Identity in Negotiation:

Chinese Gay Men and Their Everyday Use of Digital Media

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the role that digital media plays in the everyday lives of Chinese gay males, and to further explore the implications of such digital practices relating to the construction of gay identity. It draws on a nine-month ethnographic fieldwork in Guangzhou and Beijing respectively from December 2016 to August 2017. Through intensive engagement with local gay individuals and communities, this project was not only able to make a more comprehensive understanding of individuals' life stories, but also contextualise their lived experience of gay identity within the wider cultural, social, and political context of China.

This research project revealed that digital media has indeed played a significant role in the everyday lives of different generations of Chinese gay men, as it has become their vital sources of learning and understanding about sexual identity and gay community life, and their main venue of communicating, connecting and meeting with other same-sex attracted men. However, their use of digital media is still shaped by Chinese social norms and social locations. Firstly, although digital media have introduced Chinese gay men to an up-to-date transnational gay scene, research participants still understand their identity in its own sociality. Secondly, although digital media has facilitated greater connectivity between Chinese gay males and helped them to manage and maintain different gay circles, it does not necessarily produce solidarity in the community. These gay circles are often stratified by the nature of the social class. Thirdly, market ideas and proxies dominate all aspects of Chinese people's everyday lives. In particular, neoliberal discourses, such as *suzhi* has significantly shaped Chinese gay males' digital culture.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Although China has the world's largest gay population[1], homosexuality is still considered the "dark side" of society. Representations of same-sex relations, for example, are not allowed to be shown on television. In late February 2016, an online streamed drama series was pulled offline by the government because two gay men's relationship was featured in the show. It was reported that this show "contravened the new guidelines, which state that: 'No television drama shall show abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours such as incest, same-sex relationships, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual violence, and so on' " (Ellis-Petersen, 2016). Zhou (2006) humorously describes the Chinese policy on homosexuality as the "'Four No's': no enquiry (bu wen), no mentioning (bu ti), no talking (bu shuo), and no response (bu li) (p. 487)". Being a homosexual individual in China is legal, but there is no law to protect their civil rights yet. Moreover, homosexuality was only "decriminalised" in 1997[2], and ceased to be regarded as a mental illness in 2001[3] (Ellis-Petersen, 2016). The 2016 guideline seems to be the first case in which the Chinese government has officially banned depictions of gay people on television, preceding this no official document has been released that directly states that gay people are not allowed to be shown in TV or web dramas. Self-censorship among TV and film producers had hitherto been the case.

There were more than 110 million online discussion responses to this news within a day of the show's cancellation (Campbell, 2016). Most of them expressed their unhappiness about the cancellation (ibid.). Compared with traditional mainstream media, the Internet seems a relatively open space for people to discuss gay-related topics. Indeed, this is what Cao and Lu (2014) suggest when they argue that a crucial change that the Internet brings for the Chinese gay community in recent years is "the proliferation of online queer-focused discourse among online mainstream media and straight people"

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1 Generally, there is an estimation between 2%-5% of the population are homosexual (Tatlow, 2012).

2 Although it was not explicitly listed as a form of hooliganism, homosexuality was commonly penalized under the name of "hooliganism". As "hooliganism" was removed from China's 1997 law, it was considered as the "decriminalisation" of homosexuality (Bao, 2011, p.71).

3 Homosexuality was taken off the official list of mental illnesses in 2001 (Ellis-Petersen, 2016).

(p.846). The other change is that the creation of “online virtual public spaces where people can find everything necessary for a gay community, from social network services, semi-pornography, and sexual partners to discussions of the issues that concern them or opportunities to turn to someone for help” (ibid., p.845). Therefore, they argue that “without the Internet and other new media the gay movement in China would not have gathered so much momentum, and that gay communities would have been far less mature” (ibid., p.846).

While I am not disputing their claims, there are a number of issues to note with their argument. The first is the construction of the Internet as a wholly positive space for gay people, and the second is the subsequent line they draw between online and offline. Third, their claims seem to suggest that an emergent “movement” has an identity, but they leave this un-interrogated. A key question, therefore, is what these spaces actually mean to the construction of gay identity, and what is the relationship between “sharing” (as a central foundation of communities) and “identity”. These issues are at the heart of my research project, which seeks to understand how digital media is implicated in gay identity in China.

Other more recent news further highlights the need to investigate gay identity in a digital China. That is, the fact that BlueCity, the parent company of Blued - the Chinese most popular gay social application - went public and is listed on Nasdaq on 8th July 2020 at a market value of over $600m (The Economist, 2020). Baoli Ma, the founder, chairman and CEO of BlueCity, proudly wrote in his shareholder letter that he would “continue expanding our brand globally” and build “a beautiful rainbow over the capital markets” (ibid.). This seems like a dream come true to Chinese gay individuals, which could be “considered concrete evidence of increased social recognition of homosexuality in China” (Wang, 2020d). The celebration of Blued’s commercial success indicates a very particular logic in neoliberal times that people’s existence is validated by their presence in the markets.

However, as Wang (2020d) points out: “the commercial success of a social app for gays doesn’t necessarily indicate a gay-friendly social environment, not least because Blued has a history of sanding the rougher edges of gay life in pursuit of corporate gain and mainstream acceptance” (n.p.). Miao and Chan (2020b) also confirm Wang’s (2020) view. They have identified three developmental trajectories of Blued which contribute to its success: “(1) work with the Communist Party of China to employ Blued as a health education platform; (2) the switch in orientation from a hookup app to a social app; and

(3) the push for the commercialization and internationalization of the app" (p. 214).

Figure 1.1 Blued's Advertising Material in Around 2017

Figure 1.2 Blued's Advertising Material in Around 2020

These strategic moves could also be observed in Blued's advertising materials. In around 2017, Blued defines itself as "the world's leading *tongzhi* social/live streaming app", however, as the image above details, Blued now calls itself "the world's leading interest-based social & health education network". This change of statement not only highlights shifting functions and purposes of this app, but more importantly, it shows an elimination of sexual identity. The word "*tongzhi*" used in their early version of statement literally means "comrade" in English, but it also commonly refers to male homosexuals in China (detailed discussion on this term can be found in Chapter 2). Today, the term "*tongzhi*" does not appear in their promotional text as the defining identification of Blued. Instead, this social network is based on shared interests and health education. Clearly, Blued does not want to stress their identity as a gay app; rather, they want to emphasise their mainstream and positive qualities. Taken together,

the example of Blued highlights the general conservative attitudes towards sexual minorities, especially, from the party-state.

Indeed, if a gay-oriented social app does not intend to show its “gayness”, to what extent can we argue that this could be empowering to its sexual minority users? It is understandable, that for BlueCity, as a company, its primary pursuit is to gain economic benefit, social responsibility is second. It is also understandable, in the context of China, that running such a company is not easy. In a private conversation with Baojun Ma (3rd August 2018), he told me that the very existence of Blued does mean a lot in China, and what he needs to do is just keep this app running. For Ma, the idea that there is an app for the Chinese gay community is already a significant achievement. I am not sure if I would agree with his point, but what is clear from the examples above is that the Chinese context further complicates the arena of gay identity, and that this needs a thorough investigation.

1.1 Research Gap

Studies on Chinese homosexuality tend to argue that the rise of the Internet in China has transformed the lives of male same-sex attracted individuals. Within these arguments are particular references to the concept of gay identity and community building (Ho, 2010; Cao and Lu, 2014; Zhang and Kaufman, 2005), and while scholars disagree over issues of “empowerment” online, they nevertheless all argue for the transformational impact of the Internet. For example, Kong (2010) claims that the Internet has become a tool of empowerment for his research participants who were born in the late 1970s and 1980s. It has been their “major means for sexual identification” and “a significant way for [them] to identify with the imagined gay community” (ibid., p.161, 163). Wong (2010) suggests that because of the wide accessibility of the Internet “sexual minorities in China are increasingly familiar with the notions of gay rights, coming out, and same-sex marriage” (p.160). Some scholars even see this as the foundations of a future gay movement (Cao and Lu, 2014). However, Ho (2007) more cautiously addresses the concerns about the utopian view of the role of the Internet in the LGBT movement in China. She argues that “gay space in Chinese cyberspace is (self)-censored and commercialised, same-sex identity is (mis)represented” (p.158). This reminds us of the aforementioned case of Blued’s development. She also identifies that the Internet can “tend to lead some gay netizens in China to imagine the Western gay world as a gay haven, where gender or sexual variation is the

norm" (p.20). Thus, we can see that the relationship between homo/sexuality, identity and the digital is not so clear cut. This certainly deserves more scholarly attention.

This research project will add to these analyses and elaborate on how those "transformations" took place with a detailed examination of Chinese gay males' lived experiences. Firstly, to better comprehend the affordances that brought by the Internet to the Chinese gay community, I introduce a cross-generational narrative, in which I tell the stories of older Chinese gay men who came of age before the Internet was introduced to their lives alongside the stories of younger gay men who grew up in a digital age. This perspective is important not only because it provides a comparative view towards what we have assumed to be the experience of the digital natives, but also it allows me to contextualise the technological development within the broader social, cultural, and economic progression in China, in order to avoid a technology determinism view. Through this perspective, I will be able to show the continuities and changes in Chinese gay men's everyday lives, and provide a more vivid portrayal of the "digital transformation".

Secondly, the main aim of these sociological and anthropological studies on homosexuality in China is to explore how individuals make sense of their homosexual identity in a collective way; their aim is not to examine the role of (digital) media related to homosexuality (see: Bao, 2011, Chou, 2000, Ho, 2007, Kong, 2010). Furthermore, this research project does not only provide a detailed discussion on the role of digital media in relation to Chinese gay males' everyday lives, but also focuses specifically on social media, thus extending the academic work noted above to an age of social network services.

Thirdly, and related to the previous points, Grov et al. (2014) suggest "gay and bisexual men have adapted to the ever-evolving technological advances that have been made in connecting users to the Internet —from logging into the World Wide Web via dial-up modem on a desktop computer to geo-social and sexual networking via a handheld device" (p.390). Although a growing small body of literature has started to examine Chinese gay men's uses of dating/social networking apps in relation to topics such as the impression management and self-presentation (Chan, 2016), the establishment of relationships (Wang, 2020a, Wu and Ward, 2019), and digital labour (Wang, 2020b, Wang, 2020c), the main interest of these works seems to be in accordance with the latest trend in Chinese gay male digital culture, rather than provide a holistic view towards what this ever-evolving technological

development means to Chinese gay individuals. Through a retrospective, this research project investigates what the development of gay-orientated digital media (platforms) means to Chinese gay men.

1.2 Research Questions

Since this research project seeks to understand how digital media is implicated in gay identity in China, I want to keep the overarching research question open and relatively general. It provides more empirical guidance than specific theoretical inquiries.

Therefore, the main question that this doctoral research intends to answer is: **What is the role of digital media in Chinese gay males' everyday lives, and what is the implication of this for the construction of gay identity?**

I employ the terms "digital media" and "gay" in this study, because I believe that these terms help us to capture the hybridisation and congregation of both the usage of digital media and the identity itself[4]. There are three major reasons for doing so, which are introduced here.

Firstly, I use the term "digital media" to avoid the separation between online and offline. In earlier studies of the Internet, many scholars view the "online worlds as being an escape from, or response to, offline contexts, problems, and obstacles" (Mowlabocus, 2012, p.2). This often "leads to celebratory discussions of cyberspace as some virtual utopia" (Campbell, 2014, originally 2004, p.10). In other words, cyberspace is characterised, "as a sovereign realm, distinct from and unaffected by the cultural, political, and economic forces shaping the mundane world we inhabit" (ibid., p.11). Users of these digital technologies "describe their social interactions … as happening 'online' or 'in cyberspace'" (ibid., p.19). Conversely, offline experiences are "often identified as happening in the 'the real world', 'real life', or even 'RL' for short" (ibid.). This demarcation between online and offline experience seems to suggest that online experiences are less real or meaningful than experiences offline (ibid., p.20). The delineation between online and offline becomes especially unclear in the new digital media era. For example, when a gay male

4 Although I have made my choice of terms, when referencing other scholars' work around the field, I will keep the term which they are used in their original text. There might be an interchange of terms when different writers are referring to the same thing. For example, there may be the interchange of using the terms "gay", "homosexual", even sometime "queer" when one referring a sexual identity category. There may also be the interchange among "online", "cyberspace", and "virtual space".

is hanging out with his friends, and suddenly several messages pop up from Grindr[5] on his phone. At this moment it is difficult to define whether he is "online" or "offline" (to use the demarcations noted above), not least because as scholars argue gay male digital culture is "an embodied – and erotic – experience" (Mowlabocus, 2012, p.2). Consequently, in this research, I try to avoid those terms which have a disembodied connotation (such as online, virtual space, cyberspace).

Secondly, the choice of using the term "digital (media)" also helps to avoid the "problem with just how long something can be 'new'" which the term "new media" brings. I use the catch-all term "digital media" to refer to the current media that individuals live with, including so-called networked media, online media and social media which "have come to the fore as specific extensions of digital media" (Dewdney and Ride, 2014, p.2). Obviously, an individual's use of digital media is not unidirectional or singular; one may use different platforms, websites and applications etc. via one's phone, tablets, laptops, and PCs etc. Indeed, it is a diverse and hybrid usage.

Thirdly, I prefer the use of "gay" in describing a certain type of sexual identity. First, as Mowlabocus (2012) suggests that "'gay' signifies the formation of a sub-culture identity based around certain desires at a point in history when the capacity for such an identity to be constructed and maintained as valid, has become a reality" (p.25). Second, it seems the "most visible and arguably the most powerful expression of homosexuality" in the contemporary world (ibid.). Third, the word "gay" plays a special role in China. People use the word directly without translation, which signifies a specific cultural connotation. This cultural connotation is one of the research objects that I will explore in this project.

Relatedly, I prefer not to use the term "queer" in this thesis. Bartle (2015) critically notes that "gay is chiefly an identity, and queer is a form of defiantly unruly analysis" (p. 532). The term "queer" is often associated with queer theory as a "denormativising" analytic which challenges normative structures and discourses. This radical deconstructing approach makes it almost uncomfortable to speak of a "gay" subject, since all social categories are denaturalized and reduced to discourse (Gamson, 2000). Furthermore, in the commitment of highlighting human's resistance to social norms, queer theory might ignore the social and institutional conditions within which sexual minorities live (Green, 2002). As the core aim of this thesis is to understand

5 A gay dating app.

how (gay) identity is articulated and experienced by ordinary individuals, the term “queer” may therefore not be able to capture the mundane nature of everyday lives. Clearly, this is not only an issue of choosing the terms, but rather it is a choice of standpoint or ontology. These issues will be discussed more explicitly later in this thesis.

1.3 Research Contributions

This research project contributes original evidence and analysis to related fields of research like LGBT studies, digital media research, cultural studies in the Chinese context, and more broadly sociological and ethnographic approaches to media and identity.

Firstly, following the call of Kong (2016), I provide a “more nuanced understanding of Chinese homosexual identities, desires and practices that is sensitive to local experiences and global parameters under the geopolitics of the world system of knowledge” (p.16). Through nine-month ethnographic fieldwork in China in 2016 to 2017, I have interviewed 89 demographically diverse Chinese gay men. Through these semi-life-history interviews, my research participants have shared their valuable experiences of being gay in China. Furthermore, during the fieldwork, I also worked for a local gay organisation in Guangzhou for five months and spent four months in Beijing where I attended various activities and events engaging with different LGBT organisations and individuals. This intensive engagement with local gay communities in Beijing and Guangzhou enables me to provide a detailed lived account of gay identity in China.

