Living through becoming

An ethnographic study of women-loving women’s subjectivity in the 2010s in mainland China

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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).”
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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
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consisted of seven colours: red (hong, or chi), orange (cheng), yellow (huang), green (lù), 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 lù 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).
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. 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.

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, with whom I did my last interview in the city of Kunming, Yunnan Province. I preferred to meet Tea in a café, whereas she

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/](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 Hechanguan)” 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.


31 See documents such as: [https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/Flags/qq-rb_h.html](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 Tș 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 huai shi)”. She emphasised to her first girlfriend—a “straight woman (zhi nü)—that her affection was “only ‘liking (xihu an)” 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.\(^{34}\) 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), fleshted 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

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34 Starlight, Tea’s close old friend, was the founder of a lala grassroots group in Kunming. Starlight was also one of my informants.
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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\(^\text{35}\) 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, 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.

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.
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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 Borsch 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. 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-
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 boshi38) 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 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.
Studying Globalisation and Subjectivity as “Entanglements”

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-
A 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 China39. 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

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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.”

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 Anglo-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

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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).” 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” 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.

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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.