert*'s journey of becoming herself, which had led her through different homes by "coming" and "leaving", *Petal*'s journey had instead reached a successful, proud, rich self in many aspects of her life but did not reach an ideal "home"—both in her

own eyes and in people's common sense. Here, it is not only *Petal* herself but also all of us, including and especially the scholars who explore the becoming and wellbeing of subjects who are marginalised by mainstream society, who are facing a series of questions, which I think I have partially addressed in this section: Can *Petal* live a happy and secure life in the end without affiliating herself with any "home" in a traditional sense, if she is indeed tired of the homes she has already experienced? If she fails to live happily or fails to find herself a cosy "home", will she be stigmatised as a miserable, lonely, regretful old woman, or even be simply forgotten, within and outside *lala* communities? What can a study about non-heteronormative people's coming out experiences do in order to dismantle as many "closets" made of different kinds of normativity as possible, rather than merely be dissatisfied with one of them?

Throughout this section, I have used some seemingly special, atypical cases of "coming out", "coming home" and "leaving home", to try to broaden and even de-centre the imaginations of the studies about Chinese coming out/*chugui* experiences from some normative or romanticised images of "home". In the existing studies that have discussed the journeys of "coming out", "coming home" and "leaving home" of Chinese same-sex attracted individuals, including my own former study, "home" either refers to one's original family, which is taken for granted as a stereotypical representation of an imagined monolithic "heteronormativity" and "patriarchy", or refers to an idealised chosen family, a utopian umbrella embracing different queer relationships and life styles. These limited imaginations about "home" help to construct the space, time and people's relationships within one's original family into a pre-existing and oppressive "closet" per se. Meanwhile, these limited imaginations also help to anchor one's dream of fulfilling one's happiness and "self" on either reintegrating into the original family with compromises or arriving at a brand-new and idealistic "home" located somewhere "out" of the imperfect everyday reality. Such disproportionate attention paid to such limited representations of "home" may sometimes turn our studies of Chinese coming out/*chugui* experiences to another "closet", which reduces, oversimplifies, confines and normalises people's longings, belongings and destinations of the journey of "becoming". In return, such a "closet" in our thinking and knowledge may also prevent us from creatively exploring more possible figurations and connotations of the notion of "home".

Conclusion: A Retrospective Summary and A (or another) Growing Part of My Study

Further than Six Years and Three Days[109]

When I arrived here, the first line of the last chapter of my dissertation—the chapter titled "Conclusion", after several rounds of revising the above chaters, it was six years and three days after the starting point of my PhD project. Even if I know that tomorrow it will grow to become six years and four days, and that, soon, this chapter will be revised too, I mark the "six years and three days" here to commemorate all the ordinary but lively moments that have constituted the distances and time which I have lived, through all the previous chapters. To live through is by no means merely to endure; to live through is to become. In the case of my dissertation, I live through the words I have written, erased, restored, and/or revised, many times, in many paths, towards many versions; and such journeys of becoming are non-linear, multiple, and sometimes contradict each other.

Whenever I re-read a particular part of my draft, there is always something new surfacing and inviting me to incorporate or compare it with the already-written content. Whether I accept such an invitation or not, I know that my study and my writing will never be "complete" enough for me to put a true "ending" to them. Just as Braidotti describes her study of "nomadic subjectivity": the project "is quite rhizomatic in itself and it grew organically from a cluster of central and inter-related ideas. It is as if there is no possible conclusion, but only more productive proliferations and successive unfolding" (Braidotti 2014: 167).

Hence, this concluding chapter is not only a retrospective summary of my dissertation but also a (or another) freshly growing part of my study. I do not intend to set an authorial/authoritative tone for my research outcomes, but do welcome more "collectively shared cartography of discursive, affective, and social relations" (Braidotti 2011a: 18) that can break the writer/reader binary, whether through revisiting my and other scholars' studies about the subjectivity of Chinese women-loving women, or through re-working them.

My PhD project aims to explore women-loving women's subjectivity in contemporary China. Although the term of "subjectivity/*zhutixing*" is quite unfamiliar among most Chinese people, I have found that it is a concept more inclusive and open than many other overlapping concepts, such as "identity" and "selfhood", concepts which I discussed in Chapter 1. Not despite but because of this unfamiliarity, "subjectivity" can be translated into possible notions, languages, images and imaginations for my informants' and my own thinking, talking and writing processes, which have broadened, deepened and enriched my study. The approach I adopted to fulfil such a task has been greatly inspired by Rosi Braidotti's feminist-philosophic-new materialist theory of "nomadic subjectivity" (e.g. Braidotti 1993, 2002, 2006, 2011a,

109 My PhD trajectory in Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, started formally on September 2, 2012. I started to develop Chapter 7 on Septermber 5, 2018.

2011b, 2014), which calls for creative/critical projects of mapping out the "figurations"—the accurate, complex, situated, embodied, difference-affirming, ever-becoming and de-centring locations—of the ones at the periphery. Although the figuration of "nomad", which is favoured by Braidotti herself in her creative "critique of Euro-centrism from within" (Braidotti 2014: 179), is not necessarily a perfect figuration for us to understand and think about Chinese women-loving women, it does help to develop my dissertation as a cartographic work for grasping the formations and figurations of the "subjectivity/*zhutixing*" of these women. To be specific, the main task of my project has been to observe, interpret, and experience in person, the concept "subjectivity/*zhutixing*" and how this concept is specifically embodied among Chinese women-loving women; to observe, interpret and experience the concept as subtly depicted live maps about the "becoming" journeys of these women's knowledges, values, sentiments, practices, and bodies—about themselves/their "selves" in the specific times and places they live, and about "other(s)", about "same" and "different", about "better" and "worse", about the past and the present and the future, about their longings and belongs.

Methodologically, echoing with such an understanding about "subjectivity", my ethnographic fieldwork as well as my later data analyses and writing practices have been learning processes of the genealogical stretch of feminist "ethico-onto-epistem-ology" (see Barad 2007; Haraway 1988; Geerts 2016; Van der Tuin 2011b), which turns my study, my life, and myself/my "self", as a whole, into what we usually call "research results"—the quintessence of a research project. The image and idea of "nomad"/ "be nomadic"/ "to nomadize" fuel my experimental expressions, interpretations and associations. I am also reminded that it is worth nomadizing the different kinds of "subjects"—the people, the themes of studies, as well as the departments of knowledge—not only within one research project but also between different projects done by different scholars; it is worth allowing these subjects to be constantly lively, to be constantly becoming entangled with and embodied in one another.

In practical applications, I have looked into five particular but interrelated themes and analysed how these themes have been understood and expressed in the everyday lives of Chinese women-loving women: globalisation, heteronormativity, sexual orientations and gender expressions, love and sex, and coming out of the closet. My selection of these five themes does not promise an exhaustive cartography of all the facets of these women's lives, knowledges, and expressions about themselves/their "selves". However, by drawing on these five themes, I include elements ranging from individual sexuality and affection, intimate relationships, and familial and communal dynamics, up to national and transnational sociocultural environments. Thus, I draw in detail how the female subjects with same-sex desires are going through, embodied in, and making meanings with, these elements; it is to draw in detail how these women are becoming themselves/their "selves".

Eventually, the narratives provided by forty-one informants, collected during my five months of fieldwork and mainly based in the cities of Kunming and Shanghai, have been analysed together with a variety of other sources of information such as my own personal experiences, anecdotes based on the experiences of my peers, mainstream and non-mainstream artistic works, cases described and discussed in other scholars' studies, dominant discourses in the mass media and in Chinese everyday lives, etc. During this more-than-six-year period of time, my "PhD trajectory" (as the exact wording used by my institute in formal documents) has inevitably been affected by and imprinted with what unexpectedly ended or started, was unexpectedly lost or found, and has eventually become a combination of meandering paths, repeated revisits and resets, and the "lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) that multiply my personal life and deterritorialise my academic pursuit.

Encouraged by personal interest, and limited by time, energy and the length of writing, in this study I have paid more attention to individual experiences and narratives than to how the same themes work in respect of institutionalisation (e.g. the policy making and law amendments relevant to non-heterosexual life styles), consumerism (e.g. the "pink economy"), or social movements (e.g. LGBT community development and activism), despite the latter issues being equally important and worthy of research, and which may be the foci of my future studies. What should not be ignored is that, between 2012 and 2019, the period of time in which my study has been carried out, a number of events, incidents, and fluctuations in the mass media and governmental discourses, other than the ones I have mentioned in the above chapters, have immediately or indirectly influenced the rights, benefits and living spaces of non-heteronormative people in mainland China[110]. Here I name only a few examples that have recently emerged: the abolition of the "One-Child Policy (*Dushengzinü Zhengce*)" since 2015 and the governmental propaganda for a heteronormative family life style with two children[111]; the censorship of explicit depictions of same-sex behaviours in the media, and a

110 The version of my dissertation which was submitted to the committee had been finalised at the end of 2018, and it was approved by the committee in May 2019. So, the various inccidents that happened between this period are not touched on in this paragraph. However, I decided not to add new examples in this final version before I send it to the printing company; I can discuss them in my future articles and presentations.