Secondly, some scholars have argued for more and separate attentions to study a “Chinese Internet” in comparison to the studies of the Internet of the Western countries (e.g., Damm, 2007, McDonald, 2015). Indeed, studies demonstrate the development of ICT in China has always been related to a complex socio-political evolution (Morozov, 2011). Hu and Wang (2016) suggest that the development of the so-called “Chinese Internet” reveals a sophisticated entanglement between nationalist ideology, market capitalism and technological regulation. Bahroun (2016) reviews the field of Chinese Internet studies and suggests “the history of the Internet in China has been restrictively analysed […] according to how technology influences society or how society affects technology” (p.328). Within those China-based historical narratives, the users’ voice has been neglected (ibid.). Therefore, this

proposed project will not only let the users speak but also those who have been marginalised in Chinese society.

Last but not least, Szulc (2014) points out that the field of LGBTQ Internet studies has been "characterized by the predominance of U.S. (or Western) perspectives" (p.2928), little research has been done in China or on examining the Chinese context. This study aims to speak to this gap which is also a response to the call of Chan (2017a) who advocates the internationalizing LGBTQ research in the field of communication studies after reviewing LGBTQ-related articles published in Communication Journals from 2010 to 2015.

1.4 A Brief History of Homosexuality in China

In order to understand the complexity of homosexuality in China today, it is necessary to note briefly where homosexuality started as an identity historically, since the modern gay identity in China is the legacy of its own distinct history. Homosexuality was seen as a type of behaviour instead of an identity in ancient/traditional China (Cao and Lu, 2014, Kong, 2010). There has been a long period in its history of tolerance of men with same-sex desires in ancient Chinese society to as early as 650BC as shown in a well-established literature (Kong, 2010, p.151). Sodomy could result in a conviction only started during Qing dynasty (1644-1911), but the punishment was relatively light and the prosecution were few (Cao and Lu, 2014, p.841). In China's traditional patriarchal society homosexual practices were "inextricably bound up with structures of social power", and commonly happened "between emperors and ministers, masters and servants, teachers and students, and scholar-bureaucrats and opera players" (ibid.). Kong (2016) suggests that "the reason for this tolerance of male same-sex relations may be that cultural expectations of male sexuality were concerned with conformity to power hierarchies" (p.3). However, this tolerance did not mean homosexuality was supported or accepted. Reproduction was still the first duty of society, in traditional Chinese culture, one must "fulfil filial piety, particularly the duty to reproduce" (Chou, 2000, p.25). Chinese philosophers demeaned and humiliated any members of society who decided not to have a family which meant failure to pass on the family name; not having any descendants has been considered as the worst unfamilial conduct in Confucianism; therefore

everyone in ancient China was expected to get married and have children[6] (Chou, 2000, Sim, 2014). One was not able to live an exclusively homosexual lifestyle as it was "culturally inconceivable and definitely intolerable"; if so, one would be "a nonbeing in society" (Chou, 2000, p.20). In the context of this research, it is very significant that this traditional view of kinship and marriage still strongly influences present-day Chinese people's perception of homosexuality.

It was not until the 1920s that homosexuality came to be regarded as an identity "stamped with a pathological label" (Cao and Lu, 2014, p.842). This change of perception was seen as a result of the impact of modernisation and Westernisation (Kong, 2010, Chou, 2001). Western bio-medical knowledge was introduced into China by Chinese scholars[7]. They started to view homosexuality as a deviation, a temporary aberration or a mental disease (Chou, 2001, Kong, 2016). This negative view of homosexuality still lingers now[8].

In contrast with Western society, which "has gradually departed from the mental illness model [of homosexuality]" in the 1950s and 60s (Chou, 2001, p.31); Kong (2010) suggests that in the Mao period (1949-76) "homosexuality was not only pathologized and silenced, but was increasingly seen as deviance and crime" (p.153). Especially, in the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), "homosexual behaviour was seen as a severe political fault – a sign of capitalist tendencies – that merited severe punishment" (Cao and Lu, 2014, p.842). Homosexuality had become a political label. Despite this, Bao (2011) suggesting that in the Maoist period the state emphasized the unified body of "people-as-One", the collective, with gender differences being erased although there was still very harsh and severe political suppression of gay people.

The term "tongzhi"[9] (comrade) was widely used as a pronoun to refer to everyone (male and female) in communist society. Bao (2011) argues that "the socialist 'comrade' subjectivity, with its radical departure from traditional forms of family, kinship, intimacy and gender norms, together with its

6 "One major Confucian teaching narrates that 'there are three forms of unfilial conducts, of which the worst is to have no descendants'" (cited in Sim, 2014, p.3).

7 It was mainly Havelock Ellis's medical theory of homosexuality dominating the discourse which dichotomized sexual normality and deviated non-normative sexualities (Kong, 2016).

8 "Chinese hospitals [still] use drugs and electric shock therapy to 'cure' gay people" (Connaire, 2015).

9 "Tong" literally means "same", "zhi" means "will/ aspiration".

remapping of the social relations and everyday lives, intrinsically relates to queer meanings". But he also acknowledges that there was a general "lack of sensitivity to homosexuality in Maoist China" (p.69). His participants told him that sometimes male same-sex intimacy could be accepted as a sign of camaraderie in the period.

Since Chinese society started a dramatic transition in 1978, it "has witnessed a drastic change in terms of sexuality" (Kong, 2010, p.154). With the Chinese economic reform and opening up, "the socialist project has been given way to neo-liberal market economics" (ibid., p.143). In such a context, the room for public discussion of homosexuality has emerged. Kong (2010) notes that "[d]rawing heavily on a medical and mental health approach, literature in the 1980s focused overwhelmingly on 'treating' homosexuality, especially in the context of the onset of the AIDS epidemic" (p.154). Since the first HIV infection was diagnosed, ordinary people have equated the spread of AIDS with the gay community (Cao and Lu, 2014, p.843).

For the civil enforcer, homosexuality was criminalised under the charge of 'hooliganism', which was introduced in Criminal Law in 1979, although "it was not explicitly listed as a form of hooliganism" (ibid.). The visibility of discussion about homosexuality has been increasing, but the social stigmas have not been reduced. However, for most of the general public, homosexuality was something they had never heard of before the 1980s.

Wong (2010) argues that the modern identity label "gay" did not appear in mainland China until the mid-1990s. After more than a decade of economic reform and opening up, and with the increasing exchanges between China and the West, modern understandings of homosexuality were introduced to China. As a former British colony, Hong Kong has played a vital role in disseminating those understandings. Wong (2010) suggests that when the western identity label "gay" was imported into Hong Kong the positive political connotation of it was diminished, instead, it was seen as "a derogatory and demeaning label" (p.156). Therefore, sexual minorities appropriated the term "*tongzhi*" (comrade) for their identity construction. Chou (2000) argues that the appropriation of *tongzhi* signifies "both a desire to indigenize sexual politics and to reclaim their cultural identity" (p.3). He suggests that this term integrates the sexual, political, and cultural together, which highlights the cultural uniqueness and actually goes "beyond the homo-hetero dichotomy without losing the socio-political specificity of the sexual minority" as it stresses "both *zhi* (subverting heterosexism) and *tong* (sexual differences between *tongzhi* and non-*tongzhi*)" (ibid.).

The use of *tongzhi* to refer to sexual minorities was introduced to mainland China by scholars and activists from Hong Kong in the mid-1990s (Wong, 2010). According to Wei (2007), the term *tongzhi* was not widely used by Chinese gay individuals as an identity label until the new millennium. He attributed the prevalence of *tongzhi* to the blossoming of gay websites in China; he noticed that most of those websites actually used the word "tongzhi" in their names. At the same time HIV related funding was given to China. Under the name of "AIDS prevention", many gay organizations and groups were founded all over the country in order to help the government get in touch with gay communities; most of those organizations have a connection with international NGOs, or are even involved with western gay individuals. Rofel (2007) contends that "the presence of foreign gay men and lesbians in China who both create and participate in gay networks means that the transnational quality of gayness in China is both visible and visceral" (p.88). It must be noted that she suggests that those western individuals directly contributed to the import and importance of gay identities (ibid.).

A number of studies have shown that there are important differences and preferences in the adoption of the labels of *tongzhi* or gay for self-identification (Bao, 2011, Ho, 2007, Rofel, 2007, Wong, 2010). Bao (2011) identifies that for some of his participants, *tongzhi* for them attaches more emotional and affective value, they see the only difference between *tongzhi* and non-*tongzhi* is their sexual orientation, they just happen to love someone with the same-sex, but love itself is not something wrong. "*Tongzhi* are [also] characterized by gao suzhi ('high quality')"[10] (Bao, 2011, p.234). This is a positive emphasis that *tongzhi* can also be good high-quality citizens in the society and who "make[s] significant contributions to society" (ibid., p.233). Bao (2011) argues that "*tongzhi* … is a sexual subject that fits into the agenda of the nation-state", and in a way the political dimension of this identity has been reduced (p.235). It is an identity label with great Chinese characteristics.

By contrast, "gay" has always been seen as a transnational self-identification or lifestyle. Rofel (2007) noticed that most of those who describe themselves as gay in Beijing are under 30-year-olds growing up in the reform era when China has opened up its markets. Wong (2010) points out that more people in Changchun are willing to be called "gay" rather than "tongzhi" because they believe that "the use of 'gay' invokes a merry and lively mood that points toward a quality of life, including a marital life, that they are entitled to have".

10 For the discussion of "suzhi", please also see 3.2 in Ho (2007)'s thesis, and Qualities of Desire in Rofel (2007, p.103-106).

She also suggests that gay signifies a voguish stylish aspect because there is the prevalent perception that “nine out of ten men are gay in vogue circles” (ibid., p.164). All in all, being “gay” seems associated with being classy, modern, and stylish. Interestingly, scholars have observed that most of the gay people when referring to themselves as “gay”, they do not translate this word into Chinese, they use the word “gay” directly in a Chinese conversion (Bao, 2011, Ho, 2007, Wong, 2010). It seems that “gay” is a commonly understudied western concept which signifies a certain western urban image.

Although, different individuals may have different preferences in the choice of identity labels, it is not to suggest that they are two separable identities. In fact, as Wong (2010) notices some people use “gay” and “tongzhi” interchangeably for self-identification, and some people do not associate them to either of these two identity labels. The reason behind the choice of the signifier is obscure and very complex. In Ho (2007)’s view, the western gayness and *tongzhi* subject are all parts of the “fragmented same-sex identity” in China, which can best be understood within the paradigm of China’s opening up to the current globalising world. But for (Wong, 2010) and Plumer (2010), gay identity in China is actually a hybridization. Altman (2002) asserts that “homosexuality becomes a particularly obvious measure of globalisation” (p.100). So, what I shall consider is: to what extent there is a distinct Chinese gay identity.

Three significant forces, which will be explored, are identified and have contributed to the articulation of gay/*tongzhi* identity in modern China. First, as mentioned before is the HIV prevention groups/ LGBT NGOs. As “partners” of the Chinese government, those organizations gained a certain level of legitimacy to carry out projects to promote the knowledge of HIV/AIDS prevention, simultaneously, they also raise the public consciousness about gay identity, and community (Cao and Lu, 2014, Wei, 2015). Those organizations run many interest groups, clubs, and local gay magazines prompting a certain kind of gay lifestyle (Bao, 2011). They not only participate in local gay politics, but also have introduced what we might call a western notion of gay culture, activism and lifestyle through community activities such as workshops or gay film screenings (for example) (ibid.).

Secondly, we need to consider the growth of commercial gay scenes in different metropolitan cities. Bao (2011) argues that “the gay bars and clubs in Shanghai should be understood both as transnational queer spaces and social spaces linked to homoeroticism in China’s historical past” (p.219). Ho (2007) contends that gay bars in Beijing not only “facilitate the organisation of

homosocial activities and events" but also "signify the emergence of gay-oriented resources and establishments in urban China" (p.146). Those gay bars and clubs are the social sites for young urban and well-off gay individuals, and foreign visitors. Social interactions between Chinese gay people and western individuals happen in those bars every night.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, is the Internet. Although the field of LGBTQ Internet studies is still under-developed, most of the sociological studies on homosexuality in China have realized the vital role of the Internet in gay people's lives. For the participants of Kong (2010)'s study who were born in the late 1970s and 1980s, the Internet has become a tool of empowerment. It has been their "major means for sexual identification" and "a significant way for [them] to identify with the imagined gay community" (ibid., p.161, 163). Wong (2010) suggests that because of the wide accessibility of the Internet "sexual minorities in China are increasingly familiar with the notions of gay rights, coming out, and same-sex marriage" (p.160). Some scholars even see this as the foundations of future gay movement (Cao and Lu, 2014). However, Ho (2007) addresses the concerns about the utopian view of the role of the Internet in the LGBT movement in China. She argues that "gay space in Chinese cyberspace is (self)-censored and commercialised, same-sex identity is (mis)represented" (p.158). She also identifies that the Internet can "tend to lead some gay netizens in China to imagine the Western gay world as a gay haven, where gender or sexual variation is the norm" (p.20).

Additionally, I would call attention to smartphone/mobile apps as a potential fourth force which could contribute to the future articulation of gay identity in China. Bien et al. (2015) suggest that "anti-gay stigma and harsh local environments in many low and middle-income countries encourage men who have sex with men (MSM) partner-seeking mobile application (gay app) use" (p.941). They also find that "compared to non-app users, app users were more likely to be younger, better educated, ''out'' about their sexual orientation, and single [in China]. They were also more likely to report multiple recent sex partners and HIV testing" (ibid.). But little research has been done investigating how the use of gay apps influences on the construction of gay identity in China. Although gay men may mainly use these apps for a sexual purpose, the implication of these apps may not be that simple. It blurs the public-private space, online-offline demarcation. More importantly, people show their sexual identity directly to those who share the same. This becomes a distinctive way of "identifying". These issues will also be explored further in this project.

Undoubtedly, a single force on its own will not be able to articulate gay identity, it is a complex interplay and enmeshing of these and other factors. For example, the Chengdu Gay Care Organisation was founded by local gay bar owners, and later the gay bar became a cultural centre for the gay community (Wei, 2015). This complex enmeshing is further exacerbated by the digital. For instance, the company Danlan, the biggest gay web portal in China, owns the most popular gay dating app – Blued, and also owns an HIV prevention and testing centre (Jiang, 2014). They also have different social media accounts for those different purposes. Gay individuals' use of the Internet is not simply about websites, now it is a crossing-platform, apps, and multi-screen experience. In this project, I will explore and investigate how gay males negotiate these various factors and forces in the digital age.

1.5 Thesis Structure

In this introductory chapter, I have explained the research rationale and contributions to the fields of studies. I have also addressed the general conceptual and empirical concerns of this thesis. To set up a general ground of this PhD project, this chapter has also provided a brief history of homosexuality in China.

In **Chapter 2**, a broad range of works of literature that are relevant and informative to this research has been reviewed. I give a noticeable proportion to discuss the concept of identity in which I highlight the complexity and contradiction embedded in the theorisation of this concept. I have opted for an eclectic approach rather than coming down on the side of one particular school of thoughts. Because of the exploratory nature of this research, I intend to use aspects of different theories to inform what I have to say about my gay male research participants' experience in China. Following this, I review discussions on gay identity and digital identity respectively to stress further the complexities and nuances that such conditions have to add to the already elusive notion of identity. In the last section of this chapter, I consider the intersection between gay identity and digital media, in particular the issues of (self-) representation, pornography, and dating practices in the gay digital cultures. A continuous question that this chapter is addressing is what the Chinese context has to add or complicate the existing literature.

