Living through becoming

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

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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”,

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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”.

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
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(Chapter 3 of Education of the People's Republic of China 2007). It generally refers to urban, educated, professional women who have reached their late twenties (usually 27 years old, 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 naїve 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”

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.

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(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, naive 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) lifestyle, 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)’. 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’? 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”. 
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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.

\(^{51}\) 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. Hinsch 1990; 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 chuanxiao52; 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.
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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!”

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), 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 China⁵⁵, 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

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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.
More than “Just Normal”

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

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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. 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 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

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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 (zhēn’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 other. 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

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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. 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, 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

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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. 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 challenge 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 “differences” 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).