111 The "One-Child Policy (*Dushengzinü Zhengce*)" which had been implemented since the early-1980s was officially abolished in 2015, and, in order to encourage nuclear families to have two children, the government provides a variety of financial support measures to married heterosexual couples and propagates the importance of women's role in child raising and family harmony. In such an atmosphere, single individuals, regardless of one's sexual orientation, and the married women who have less than two children are facing new pressure and inequality in respect of material life quality, career pursuit, aesthetic ideal and embodied experience. Sarcastic comments by Chinese young people who prefer a free choice of marriage and procreation say that the state is now participating in the team, which usually consists of parents and older family members, in exerting pressures to marry (*guojia bihun*).

recent regulation carried out by *Sina Weibo*, which tried to ban the mangas and games involving homoerotic content on their platform[112]; several physically violent incidents in public places towards women whose appearance or behaviour was supposed to be indicative of gender nonconformity[113]; and the recent nationwide verbal assault in the mass media against "effeminate" young men (*niangpao*, which is a derogatory term) in September 2018[114]. It is interesting and important to realise that my study, my informants and myself are embedded in social phenomena like these.

Review(ing) as Another Approach

From Chapter 2 to Chapter 6, each of the abovementioned five themes has been specifically discussed in one chapter, although these discussions are of course interrelated and intersected with one another. In this section, I respectively review what I have found—or rather, how I have learned—from researching these five themes. Inspired by Braidotti's call for "critique as creativity" in the practices of "nomadic" thinking and writing (Braidotti

112 In April 2018, the official administrative system of *Xinlang Weibo* (Sina Weibo) released an announcement saying that, according to China's Internet Security Law (*Wangluo anquan fa*, see: http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2016-11/07/content_2001605.htm, accessed on October 6, 2018), Sina website would conduct a three-month intense cleansing action, especially targeted at the mangas, computer games and video clips which have pornographic, violent, and other illegal contents. Because, in the announcement, homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) was also included in the "pornographic content", very quickly this cleansing action was widely criticised and protested against by many netizens. Three days later, Sina released another announcement, saying that the contents touching upon homosexuality were no longer among the targets of this cleansing action, although the action would still be carried out, targeting pornographic and violent content (see, for example, http://tech.huanqiu.com/game/2018-04/11865657.html, accessed on October 6, 2018).

113 On May 17, 2018, the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, two young (reportedly lesbian) women were beaten by the security personnel of the 798 Art Zone in Beijing, one of the most famous and productive art zones in mainland China, simply because they wore rainbow-patterned badges.

114 On August 22, 2018, the Ministry of Education (*jiaoyubu*) gave out an order that all students and their parents across the country should watch the programme produced by China Central Television (CCTV), "The First Lesson at the Beginning of a Term (*kaixue diyi ke*)", which would be punctually broadcasted at 8pm on September 1st. However, besides complaining about this order to make watching a TV programme compulsory, many parents also complained that the programme was in fact not broadcasted punctually, but was postponed by a sequence of commercial advertisements. What should be pointed out here is that most of these complaints adopted a discourse which criticised the young male popular idols appearing in the advertisements because of their "effeminate" traits, and condemned these idols for giving Chinese (male) youth poor gender examples and undermining the masculine power of the next generation. These male idols were derogatorily called by these parents as "*niangpao*", implying someone who has a penis but behaves in a sissy way, just like a woman.

2014: 169), here I apply this idea in developing a review of my own thinking and writing in my PhD project. I treat the process of reviewing and the eventually written review as another approach (manner) for me to approach (to draw closer to) the themes I have already discussed earlier. In other words, the following parts are not merely a paraphrasing of the content of the previous chapters, but include further theorisations drawn from such a process of assembling the important findings of my project.

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I tend not to view "globalisation" as an already-shaped background at a macro historical and sociocultural level, against which my informants are living through "becoming". Instead, I study "globalisation" as a series and multiple set of entanglements of time, space, imagination and reality, which is not ahistorical or has universal meaning in different studies, firstly in the informants' everyday lives and micro-politics, and secondly in my own experiences as a specific researcher and a specific women-loving woman. From these contingent but concrete entanglements, people's sense of the "self" and the world emerge, interact—or rather "intra-act" according to Karen Barad (2007)—and change; and it is these very processes which are the becoming of "globalisation" as well as the becoming of "subjectivity".

In my fieldwork, it was not rare that the power relations between the researcher and her informants became rather unstable and unexpected, because specific dynamics were created or fuelled by either physical participation in global tourism or symbolic identification with globalised (or rather, Euro-Americanised) gay and lesbian cultures. Such dynamics have not only shifted, altered or dismissed the commonly assumed researcher-informant power inequality, but also consciously or unconsciously marginalised the individuals whose knowledges, ideas, ideals and life styles were supposed to be "conservative", "isolated" and not globalised enough, even though the experiences of being same-sex attracted were indeed shared among these women. I metaphorically point out that there is/are "missing colour(s)" on the Rainbow Flag, the official version of which consists of six particular colours and represents the positive, healthy and proud self-acceptance of homosexuality, based on the identity politics originating from the normalised life style of Western, urban, middle-class, white gays and lesbians. I try to mark the locations of some Chinese women-loving women whose knowledge about themselves/their "selves" and about their living worlds has been largely belittled or dismissed by the ones—sometimes including me—whose map of the thinkable life of a contemporary women-loving woman is dominated by the seemingly "universal" and "globalised" representations such as the Rainbow Flag.

Furthermore, my ethnographic study (and myself) is a series of exercises of "thinking sexuality transnationally" (Povinelli & Chauncey 1999). My study is an assemblage of entanglements of time, space, reality and imagination as well, and becomes a personalised embodiment of transregional and transnational affection and desire, about which I have tried my best to draw a live map through my writing in Chapter 2. For one thing, since I am a Chinese woman with an urban family background, who was born in the 1980s and grew up with the pace of the "Economic Reform and Opening-Up (*Gaige kaifang*)" policy[115] of the People's Republic of China, my private memories, my everyday habits, my pursuit of a "happier" life, and even my critical thoughts in academic practices, are deeply rooted in globally—but selectively—circulated information, and in China's/Chinese actions and reactions as part of its/their own agendas, blueprints and Dream[116]/dreams of playing a role in globalisation. For another thing, because some significant moments in my personal life—especially the breaking up with my so-called "first love/r (*chulian*)" right in my fieldwork location, as well as the encounter and the later reunion with one of my informants, who once lived in the other hemisphere but is now my life partner beside me every day—have been organically embedded in the unfolding of my study, my PhD project means much more to me than merely a step in my academic career, and has permeated every pore in my skin and every second in my life. I am repeatedly reminded of the various chances, surprises, tensions, paradoxes, sensitivities and creativities that have taken place during my study, which could not have happened in a less globalised time. I am also invited by these memories to revisit the theme of "globalisation" in my work on female same-sex desires.

Hence, together with the content that you can read in Chapter 2, my intertwining intellectual, emotional and materialised journeys, from which this chapter has emerged, constitute an "ethico-onto-epistem-ologial" practice (Barad 2007). As early as the first section of Chapter 2, in which I theorise globalisation through diving into a series of highly personal memories and experiences triggered by a glance at the logo of McDonald's, the writing style, logic and ethics throughout my dissertation have been highlighted. Chapter 2 is not merely a constituent part of my study, but also an epitome of how I think, study, write, commemorate and create, appreciate and criticise, empathise and empower, keep exploring the world and becoming myself.

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115 The "Economic Reform and Opening-Up (*Gaige kaifang*)" is a general policy which has been implemented in different stages in mainland China, since the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (*Shiyijie san zhong quanhui*), held in 1978.

116 Here I refer to the nationalistic "Chinese Dream (*Zhongguo meng*)", which I have discussed in the fourth section of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, I elaborate the concept "passionate aesthetics", which was coined by Saskia E. Wieringa in her study about how the prevalent forms of heteronormativity influence rather marginalised women (widows, women-loving women and female sex workers) in India and Indonesia, whether they are self-identified as heterosexual or not, and how these women negotiate with or resist heteronormativity in order to make their own lives meaningful (Wieringa 2012, 2015). Her study breaks the binarism of heterosexual/homosexual in analyses of heteronormativity, shows sensitivity to the overlapping yet distinct life experiences between different groups of marginalised women, and uncovers how the mechanism of "normal", orthodox sexualities works on the most "abnormal", abjected categories of sexualities in a society (*ibid.*).