Chapter 3 addresses the methodological issues around this PhD project and offers a reflexive account of the conduct of this research. By first providing the

epistemological stance of this study, I seek to connect the theoretical and empirical issues highlighted in the Literature Review and explain the nature of this research project that is inspired by ethnographical approach. In understanding an ethnographically inspired methodology, I then provide a detailed account and reflection of my research fieldwork in Guangzhou and Beijing from late 2016 to 2017. In particular, I elaborate on the process of participants recruitment and ethical concerns to further shed light on conducting research with sexual minorities in China.

As the first empirical chapter, drawing upon the Chinese gay individuals' stories from different generations, **Chapter 4** addresses issues around self-awareness and self-acceptance of homosexuality. It provides a significant glimpse into the development of Chinese society, but more importantly, the experiences of Chinese gay men from different generations. Through this cross-generational perspective, this chapter also illustrates the "digital transformation" that the Internet has brought to Chinese gay males.

Chapter 5 deals with the narrative construction of gay identity in China from the perspective of ordinary Chinese gay males. I demonstrate how Chinese gay males make sense of their identity via stories/representations in a digital age. In particular, I show how gay identity is attained and imagined through narrative engagement by the participants. Narratives of homosexuality related issues, such as HIV (or sexually transmitted diseases in general), coming out, and relational development etc., have been created and recreated in the digital spaces which provide Chinese gay male with resources in terms of narrative engagement.

In **Chapter 6**, I unpack Chinese gay sexual (and digital) culture by exploring my participants' construction of sexual desires and relational goals. I illustrate how the concept of "cybercarnality" works in Chinese gay digital cultures and further complicate this idea by elaborating how the Chinese party-state has intervened into people's construction of sexuality. I also examine the affordances that location-based real-time dating (LBRTD) applications have brought to Chinese gay men, as well as the social and cultural issues around the use of these applications.

Chapter 7 contextualises Chinese gay men's use of digital media in relation to the concepts of network and connectivity and explores the implications of such digital mediated networks in relation to the concept of "community" in a neoliberal China. I illustrate how digital media platforms have become most participants' main way of establishing and maintaining their gay friends' circles

in which they could comfortably expose their sexual identity and spend their private social life.

Finally, **Chapter 8** synthesises the empirical findings and links these to the existing academic debates that I have highlighted throughout the thesis. By doing so, I do not want to simply summarise the results of this research, but also, I want to shed light on further studies on sexual identities and digital media in China.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this research project, as stated in Chapter 1, is to understand the role that digital media plays in the everyday lives of Chinese gay males, and to further explore the implications of such digital practices relating to the construction of gay identity. The exploratory nature of this study will examine a range of theoretical perspectives. In particular, three central concepts: that of (gay) identity, the digital aspect in general, and the particular Chinese (context). Each has its own long pedigree, and is theoretically laden in different and/or even oppositional canons. I acknowledge there are central tensions within each theoretical strand, thus, I have drawn and debated the relevant highlights and approaches within the literature.

The reason for employing an integrated theoretical approach to investigate gay men's experiences of using digital media in their everyday lives is simply because of the complex social reality in today's world. Elliott (2008) has critically pointed out that "the rapidity of social change, and uncertainties promoted by globalization and multiculturalism" has resulted in further "complexity and contradiction of contemporary social processes" (p.158).

A single theoretical approach is, therefore, unable to capture the complicated nature of present-day societies. Moreover, we should be aware that "identity theories themselves are the products of scholars who inhabit social identities that prescribe a set of parameters within the knowledge production industry" (Hammack, 2015, p.25). This means theoretical approaches developed within different disciplines have their own emphases to be demonstrated later in this chapter.

In this context, an integrated theoretical approach allows for an examination of various aspects of Chinese gay males' lived experiences with greater openness. Furthermore, this is also an approach that follows the advice of Jenkins (2014) who treats identity as "a matter for empirical discovery, rather than a priori theoretical presumption" (p.8).

This chapter concentrates mainly on the work of social theorists and cultural analysts who have attempted to place the self in relation to psychological processes, social contexts and historical perspectives. Bearing in mind the

above complexity and conflict embedded in the field of identity studies, I review the interdisciplinary scholarship on identity in order to highlight a number of central themes in the academic debate. These themes, thus highlighted, will be discussed in relation to my ethnographic work in the following chapters.

In this chapter, I review the conceptual relationship between the individual self and society, and then move on to mapping different theoretical approaches dealing with the notion of identity. After which I shall discuss what it means to be gay and how this further adds to our understanding of identity. Throughout the chapter, I highlight how has the Chinese context could make us think further about the relevant academic debates.

2.2 Theorising Identity

The central concept underpinning this thesis is that of gay identity. It is, thus, necessary to look at the foundational notions of identity in order to investigate all the complexities at stake. It is indisputable that identity is a core concept in the social sciences and humanities, commonly studied since the 1950s (Wetherell, 2010). However, a precise definition of identity proves elusive (Lawler, 2015a, p.1). Indeed, as Vignoles et al. (2011) identify, the scholarly use of the term “identity” is very diverse and can refer to “people’s internal meaning systems, characteristics and attachments conferred through group memberships, nationalism, positions taken in conversations, and social–historical currents in belief systems” (p.2).

The notion of “identity” has been further undermined in post-structural and postmodern theory. Elliott (2009) best summarises the catchword for the postmodern theorisation of identity is “fragmentation” (p. ix), although some scholars attack the essentialist understanding of identity by questioning the very nature of social reality. They claim that there is no essence of the self but only images, thus arguing for the “death” of the subject (Allan and Turner, 2000). Furthermore, Judith Butler argues that “the very notion of identity has served to constrain the political possibilities for transforming current gender regimes” and acting as a “form of repression” in postmodern societies (Elliott, 2020, Section 2, para. 9).

Nevertheless, as Hammack (2015) puts it: “identity is [still] the anchoring concept for thinking about difference and sameness in our time” (p.11). This is rooted in the word’s Latin origin “idem” (same) (Lawler 2015, p.2). Thus,

Jenkins (2014) believes that “as a very basic starting point, identity is the human capacity - rooted in language - to know ‘who’s who’ (and hence ‘what’s what’)” (p.6). Elliott (2020) also claims that “the study of identity is, among other things, an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to emotionally invest in their own self-making, self-construction and self-renewal” (section 1, para. 1).

Recognising the elusive nature of defining the concept of identity and the postmodern context with the prevailing advanced capitalism and the globalisation of the economy across the world, the following sections seek to justify that the notion of identity is still helpful in understanding how Chinese gay men make sense of their sexualities and their lived experience of being sexual minorities.

2.2.1 The Self, Identity, and Society

Hammack (2015) points out that “the term self and identity have frequently been used interchangeably, and they share a conceptual history” (p.12). He further notes that few scholars have made an explicit distinction between these terms (ibid.). However, in the early scholarly exploration of homosexual identity, theorists have argued that the definition and differentiation between concepts of self, self-concepts, identity, and homosexual identity are necessary in order to offer a precise analysis of the lived experience of homosexuality (Cass, 1984, Troiden, 1985). They believe this is not an issue of terminology. Rather it is essential that authors should make clear about the assumptions upon which they rest their notions of identity (ibid.).

Although the relationship between identity and self is closely associated, I must differentiate them before we go any further on this conceptual journey. The notion of self/selfhood has been regarded as “the most puzzling puzzle with which psychology has to deal” (James 1890, p. 330, cited in Owens, 2006, p.206). Troiden (1985) generally states the self as “an individual’s consciousness of his or her own being” (p.99), which is a set of cognitive and affective attributes. Owens (2006) precisely defines the self as:

> An organized and interactive system of thoughts, feelings, identities, and motives that (1) is born of self-reflexivity and language, (2) people attribute to themselves, and (3) characterize specific human beings (p.206).

From the above definition, we can see that notion of identity is subsumed under the concept of self. Furthermore, the self here is a social object, which Mead (1934) regards as the “me”. George Herbert Mead (1934) was one of

the first theorists who proposed systematic understandings of the concepts of self as socially constructed, and claiming that “the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity” (p. 135). He distinguished two components of the self: the “I” and the “me” asserting that “the ‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes” (ibid. p.175). Owens et al. (2010) go further to explain this distinction stating:

> The “I” (or subject) is the dynamic, novel, spontaneous aspect of the self that constitutes the individual as knower and actor. The “me” (or object) is all learned perspectives a person takes toward him- or herself and the attitudes that the “I” assumes toward one’s own person, especially when taking the role of the other (p. 478).

Thus, the identities are more included in the “me” aspect of the self. For Mead (1934), the “me” is a composite view of the self which embodies the “generalized other” - “the organized community or social group which gives to the individuals his unity of self” (p.154). This implies that the self is abstracted out of experience and engagements with the wider community and situated in social contexts. However, as Jackson (2010) remind us, we should not over-simplify the distinction between the “I” and the “me”. She suggests that:

> In Mead's work there is no assumption of a primitive pre-social ‘I’. Rather, the ‘I’ is only ever momentarily mobilised in dialogic, ongoing interplay with the ‘me’ (p. 218).

Jackson (2010) argues that “a central point of Mead's thesis on the self [is]: that the self is process not structure” (ibid.). Instead of understanding the “I” and the “me” as two separate parts of the whole, we should regard them as two aspects that one informs each other in a continuing dynamic relationship.

Laying on this theoretical perspective, “symbolic interactionism” has been developed in sociological investigations of the self in which an individual’s reflexivity has been foregrounded to understand how one views themself. Further discussion on the idea of reflexivity in relation to the notion of identity will be found later on in this chapter.

Another very important point regarding symbolic interactionism is the understanding of the self that “language is at the heart of the constitution of the self” (Elliott, 2008, p. 31). This is further shown in the term “symbolic interaction” symbols are the key to our everyday social interaction. We communicate through symbols. Elliott (2008) critically writes:

> Without access to language there is no access to the symbols necessary for thinking and acting as a self in a structured world of symbolic meaning (ibid.).

We need symbols to understand other people's view, position, or feelings; they are the "common currency through which individuals forge a sense of self and interact with other people" (ibid.). Thus, the reflective self is constructed through the exchange of meaning via symbols/language. Hall (1997) defines "the production of meaning through language" as representation (p.16). Then, we can say that the self is built on the process of representation. The idea of representation is central to this thesis and will thus be elaborated in later sections of this chapter and throughout the thesis.

Symbolic interactionism's approach to the self also highlights the performative dimension of self-constitution. This body of literature was generally inspired by the seminal works of Erving Goffman (1959). He views the self as a situated performer with reference to the metaphor of the theatre that "individuals perform roles and stage-manage impressions within specific social settings" (Elliott, 2008, p.37). Individuals are constantly monitoring and manipulating their impressions that they give off to, and make upon others, a process which Goffman (1959) calls *impression management*. Namely, employing dramatic techniques the self displays agency to others in routine social interactions and creating different self-presentations to different audiences. In this view, "if identity is performed, then the self is an effect, not a cause" (Elliott, 2008, p.39). Elliott (2008) continues:

> We might tend to think of the self as the source of our activities, ideas, beliefs or ways of being in the world, but in fact we retroactively attribute private intentions and subjective capabilities to our identities through the realization of skilled social performance (ibid.).

Goffman (1963) further demonstrates this point by looking at the experiences of individuals who are "devalued" by the society in his book - Stigma: Notes on the *Management of Spoiled Identity* (p.9). He defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting' which reduces an individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p.3). Sigma, thus, exists in the relationship between the individual who has a discrediting attribute and the others that are "normal"; as Toyoki and Brown (2014) claim that "a stigmatized identity is an effect of power and can marginalize an individual, resulting in that person being disqualified from full societal acceptance" (p.715). Goffman (1963), then, suggests that stigmatized individuals (e.g., disabled people, or ethnic minorities) would (carefully) disclose their personal identity to others in social interactions which engage in

information control. Another important theme of this thesis arises here, in this theoretical perspective, that is the power (dynamics) between “stigmatized individuals” and the “normal others”. The interpersonal power dynamics in relation to Chinese gay males self-(re)presentations on dating apps is discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

In symbolic interactionism, the self exists in a world of (social) relationships, in which one plays different roles according to other people with whom the individual engages. An individual, thus, will have multiple identities which are defined by one’s roles and attachments in their social systems. Thus, this theoretical perspective mainly focuses on the micro-level of human interaction with a more individualistic approach. However, we should also acknowledge the wider social, cultural, political structures and systems that have a profound influence on our sense of self. That is to say, the self is shaped and reshaped by broader structures in our societies.

First of all, ideologies can be seen as conceptual structures that shape one’s construction of the self within a given society. Althusser (2000) famously suggests that ideological structures deeply shape how individuals understand themselves as subjects. He claims that “ideologies can tie individuals’ self-identities to existing power relations, so much so that defining subjectivity is the primary means through which ideologies gain their effects” (Warren, 1990, p. 603). This process is defined as interpellation (i.e. “ideology interpellates individuals into subjects”) which suggests that “individuals acquire their sense of self and place in society as a result of effects on them of their participation in pre-existing social structures and practices (socialisation)” (Benton, 1998, p.200).

Although Althusser does not identify himself as a structuralist, his anti-voluntarism position does seem “to reduce individuals to the status of mere ‘puppets’ of the social system” (ibid.). Clearly, this theoretical view does not recognise the full capacity of the human agency and their possibilities to “challenge the ‘hegemony’ of the ruling ideas through cultural struggle in favour of an alternative ethical vision and way of life” (ibid.). Indeed, the issue here is known as “the problem of structure and agency” which is a central theoretical dilemma to (modern) sociology (Giddens and Sutton, 2017, p. 86-90). This problem of structure and agency is central to this thesis, and in particular, it is a key perspective with which to examine the empowerment argument that some scholars proposed in regarding the development of digital media and LGBT communities in China (see chapter 1).

What we could take on from Althusser's concept of interpellation here is that individuals do make sense of who they are by referencing to the dominant ideology in a given society, although the extent to which individuals accept and interpret those given meanings are questionable. Furthermore, it is problematic to assume that people are not always in a passive position in these processes. Nevertheless, the analyses of ideological dimensions of power is another central focus of this thesis.

Following this line of inquiry, Foucault (1979, 1980,1988, 1994) was one of the most influential thinkers in understanding how power shapes the making of the (modern) self. He claims that individuals are increasingly subject to the institutionalization of power which he terms "disciplinary power", "a power that is hidden, monotonous and invisible" (Elliott, 2008, p. 89). Foucault sees the self as a result of power within historically specific systems of discourse. Callero (2003) summaries this idea and puts: "so-called regimes of power do not simply control a bounded, rational subject, but rather they bring the self into existence by imposing disciplinary practices on the body" (p. 117). The subject is realised by imposition through technologies including methods of self-assessment, and self-ordering them in a disciplined manner. Examples such as teachers, therapists, physicians and officers become ways of using power in schools, hospitals or other institutions. They, in effect, serve as their own dominators. Hence, "rationality, reason, and scientific knowledge are rejected as progressive sources of emancipation" (ibid.). Foucault understands the Enlightenment project as the "discursive foundation of control and domination in modern society" (ibid. p. 118). From his perspective, "the self is coerced into existence, not to become an agent but as a mechanism of control where systems of discourse work from the inside out by creating a self-regulating subject" (ibid.).

To generalise, Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" refers to "socially sanctioned procedures that encourage or teach people to address themselves systematically to their own feelings, thoughts, and conduct" (Danziger, 1997, p. 151). Through this way, "individuals develop particular ways of experiencing, of understanding, themselves" (ibid.). These procedures are socially institutionalized, and historically specific, namely these technologies changes across time. Thus, individuals' construction of self is not fixed. The self is (re)constructed and (re)maintained through the exercise of specific socially sanctioned "technologies".