According to Wieringa, in both of these two Asian societies there is "a particular form of heterosexuality" functioning "as the hegemonic pattern of the passionate aesthetics" (Wieringa 2012: 517); at the same time, facing the material, physical and symbolic violence (see Bourdieu 1991) imposed by the mechanism of heteronormativity, those marginalised women strategically perform different forms of resistance and rejection, including some subtle, invisible, symbolic acts which are called "symbolic subversion" by Wieringa (2012, 2015). Analysing heteronormativity with the help of the two concepts, "passionate aesthetics" and "symbolic subversion", Wieringa's study opens up nuanced lenses for us to observe how the powerful discourses—whether in wider society or in a certain micro-level circumstance—become engrained in individual desires, bodies, values, emotions, imaginations and relationships, which depend on but yet are limited by specifically fuelled affections and specifically shaped embodiments. At the same time, through the lenses of these two concepts, we can see the trickiness of people's performance/performativity of ostensible compliance with various "norms". Building on Wieringa's study, I, in my PhD project, push the discussions revolving around heteronormativity, "passionate aesthetics" and "symbolic subversion" in a slightly different direction. I make further efforts to be affirmatively sensitive to the "differences" that are different from the "normal", rather than focusing on how the "normal" normalises different groups of people, without a binary and oppositional understanding about same/different, as Braidotti proposes (e.g. Braidotti 2011a, 2014).

First, in my study which aims to criticise the heteronormativity in a society which deploys complicated discourses to naturalise a certain form of heterosexual life style, I prefer to apply the concept "passionate aesthetics" as an analytic tool to detect the precise mechanisms which reinforce or challenge heteronormativity in a specific context, rather than generally and abstractly name all the thoughts and practices that "fail" to defy the dominant sexual and gender hierarchy as "heteronormative". Since the term "heteronormativity" itself implies a

predetermined association between heterosexuality and normativity, this concept not only oversimplifies diverse and sometimes ambiguous sexual orientations, but also flattens the contextualised and ever-changing power relations that make some expressions, behaviours and personalities closer to the "normal" than some others. In comparison, "passionate aesthetics" embraces more potential possibilities and creativities through the processes of people's exploring, comparing, negotiating, debating about what counts as "good", "beautiful" and "desirable", and allows these possibilities and creativities to exist multiply or even paradoxically.

Second, some recent ethnographic studies of female same-sex desires and relationships in contemporary mainland China have undertaken some profound analyses of the collective tendency to seek normalisation and the individual internalised longing to be "normal" among Chinese *tongzhi* and *lala* communities, such as Lucetta Y. Kam's discussions about the "politics of public correctness[117]" (2013: 89) and Elisabeth L. Engebretsen's work about the "politics of different normativities[118]" (2014: 157). However, I instead point out, based on the analyses of my fieldwork data, my personal experiences, and some popular artistic works globally or nationally circulated in the mass media, that, rather than being satisfied with just being "normal", people—including the ones who appear to be "normal" in a society—often appreciate more being "special" in a good way, which means being different from banality, superior to ordinary and away from stigmas. In other words, it is what is understood as "better", "more beautiful", "more desirable", "closer to perfection" in a specific context, rather than an objective and uniform standard of "normal", that drives one to prefer certain people, stories, deeds, atmosphere, images, and to prefer acting in certain ways in order to become a unique and lovely "self".

Third, although in Chapter 3 I have not discussed Wieringa's concept of "symbolic subversion", here, following my argument in the previous paragraph, I further argue that various practices of symbolic subversion are widely carried out, not only among the marginalised individuals such as the women in Wieringa's study but also among the already

117 According to Kam (2013), "[t]he formation of *tongzhi* communities has created a gap between an increased public awareness of homosexuality and the denial and silence of homosexuality in individual families. This existential rupture caused by the public/private divide has given rise to a culturally specific *tongzhi* politics in China, which I term 'the politics of public correctness'. It refers to a logic of normalisation that seeks to promote a 'healthy' and 'proper' image of *tongzhi* in order to acquire social and familial recognition, developed as a response to the changing forms of oppression and opportunities of *tongzhi* during the reform era" (p. 12). Although I have not looked into this theory in detail in the main text, I do think it is an important analysis about the heteronormative influences that are cast upon Chinese *tongzhi* and *lala* people.

118 Engebretsen's elaboration about "different normativities (2014), a term originally coined by Yau (2010), has been discussed in the third section of Chapter 3.

"normal" individuals who try to walk a fine line to achieve some acceptable and appreciated specialness but meanwhile to avoid any risk of being labelled either as "abnormal" or as "too normal". However, such efforts do not always promise success, because a so-called "fine" line is predicted and performed by someone in live interactions (or intra-actions)—according to her or his knowledge about the boundary of normality as well as the liminal space between "normal" and "abnormal". Such interactions/intra-actions are full of unpredictable and volatile agencies that may alter that boundary or dismiss that liminal space. These very processes on the one hand expose the non-essentialness and precariousness of "normalcy", and on the other hand create different versions of passionate aesthetics.

In Chapter 3, I especially look into the life stories of my informants and explore how "marriage", one of the most salient heteronormative imperatives in the social and private lives of Chinese people, has been given dramatically different definitions, sentiments, meanings, memories, and imaginations, even by the same person as the context in which the notion and experience of "marriage" is embedded varies—from a heterosexual marriage to a same-sex marriage, from a lawful marriage to an unlawful marriage, from an already experienced marriage to a never actualised marriage, etc. Based on these analyses, I stress the importance of realising the "different differences", which are more nuanced than the "different normativities" (Engebretsen 2014; Yau 2010), in the individual thoughts and actions that seemingly get shaped in the name of or under the surface of pursuing a "normal life". In addition, I also look into the creative practices of some of my informants and non-heteronormative female friends, who not only survive on the margins of or outside heteronormative marital life but also actively revise predominant heteronormative aesthetics in public and media spheres.

Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, I take a close look at the *T*- and *P*-identifications, as well as *T-P* relationships, which are so controversial that they are simultaneously practised, criticised, abandoned or/and re-appropriated among contemporary Chinese women-loving women. Originating from the English word "tomboy", "*T*" usually refers to the masculine women with same-sex desires; "*P*", short for the Chinese character "*Po*" which means (*T*'s) "wife", usually refers to the feminine women who are attracted to and/or dating *T*s. "*T*" and "*Po*", as a pair of terms indicating two distinct gender roles and the erotic attraction and tension between them, were firstly used among Taiwanese lesbians in the 1960s (Chao 2001), and then travelled to mainland China around the turn of the 21st Century. In the form of "*T*" and "*P*", they, together with "*lala*", have become the most popularised local terms and identities in contemporary cultures of Chinese women-loving women. However, similar to the historical situation

of some other practices of gender-dyad division and pairing between women in same-sex relationships in other societies, such as butch-femme practices in America (e.g. Harris & Crocker 1997) and tomboi (*cowok*)-*cewek* practices in Indonesia (e.g. Wieringa 1999), *T-P* practices are often criticised by young generations of Chinese urban *lalas* as an imitation of normative masculinity and femininity, as well as heteronormative relationships. Sometimes, even if such critiques are not explicitly made, there is within Chinese *lala* communities a growing tendency of embracing female bodies and desires, yet at the same time questioning the gender inequality and gender stereotypes that dominate wider Chinese society.

At the beginning of Chapter 4, I depict the encounters between a group of young *lala* feminists, who had been well-educated in some of the biggest Chinese and Euro-American cities, and a group of young women of the same age, who lived in the local *T-P* community in southwestern China. Impressed by a passionate performance given by a pair of *T-P* lovers at this occasion, I saw a gap between the abovementioned critiques and aesthetic depreciations of *T-P* relationships, and the lively beauty and bold creativity of *T-P* dynamics in the everyday lives of *T-P* lovers. Such a gap to a certain extent oversimplifies the multifold subversive practices throughout both gender performativity and embodied sexuality, ignores the erotic mechanism in *T-P* dynamics that fuels passion between women, and marginalises the experiences of individuals self-identified as "iron *T* (*tie T*, similar to the "stone butch" in Euro-American lesbian cultures)" or as female-to-male transgendered.

In my study, I depict *T-P* dynamics as a "half-rehearsed and half-improvised dance duet", and use it as a figuration for observing, understanding and imagining *T*- and *P*-identifications and *T-P* relationships. I look into how the different sexual orientations (e.g. homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality) and gender identities and expressions (e.g. various sub-identities in *T-P* relationships) are strategically defined, hierarchically valued, or creatively (re)appropriated and (self-)identified among my informants. Their attentions are especially focused on the notion of "pureness (*chun*)", revolving around the various paradoxes, competitions and negotiations which exist in both their statements and their actions. I analyse the nuanced stigmas that are respectively attached to bisexual women, *Ps*, "iron *Ts* (*tie Ts*)", "pure *Ps* (*chun Ps*)", and "pure women", by different women-loving-women subjects in different circumstances. Furthermore, I discuss both the revolutionary elements and the limitations of the lately popularised discourses about "feminine *T* (*niang T*)" and "masculine *P* (*ye P*)" in Chinese *lala* communities, which imply a hidden logic that values males and masculinity over females and femininity.

Finally, I point out that it is how much we can allow ourselves and others to partially identify with, occasionally play with, and creatively live with a so-called sexual orientation or gender identity that opens up emancipatory possibilities for all subjects and undermines

the fortress of authoritative yet stagnant knowledge about gender and sexuality. But this is not about how many categories of sexual orientation and gender identity can be produced for marking, pinning up and confining every individual within a rigid repertoire. Recognising the figuration of a half-rehearsed and half-improvised dance duet in the dynamics between *Ts* and *Ps*, or in the dynamics consisting of vibrant passion and affirmative tension, is a visualised and sentient access to insightful understandings about how the boundaries of concepts, identities, bodies, emotions, and subjectivities, are instantly and subtly stressed, shifted and blurred, and can even create a slight difference from a seemingly strict rule which is in fact not the (only) "fact". The inconsistency in the definitions and evaluations of "pureness" and "impureness" in the cases I discuss in Chapter 4 are based on such an observation.

Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, I try to overcome a theoretical and methodological lack of "academic" language about the themes of "love" and "sex" in my research project. Although the love and sexual experiences between women count as the core of the definition of female homosexuality, in existing studies casting light on Chinese women-loving women, the same-sex love and sexual practices in most cases are discussed as pre-existing backgrounds, abstract concepts and fixed variables. That is to say, compared with the detailed analyses and narratives about some other typical issues in the lives of Chinese women-loving women, such as the pressure caused by the marriage imperative, the predicament of coming out or not, the emergence of *lala* images and topics into the public view, the participation in semi-public and public LGBT activities, etc., the depictions of female same-sex love and sexual experiences per se are much less thick and much less highlighted. This situation to a certain extent reduces the richness of what we know about the becoming of female same-sex desires, intimacies and subjectivities in contemporary China.

However, when thinking, talking and writing about "falling in love" and "having sex", I have often doubted whether the language I have used has been "academic" enough. On the one hand, since "love" is usually understood as one of the most universal—and meanwhile the most personalised—human experiences, it seems too ordinary yet at the same time too unique to be qualified for "objective", "scientific" or representative theorisation. Even though there is some sociological literature paying special attention to "love" in the syllabuses I have been taught (e.g. Bauman 2003; Giddens 1992), "love" is often analysed as an epitome of the dominant ideology, material life, economy and policies, social institutions and cultural trends of specific societies in specific times, rather than as a knowledge as serious, broad and important as what it epitomises. On the other hand, in mainland China, the topic of "sex" has been more or less taboo in public discourses and discussions for decades, and as

a result among the ordinary Chinese people there is a barely comfortable or productive language for discussing sex in an open, positive way, despite the fact that there are sexualised implications and voyeuristic descriptions spread over China's mass media. As a researcher self-identified as a female homosexual who studies female homosexuality, I find it difficult to develop a sensitive, communicable but also proper vocabulary when collecting narratives about sex in my fieldwork, and find it no less difficult to produce an affluent, insightful but proper vocabulary when writing about sexual experiences as an academic work. Not as simple as a refusal to be a hunter and seller of sensational plots, the intricate and unstable ethical challenges of talking and writing about sex have kept creating uncertain, awkward, regretful—and grateful though—moments through the whole process of my study.

My solution to this problem, or rather "my attempt", is to become a translator, who looks into my informants' life stories about love and sex and makes the muted loud, the standardised altered, the cliché novel. Simultaneously, my own affective and bodily experiences of love and sex that happened during my study and were entangled with my study—without which I would not have become the myself/my "self" now and my study would not have become what it is like now—become a specific translation of female same-sex love and sex. It is an assemblage of practices, done by my informants and me, of re-creating (creating again) "love" and "sex" as well as recreating (enjoying) in love and sex. With a pun, I appreciate how we create again and again the contents, meanings, boundaries, associations and differences of the two inclusive, fluid and yet embodied notions, and at the same time I also stress the importance of how we can enjoy, relax, seek pleasure and keep vital through love and sex.

To be specific, in Chapter 5, I firstly discuss "first love without articulation", which ambiguously happens between young women or teenage girls, without being explicitly labelled as "love/*aiqing*" by either of them, but often triggers their first exploration, wondering, doubts, or/and confirmation of their own affective feelings and sexual inclinations. By using two different meanings of the word "articulation", I point out that, in some cases the cherished same-sex love is not directly called "love" in order to (vainly) steer clear of the doomed bitterness attached to homosexuality. In other cases, however, some people and memories in the past that no longer have any important connection to one's present life will still be called a "first love", only because of the habitual logic inherited from the "formal" chronicles and the lazy wording which is confined by limit categories and rigid categorisation of human affective and sexual feelings.

Then I compare the nuances between the historical and sociocultural meaning of "passionate (love)" and "romantic (love)" in Western contexts and the meanings of the Chinese translations of these terms. I argue that the definitions, sentiments, images and

imaginations usually associated with the Chinese term "*langman*", which is transliterated from the English word "romantic", are in fact closer to what "passionate love" represents than what "romantic love" does in Euro-American cultures (cf. Giddens 1992). I therefore challenge the binaristic thinking of passionate love and romantic love discussed by some influential Western scholars who theorise Western (but to a large extent taken for granted as universal) modern "love" and intimate relationships, such as Anthony Giddens (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the mainstream discourses about "*aiqing* (love)" in today's China instead have a commonality with the "romantic love" which has emerged in Western societies since the late 18th Century (*ibid.*). The officially propagated figuration of "true" and "perfect" *aiqing* (the monogamous heterosexual relationship, the family values reinforcing stability and harmony, the sex inside marriage that promises high quality procreation, and linkages to efficient economic production) are organically organised into a particular form of heteronormative social institution and passionate aesthetics, which excludes and ignores the range of other diverse human affective attractions, bodily intimacies and everyday companies.

Moreover, I explore how my informants and I myself usually define, and can possibly define, "having sex" between women. The physical fact of "penetration (*charu*)" plays a determining role in the uttered definitions of the behaviour of "having sex" among a considerable number of informants. This at first disappointed me because it seemed so heterosexual and heteronormative, but a deeper analysis of the subtle, hesitant, contradictory, metaphoric expressions about sex by them instead brought more implications and inspirations for extending and deepening the notion. Experiencing and defining "penetration" as one's entering into another's body and soul, and thus becoming a part of the other yet meanwhile becoming an unprecedented "self", rather than as (a penis) entering a vagina, I understand sex and love as journeys of penetration and simultaneously becoming myself and being home.

Chapter 6

In Chapter 6, I revisit the theme of "*chugui*/coming out of the closet" with some perspectives different from the ones I once adopted in my MA thesis, which was based on a study of the coming out choices of young *lalas* living in Beijing (Wang 2012). During the nine years between the moment I made the first step in that academic exercise, which was immediately relevant to my personal life then, and today, my own coming out experiences have been greatly enriched. So far, I have come out to some of my friends, several relatives of my generation, a couple of professors in the Chinese universities I once attended, all of the informants in my studies, almost all the *lala* and *tongzhi* peers in LGBT activities and LGBT-friendly places, many acquaintances I have met in the Netherlands, and, eventually, to my parents. Along these years, my main concern and research interest about the theme

"*chugui*/coming out" has varied; in my review below, I make some comparisons between what drew my attention and what I was eager to argue in my MA thesis, and what I discuss in Chapter 6. By doing so, I am not aiming to assert that my findings included in Chapter 6 must be more "correct", more "profound", more "important", and more "innovative"; instead, I am showing the connections between my Chapter 6 and the existing scholarly works and activist discourses about the *chugui*/coming out practices in today's China, despite many of my arguments in Chapter 6 more or less challenging these discourses.

Among the obstacles which hinder the practice of coming out or even make the idea of coming out unthinkable in the Chinese contexts, "filial piety (*xiao*)" is a most salient one, according to existing studies that cast light on the coming out experiences of non-heterosexual subjects in contemporary China (e.g. Chou 2000; Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; Kong 2011), and according to my own research and personal experiences. It is not uncommon that, in China, "coming out" is narrowly defined as disclosing one's homosexual orientation and/or same-sex relationships to one's parents; and for most Chinese *tongzhi* and *lala* individuals, being "out" in front of all your acquaintances except your parents does not count as being "really" out. Deriving from the pressure of filial piety, which is entangled with patriarchal family values and heteronormative social values, children's major obligations in their original families include fulfilling the marriage imperative and "caring on the family line (*chuanzong jiedai*)", saving and even honouring the parents' "face (*mianzi*)", and showing gratitude for their upbringing by materially or/and symbolically paying back in order to please and comfort them.