Foucault gives the most important example of the technology of the self that is the practice of confession by Christianity. When one is confessing, the self

is created through tell the truth about oneself. Thus, confession is a type of ‘discipline’ that ‘entails training in the minute arts of self-scrutiny, self-evaluation, and self-regulation, ranging from the control of the body, speech, and movement in school, through the mental drill inculcated in school and university, to the Puritan practices of self-inspection and obedience to divine reason’ (Rose, 1990, p. 222).

Although, arguably, the influence of Christianity in China is only of a small degree, the idea of Confessional technologies of the self could still help us to understand similar institutional process where an autobiographical self is constructed. These processes, such as counselling, compel us to narratively recreate ourselves, which are also about “assigning truth-seeking meaning to our lives” (Besley, 2005).

In contrast to Foucault, Giddens (1984) puts forward a theory of structuration, in which he recognises the creative nature of human beings, but also acknowledges the structural qualities of society. In this view, the human being is neither a determined object nor an unambiguously free subject. He claims that “all human action is carried on by knowledgeable agents who both construct the social world through their action, but yet whose action is also conditioned and constrained by the very world of their creation” (Giddens, 1981, p. 54). This is to say people are actively making and remaking their own social structure during the course of their everyday activities.

That our social systems are relatively stable is possibly because individuals intend to achieve a certain degree of ontological security, “which is based on the routinization of actions and is made to happen by the actors’ reflexive monitoring of their actions” (Fuchs, 2003, p. 141). Actors have social identities, such as age and sex, which carry certain prerogatives and obligations within a particular space-time frame. Individuals reflect upon those social rules and positions with the respect which leads to the routinization of actions.

Fuchs (2003) very well summarises structuration theory, and puts:

> In structuration theory, society is considered a social system where structural principles serve to produce a clustering of institutions across time and space, an association between the social system and a specific locale or territory can be found, normative elements exist that help to lay claim to the legitimate occupation of the locale, and there is some sort of common identity among the member of the society which does not necessarily involve a value consensus (p. 141).

In general, Giddens suggests that individuals, in the modern age, must “self-reflexively - knowledgeably construct their own identities and chart their

biographical courses through the mediation of modern institutions" (Burkitt, 1992, p. 72). This view is particularly helpful not only because it bridges the gap between "structure" and "agency", but also because it is empirically sound when explaining Chinese gay males' everyday experiences (as will be shown in the later chapters).

2.2.2 The Chinese Sense of Self

it is important to note that traditionally the Chinese sense of self is different from the understanding of self in Western Thought. Hall and Ames (1998) summarise that:

> the fundamental senses of self in the Western tradition appeal to at least three sets of distinctions: The first utilizes the four primary semantic contexts defined by the metaphors of matter, mind, organism, and will. The second involves three psychic modalities of thinking, acting, and feeling that constitute the tripartite functioning of psyche. The third involves the gender distinction (p. 20).

However, "a traditional Chinese ideal" advocates "selflessness" and "self-abnegation", which suggest that Chinese individuals sometimes may "need to suppress their interests on behalf of the well-being of the group" (ibid., p. 21). In other words, one is encouraged to sacrifice oneself for the good of a larger entity, such as family and society. This is linked to the distinctions between *da wo* (big me) and *xiao wo* (small me), and *da wo* should always be put before *xiao wo* (Lau, 1996). Arguably, this (traditional) Chinese understandings of self, typically in the Confucian model, "do not entail a strong notion of 'individuality'" (Hall and Ames, 1998, p. 23).

According to traditional Confucian teaching, the self is defined within the social context or relationships, as Lau (1996) notes that "an [Chinese] individual's self, identity, and roles derive meaning from his relations with others" (p. 360). Among all kinds of social relationships, "familial order is fundamental in determining at least the Confucian sense of self" (Hall and Ames, 1998, p. 37). This is to say, the familial relations constitute the ground of the relationships between the self and the society. Hall and Ames (1998) suggest that "the self is primarily focal within the family field; other fields by which the individual is contextualized are continuous with the family model" (ibid.). For example, "the bureaucratic structure and the state itself" can be seen as extensions of familial order in Confucian thinking (ibid.). Thus, Lu (2008) concludes that "a person in the Confucian tradition is primarily a relational being defined in terms

of specific dyadic relationships, such as being a son, brother, husband, or father".

Lu and Yang (2006) describe the above model of the self as "the traditional (*social-oriented*) Chinese self", which differs to the individual-orientated (modern) Western understanding of self. This individual-orientated self also "referred to as the personal, private, individual, idiocentric, or independent self, involves the conception of the person as a bounded, coherent, stable, autonomous, independent, and free entity" (Lu, 2008, p. 349). The core of this self is "the independent and individual way of being" (ibid.). Thus, Lu (2008) points out that "the essence of the Western self is its emphasis on personal talents, potentialities, needs, strivings, and rights" (ibid.).

Lu et al. (2008) believe that "both traditional and modern self are now available to most Chinese" "against the greater socioeconomic background of globalization". Lu and Yang (2006) term this as a model of "Chinese bicultural self". Although, this understanding of modern Chinese construction of the self seems to enforce a binary position between the West and East which is what I am against, their theoretical model does highlight the cultural hybridity in China and its impact on Chinese people's understanding of the self. It is against this cultural hybridity and the context of globalisation that I am unpacking Chinese gay males' experience and understandings about their sexual identity.

Hall (1976) put forwards another influential idea in conceptualising cultural differences between the East and West that is the high versus low context culture. Nishimura et al. (2008) summarise the cultural issues in high vs. low context cultures and note:

> Rooted in the past, HC cultures are very stable, unified, cohesive and slow to change. In an HC culture, people tend to rely on their history, their status, their relationships, and a plethora of other information, including religion, to assign meaning to an event.
>
> LC cultures typically value individualism over collectivism and group harmony. Individualism is characterised by members prioritising individual needs and goals over the needs of the group (p. 785).

According to such cultural differences, Chan (2016) suggests that:

> in a low-context culture such as the United States, fewer social norms are imposed on individuals; therefore, people tend to express themselves more directly and explicitly. In contrast, in a high-context culture such as China, a stable social

> hierarchy from which people can derive meanings exists; therefore, people are more likely to communicate in an implicit and simplified manner (p. 6044).

Thus, we can see that different cultural contexts may not only shape in the way how individuals construct the self, but also influence their communication styles. Although some scholars have criticised this theoretical model (see Holliday et al., 2010), it is still proved to be important in the field of communication studies (Cardon, 2008). However, it is not my intention to test this contexualising model empirically, rather, by introducing this model I seek to highlight the significant impact of cultural context on people's everyday process of meaning-making and communicating.

2.2.3 Approaches to Understanding Identity

After reviewing the relationship between the self and society, now it is the time to unpack the concept of identity. In general, most authors subscribe to the idea that identity is "the answer to the questions Who am I? and Where do I belong?" (Cass 1984, p. 108). However, as Lawler (2015b) writes "'identity' is a difficult term: more or less everyone knows more or less what it means, and yet its precise definition proves slippery" (p.1). This is, perhaps, because there are different major aspects to look and consider this concept.

Cass (1984) identifies two major aspects in using, understanding, and theorising the concept of identity. First, identity has to been seen from "a personal aspect of individual functioning conceived of as self-representations and self-perceptions" which make one's idiosyncrasies different from others (ibid., p.110). Secondly, identity can be viewed from a social aspect, in which identity "is the representation of the personal aspect to others in a relatively consistent way" (ibid.). However, she considers that these two aspects are both "essentially cognitive elements of functioning that emerge out of the interplay between the individual's own perceptions and perceived perceptions of self by others" (ibid.).

After an extensive review of the literature on identity, Vignoles et al. (2011) further break down those different aspects that could define identity. They summarise four basic aspects: individual, relational, collective, and material. The individual or personal identity "refers to aspects of self-definition at the level of the individual personal" (ibid., p. 3). This understanding is similar to that of Cass' (1984) conceptualisation above regarding the personal aspects. However, Vignoles et al. (2011) seem to break down Cass' (ibid.) theory of the social aspects into two levels: the interpersonal and the collective. They

view relational identity as “one’s roles vis-à-vis other people, encompassing identity contents such as child, spouse, parent, co-worker, supervisor, customer, etc.” (p.3). Collective identity is defined here as “people’s identification with the groups and social categories to which they belong, the meanings that they give to these social groups and categories, and the feelings, beliefs, and attitudes that result from identifying with them” (ibid.). Furthermore, Vignoles et al. (2011) suggest that people might also have material identities in today’s society, which refer to material artefacts that individuals may treat as part of their identities, such as one’s clothes, house, car etc.

Vignoles and his colleagues provide a more nuanced and integrated view of the definition of identity. However, there does not seem to be a clear division among these four aspects. For example, one could be identified as a parent to his or her child, but “parent” could also be the social group that they identify with. Furthermore, the idea of material identity could also be viewed as a part of an individual’s personal identities because those material artefacts ultimately contribute to one’s self-definition. Having said this, I am not disputing their understanding of identity. The point we need to take on from here is the multidimensionality of identity.

Similarly, Côté (2006) suggests that there are three levels of analysis in the field of identity studies: “the subjectivity of the individual, behaviour patterns specific to the person, and the individual’s membership in societal groups” (p. 8). In this classification, he recognises the social and personal aspects of identity in Cass’ (1984) conceptualisation of identity; however, he also seems to suggest the analysis of identity is not just about the cognitive dimension. The behavioural aspect is also a focus on analysis identity. Yet, there might be some links between one’s identity and one’s behaviour, and it is important to study the relationships between these two factors. We must not assume that identity determines individual behaviour[11].

Côté (2006) further provides a metatheoretical review of major cleavages in the studies of identity (as shown in table 2.1). Again, we can see there are two dominant perspectives in the field: the psychological and the sociological. Owens et al. (2010) also make a distinction between “identity theories that focus on the internalisation of the social position within a self-structure and those that focus on how consensual, cultural identity meanings are

11 For a more detailed discussion on if whether identity actually cause behaviour please see Jenkins (2014, p. 5-12).

implemented within situations that evoke them" (p. 478). Indeed, acknowledging the different aspects and distinctions within the field of identity studies lead us to be particularly mindful of these complexities and paradoxes. However, this does not mean these aspects of identity are independent of each other. Rather, "multiple aspects of identity can and do coexist; they intersect and interact with each other" (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 4).

Table 2.1 A Review of Identity Studies Approaches (Côté, 2006, p. 9)

	Individual Focus		Social Focus	
Epistemology	*Status Quo*	*Critical/ Contextual*	*Status Quo*	*Critical/ Contextual*
Objectivist	Identity status paradigm Self-psychology	"Critical and cultural psychologies" (e.g., Cushman, Baumeister, Kurtines)	Structural symbolic interactionism (e.g., Stryker, Burke)	Late-modernism (e.g., Beck) Critical social psychology (e.g., Wexler)
Subjectivist	Life history and narrative approaches (e.g., McAdams, Chandler)	Post-modernism (psychological variant; e.g., Gergen)	Symbolic interactionism (interpretive approach - e.g., Goffman, Weigert)	Post-modernism (sociological variant; Bauman; Rattansi & Phoenix)

Elliott (2020) further explores a paradox embedded in identity studies. He claims that "the tension between subjective and objective aspects of identity-processes is fundamental to social science research" (section 2, para. 5). He writes:

> On the one hand, it can be said that individuals go about the daily business of forging, reproducing and transforming their identities primarily through the deployment of subtle social skills, emotional receptions to others and interpersonal relationships, and intricate understandings of the world around them. In short, individuals are highly skilled, knowledgeable agents. On the other hand, however, individuals can only make and remake their identities by virtue of the fact that they are embedded in, and supported by, hugely complex and highly technical systems. From automobilities to aeromobilities, from digital technologies to global finance: the "identity" of any human agent acting in the

> world is intricately interwoven with the complex technical systems - administrative, technological, financial, governmental - of modern societies (ibid.).

Elliott's (2020) view is essentially kin to Giddens' (1984) structuration theory in which recognises both human creativity and society's structure constrain. This is also the approach that I will take on in this thesis, in particular, through sharing my research participants' life stories, I highlight both their agency and the Chinese social/cultural structure that shaped their experience.

Another important point indicated in Côté's (2006) metatheoretical review of identity studies (although he does not illustrate further in the article) is the disciplinary distinctions developed in this history of studying the concept of identity. Hammack (2015) takes this point on and critically writes that "identity theories themselves are the products of scholars who inhabit social identities that prescribe a set of parameters within the knowledge production industry" (p.25). He postulates that disciplinary identities are similar to social identities that command distinctiveness, which results in different emphases within different theoretical approaches. For example, psychology is categorized as concerning the private interior of individual cognition, whiles the major concern within sociology and cultural studies is the public exterior world of marked affiliation (ibid.).

Scholars thus may offer their own definitions of identity from different perspectives and different disciplines, or refer to different aspects by using the term "identity". For example, Cass (1984) defines identity as "organized sets of self-perceptions and attached feelings that an individual holds about self with regard to some social category (p.110)". Troiden (1985) refers to identity as an "organized set of characteristics an individual perceives as definitively representing the self in relation to a social situation (imagined or real)" (p.102). Chryssochoou (2003) suggests that "identity is a particular form of social representation that mediates the relationship between the individual and the social world" (p.225). Jenkins (2014) writes that "'identity' denotes the ways in which individual and collectives are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities" (p.19). Indeed, the main point of these definitions slips between the personal aspect and social aspect. However, as mentioned earlier, the personal aspect and the social aspect cannot be separated in understanding identity, both aspects shape one's identity. Identity seems to be better understood as not only "belonging 'within' an individual person" but also "as produced between persons and within social relations" (Lawler, 2015a, p.8).

Despite the different definitions of the concept of identity, theorists tend to agree that identity is constructed rather than innate. Castells (2011) contends “the construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations”. For Hall (1996a), drawing on Foucault, those “building materials” are all discourses. If identity can be constructed, then, identity might be seen as a process (Dervin and Risager, 2014, p.8). Thus the question of how people construct what they present as their identity or how they identify themselves becomes even more complicated (ibid.).

Castells (2011) proposes three types of identity-building process. The first type is “legitimizing identity” which is “introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination vis-à-vis social actors”. The second type is “resistance identity” which has been “generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of institutions of society”. “Project identity” is the last type, which occurs “when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure” (ibid., p.8). He suggests that one type of identity can develop into another type along the course of history, and “each type of identity-building process leads to a different outcome in constituting society” (ibid.). Therefore, he insists that one needs to look at identity within a certain historical context. Castells’ (2011) insight of types of identity-building process is helpful not only because it categorises types of identities, but also shows the possibilities of an identity’s development within history; it implies therefore fluidity. More importantly, he demonstrates that living with an identity involves the negotiation between the individual (actor) and society. Thus, this concept of identity signifies a certain relationship between the individual (identity actor) and society. It is in people’s experience. Additionally, it also emphasises the impact of identity development on the social context. Thus, there is a mutual relationship between identity development and society.

This project will not provide a precise definition of “identity” but will be used as an open and fluid concept of identity along the lines of Castells (2011)’ work. What is central to this project is the relationship between the individual (the identity actor) and society in a specific period of history. Identity is treated as

an active process - it is an experiential, and also an imagined and internal process.