These obligations are to a large extent incompatible with an open self-identification as homosexual, the choice of same-sex love and a same-sex sexual relationship as an everyday life status, or a confrontational disobedience to the parents' wishes. So, it is widely believed that the idea and ideal of "coming out", which originates from the individualism, identity politics and human rights movements in Western cultures, is not applicable to Chinese society and Chinese people (Chou 2000). It is also argued that the strategies alternative to "coming out" applied by Chinese non-heterosexual individuals in order to cope with the conflict among social heteronormative hegemony, family obligations, and personal sexuality, are unique local creations, which in turn can inspire Western scholars and activists to rethink not only identity politics but also queer theory (e.g. Engebretsen 2014). For example, "*xingshi hunyin* (cooperative marriage)", which refers to a "nominal" marriage between a male *tongzhi* and a *lala* woman, with or without a legal marriage certificate, is a strategy practised by Chinese non-heterosexual people and frequently discussed by scholars (e.g. Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; Zhu 2018b). Another strategy is "coming home", named by Chou Wah-Shan in his study about Chinese *tongzhi* (2000), which is an alternative to the

Western "coming out" and refers to bringing a same-sex partner into an original family as a new part of it, but without explicitly affirming the homosexual relationship. Nevertheless, other scholars, such as Wong's (2007b), in dialogue with Chou, point out Chou's binary thinking about "out" and "home" and argue for the possibility of a combination between the two. They also criticise Chou's "coming home" for underestimating the possible violence caused by de-sexualising the same-sex relationship and ignoring people's non-heteronormative subjectivity (e.g. Liu & Ding 2005).

In my MA project from 2010 to 2012, I interviewed twelve young *lalas* in their early- or mid-twenties, living in Beijing, about whether they had come out to their parents or not, why they had or why they had not, how they had gone about coming out or avoided coming out, what their parents' responses and attitudes were, what their biggest difficulties were, and how they planned to cope with them. I paid attention to the distinction between the Western idea of "coming out" and the Chinese idea of "*chugui*", as well as to how the relation between the idea of "coming out/*chugui*" and the identity of "gay and lesbian/*lala*" differ between Western societies and China, although I had oversimplified and binarized "Western" and "Chinese". I asked the informants about their attitude to "cooperative marriage" and spent some time analysing their answers in my MA thesis, regardless of the fact that none of them were in a cooperative marriage. In addition, disagreeing with Chou's statement about "coming home", I instead found a commonly shared experience among those young *lala* informants, when they were facing the dilemma of coming out to their parents or not, which was "leaving home"—leaving for a place away from where their original families were located—rather than "coming (back to the patriarchal) home" (Wang 2012).

In my PhD project, however, I have questioned our usual assumption that the parents of Chinese non-heterosexual individuals are conservative, stubborn guardians of heteronormativity and patriarchy, who define the "filial piety" in a uniform, rigid way and are easily paralysed by children's coming out without any resilience or any "unexpected" response which is more nuanced than total disappointment, sorrow and fury. Such an assumption is not only ahistorical—because attitudes towards non-heterosexuality vary among different generations of parents—but also otherizes the parents rather than viewing their subjectivities as similar becoming journeys as their children's. In Chapter 6, I include several cases in which the parents (and even grandparents) of the informants show a willingness to learn, understand and empathise about the children's same-sex experiences; and the challenging tensions between the generations are at the same time vital dynamics that take part in the becoming of the "selves" of both the parents and the children.

Following this critical rethink, I further question the essentialistic nature of popular discourse that stresses the distinction between Western and Chinese sociocultural contexts

for thinking and doing "*chugui*/coming out", and the idea that coming out is inapplicable in China. This discourse has to some extent confined the potential of a transregionally travelling concept (a "nomadic" concept) and ignored the creativity with which it can inspire and be embodied. This discourse has also flattened the experiences of some people, who together with their families bravely practise *chugui* and give it new meanings, and who encourage *lala* and *tongzhi* people to explore *chugui* rather than merely thinking of it as completely impossible, as being simply "Westernised". Appreciating a key feature of the phrase "coming out of the closet", which was originally a figure of speech, I argue that we should keep using this concept as one and another metaphor, even beyond the areas of gender and sexuality, for enriching the meanings of it and simultaneously enriching our knowledges.

In the last section of Chapter 6, I call for more observations and descriptions that de-centre *chugui*/coming out practices from informants' original families, and instead cast light on how these non-heterosexual subjects come out to people other than their parents, for example how they—together with their same-sex partners—come out to their children. Such multi-directional analyses can help us re-imagine the various figurations of "home" outside our biological families. Furthermore, instead of imagining the home of a non-heteronormative individual as either an oppressive original family or a utopian chosen family, I tend not to idealise any particular form of "home" as her or his ultimate "meaningful" and "fulfilled" situation. Rather, I believe that we should also de-centre our pursuit of "coming out" (or "coming home") from such an idealistic "home", as the only goal and a necessary promise. It is more interesting and more powerful to imagine and embody the notion of "home" more freely and diversely. For example, an experience of being "penetrated" through body and soul, as I depict in the end of Chapter 4 when I discuss love and sex, can also be a moment of coming home; this very moment, as well we the bodies, emotions and subjectivities of ourselves, have become our "home" itself.

A Different Way Home

Based on my five months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2013 and 2014, based mainly in two Chinese cities, Kunming and Shanghai, I have developed my dissertation, which is approaching its finale as the autumn of 2019 arrives in Shanghai, where I and my partner, who was once my "best informant" (see Newton 1993), live now. Calling my PhD project as a study of women-loving women's subjectivity in the 2010s in mainland China, I do not mean that my project covers, exhausts or represents all the various life stories of so many Chinese women-loving women that have taken place and are taking place in this latest decade, which we are still undergoing. I do not want to narrow down the span of time to "five months" nor specify the range of space to "two cities", because the life stories we

recall and narrate are in fact not confined by the hours of an interview, and do not revolve around the table where an informant and I sit face to face.

After my fieldwork finished, stories continued, and keep extending them to today and to the future. Some of these stories are partly known by me, through occasional catch-ups via internet-based social networks; some others, however, I cannot follow any longer. Anyway, my own life and my informants' lives sometimes stretch towards directions which I have not previously thought about. One of my *lala* informants married a man; and according to the photos and words filled with genuine happiness she openly posted, I am persuaded that it is not a cooperative marriage. Another informant, who was assiduously preparing to apply for a PhD programme in the U.S. when I interviewed her, started doing her PhD in Europe. An informant, who said to me in 2013 that she no longer wanted to emigrate abroad because living overseas could not solve the painful problem of being single, moved to the Southern Hemisphere not long after the interview and seems to be enjoying her life, albeit still being single. An informant who had smoothly come out to her family and had received kind support from her mother for years when the interview was conducted, contacted me later because she found herself suffering from mental disturbances but had nobody who could offer her help. Two informants started dating each other, after they met at my farewell party[119]. An informant visited Amsterdam and I guided her around the city as a "local", exchanging our roles we had once played in my fieldwork site.

Even as early as when I was collecting the data, I was reminded again and again of the impossibility of locking on to the so-called "truth" comprehensively and impartially within these limited data. For example, in the interview with one informant, her life stories, which were full of very dramatic plots and emotions but with some doubtful details, were quickly and fluently narrated as if it had been rehearsed many times. I was on the one hand struck by the hugely painful feelings emitted from her stories just like an audience with deep empathy, but on the other hand uncertain about which information was reliable and which was not. It felt confusing and embarrassing that I had spent time sharing a tear with the informant only to find I could not contact her again when I tried to do a follow-up interview, in order to make clearer the validity of the information she had provided. Another example was that two of my informants respectively described a sexual encounter that they each had had. Later,

119 Before I finished my fieldwork and left Kunming and Shanghai, I organised a farewell party in each. I rented a room in a local karaoke lounge, which could provide a relatively private space, entertainment and relaxing atmosphere, and foods and drinks, and invited all of my informants. They could feel free to come or not, and they could also bring their lovers, *lala* friends, or LGBT-friendly female friends. I promised in advance that, during and after the party, I would not disclose any private information of any informant to anyone else; however, they were free to share stories and make friends.

accidentally, I learned that these two informants did have a sexual encounter, and, according to some background information, I immediately recognised that those two descriptions were in fact about exactly the same encounter. Yet, at the same time, those two descriptions were rather different from each other, in terms of the narrator's subjective memory and evaluation of her own and the other party's emotional and bodily experiences during the sexual encounter. Such a difference between two individuals' feelings when they have sex, or do anything else together, is not rare according to our common sense and personal experiences. However, my discovery of the difference between the two narratives, about the same incident, does make me admit with a frown that there are many more subjective differences that have been soaked into and throughout my study, and, without knowing what exactly they were or are, I have done analyses and drawn conclusions in my dissertation.

The cases mentioned above, however, do not indicate that an effort to draw precise live maps of the becoming process of a thought, a feeling, a subject, an entanglement, is inevitably vain. On the contrary, they prove the necessity of drawing such maps, as precisely as possible, by different people, at different times and locations, through different paths, giving different versions, building different associations, without being simply satisfied with binaristic standards of same/different, true/false, useful/useless, important/trivial, enough/lack, etc. Thus, my study is among many other studies relevant to female same-sex desires and experiences, which have been done, are undergoing "becoming", or will come up in the future. Thanks to Rosi Braidotti's theory of "nomadic subjectivity", which calls for such an affirmative and productive understanding of "difference", and to a number of ethnographic works that echo with Braidotti, in this study I have seen, heard, learned, felt, explored and expressed rich, complicated and multiple differences that might otherwise have been largely missed out.