This idea of seeing identity as a process can also be found in developmental psychology literature. Psychologists “tend to view identity change as a long-term process that occurs mainly during specific parts of the lifespan” (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 10). Indeed, this view of identity stresses fluidity and change in which the individual plays an active role. It seems to suggest “the late-modern world saturated us with so many choices - and so much information - that one’s sense of self is nearly impossible to pin down from moment to moment” (ibid.). Lawler (2015b) questions this very reality and asks if people’s identities are endlessly contingent, “choose-able” and changeable in their everyday lives (p.4)? The everyday situation and condition seem to require “people to see themselves as consistent, unitary actors who must take responsibility for their actions” (Miller, 2011, p. 160). This leads us to think about how identities are experienced in the everyday context, which is a central concern of this thesis.

Before we go to explore my research participants’ lived experience of identity, there is a still an important theoretical issue we need to address regarding the extent to which we should understand identity as fragmented and fluid. This conceptual issue is central to the essentialism vs constructivism debate. Instead of thinking the essentialism and constructivism understanding of identity formation as two sides of a debate, Papadopoulos (2008) offers a threefold shift view in reformulating the concept of identity. He asserts that both essentialists and constructivists fail to tackle the issue of “the individual/social dichotomy” (p.140). He explains that “while traditional theory [essentialism] reduces identity to an individual substance (e.g. Erikson, 1993), constructivist approaches reduce identity to discursive positioning (e.g. Gergen, 1991)” (ibid.). This is to say constructivists link “culture to identity is a helpful move towards essentialism but does not necessarily enable an understanding of how individual subjectivity function in relation to identity” (ibid., p.144).

Critical psychology adds to and also questions constructivists’ understanding of identity, created another shift in intellectual development by introducing the concept of embodied subjectification (Papadopoulos, 2008). Critical psychologists work with Foucault’s later understanding of power and government, and they examine “how specific practices and techniques operate with and beyond language and create possibilities for the production of particular forms of embodied experience” (ibid. p. 150). As Papadopoulos

(2008) puts, there are two major aspects of investigation in critical psychology regarding the concept of identity:

> On the one hand, this work investigates different representations of subjectivity within current cultural and media production. On the other hand, it explores how these representations become embodied through relational and situated practices of the subjects (ibid.).

Papadopoulos (2008) summarises the above theoretical development and argues that "the movement through these steps in our conceptualization of identity corresponds to an emergent form of subjectivity which is situated in the ongoing neoliberal reorganization of the social realm since the 1970s" (p.141). This argument leads us to further evaluate the nature of knowledge production that we should be more reflective about the general social realm in which theories are produced. As many scholars argued that "the relationship between psychological [and other] theories, social policy and public administration is a closed circuit" (ibid. p.143). This is also why this thesis takes a more integrated approach to the concept of identity, and more importantly, it intends to illustrate the contextualised lived experience of identity.

Papadopoulos (2008) further suggests that "doing research in the 'ruins of representation' (Olkowski, 1999) requires a reorganization of critical social science which follows but, finally, goes beyond the discursive, constructivist, and critical psychological positions" and he proposes five research trajectories that scholars could follow, one of which is that "instead of focusing on subject embodiment, explore processes of materialization which literally create new material actors" (p. 157). Inspired by this trajectory, I shall explore how the intensified market economy (or neo-liberalism) in China as a form of ideological, discursive, and narrative structure, as well as a form of materialization, has shaped Chinese individuals lived experience of identity. Before I unpack the relationship between neoliberalism and today's project of identity construction, I shall introduce another important theoretical approach to understanding identity.

2.2.3 The Narrative Construction of Identity

Another direction that the idea of seeing identity as a process leads us to consider "identities as 'made up' through making a story out of a life", which suggests that "identities can be seen as being creatively produced through various raw materials available - notably, memories, understandings,

experiences and interpretations" (Lawler, 2015b, p. 24). McAdams (2011) defines narrative identity as "the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life (section 1, para. 1). In this view, "the product of identity exploration and commitment is a story about the self that the person begins to formulate in late adolescence and emerging adulthood" (ibid., section 2, para. 4). However, this does not mean those narrative identities once formed in adulthood, then they are fixed. In fact, "the process of narrative identity development continues across the life course" (ibid., section 1, para. 1).

McAdams and Cox (2010) put the idea of narrative identity into a broad context of the conception of the self. Drawing upon William James's treatment of the self as the conjoining of "I" and "Me"[12], they conceptualise the self as actor, agent, and author. They suggest that "over the life course, the I develops increasingly sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the Me as it develops from an actor to an agent to an author" (McAdams, 2011, section 2, para. 9). In other words, people build up their narrative identities slowly over time. It is important to note the idea of the self as an author does not simply suggest constructing one's narrative identity is like writing one's autobiography. Instead, as Lawler (2015b) argues that "identities are *produced* through autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day" (p. 26).

When understanding the relation between narrative and identity, we should not underestimate that through telling stories agents themselves are actively making sense of actions and events. Teichert (2004) notes:

> Narrative has the function of giving explanations of actions and events. This functional role of narrative is not restricted to explanations in retrospect. During the process of forming plans and projects agents themselves are using narrative concepts and schemata to specify the goals and organize the means of action. Narrativity concerns not only past actions and events but also gives shape to the future. Conceived in this way it is evident that there is narrativity even without any explicit narrative text. Narrative in this perspective is not only a way of representing past facts that are themselves in part independent of narrative modes of thought and speech, but a way of forming expectations about future events (p. 183).

Hammack (2015) critically summarises the above of role of narratives in individuals' life courses, and he writes that "life stories function to provide a

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12 James' (1890) I/Me distinction is different from Mead's (1963) conceptualisation of I/Me, for a more detailed discussion on this matter please see Hammack (2015, p. 13-14).

sense of unity, purpose, and coherence, which may assume particular psychological significance in the context of modern or later modern social organization" (p. 21). Although, in theory, identity is still viewed as fragmented and fluid in the narrative approach, narrative theories do stress that "individuals construct coherent life stories that provide a sense of meaning and purpose across the life course" (ibid., p.23). In their view, as McAdams (2011) puts:

> narrative identity need not be the grand and totalizing narrative that makes all things make sense for all time in any given person's life. Rather, people seek some semblance of unity and purpose as they move into and through adulthood. They aim to make some narrative sense of their life as a whole (section 2, para. 7).

So far, it seems that the above narrative approach mainly considers the personal aspect or the individual level of identity. However, there is another line of narrative theory emphasises the socially constructed nature of identity. These theorists posit that "individuals appropriate cultural themes and are also constrained by the received system of categories and version of collective memory" (Hammack, 2015, p. 23). This perspective treats narrative identity development as a cultural process which is "highly influenced by the relative value of one's social identity and on the negotiation between dominant and resistance narratives in interaction" (ibid.). It is this perspective that I will take on to explore how gay identity is constructed narratively in China (see Chapter 5).

Loseke (2007) refers these narratively created identities as cultural identities which are "the imagined characteristics of disembodied types of people that simplify a complex world and construct symbolic boundaries around types of social actors" (p. 661). She critically explains:

> In our current world, stories producing such categorical identities associated with families, gender, age, religion, and citizenship remain from the past; story themes and identities of nationality and race/ethnicity have arisen as major areas of story construction, challenge, and negotiation (ibid., p. 663).

Indeed, this view echoes a major perspective of symbolic interactionism understanding of the self that I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the argument that "language is at the heart of the constitution of the self" (Elliott, 2008, p. 31). Thus, the emphasis here is seeing cultural narrative identity as a social classification or a collective representation. Undoubtedly, sexual identities are one of those new categories that proliferated in the past few

decades. I shall demonstrate the narrative construction of sexual identities in the later sections of this chapter.

Loseke (2007) refers those narratives creating cultural identities as formula story, which other scholars may call it cultural stories (Richardson, 1990), cultural narratives (Singer, 2004), or master narratives (Mishler, 1995). Despite the difference in terminology and theoretical assumptions behind, these terms “all refer to narratives of typical actors engaging in typical behaviours within typical plots leading to expectable moral evaluations” (Loseke, 2007, p.664). The production of formula story is a very common activity in the post-industrial world, which is “continually created, modified, challenged, and discarded” (ibid.), and we are all authors of formula stories. However, much scholarly attention is just more likely to “examine how politicians, media, and social activists create narratives of cultural identities” given the fact that “empirically examining narrative authorship can be difficult” (ibid.).

Loseke (2012) believes that “formula stories obtain [people’s] recognizability and predictability by deploying symbolic codes and emotion codes in ways that reflect how audience members understand the world” (p. 254). She defines symbolic codes as “systems of ideas about how the world does work, how the world should work, and about the rights and responsibilities among people in this world” (ibid.). As I shall explain later, individualism, neoliberalism and capitalism are among such symbolic codes that weave into the construction of cultural identities in our post-industrial societies. Emotion codes refer to “systems of ideas about when and where and toward whom or what emotions should be inwardly experienced, outwardly displayed, and morally evaluated” (ibid.). To put it simply, emotion codes “are cultural ways of feeling” (Loseke, 2009, p. 500). For illustration, there are socially circulating thoughts about “when it is appropriate to feel sympathy, anger, or fear, as well as ideas about how sympathy, anger, or fear should be outwardly expressed” (ibid.). Such frameworks of meaning are the “structuring and constituting resources which we utilize in expressing our own emotional states and in responding to those of others” (Tudor, 2003, p. 241). I will examine the emotional codes associated with gay identity in China and how my research participants identity with those codes in Chapter 5.

2.2.4 Neoliberalism and Identity

The works of Loseke (2007) mainly focus on how “cultural narratives reflect widely circulating symbolic codes” (p. 665). However, if we consider back to Althusser’s (2000) interpellation theory which I have mentioned earlier, it also seems necessary to look at how symbolic codes shapes (cultural) identities. As a “strong discourse” neoliberalism has “deeply enmeshed with the primary circuits of financial, cultural, and corporate power” since the later part of 20th century with the intensification of capitalism (Peck et al., 2018, p.3). Wilson (2017) also suggests that “neoliberalism refers to the reinvention of liberal ideas and commitments in ways that have profoundly transformed the fabric of identity and social life” (p.2). Clearly, “neoliberalism as a historical context in which the economy is disembedded and directs the other spheres of living, plays a fundamental role in the shaping of an individual’s identity” (Wrenn, 2014, p.503). It is important to note that neoliberalism not only functions as an impactful cultural narrative, but also as a particular mode of governmentality which affects the power dynamics between structure and agency in modern societies.

However, what is “neoliberalism”? As the definition of identity, the definition of the neoliberalism can also be elusive. Venugopal (2015) critically puts that “neoliberalism is everywhere, but at the same time, nowhere” (p.165). He further claims that because of a growing conceptual ambiguity, “neoliberalism is now widely acknowledged in the literature as a controversial, incoherent and crisis-ridden term, even by many of its most influential deployers” (ibid., p.166).

Although a precise definition of neoliberalism can be difficult to provide, there are two major ways of approaching this concept, as Venugopal (2015) identifies: “the first would be to take neoliberalism as a given doctrine, revealed by its key thinkers and articulated in canonical urtexts” (p.167); “the second way would be to identify ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ in the real world” which is “to delineate and describe this phenomenon, trace its spheres of operation and explain its dynamics” (ibid.). It is this second approach that this thesis adopts to address the social, cultural, economic and political transformations that have been taking place in China since its reform and opening-up. My intention is to provide ethnographic accounts of individuals who live under such structural transformations rather than identifying whether China should be regarded as a neoliberal region or providing the definition of what is neoliberalism in China. Thus, I treat neoliberalism as a process and that I use the term “neoliberalisation” to convey this in a Chinese context.

Related to the notion of “actually existing neoliberalism”, “neoliveralization” is another idea that some theorists to “‘materialize’ very differently as a series of hybridized and mutated forms of neoliberalism, contingent upon existing historical contexts, geographical landscapes, institutional legacies, and embodied subjectivities” (Springer, 2012, p. 135-136). It is a concept which “acknowledges multiplicity, complexity, variegation, and contextual specificity” (ibid.). The advocacy of neoliveralization is also in line with the argument of Cornelissen (2019) that in order to make neoliberalism as a more helpful and useful analytical and methodological framework the use of neoliberalism needs to be historically, politically, and organizationally specific and makes clear what it means in different times and places.

Another point that makes neoliberalism a difficult term is that there are two different approach of theorising the term; as Springer (2012) points out that “on the one hand, studies influenced by Foucault in emphasizing neoliberalism as a form of governmentality, and on the other hand, inquiries influenced by Marx in foregrounding neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology” (p,133). This “dichotomy” embedded in the above debate is essentially related to “the problem of structure and agency” which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. While Marxian perspectives understand neoliberalism from a “top-down” approach, poststructuralist views it from “bottom-up”.

Despite the above “dichotomy” embedded in the concept of neoliberalism, Birch and Springer (2019) identify two shared basic assumptions in scholars’ investigation into neoliberalism:

> First, they contend that market and market-like ideas and proxies are increasingly instituted across our societies and organizations (with problematic outcomes); and second, they contend that people and organizations have been transformed (for the worse) as a result of this spread of market ideas and proxies (p. 472).

It is these assumptions that make neoliberalism still a popular concept to understand recent and ongoing social, cultural, political, and economic changes in our current world. It is also these assumptions that drive me to provide an empirical account of the neoliberalization in China and how has it shapes “individual and collective conduct thus constituting ‘subjects’ in a completely novel fashion” (Lorenzini, 2018, p.155).

In spite of the different usages of the term “neoliberalism”, there are many common themes in the academic applications of this term, as Houghton (2019) well summarises, which include:

- the fetishisation of competition, and market fundamentalism;
- a narrative of investment in human capital, both by individuals to increase their own employment prospects, and by the state to drive up national productivity;
- a transition in the Global North from productive capitalism to financialised capitalism;
- a shift from populations made up of people as citizens to people as consumers;
- a reliance on debt-fuelled consumption;
- an emphasis on individualised responsibility and the withdrawal of the welfare state;
- widening inequality, featuring rapid enrichment at the top of the income distribution, presented as the justifiable consequence of entrepreneurial meritocracy; and,
- a prevailing sense of insecurity, both on a global scale and for individuals in their daily lives (p. 616).

She also points out that “these themes not only co-exist, but also interweave, permeating various areas of life” (ibid.). This might make neoliberalism as a catchall term. However, if we can carefully unpack these recurring themes within the applications this term, it does highlight certain characteristics of our modern society with particular reference to marketisation, privatisation, globalisation and individualism. Again, these social, cultural, political, and economic contexts form the unique background of my empirical analysis of the lives of Chinese gay men. I will examine the above themes in the following chapters of this thesis.

Having briefly discussed the general idea behand neoliberalism, we can now focus on how has neoliberalism shaped individuals’ construction of identities. For Foucault (2008) neoliberalism is related to the “entrepreneur of [the] self”, which means one being one-self’s own “capital… producer… [and] source of earnings” (p. 226). This is to say the ideal neoliberal subject “will invest in themselves and their futures by acquiring the necessary levels of ‘human capital’ to succeed” (ibid). Indeed, drawing on the work of Sandage (2005), Wrenn (2014) claims that “within neoliberalism, identity is not something that an individual can claim; identity is bestowed upon the individual - the financially successful individual is assigned identity and assured validity” (p. 503).

This idea is further supported by works of Brown (2015) and Dardot and Laval (2014). Inspired by Foucault’s thoughts, they underscore how neoliberalism

produces particular subjectivities, social relations, practices, and so on that are supported by an 'economization' of everything in our lives. Consequently, they contend, everyone now considers themselves to be a private commerce organization driven by financial logics looking for the most noteworthy return from their investments. Thus, Birch and Springer (2019) summarise "we have all become, in this sense, market monsters" (p. 471).

It is under such economic narratives that a certain neoliberal identity has emerged. Wrenn (2014) explains:

> The modern citizen's identity is ascribed by the neoliberal ideology whereby previously distinguishing facets of personal identity become subordinate to the agent's neoliberal identity as a citizen accountable to and responsible for no one. The individual is taught that to have a responsibility for the care of others diminishes one's own identification, constrains the possibilities of the responsible individual who is thereby self-sacrificing her own personal identity. If under neoliberalism the market mentality and economic sphere dominate all other spheres of living, then it stands to reason that collective social identity is circumscribed by neoliberalism as well (p. 504).

In this intensifying market setting, market relationships dominate social relationships subordinate to market relationships; namely, the individual's personal and social identities subordinate to his/her place and rank in the economy. I will discuss this point further in my discussion of the *suzhi* [human quality] discourse in China and how has it differentiated the gay circles in Chapter 6.

Another important concept related to the neoliberal construction of subjectivities and identities is the notion of desire. De Beistegui (2018) critically points out that the connections between desire and sexuality, capitalism, perversity, "are an intrinsic part of our life, cultural landscape, and civilization" (p.3). He further argues that "desire is a key assemblage of knowledge and power through which we are constituted as subjects, and through which we learn to recognize and govern ourselves". His argument is particularly relevant to this research project, throughout the empirical chapters I shall demonstrate how desire plays "a crucial part in our understanding of who we are, our sense of self, and our relations to others" (ibid., p.1).

Moreover, De Beistegui (2018) suggests that in liberal and neoliberal governmentalities, desire is:

> No longer what needs to be governed properly in order for the true or good life to flourish, no longer an object of pastoral and spiritual care, but an instrument

> of government, that is, a way of conducting conducts and achieving certain (biopolitical) goals (p. 209).

This is to say that modern individuals are no longer governed against their desires, but in fact, they are governed by the multiplication of their desires in the free market. To put into De Beistegui's (2018) words, that means "the government of desire is also, and especially, the government by and for desire" (ibid.). Furthermore, De Beistegui (2018) reminds us that this radical transformation of desire "should be viewed not as a mere ideological effect, but as a phenomenon constitutive of the substructure itself" (p. 210).

2.3 Gay Identity

If identity can be thought of as it emerges in the interactions between the society and the individual, then gay identity offers another horizon, not least because living with this identity means the individual has to deal with the difficult concept of being different from the majority of the society. Indeed, living with this identity often leads gay people to face many choices, dilemmas, stigmas and difficulties in their individual lives. Since the late 1960s, while gay people's human rights and civil rights in the western world have improved and gained protection through a gay liberation movement, resulting in a more open and egalitarian society; gay people in China are still largely considered as the "dark side" of society, at least from the state level (Ellis-Petersen, 2016).

One of the significant differences between sexual minorities and other minorities (such as racial and ethnic minorities), regardless of which society, is that they are self-identified. Namely, they are "not necessarily easily identifiable by others" (Gross, 1991, p.20). Sometimes people assume that effeminate men or masculine women might be homosexual, however, there is no direct connection between these. As a consequence, gay people may feel isolated, confused, and alienated when they first sense their "difference" in sexual orientation.

Furthermore, it was the 19th century medicalisation of "homosexuality" as an innate characteristic which first put forward the idea that this marks out certain people as "different" or "deviant , a medical condition which can (or cannot) be cured (Anderson and Holland, 2015). It also in the 19th century that same-sex sexual behaviour was criminalised across the British Empire that further stigmatised same-sex attracted people. This has influenced on the

criminalisation of homosexuality around the world, in particular the Commonwealth (Lennox and Waites, 2013).

Thus, gay identity seems to signify a “not very nice” personal experience. This is perhaps the reason why early studies on homosexual identity were more likely to focus on the personal aspect of the identity and largely draw from a psychological approach. Psychologists view the development of homosexual identity as a process of negotiation between the self and social stigmas. Theorists developed models of homosexual identity development which normally include several stages from identity confusion to final acceptance of the identity (e.g., Cass, 1979, Troiden, 1989). Although these theorists tend to simplify and universalise the negotiation of identity, they seem to ignore the other important factors in society such as politics and economy. Nevertheless, they do reflect some homosexual people’s experience of identity development to some extent and indeed highlight homosexual identity as an internal process.

Gay identity differs from the above homosexual identity in that it bears a political connotation which emphasizes the social aspect of identity. The gay liberation movement came about in the late 1960s in the United States, signalled by the Stonewall Riots in 1969, following the examples of the black, anti-war, and feminist movements (Chambers, 2009, p.11). This original and literal fighting for “gay liberation” and “radical sexual politics” “quickly became a part of ‘identity politics’ with the goal of achieving ‘gay rights’ in the 1970s, by claiming that sexual orientation is “a fixed sexual identity” whose rights should be protected (ibid.). Gay liberation signifies a specific political approach which includes “coming out” publicly and pride parades. These political strategies were initially used by American gay radical groups as a way to counter societal suppression in that period, then adopted by other gay groups/organizations in Western countries (ibid.). Therefore, they are culturally and historically specific.

Along with the political side of gay identity, the power of capital and commerce cannot be ignored in understanding issues of identity. D'Emilio (1997) believes that gay identity is a creation of capitalism in the United States. He argues that, as the free labour system of capitalism released individuals from the old interdependent family unit patterns of living to modern economic independent nuclear family living, same-sex-attracted men and women were able “to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex” (ibid., p.172). They “began to invent ways of meeting each other and sustaining a group life” (ibid.), thus gay and lesbian communities started to

emerge. The growth of a self-identified community means capitalism has something to focus on.

Therefore, in recent years, capitalism in a commercial sense has discovered and promoted the opportunities for money-making in the so-called “gay market”. The gay market’s collaboration with the “pink press” showed evidence of being shaped and influenced into a gay identity promoting a certain kind of gay lifestyle - the so-called “metropolitan model of homosexuality” (Mowlabocus, 2012, Sender, 2004). As a consequence, it seems there has been a gay globalization, as Simpson (1997) writes that “in the gay world, everything is reassuringly similar, wherever you go. Gays are better at franchising than McDonalds” (p.7, cited in Mowlabocus, 2012, p.26). This global gayness means that it will have had an influence on Chinese gay communities and identity development, particularly after China has opened its doors to global markets. Indeed, capitalism did create the material conditions for a gay lifestyle, but it did not necessarily create the identity directly, and it is certainly not the only one creator/contributor of/to the identity.

To conclude, by putting “gay” in front of “identity” makes this identity belong only to a small percentage of the population whose sexual orientation is different from the majority. The result is that they may seem to struggle to accept their own identity due to social stigmas placed on their sexual orientation; but they may also want their rights to be protected which introduces a political dimension. Meanwhile, as consumers, they are also contributing to the market, and have been recognised as a commercial niche. In this sense, I see gay identity as multi-dimensional, multifaceted, and hybrid. It does not have only the personal and social aspect, but also has cultural, historical, political and commercial aspects. In other words, the social aspect is shaped and influenced by the cultural, historical, political, and commercial factors. It is perhaps the interplay of these dimensions that shape gay identity. For example, Sender (2004) has demonstrated how the interplay of business and politics influence the articulation of gay identity. How these dimensions interplay and shape/influence gay identity in China is at the centre of this thesis.

2.4 Digital Media and Identity

Having discussed the relationship between identity and broader structural issues above, we shall turn to examine on the relationship and role between

media and identity, in particular the implications of “new communication technologies” on the construction of contemporary identities. Before we go any further, we need to make clear two main theoretical approaches in the studies of information and communications technology (ICT).

This first influential approach can be generally categorised as “technological determinism”. In this perspective, as Buckingham (2008) summarises, “technology is seen to emerge from a neutral process of scientific research and development, rather than from the interplay of complex social, economic, and political forces” (p. 11). This means people commonly believe that technology has its effects which could bring social and psychological changes to its users, and eventually to the society. This approach has a long history. For example, Eisenstein (1983) investigates the important consequences of the shift from script to print, and argues that the invention of the printing press have made books accessible to a wider readership and brought a standardisation in knowledge production. Like the printing press, television, and other new technologies that have gone before it, the computer is seen as an independent force which brought about radical changes to human society.

Many scholars have challenged this “transcendent” view of technology. For example, Robins and Webster (1999) argue that this “dissocialized” view of technology ignores technology’s social history and views it as somehow “influencing society yet beyond the influence of society”. Likewise, MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) argue that the path of technology innovation is shaped by social forces, i.e. the society plays an important role in deciding which technologies are adopted. We cannot regard technology as an independent and neutral factor being outside society. Hence, the view of the social determination of technology would argue that “what matters is not technology itself, but the social or economic system in which it is embedded” (Winner, 1980, p. 122).

However, such critics may also lead to an extreme opposite view which sees technology is somehow entirely shaped by existing social relations. Buckingham (2008) explains:

> Crudely, this approach sees technology as simply a matter of what people choose to make of it: it has no inherent qualities and is regarded as essentially value free. This ignores the fact that technologies have inherent potentialities or “affordances”: it is much easier to use them for some purposes than for others. Relatively few of these affordances are inevitable: the history of technology is full of examples of unanticipated consequences and even subversive uses. Even so, the forms that technology takes are largely shaped by the social actors and social institutions that

> play a leading role in producing it, and in determining where, when, and how it will be used, and by whom (p. 12).

Nevertheless, there are many scholars who intends to bring us a more dialectical view towards technology. In his influential discussion of television, Williams (2003) comments that:

> technology is both socially shaped and socially shaping. In other words, its role and impact is partly determined by the uses to which it is put, but it also contains inherent constraints and possibilities which limit the ways in which it can be used, and which are in turn largely shaped by the social interests of those who control its production, circulation, and distribution (p. 86).

This approach thus starts to move beyond the simple one direction cause and effect relationship between technology and society, which recognise the complexity in the interactions between technology and society. This is the approach I am taking in this thesis, and throughout the empirical chapters I will show how technology and society are mutually in shaping in a Chinese context.

Another relevant, and perhaps more precise, academic debate that this thesis is engaging with a discussion on the implications of the Internet for identity construction. De Ridder (2012) has identified that the concept of identity "is already complicated without the 'online' proposition" (p.354). He explains that studies on identity are "theoretically heavily laden in different and/or even oppositional canons such as social theory, identity politics, and post-structuralism" (ibid.). Moreover, he notes "an *online* identity disconnects from a 'real' to a 'virtual' space, which evokes even more interesting questions and complexity on issues such as (dis)embodiment, public sphere, identity play, resistance, etc" (ibid.).

Cerulo (1997) has critically identified one of the important trends in identity research in the late 1990s she was investigating the relationship between identity and new communication technologies which she believed have "changed the backdrop against which identity is constructed" (p. 397). She claims that:

> New communication technologies have freed interaction from the requirements of physical copresence; these technologies have expanded the array of generalized others contributing to the construction of the self. Several research foci emerge from this development: the substance of "I," "me," and the generalized other in a milieu void of place, the establishment of "communities of the mind," and the negotiation of copresent and cyberspace identities (p. 386).

Clearly, these research foci are still relevant in today's academic discussion, however, with the fast development of the Internet and other forms of digital communication technologies, theoretical stances regarding the link between the Internet and identity have shifted dramatically.

For early internet theorists, such as Mark Poster (1995), Allucquère Stone (1996), and Sherry Turkle (1996), "cyber space, as it was then commonly called, is understood as fragmenting and reconstituting identity" (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 120). In their account "the online self is multiple, transitory and always in the process of redevelopment" (ibid.). For example, in one of the most referenced early online identity studies, Turkle (1996) conducts ethnographic work in "Multi-User Domains" and finds these users engage with role-playing and identity building by creating online personas. Namely, "a person can perform whatever identity one chooses" that one may not be about to create in the offline worlds (Miller, 2011, p. 163).

This particular view towards (online) identity is heavily informed by postmodernism thinking. Miller (2011) identifies that "authors of the day were emphasising the 'liberation from meat' (Bell, 2001) that cyberspace promised, by having identity constructions that were *disembodied* and therefore, free from the typical bodily/discursive markers of gender, race, disability and class that tends to mark out 'others' in the society" (p. 164). The notion of "performance" is celebrated in this view which disconnects from a "real" to a "virtual/cyber" space.

As the Internet developed from its very basic form and created a more interactive and sophisticated environment for its users in later the 1990s, theorists started to take a more incorporated view towards identity construction and stopped seeing online life as separated from the offline life. Thus, some scholars criticised the postmodernist cyber-theorists' account of (online) identity "is not based in social theory and is therefore not accountable to the history of discussion of social activity" (Wynn and Katz, 1997, p. 299).

Studies of the day on the use of personal web pages "add further evidence for rejecting arguments about fragmentation of the individual in cyberspace" (Wynn and Katz, 1997, p. 318). These studies have shown that "'identity' was still indeed grounded in embodied, offline life and that web users generally had a desire to maintain a coherent sense of identity in the online sphere" (Miller, 2011, p. 166). For example, Wynn and Katz (1997) views home pages as a presentation of self in which users "attempt to construct a unified presentation or at least to pull together diverse aspects of the self so that browsers can follow paths that interest them" (p. 233). Furthermore, they claim

that “home pages tend to present social context by the fact of where they are located, especially if at a corporate site, or by the links they establish to other domains and other people” (ibid.).

This trend of “presenting the self online” came to be even more significant when blogging became a popular phenomenon around the first 5-10 years during the 2000s. Deuze (2006) critically put that “I see the praxis of digital culture [of the day] as an expression of individualization, postnationalism, and globalization” (p. 64). Blogging has been seen as the ideal environment “for pervasive self-disclosure and relationship building” (Miller, 2011p. 170). Miller (2011) claims that:

> The desire to tell one’s life narrative to the world, to write about one’s personal experiences of, for example, emotional pain, or one’s opinions on world events through a kind of chronological public diary sites quite to overcome disembeddedness and work towards self-realisation (ibid).

Therefore, it seemed that one must have a certain sense of self when s/he was blogging, and this sense of self would clearly be embedded in the bloggers’ everyday social context. This idea links back to what I have discussed earlier in this chapter that “identities are produced through autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day” (Lawler, 2015b, p. 26). It is fair to argue that blogs not only provide individuals space to exhibit their identities but also through that they maintain their identities. This is exactly the point that Miller (2011) claims: “the phenomenon of blogging could be seen as an overt attempt to construct and display a coherent identity narrative as part of the reflexive project of the self” (p. 171).

The rise of social networking sites in the early 2000s continues to direct us to online identities as embodied. Many researchers have “demonstrated, social networking profiles, much like online dating profiles, narrow the gap between multiple (or ideal) selves sometimes depicted in anonymous contexts, and selves that are grounded within corporeal daily life” (Miller, 2011, p. 171). For example, through examining identity construction on Facebook, Zhao et al. (2008) find that “the identities produced in this anonymous environment differ from those constructed in the anonymous online environments previously reported” (p.1816). The users of Facebook claim their identities rather implicitly than explicitly; “they ‘show rather than tell’ and stress group and consumer identities over personally narrated ones” (ibid.).

The discussion in this section demonstrate “how different internet phenomena have lent themselves to different theoretical stances in terms of identity

construction" (Miller, 2011, p. 181). When Turkle (1996) and her peer researchers explore Multi-User Domains, the Internet environment was largely anonymous and text-based, thus individuals could play with their identities and construct personas without the constrain of offline social contexts. However, when we moved to a more image-based, and a more interactive Internet environment, it "leaves little room for identity play or decentred identities" (Miller, 2011, p. 182). This is one of the reasons why this thesis takes a more integrated approach to examine the implications of digital media on Chinese gay males' identity construction. I will investigate how the development of the Internet has shaped their experiences.