My personal life in the past three years has not been "after" my fieldwork and "outside" my academic environment, but is instead intertwined with them. In these years, a sequence of differences—in terms of not only visible changes but also subtle transformations—has also been sensed. Some of the differences are ironically bitter while some others are unexpectedly amazing. Since the September of 2016, I have no longer been funded by any organisation because I failed to achieve the PhD degree within my 48-month formal PhD trajectory, which my scholarship covered. In order to make life cheaper, I left the Netherlands and moved back to China. My partner, who aspired to build a life together with me physically, after suffering from our long-distance relationship and from a series of frustrations with visa applications[120], quitted her job in Melbourne, Australia, and moved

120 Relevant experiences of mine have been touched upon in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 and Chapter 5.

back to China as well. We started a new life in Shanghai, two and a half years after we met each other for the first time there as a researcher and her informant.

However, this life is far from "easy". Having come out to our parents, we fortunately find our relationship to some extent accepted by them. But we face new pressures derived from their acceptance. Not despite but because they kindly embrace our non-normative relationship and bravely adapt themselves to a probable future which completely differs from their long-term expectations, we feel especially pained to further deprive them of their dreams, for example having grandchildren, even though we do know that these seemingly universal dreams are largely forged by the heteronormative discourses prevailing in our society. After all, we want our parents to be happy. Born in the 1950s and the 1960s, our parents, among their peers, have organically embodied the ideas, values, aesthetics and material life routines—which are usually gendered and sometimes sexualised—of different periods in China's history from the second half of the 20th Century onwards, including the period of "*Dayuejin* (The Great Leap Forward)" (see Gao 2016; Manning 2016), the period of "*Wenhua dageming* (The Cultural Revolution)" (see Jin 2016), and the post-Mao era and "*Gaige kaifang* (Economic Reform and Opening-Up)" since the end of the 1970s. They have experienced the drastic social vicissitudes, and the macro- and micro-level tensions emerging from the constant precariousness, which have been impacted and imprinted on their minds, bodies and lives. It is not easy at all for them, and for us, to make a tiny change. It is hard to say that any specific change—or any specific definition and qualification of "change"—is necessarily "good", "progressive" and "right", especially if we use an either-or method of judgment.

What is a relief for me is that we no longer have to be confined by a narrowly observed and imagined "*jia* (family; home)" either in Chou's notion of "*huijia*/coming home" (2000) or in my former analysis of "*lijia*/leaving home" (Wang 2012, 2014). My partner and I, as well as our parents, are encouraged or forced by one another to keep rethinking, redefining and re-imaging one's shelters, attachments and belongings[121], critically and creatively, in our everyday practices and interactions—or rather "intra-actions" (Barad 2007). As a result, every different way through which we actualise deterritorialisations, nomadizations, revisits, reunions, revisions, or/and revivals, time after time or at the same time, becomes a part of ourselves/our "selves", which not only makes a subject "whole" but also welcomes a subject "home". Just before I put a full stop to my dissertation, I think that I have found my own favoured figuration for understanding and exploring the concept of "subjectivity/*zhutixing*": an assemblage of different ways through which we search for, head to, build up, come, and become, a "*jia*"—of our own and for the ones we love.

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121 According to Antonia Y. Chao, there are three aspects simultaneously implied by the Chinese character "*jia*"—"home", "family" and "household" (Chao 2018: 47).

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Appendix

What follows is an English translation of the invitation I posted on different online forums, in chat groups, and on my social network page. This is a generalised version based on the various original posts, which were mostly the same as one another but different in the detailed information about dates, cities, website links, means via which the potential informants could find me. Since my fieldwork finished and then my PhD project was wrapped up, those posts, one after another, have been removed either by the administrators of the online groups or by me.

INVITING *LALAS* IN KUNMING/SHANGHAI TO HAVE A CUP OF COFFEE/TEA AND SHARE LIFE STORIES!

Hello there! My nickname is "*Naonao*"[122], and I am a *lala* myself. My hometown is located in Zhejiang Province, and now I am a PhD candidate in anthropology, in the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. My PhD research project is about the everyday lives and life stories of Chinese *lalas*, including self-identification, coming out of the closet (*chugui*), the gender roles of *T/P/H*, cooperative marriage (*xingshi hunyin*, or *xinghun* for short), love and sex, marriage and motherhood, bisexuality, transgenderism, queer, etc., and any other themes about which you have experiences. At this moment, I am doing fieldwork in Kunming and Shanghai, and I sincerely invite you to participate in my project. Between the September and the November of 2013, I will be in Kunming[123]. You are welcome to contact me, and we can have a cup of coffee or tea and share our stories with each other. I am also happy if you can show me around your city. In order to protect your privacy, you can be anonymous (only using a nickname) throughout our communications, and have the full right to authorise me, or not, to use the data you provide in my studies (an informed consent form signed with your nickname will not reduce this right). My dissertation will be written in English, and will be defended in the University of Amsterdam. If you are interested in my project, feel free to send me a *Douban*-mail, add me as friend on *Weixin* APP, or follow my *Xinlang Weibo* account. Looking forward to meeting you!

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122 I have described in a footnote, located in the second section of Chapter 2, the use of nicknames in Chinese *lala* communities. In my fieldwork, my nickname was "*Naonao*". Actually, it has been my nickname since high school times, and many of my friends, whether *lala* themselves or not, know and call me this nickname. The Chinese character "*nao*" is rarely used today; it can be found in some ancient poems, referring to monkeys.

123 In the version I posted in the places where I could reach for potential informants in Shanghai, I replaced this sentence as "Between now in November, 2013, and the end of January, 2014, I will be in Shanghai."

Summary

Living Through Becoming is my PhD dissertation based on a research project starting from 2012. This project casts light upon different yet interrelated aspects of the everyday lives of Chinese women with same-sex desires, aiming to explore women-loving women's subjectivity in mainland China during the last decade. The data for analysis is mainly collected from a five-month fieldwork between 2013 and 2014, carried out in two Chinse cities, Kunming (the provincial capital of Yunnan Province) and Shanghai. As an ethnographic study in an era of rapid globalisation and soaked with feminist thoughts and ethics, this dissertation also includes analyses of my own personal experiences, anecdotes of my friends, narratives of informants of my former studies, fictional works, cases discussed in other scholars' studies, as well as prevailing discourses in Chinese everyday social lives and mass media.

"Subjectivity" is on the one hand the key concept on which my study is premised, and on the other hand a notion worthy of explorations in Chinese contexts. The approach I adopt to study subjectivity is greatly inspired by Rosi Braidotti's feminist-philosophic-new materialist theory of "nomadic subjectivity", which calls for creative/critical projects of mapping out the "figurations"—the accurate, complex, situated, embodied, difference-affirming, ever-becoming and de-centring locations—of the ones at the periphery.

The main task of my project is to observe, interpret, and experience in person, the concept of "subjectivity" and how this concept is specifically embodied among Chinese women-loving women, through subtly depicted live maps about the "becoming" journeys of these women's knowledges, values, sentiments, practices, and bodies. I look into five particular yet intertwined themes: (1) globalisation; (2) heteronormativity; (3) sexual orientations and gender expressions; (4) love and sex; (5) coming out of the closet.

Methodologically, my ethnographic fieldwork, as well as my later data analyses and writing practices, are learning processes from the stretch of feminist "ethico-onto-epistem-ology", which turns my study, my life and myself/my "self" to be what we usually call "research results". In total, I collected information from forty-one women aged between early-twenties and mid-forties, through semi-structured interviews, casual conversations, participatory observations, and focus groups.

In the chapter about globalisation (Chapter 2), I try not to view "globalisation" as an already-shaped macro background against which my informants are living; instead, I study "globalisation" as series and multiples of "entanglements" of time, space, imagination, and reality. From these entanglements, people's sense of "self" and "world" emerge, "intra-act" and change; and it is these very processes per se that are the becoming of "globalisation" as well as the becoming of "subjectivity". Specifically, I analyse the unstable and unexpected power

relations between a researcher and her informants, in which diverse dynamics were fuelled by either physical participation in global tourism or symbolic identification with globalised (or rather, Euro-Americanised) gay and lesbian cultures. Such dynamics not only have shifted, altered and dismissed the commonly assumed researcher-informant power inequality, but also have consciously or unconsciously marginalised the individuals whose knowledges, ideas, ideals and life styles are supposed to be "backwards" and "isolated".