2.5 Digital Media and Gay Identity

The studies of gay identity and the Internet prove a similar pattern as what I have discussed before. Since Nina Wakeford's (1997) seminal essay, *Cyberqueer*, was published, in which she asked "what precisely does the cyber add to the queer identity" (p.32), there has been an increasing number of scholarly works on the "collaboration" of online/digital media and LGBT identity. However, there is still insufficient knowledge and research to enable us to answer her question satisfactorily.

Wakeford (2002) has identified that studies in the field in the 1990s has focused largely on the question of "how one creates and maintains a queer persona in online spaces" (p.138). The Internet was seen as a "very queer space" where LGBTs can " 'practice' the queer life and explore their identity [freely]" as a player in the "avatar-based programme *Second Life*" (Rodat, 2014, p.430). Influenced by the writings of "queer theorists Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1991) who were read as if they were proposing a theory of voluntaristic performance of the queer self". In these studies, identity was seen as being performed (Wakeford, 2002, p.124).

Although this utopian view of "online" identity as a disembodied performance "has faded in the face of the inescapably raced, sexed, and gendered body" (Paradis, 2009, p.447), it still strongly influences some scholars in the research of the Internet and gay identity. For example, Fox (2012) illustrates how online performances of gay males can challenge some of the mainstream misrepresentations of gay men by conducting a visual ethnography and qualitative textual analysis on gay male produced blogs and podcasts in the United States. Taken from a post-structuralistic perspective, he goes along

with the acknowledgement that identity is the product of a discourse which is fluid and unfixed. He believes “when users log onto the Internet, there are no essential identities” (ibid., p.71). He argues that online identities “can be manipulated, and are wholly dependent on the discourse a computer user employs to articulate his or her sense of personhood” (ibid.). Therefore the “online” world becomes a theatrical stage in which gay males perform their identities; it is an “identity workshop”.

Again, this idea of “identity workshop” does illustrate certain aspects of gay men’s experience with the Internet, however, we should be very clear about the social and technological contexts in which Fox (2012) generalised his claims. His idea of blogs and podcasts functioning as an “‘identity workshop’ where individuals alter re-presentations of self, experiment with personae, and manipulate physical embodiment by swapping gender, race, ethnicity, and body size” (ibid., p.58), will be problematic when applying this to other digital platforms where personal visual images are largely used in the social media era because of the change of mechanism. On social media (such as Facebook or Twitter) many of the followers of the individual are perhaps people they know in person; one share his/her life with audiences through the use of selfies. In this case, it is certainly not easy to “swap gender, race, ethnicity, and body size”. To this end, while I am not disputing a performative element to digital media engagement, the notion of performance does not adequately explain the entirety of it.

In this research, I do not see Chinese gay males as “performers” who are able to perform their identity freely in the digital “stage”. The central issue here is not that identity cannot be seen as performed, but rather how we contextualize this kind of “performance” into a broader spectrum of digital culture. The real danger is to see the Internet as a “stage” without context. Goffman (1978) suggests that we all can be seen as actors to some extent. If everything we do is performed, then how and why we “perform” differently becomes a crucial question. It is important to contextualize our “performance”.

Indeed, Mowlabocus (2010b) has demonstrated how profile pictures function as “social capital” among Gaydar members. It is arguable that the “online” experiences of gay males have already been materialized, therefore studies of those digital practices need to address how these practices are implicated in everyday life and social institutions (Wakeford, 2002). There is no problem to see identity as performed if we contextualize it.

Although most of the studies on marginalised sexual identities and the Internet still view the Internet as a very distinct space, and struggle “to redefine the

queer web in light of a growing commercialization of cyberspace" (Paradis, 2009, p.447), their largely textual-analysis-based examinations of those new opportunities provided by the new digital media forms are still helpful because they have already pointed the way for further investigations.

First, these studies have demonstrated how photographs and videos were used by LGBTs as a way of expressing themselves in those digital media forms. "Coming out" through videos online (mainly on YouTube) became prevalent in western society. Alexander and Losh (2010) argue that "the proliferation of coming out videos offers us a unique opportunity to consider the management of sexual identities in online space" (p.38). They suggest that coming-out videos have become a specific genre within which personal stories are highlighted, offering "alternative ways of understanding sex, sexuality, and gender" and also providing value "in establishing identity, forming community, and even potentially shaping the political" (P.38, p.46). Interestingly, they also point out that these videos sometimes act not only as a subverting force providing a sense of flux and instability of sexuality, but place "emphasis on revealing a long-hidden, essential truth of unchanging and fixed identity" (p.43).

Gay couples also have documented their romance and posted their love stories on those online video channels. Lazzara (2010) analyses some videos on YouTube which were posted by a gay male couple documenting their romance. He argues these videos synthesise performed identity and community participation and create their own metanarrative of love. Those videos not only increase the visibility of gay people, but also, more importantly, form a metanarrative of gay identity. Some gay individuals may find those videos supportive and affirm their own stories, but others may not fit in with this narrative. In this study I want to explore how Chinese gay individuals perceive and negotiate with this metanarrative of gay identity in their everyday lives (see chapter 5).

Compared with using videos to express their stories, most of the self-representations of gay people are actually visual images. Arguably, the most important image would be one's profile picture to appear on a website or app. Laukkanen (2007) studies two online discussion forums and found that queer youth have "a very calculating use of pictures, both in order to present their own bodies' sex/gender and sexual orientation, and to read other people's bodies in the same way" (cited in Paradis, 2009, p.448). Mowlabocus (2012) also demonstrates that the use of profile pictures in Gaydar is akin to an investment. He notes "a face-pic demonstrates your investment in this space

and your willingness to openly identify as gay or bisexual" (p.103). He also points out that the use of body image in the profiles is highly influenced by gay porn culture, and this made those profiles in which contain the athletic body in action (often sexually) "sell" well (Mowlabocus, 2010b, p.208). He argues that those pictures represent "a pornographic remediation of the gay male body" (Mowlabocus, 2010a, p. 58). A metanarrative about gay male's body has been created in those profile pictures. Duncan (2010), through his interviews with gay males in Australia, has found out that the participants "negotiate a gay pride discourse in which the muscular male body generates both social status and self-esteem, and deploy notions of everyday masculinity that imply rationality and control to resist gendered assumptions about gay men's body image relationships" (p.437). A question of how this negotiation would develop arises in the digital age when gay males are increasingly exposed to masculine images via many different digital channels. This issue has particular resonance as I will illustrate later, not least because the situation in China is greatly different from its western counterparts (see chapter 6).

Secondly, the new digital media forms provide new ways of erotic practices for gay individuals, from the early online chat rooms to the geo-social media application, finding someone to have dates or sexual encounters. Online practices are often followed by offline meetings in person. Campbell (2014, originally 2004) explores three gay male Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels: #gaymuscle (a community that celebrates the muscular male body), #gaychub (a community that celebrates male obesity), and #gaymusclebear (where the muscular "bear" type of male body is preferred). He claims these niche gay channels function like a "virtual gay bar" where online interaction often leads to an offline encounter. He suggests "individuals integrating their online and offline experiences into a broader understanding of the reality of everyday life", in other words, the online social dynamics are still shaped by the offline social positions of individuals (p.12). Cassidy (2013) also suggests that certain features of Gaydar are designed for the seeking of sex. It allows the user to provide detailed information about sexual practices and preferences. Today, with the development of new technologies, geo-social apps like Grindr have made quicker and easier modes for gay males to have sexual encounters (Goedel & Duncan, 2015)[13]. New digital media provide new opportunities for gay males not only to meet those who share the same identity, but with whom they can also have sex.

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13 Goedel and Duncan (2015)'s survey shows that 38% of the gay male users of Grindr use the app to meet new sexual partners.

Mowlabocus (2012) proposes a theoretical concept of “cybercarnality” in order to better understand this phenomenon. He asserts that “there is a distinct and specific relationship between the digital body and the real body in gay male cyberspace and that this relationship is intimately tied up with the structures of looking and of consumption that are to be found in gay pornography” (p.81). I will explore this idea of “cybercarnality” in the Chinese context and try to use it to understand certain aspects of Chinese gay males experiences in a digital age (see chapter 6).

Special interests will be paid to pornography in the digital age in China, as Jeffreys (2002) has pointed out that “pornography is crucial to gay men’s survival, to their identities, and to their ability to do sex” (p.78). This point becomes interesting in China, as pornography is still illegal regardless of whether it is gay porn or straight porn. The Chinese authorities have “step[ped] up the anti-pornography campaigns as part of China’s Internet regulation” in recent years (Wu et al., 2010). However, as the web is too big to control, people can still access porn via the Internet, especially as social media provide new ways to disseminate porn. Mao (2015) has demonstrated that Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) can be used as a way of disseminating gay porn. Porn (usually western productions) can be shared on Weibo by gay individuals who are usually well educated, have certain IT skills and speak English or study in western countries, as a way of self-promoting and or a money-making business (ibid., p.88-92). It seems that there is also an interesting negotiation between power and capital relating to gay identity for me to explore further (see chapter 6).

Thirdly, these new digital media forms offer new opportunities for activism and “to mobilize political ideologies” (Pullen, 2010, p.1). Cooper and Dzara (2010) have noted that Facebook has been used by LGBT individuals to raise the social agenda to combat homophobic behaviours, and promoting same-sex marriage. One can easily make a (LGBT related social problem) cause in a Facebook group for other members to show and discuss the concern. They argue that in this way Facebook “present[s] a huge potential for [LGBT] activism” (ibid., p.110). Soriano (2014) also demonstrates that social media acts as a vital force in the queer movement through their case study of Ladlad, an LGBT political party in the Philippines. She argues that “the process of connectivity facilitated by online spaces creates nodes of identification, belonging, and support that symbolically form a collective site of resistance to sources of oppressive power for LGBTs” (ibid., p.20). Indeed, gay individuals or activists can easily make their political voices heard via the Internet, but we

should not overestimate the power of such digital media forms in the Chinese context, because for example, Facebook is blocked in China, and online political expression is largely controlled by the state. This raises the question of how Chinese gay individuals negotiate their political rights in the digital media (see chapter 4, and 5).

While some scholars celebrate the new opportunities that digital media (i.e. the internet and social media) have provided with sexual minorities, Cassidy (2018) has observed a "counter-culture" emerging in Western environment that digital media participation is "in a state of discontent, neither fully active of absent - a digital presenteeism of sorts"(p.7) against the "growing convergence between mainstream social networking services and gay men's digital culture" (p. 4). Cassidy (2018) terms this phenomenon as "participatory reluctance" in (Western) gay men's digital culture. This "participatory reluctance" also relates to a wider understanding of gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men's use of the Internet. Though a metareview of studies examining Internet use and interpersonal connectedness among gay and bisexual men, Card et al. (2020) suggest that "Internet use may be associated with lower gay identity, community attachment, and social embeddedness" (p. 265). Their findings direct us to think further about what has the Internet "actually" brought to gay and bisexual men in a collective sense. I will explore this sociotechnical shift in the Chinese context; in particular, I consider the implications of Internet use on gay community building in metropolitan China (see chapter 6).

To conclude, it seems that scholars generally see the digital media as a space for self-expression either personally or politically, in which the storytelling of gay lives plays a significant role to challenge the heteronormative. It shows "the importance of narratives about sex and sexuality" (Plummer, 1995 cited in Wakeford, 2002, p. 135). Moreover, these digital channels also provide opportunities for gay people to meet in person for sex or other activities, but what the addition of 'digital media' does to 'gay identity' is still unclear if we only view the digital as a distinct space/terrain in our life. Instead as Cooper and Dzara (2010) write "through online communities, not only may a personal identity be tested and accepted, but the connection between the individual identity and the collective identity develops", the digital is actually a powerful framework. It makes the social dimension of identity become collective, and hybrid. An individual is actually contributing to the collective subject but at the same time negotiating for their own representation. So in this way, if the research departs from the "online" content, it may, to some extent, lose the

opportunity to examine the complexity, although it can still provide deep understanding of the “online” experience. Therefore, I position the gay individual at the heart of this research; I want to explore what the digital media means to them, how they use digital media in relation to their sexual identity, and what digital platforms they are using, in the context of modern China.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the relevant academic debate this thesis is engaging with. In some sections, I have highlighted the theoretical approach that I would draw on in this research project, however, in many sections I have left my position open because of the rather exploratory nature of this research. In doing so, I seek not only to emphasis the theoretical complexity embedded in each central concept of this PhD study, but also, I intend to draft a broader theoretical landscape from which I could relate back to in later chapters that explain the studied empirical phenomena. Here I underline and summarise some important points that this thesis will return to in the following chapters.

Firstly, as the notion of identity is subsumed under the concept of self, I reviewed how the self is constructed under a given society. By doing so, I stress “the problem of structure and agency” in sociological inquiries to the self and identity. This problem is particularly relevant in the Chinese context. Since China’s economic reform in the later 1970s, Chinese individuals are increasingly living in a cultural hybridity in which they might negotiate between the “traditional self” and the “modern self”. With the increasing exchanges between China and the West, modern understandings of homosexuality were introduced to China. The early developed Internet also facilitated the importation of western gayness. However, as I shall demonstrate in the following chapters that the construction of gay identity in China is far more complicated than a simple importation.

Secondly, I unpacked different approaches in understanding the notion of identity in which I highlight the personal and the social dynamics embedded in this concept. Thus, this concept of identity signifies a certain relationship between the individual (identity actor) and the society. This relationship is what I will further illustrate in the later chapters. Moreover, one’s lived experience of identity is narratively constructed throughout the life course. In particular, I demonstrated how the formula story (or master narrative) could shape one’s understanding of their own identities. Loseke (2012) points out that “formula

stories obtain [people's] recognizability and predictability by deploying symbolic codes and emotion codes in ways that reflect how audience members understand the world" (p. 254). I will examine the symbolic and emotion codes regard the narrative construction of gay identity in China mainly in Chapter 5.

Thirdly, in the introduction chapter I have shown how consumerisation and digitalization as big umbrellas also influence gay people's lives and the articulation of gay identity in China. As gay people have been recognised as consumers, they have gained social spaces in the big cities, and were able to start to live in a certain lifestyle. The Internet and other digital media have become a vital part of their life. The Internet has been the major source of their identity; mobile technology has also enabled them to identify others who share the same identity ever easier than before. In this context, we should understand that gay identity is a complex and long-standing project in China, and the digital is simply not a platform, a terrain, nor a blank space to be acted on. Technology is both socially shaped and socially shaping. This research thus seeks to explore the complexity of the "combination" of "gay identity" and "the digital" in the unique context of China.

Chapter 3
Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The overarching research question that guides my empirical investigation is:

What is the role of digital media in Chinese gay males' everyday lives, and what is the implication of this for the construction of gay identity?

This question stresses the need for exploratory and open-ended examination to be conducted into the lives of Chinese gay men. Therefore, this research is necessarily an "ethnographic" project which is based on my fieldwork in Beijing and Guangzhou, and the themes addressed in the following chapters represent issues that emerged during the fieldwork in dialogue with the research participants. In doing so, I seek to achieve the prize that ethnography gifts us that is "a method for getting to the heart of meaning and enabling us to understand, in the round and in depth, how people make sense of their lives" (Hine, 2015, p.1).