In the chapter about heteronormativity (Chapter 3), I elaborate the concept of "passionate aesthetics" coined by Saskia E. Wieringa, and apply it for analysing heteronormativity. I point out the limitations of the concept "heteronormativity" itself, including its essentialisation and binarization of heterosexual/homosexual, its assumed links of "heterosexual-normal" and "homosexual-abnormal", and its insensitivity of the aesthetic pursuits more complicated and paradoxical than the normal/abnormal binary. In comparison, the concept of "passionate aesthetics" leads us to find out what is considered as "better", "more beautiful", "more desirable" and "closer to perfection" in people's life aspects relevant to sexuality and gender. This concept is sensitive to the subtle changes, partial subversions and unexpected potentials, and is also sensitive to the ignorance, discrimination and violence in the name of chasing after a "finer" life style. Recent studies of the female same-sex desires and relationships in contemporary China have found the collective tendency and individual internalised longing for being "normal". However, I instead argue that, rather than being satisfied with being "just normal", people—including the ones who seem "normal" in a society—often appreciate more being "special" in a good way, which means being different from banality, superior to ordinary and away from stigmas. Hence, I make more efforts to be affirmatively sensitive to the "differences" that are different from the "normal", without a binary and oppositional understanding about same/different.

In the chapter about sexual orientations and gender expressions (Chapter 4), I take a close look at the *T*- and *P*-identification, as well as the *T-P* relationship, which is so controversial that it is simultaneously practised, criticised, abandoned or/and re-appropriated among contemporary Chinese women-loving women. As female same-sex practices based on gender-dyad division and pairing, the *T-P* practices are often criticised as an imitation of heteronormative masculinity, femininity and relationships. However, in this chapter I depict *T-P* dynamics as a "half-rehearsed and half-improvised dance duet", and use it as a figuration for observing, understanding and imagining *T*- and *P*-identifications and *T-P* relationships. I look into how different sexual orientations (e.g. homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality) and gender identities (e.g. some sub-identities in *T-P* relationships) are strategically defined, hierarchically valued, and creatively (re)appropriated and (self-)identified, by my informants for their own sake. Their attentions are especially paid to the notion of "pureness (*chun*)", revolving which

various paradoxes, competitions and negotiations are existing. I analyse the nuanced stigmas that are respectively attached to bisexual women, *Ps*, "iron *Ts* (*tie Ts*)", "pure *Ps* (*chun Ps*)" and "pure women", by different women-loving-women subjects in different circumstances. I also discuss both the revolutionary elements and the limitations of the lately popularised discourses of "feminine *T* (*niang T*)" and "masculine *P* (*ye P*)".

In the chapter about love and sex (Chapter 5), I try to overcome a theoretically and methodologically multi-fold lack of language when I think, talk and write about "falling in love" and "having sex". As an attempt, I try to become a "translator", who looks into my informants' life stories about love and sex and makes the muted loud, the standardised altered, and the cliché novel; simultaneously, my own affective and bodily experiences of love and sex, entangled with my study, also become a particular "translation" of female same-sex love and sex. To be specific, I firstly analyse the "first love without articulation", which ambiguously happens between young women or girls, without being explicitly labelled as "love/*aiqing*", but often triggers their first exploration, doubt, or/and confirmation, of their affective feelings and sexual orientations. I then compare the differences between the meaning of "passionate (love)" and "romantic (love)", in mainstream and male Western scholars' works, and that of these terms' Chinese translations. Finally, I explore how my informants and myself define "having sex" between women. Although the physical (f)act of "penetration" plays a determining role in the uttered versions of definition, some subtle, hesitant, contradictory, metaphoric expressions about sex instead bring me implications and inspirations about how we can extend and enrich a notion.

In the chapter about "coming out of the closet" (Chapter 6), I revisit the theme of "*chugui*/coming out of the closet", after I paid attention to it in my MA thesis. Among the elements which obstacle a coming out practice or even make the idea of coming out unthinkable in Chinese contexts, "filial piety (*xiao*)" is one of the most salient ones. It is widely believed that the idea and ideal of "coming out", which originates from the individualism, identity politics and human rights movements in Western cultures, is not applicable to Chinese society and Chinese people. It is also argued that the strategies alternative to "coming out" applied by Chinese non-heterosexual individuals, such as "cooperative marriage (*xingshi hunyin*)" and "coming home", are unique local creations, which in return inspire Western scholars and activists to rethink identity politics and queer theory. However, I in my study question the usual presumption that the parents of Chinese non-heterosexual individuals are conservative, stubborn guardians of heteronormativity and patriarchy, who define "filial piety" in a uniform, rigid way and are easily paralysed by children's coming out without any resilience or any "unexpected" response nuanced from totally disappointment, sorrow and fury. Such a presumption is not only ahistorical—because attitudes towards non-heterosexuality vary

among different generations of parents—but also otherizes the parents rather than viewing their subjectivities as similar becoming journeys as their children's. I also question the essentialistic admission that "coming out" is a more or less rootless idea in China, which itself has confined the potential of a transregionally travelling and relocated concept. This admission has marginalised some people who, together with their families, bravely practises *chugui* and gives it new meanings, and who encourages their peers to explore *chugui* rather than merely thinking it completely impossible. Moreover, I call for more observations and descriptions that de-centre *chugui*/coming out stories from the original family of a non-heterosexual individual, but to see, for example, how they come out to their children. Such multiple-directional analyses can help us re-imagine the figurations of "home". Nevertheless, what I equally stress is that we should not idealise any single figuration of "home" as people's ultimate fulfilment, and should de-centre a pursuit of "coming out" from a narrowly imagined and uniformly evaluated utopia of "chosen family".

Samenvatting

Living Through Becoming is mijn proefschrift gebaseerd op een onderzoeksproject dat is gestart in 2012. Dit project werpt licht op verschillende, onderling verbonden aspecten van het dagelijks leven van de Chinese lesbische vrouw en de subjectiviteit van women loving women in China tijdens het laatste decennium. De gegevens zijn voornamelijk verzameld in vijf maanden veldwerk in 2013 en 2014 uitgevoerd in twee steden in China: in Kunming (provinciehoofdstad van Yunnan) en Sjanghai. Als etnografische studie in een tijdperk van globalisering, doordrenkt met feministisch gedachtegoed en ethiek, bevat dit proefschrift naast analyses van mijn persoonlijke ervaringen tevens anekdotes van vrienden, verhalen van informanten uit eerdere studies, werken van fictie, casuïstiek besproken in ander onderzoek, alsmede het heersende discours in het dagelijks leven en de media in China.

'Subjectivity (subjectiviteit)' is het sleutelbegrip waarop mijn onderzoek is gebaseerd en bovendien een thema dat verdere verkenning verdient binnen de Chinese context. Mijn benadering om subjectiviteit te bestuderen is sterk geïnspireerd door Rosi Braidotti's feministisch-filosofisch-nieuwe materialistische theorie van 'nomadic subjectivity (nomadische subjectiviteit)'. Deze benadering roept op tot creatief-kritische projecten waarbinnen 'figurations (figuraties)' (te weten de accurate, complexe, gesitueerde, belichaamde, verschilbevestigende, altijd-wordende en decentrerende locaties) van hen die zich in de periferie bevinden in kaart worden gebracht.

Het hoofddoel van mijn project is om het concept 'subjectivity (subjectiviteit)' persoonlijk te observeren, te interpreteren en te ervaren. Ik heb onderzocht hoe dit concept specifiek wordt belichaamd door Chinese women loving women, door middel van subtiel afgebeelde 'life maps' over de 'becoming (wordingsreizen)' van de kennis, waarden, gevoelens, praktijken en lichamen van deze vrouwen. Ik kijk in vijf specifieke, maar toch met elkaar verweven thema's: (1) globalisering; (2) heteronormativiteit; (3) seksuele oriëntaties en genderuitingen; (4) liefde en seks; (5) uit de kast komen.

Methodologisch gezien zijn mijn etnografisch veldwerk, evenals mijn latere gegevensanalyses en geschreven stukken, leerprocessen van het traject van de feministische 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology (ethico-onotto-epistem-ologie)', die mijn studie, mijn leven en mezelf/mijn 'zelf' verandert in zijn wat we gewoonlijk 'onderzoeksresultaten' noemen. In totaal verzamelde ik informatie van eenenveertig vrouwen in de leeftijd van begin twintig tot midden veertig, via semi-gestructureerde interviews, informele gesprekken, participerende observaties en focusgroepen.

In het hoofdstuk over globalisering (hoofdstuk 2) probeer ik 'globalisering' niet te zien als een al reeds gevormde macroachtergrond waartegen mijn informanten leven; in

plaats daarvan bestudeer ik 'globalisering' als een serie en veelvoud van 'entanglements (verwikkelingen)' van tijd, ruimte, verbeelding en realiteit. Uit deze entanglements (verwikkelingen) ontstaat het gevoel van 'zelf' en de 'wereld' van mensen en 'intra-act (intra-acteren)' en veranderen ze. Juist deze processen zijn het ontstaan van 'globalisering' en 'subjectiviteit'. Specifiek analyseer ik de instabiele en onverwachte machtsverhoudingen tussen een onderzoeker en haar informant, waarin verschillende dynamieken worden aangewakkerd door fysieke participatie in globaal toerisme of symbolische identificatie met geglobaliseerde (of eerder Euro-Amerikaanse) homo- en lesbische culturen. Een dergelijke dynamiek heeft niet alleen de vaak veronderstelde machtsongelijkheid tussen onderzoekers en informanten verschoven, gewijzigd, verworpen, maar ook bewust of onbewust de mensen gemarginaliseerd wiens kennis, ideeën, idealen en levensstijlen verondersteld wordt 'achterlijk' en 'geïsoleerd' te zijn.

In het hoofdstuk over heteronormativiteit (hoofdstuk 3), behandel ik het concept 'passionate aesthetics', gemunt door Saskia E. Wieringa, en pas ik het toe voor het analyseren van heteronormativiteit. Ik wijs hierbij op de beperkingen van het concept 'heteronormativity (heteronormativiteit)' zelf, waaronder zijn essentialisering en dichotomisering van de concepten heteroseksueel/homoseksueel, de veronderstelde verbanden tussen heteroseksueel-normaal en homoseksueel-abnormaal, en de ongevoeligheid voor dat esthetische streven dat complexer en paradoxaler is dan de dichotomie normaal-abnormaal. In contrast hiermee nodigt het concept passionate aesthetics ons uit om echt te onderzoeken wat 'beter', 'mooier', 'wenselijker' en 'dichter bij het ideale' is binnen de domeinen van het leven van mensen die betrekking hebben op sexualiteit en gender. Dit concept is tevens gevoelig voor subtiele veranderingen, subversieve processen en onverwachte mogelijkheden. Daarnaast is passionate aesthetics ook gevoelig voor de onwetendheid, discriminatie en het geweld dat voortkomt uit het najagen en opleggen van het 'betere' leven. Recent onderzoek naar verlangens en relaties tussen vrouwen in het hedendaagse China hebben aangetoond dat een collectieve neiging en een geïnternaliseerd individueel verlangen bestaat naar 'normal' te zijn. Echter, ik stel dat, in plaats van dit genoegen nemen met 'gewoon normal' te zijn, mensen—ook diegenen die 'normal' lijken binnen een samenleving- het doorgaans waarderen om 'bijzonder' te zijn in positief opzicht, te weten af te wijken van het banale, superieur aan het 'gewone', maar zonder stigmas. Daarom heb ik in dit proefschrift moeite gedaan om gevoelig te zijn voor de verschillen die afwijken van het 'normale', zonder hierbij een binair en oppositioneel begrip van gelijk/verschillend te hebben.

In het hoofdstuk over seksuele oriëntaties en genderuitdrukkingen (hoofdstuk 4), bekijk ik de *T*- en *P*-identificatie, evenals de *T*-*P*-relatie, die zo controversieel is

dat deze tegelijkertijd wordt toegepast, bekritiseerd, verlaten en/of en zich opnieuw toegeëigend tussen hedendaagse Chinese lesbiennes. Als vrouwelijke homoseksuele praktijken gebaseerd op de verdeling en koppeling van geslachtsdynaden, worden de *T-P*-praktijken vaak bekritiseerd als een imitatie van heteronormatieve mannelijkheid en vrouwelijkheid. In dit hoofdstuk beschrijf ik echter de *T-P* dynamiek als een 'half-geoefend en half geïmproviseerd dansduet', en gebruik het als een figuratie voor het waarnemen, begrijpen en verbeelden van *T*- en *P*-identificaties en *T-P*-relaties. Ik onderzoek hoe verschillende seksuele oriëntaties (bijvoorbeeld homoseksualiteit, heteroseksualiteit en biseksualiteit) en genderidentiteiten (bijvoorbeeld Sommige sub-identiteiten in *T-P*-relaties) strategisch gedefinieerd, hiërarchisch gewaardeerd en creatief (her) toegeëigend en (zelf) geïdentificeerd worden, door mijn informanten voor hun eigen bestwil. Hun aandacht wordt vooral besteed aan het begrip 'pureness (*chun*)', waarbij het erom gaat om welke verschillende paradoxen, competities en onderhandelingen er bestaan. Ik analyseer de genuanceerde stigma's die respectievelijk zijn verbonden aan biseksuele vrouwen, *Ps*, 'iron Ts (*tie Ts*)', 'pure *Ps* (*chun Ps*)' en 'pure vrouwen', door verschillende women loving women in verschillende omstandigheden. Ik bespreek ook zowel de revolutionaire elementen als de beperkingen van de recent gepopulariseerde discours van 'feminine *T* (*niang T*)' en 'masculine *P* (*ye P*)'.

In het hoofdstuk over liefde en seks (hoofdstuk 5) probeer ik een theoretisch en methodologisch meervoudig gebrek aan taal te overwinnen wanneer ik denk, praat en schrijf over 'verliefd worden' en 'seks hebben'. Als een poging probeer ik een 'vertaler' te worden die de levensverhalen van mijn informanten over liefde en seks onderzoekt en het verzwegene luid maakt, het gestandaardiseerde verandert en het cliché verandert in iets nieuws. Tegelijkertijd worden mijn eigen affectieve en lichamelijke ervaringen van liefde en seks verweven met mijn studie ook een specifieke 'vertaling' van liefde en seks voor vrouwen van hetzelfde geslacht. Om precies te zijn, analyseer ik eerst de 'eerste liefde zonder articulatie', die dubbelzinnig gebeurt tussen jonge vrouwen of meisjes, zonder expliciet als 'love/*aiqing*' te worden bestempeld, maar vaak hun eerste exploratie, twijfel, of/en bevestiging van hun affectieve gevoelens en seksuele oriëntaties. Vervolgens vergelijk ik de verschillen tussen de betekenis van 'gepassioneerd (liefde)' en 'romantisch (liefde)' in reguliere en mannelijke werken van westerse geleerden en die van de Chinese vertalingen van deze termen. Ten slotte onderzoek ik hoe mijn informanten en ik het concept 'seks hebben' definiëren tussen vrouwen. Hoewel de fysieke (f)act van 'penetratie' een bepalende rol speelt in de geuite versies van de definitie, brengen sommige subtiele, aarzelende, tegenstrijdige metaforische uitdrukkingen over seks mij implicaties en inspiraties over hoe we een idee kunnen uitbreiden en verrijken.

In het hoofdstuk over 'uit de kast komen' (hoofdstuk 6), ga ik terug naar het thema '*chugui*/coming out the closet', nadat ik er aandacht aan besteedde in mijn MA scriptie. Onder de elementen die een obstakel vormen voor coming-out of zelfs het idee om uit de kast te komen ondenkbaar maken in Chinese context, is 'kinderlijke vroomheid (*xiao*, filial piety)' een meest opvallende. Er wordt algemeen aangenomen dat het idee en het ideaal van 'coming-out', dat voortkomt uit het individualisme, identiteitspolitiek en mensenrechtenbewegingen in westerse culturen, niet van toepassing is op de Chinese samenleving en het Chinese volk. Er wordt ook beweerd dat de alternatieve strategieën voor "coming-out" toegepast door Chinese niet-heteroseksuele individuen, zoals 'coöperatief huwelijk (*xingshi hunyin*, cooperative marriage)' en 'thuiskomen (coming home)', unieke lokale creaties zijn, die op hun beurt westerse geleerden en activisten inspireren om niet alleen identiteitspolitiek, maar ook queer-theorie te heroverwegen. Ik twijfel echter in mijn studie aan het gebruikelijke vermoeden dat de ouders van Chinese niet-heteroseksuele individuen conservatieve, koppige beschermers zijn van heteronormativiteit en het patriarchaat, die de 'kinderlijke vroomheid' op een uniforme, rigide manier definiëren en gemakkelijk verlamd zijn door de coming out van hun kinderen zonder enige veerkracht of een 'onverwacht' antwoord genuanceerd van totale teleurstelling, verdriet en woede. Een dergelijk vermoeden is niet alleen ahistorisch—omdat de houding ten opzichte van niet-heteroseksualiteit varieert tussen verschillende generaties ouders—maar ook de ouders anders maakt, en niet hun subjectiviteit te zien als reizen in 'wording' net als die van hun kinderen. Ik betwijfel ook de essentialistische aanname dat 'coming-out' een min of meer wortelloos idee is in China, dat zelf de mogelijkheid van een transregionaal reis en verplaatsings concept beperkt heeft. Deze bekentenis heeft sommige mensen gemarginaliseerd die, samen met hun families, dapper *chugui* beoefenen en nieuwe betekenissen geven, en die hun leeftijdsgenoten aanmoedigen om *chugui* te verkennen in plaats van het alleen maar volledig onmogelijk te vinden. Bovendien roep ik op tot meer observaties en beschrijvingen die *chugui*/coming-out verhalen uit de oorspronkelijke familie van een niet-heteroseksueel individu declasseren, bijvoorbeeld om te zien hoe de coming out naar hun kinderen is. Zulke multiple-directionele analyses kunnen ons helpen de verschillende figuraties van 'thuis' opnieuw te verbeelden. Niettemin, wat ik evenzeer benadruk, is dat we geen enkele figuratie van 'thuis' als de ultieme vervulling van de mens zouden moeten idealiseren, en dat we het streven naar coming out van een eng verbeeld en uniform geëvalueerde utopie van 'gekozen familie' moeten decentreren.