Ethnography has always been used as an important approach to explore the sexual and cultural hybridity in non-western societies (Ho, 2007). Most of the existing studies on Chinese homosexuality were based on an ethnographical approach; their results were vibrant and fruitful, providing "thick descriptions" of the experiences of homosexual people in China (for examples see: Bao, 2011, Chou, 2000, Ho, 2007, Kong, 2010). However, their ethnographies did not focus significantly on the use of digital media in gay people's everyday lives. This research is an attempt to understand the use of digital media from the users' viewpoint, and explore their lived experience of identity, thus, I will not strictly define my thesis is an ethnography, rather, it is ethnographically inspired qualitative study.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the epistemological stance of this research project and how it has led to the ethnographically inspired methodology. I will underline the value of this particular qualitative methodology regarding the issues discussed in the literature review and in relation to the main aim of this thesis. I then provide a detailed account and reflection of my research fieldwork in Guangzhou and Beijing from late 2016 to 2017. In particular, I elaborate on the process of participants recruitment

and ethical concerns to further shed light on conducting research with sexual minorities in China. Finally, I will explain how the data has been analysed.

3.2 Epistemological Stance

As I have shown in the Literature Review, each central concept embedded in the research project has its own long pedigree, and is theoretically laden in different and/or even oppositional canons. “The problem of structure and agency” is at the heart of how we understand the relation between the self and society; thus, it is the key to investigating “identity”. This research project embraces a critical realist epistemology which seeks to balance “humanism, which sees human agency as everything, and structuralism, which sees social structure as everything” (Collier, 1994, p. 141). Danermark et al. (2019) further explain that in critical realism “structures are viewed as laying down conditions for people’s lives, while agency provides the effective causes for what happens in society - only human beings can act” (Chapter 1, Section 6, Para. 4).

Critical realism can be seen as “an alternative to both positivism and interpretivism in the philosophy of social science” (Kuhn and Westwell, 2020, no pagination). In a critical realist view, “there is a reality independent of our knowledge of it, but also that this reality is not something immediately fixed and empirically accessible” (Danermark et al., 2019, Chapter 1, Section 6, Para. 2). Social researchers need to find the mechanisms behind the empirically observable events. For example, we cannot directly observe relations of power, but they “can be inferred to exist from their effects in the social world” (Frauley and Pearce, 2007, p. 5). Thus, scientific work in critical realism is “to investigate and identify relationships and non-relationships, respectively, between what we experience, what actually happens, and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events in the world” (Danermark et al., 2019, Chapter 2, Section 4, Para. 5). Thus, my main research objective is to “use perceptions of empirical events [those that can be observed or experienced] to identify the mechanisms that give rise to those events” (Volkoff et al., 2007, p. 835).

3.3 Ethnography as a Methodology

In social sciences, the term of ethnography is often treated, although sometimes confusing, as both a method for collecting data and a type of

qualitative methodology with a particular set of practical rules and theoretical positions (Brewer, 2000). As a method, ethnography is often related to an immersive and observative way of studying people in their naturally occurring settings or “fields”, involving such as in-depth interviewing and participant observation. It often entails a relatively long-term engagement in a particular social reality (e.g., a country, group, or culture) to participate in everyday activities and social interactions of research participants (Emerson et al., 2001).

As a methodology, Cummings (2019) critically puts:

> Ethnography implies a form of research that is embedded in everyday life, one in which the very nature of a research project, the issues to be analysed, the methods through which data is generated, and the conceptual tools used in analysis are negotiated in dialogue with the researcher’s ongoing interactions with participants and integration into the everyday social worlds, networks, and scenes that the researcher seeks to explore (p. 76).

In this view, “ethnography is an endeavour to produce contextually specific forms of knowledge that emerge through the researcher’s embedding within, and attempt to understand, culturally, socially, and materially specific situations” (ibid.). This particular methodological commitment is particularly relevant to this project as my main aim is to explore Chinese gay males’ lives “in relation to social, cultural, material, and linguistic contexts within which they are lived” (ibid., p.77). Thus, I understand ethnography as a methodology rather than a particular set of methods. It tells me how to orientate myself to my work using principles of reflexivity and being attuned to power.

Rees and Gatenby (2014) also argue that as a *sociological practice*, ethnography “involves linking rich individual ethnographic accounts to various layers of context and social structure, and attempting to explain rather than merely describe social phenomena” (p. 132). Seen from this view, critical realism would inform an ethnographer by linking structure to agency (Decoteau, 2017). This critical realist ethnography could build connection “between the actions of people in social settings and the social, economic and political structures within which those actions occur” (p. 136). This connection is much needed in this project as I seek to contextualise Chinese men’s lived experience within the specific social reality in China, in which I recognise both individuals’ capability (agency) and the social and cultural constraints (structure).

Moreover, Rooke (2010) suggests that “an ethnographic approach to sexuality … acknowledges that gender and sexual identities, and the meanings that circulate around them, are more than merely discursive formulations, they are daily realities and practices that have real consequences”. This view is clearly celebrated by many social scholars who examine Chinese sexual minorities’ lived experiences. An ethnographic approach has helped them to understand the multiplicities of sexual identities in the rapid social and cultural transformations in contemporary China (e.g., Bao, 2011; Chou, 2000; Ho, 2007; Kam, 2012; Kong, 2010; Zheng, 2015).

Coleman (2010) reviews the ethnographic corpus on digital media, and suggests that “scholars are increasingly applying an ethnographic lens to practices, subjects, modes of communication, and groups entirely dependent on digital technologies for their existence” (p. 492). However, a clear distinction can be found in this body of literature that is the “online ethnography” vs “ethnography for the internet”. Online ethnography can also be termed as “netnography” which is essentially “doing ethnographic research online” (Kozinets, 2010). In other words, netnography studies Internet-based texts and interactions. For example, Weijo et al. (2014) employed netnography to investigate the development of an online electronic music community in which the researchers had twenty-year involvement with members of this online community. To sum up, netnography or online ethnography can be seen as ethnographers extend their participation to the online spaces where their participants frequent.

However, as Markham (2016) well observed:

> In the past twenty years, we’ve witnessed massive growth in global networked social forms as well as major transformations in economic, political, and social infrastructures. Everyday lived experience in this decade is impacted by the convergence of media, the mediation and remediation of identities, and the still-rising interest in quantification and big data (p. 651).

This has caused “the fundamental shift in thinking about the internet as ‘virtual’ ‘online’ or somewhat disembodied to digital and embodied” (Jaynes, 2018, p. 82) as what I have discussed in Chapter 2. As such, doing ethnography for the Internet means researchers should not only limited their focus just on these online spaces but also embrace the digital as part of our everyday lives. In this context, Hine (2015) suggests that “the ethnographer needs to take part in those mediated communications alongside whatever face-to-face interactions may occur, as well as taking note of any other forms of document and recording that circulate amongst participants” (p.3). Thus, an ethnography

for the Internet does not focus “solely on ethnography through the Internet, because in order to understand mediated communications one is also often led to study face-to-face settings in which they are produced and consumed, and to comprehend the settings in which they become embedded” (Hine, 2015, p. 5-6). Guided by this approach, I conducted my fieldwork in China, as I explain in the following sections.

3.4 The Fieldwork

In the sections below, I provide a chronological account of my experience of doing fieldwork in China. In this way, I am able to highlight the process of conducting ethnographic research and also the decisions that I have made during the fieldwork, which is generally informed by seeing the filed as fluid (Hine, 2015). This is also a reflexive account of key aspects of events and interactions that I encountered in my fieldwork in Guangzhou and Beijing regarding the issues of access, recruiting participants, and interviewing.

3.4.1 Getting into the Field

Since I wanted to investigate the experiences of Chinese gay males in the digital age, then I must find a way to engage with them. As a self-identified gay man, I have some special knowledge about the Chinese gay community, and I use those digital platforms as well. However, since I have studied in the UK for three years, I had little contact with the local Chinese gay community. I still need to find a way for me to get into the gay community in China.

As stated in the literature review, Chinese local gay organizations have gained support and legitimacy under the name of HIV prevention. They are widespread in China, and nearly always function as gay community centres as well. They provide many kinds of activities to promote HIV prevention knowledge, and at the same time, they also promote western gay activism to some extent (Bao, 2012; Cao and Lu, 2014; Wei, 2015). Ho (2007) has identified that “gay activism in China is often linked with Western-operated sexual health groups” (p.15). Rofel (2007) suggests that those international people who worked for those organizations were the contributors to the import of western gay identity into China. Therefore, those organizations play a very important part of Chinese gay politics in different ways. I believe that doing my field work in a local gay organization will not only provide me with a connection

to the local gay community, but will also provide me with a very important contextualization of current Chinese gay politics.

Furthermore, the organization may use digital media to promote itself, and although the organization per se is not my research object, it is still adding insights to the whole picture of gay-orientated digital media in China. Those working in the organizations are more likely to be gay males themselves, and they use different digital media platforms, which could provide me with a valuable opportunity to engage deeply with people's everyday use of the digital. Moreover, as digital media is part of our everyday life, people will use and talk about it during those events and activities organized by the local gay organization. For these reasons I believe the local gay organizations will provide me with a valuable chance to elicit gay males' everyday use of digital media as it unfolds in order to capture its mundane, everyday nature.

I selected Guangzhou as the place to start my fieldwork for the following reasons. Firstly, there are a good variety of gay organizations based in Guangzhou, perhaps due to its open environment for such organizations to live and carry out their work. Secondly, it is the third-most-populous city in China. I believe I can easily reach diversified gay males there. In such a metropolitan city like Guangzhou there are people from different parts of China living there long term. Thirdly, I have grown up in the nearby city - Shenzhen, which has some cultural similarity with Guangzhou, and I believe this could help me better engage with the local community. Furthermore, as I have not lived in Guangzhou before, as a new place, it provides me valuable standpoint to explore a relatively new community and allow me to question taken-for-granted social and cultural norms.

Via my personal connection, I contacted a local gay organization in Guangzhou, called "Zhitong"[14]. I told the director all my research objectives on the first day I met him. My role as a researcher was made clear to him, and in return I offered my willingness to work voluntarily. He kindly agreed to help and allocated me some translation work to start with. I was introduced to all other full-time staff by the director and they all knew my position as a PhD researcher. I introduced my research project and I told them what I planned to do in their organization. All of them were happy about my presence there.

14 "Zhi" literarily means clever; "Tong" denotes for Tongzhi. A leaflet of Zhitong is attached in the appendix. I designed it and translated it into English.

3.4.2 Immersing in the Field

I started my work in Zhitong on the 20th December 2016. During the five months that I worked in Zhitong, I became deeply involved in many aspects of their works: including translating simple introductory material, designing their promotional leaflet, and writing project proposals. By this involvement I not only came to know the organization better, but also gained a better understanding of how this so-called "gay movement" works in the organizational level, which provided a valuable contextualization of my research. Moreover, working in Zhitong provided a great opportunity to engage with the local gay community and I helped to organize various events and activities including a New Year's Eve party, film screenings, book clubs, and themed talks. Whilst I was working there (whether doing paperwork in the office or organizing community events) I paid special attention to the role of digital media in the organization, and how people[15] there talked about gay-orientated digital media in their everyday lives.

When I was in the organization, I did not make notes immediately when I noticed something interesting related to my research subject; instead, I compiled detailed notes after I returned home. Although I have made my role clear to them, I still felt rather uncomfortable making notes of matters I have heard or observed, and I was concerned that such behaviour might be disruptive. Moreover, as most of the time, I was doing the allocated work in the organization or holding an event, it was not practical to make immediate notes.

3.4.3 Recruitment (Part 1)

As gay people can be seen as hard-to-reach research participants, I have employed a mixed-method of recruiting participants. Through the social and cultural events and activities that I organized with Zhitong, I got to know many volunteers and attendees in person. I always introduced myself to them as both an intern of Zhitong and a PhD student, and if I had a chance, I would also introduce my research briefly. In those events, we would usually create a WeChat group or if not, people would still exchange their WeChat numbers. In this case, I would have most of the people's WeChat numbers. After the events, I asked those attendees if they were willing to take part in my research, and I was very pleased that a large majority agreed. I believe that personal

15 These people were the staff members, volunteers, and those who attending their events.

contact with these people helped to engender trust between us, and they may have been further encouraged by my involvement with Zhingtong. I also attended the events and activities organized by other organizations or individuals in which I repeated the above process, and in this way, I found 31 participants. Then some of the initial participants also introduced their friends to me, and by this means, I recruited a total of 43 participants with diverse demographic features[16]. Their age ranged from 19-63, although most of them are still in their 20s, I have tried hard to recruit gay males in their 30s and above as I believe that age means different experiences in the digital. For example, those teenage students would not experience the gay online chat room time. Most of the interviews took place in a coffee shop like Starbucks, and a few interviews were done in the office of Zhitong. I always made sure that the participants felt comfortable with the venue before we started the interview.

I created academic accounts of gay social media for me to explore the everyday use of digital media and potentially find some more participants. In those academic accounts, I described myself as a researcher and gave basic information about this project. I found it is difficult to approach people in those gay social apps and most of the people I approached rejected my interview invitation even though we had chatted for a while. Only one guy agreed to meet and be interviewed. However, interestingly, there were a few people who contacted me directly on Blued and told me of their willingness to take part in my research. Although it might not be a helpful way of recruiting participants, it did provide me with a great opportunity to observe the local gay digital culture and gain nuanced and deep insights via engaging in multiple digital platforms.

3.4.4 Interviewing

Coleman (2013) has demonstrated how research interviews function as a good way of gaining access to people's memories and revealing their experiences. He suggests for his interviewees that talking about election/voting experiences could be a way of enacting the citizen. For LGBT people, interviewing could also be a special interaction. Suen (2015) finds that for LGBT students in Hongkong, especially those who are in the closet, the interview was redefined and became an occasion to ponder their identity struggles and to release problems and worries that in everyday life they can

16 A full list of research participants can be found in the appendix.

share with no one. I am not arguing that the interview can be an act of empowerment, but I have found that most of my participants view it as a pleasant experience.

The interviews I conducted with my participants lasted for approximately one hour. They were semi-structured and reviewed the participant's life history from the time when he thought he maybe was attracted to males. If the digital is constitutive, which means that it is "part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds that people inhabit" (Pink et al., 2016, p.7), then exploring people's life history will reveal people's experience of the digital. In this way, it avoids the separation between online and offline and contextualizes people's usage of gay-orientated digital media.

In the interview follow-up questions were asked if the participants mentioned something related to the use of the Internet and/or any other digital platforms. For example, if he said that he became aware of the concept of homosexuality from the internet, I would then ask where he searched for the information and how he felt about what he discovered. Nevertheless, I remained in control of the whole interview process by asking questions which could guide them to review their life experiences. As interview is essentially a conversation, the researcher and the participants are both the players in the dialogical space, I tried to keep an equal power relationship between me and the interviewee. I sometimes shared my experiences and opinions with them in order to encourage them to speak more about themselves. I used lots of eye contact and vocal responses to encourage them to tell their story at their own pace and to show I was listening to them carefully. All in all, I tried to give my participants confidence and control in telling their stories.

Although the interview covered the period from the participant's realisation of his same-sex attraction, substantial time was taken over his more recent experiences of being a gay male in China, and the use of current popular gay-orientated digital media (such as Blued, Aloha[17], and gay-related WeChat public accounts and groups). I used specific probes to facilitate the discussion on the experiences of the usage of current gay-orientated digital media drawing on the literature review, for instance, questions on the topics of local and international gay news, profile picture, gay porn, and hooking-up practices. Sometimes during the conversation, participants also showed me their profile on gay social apps and or those gay WeChat public accounts that they follow,

17 They are the current popular gay dating (hooking-up) mobile applications.

and I would collect that material for future analysis[18]. Most of those questions[19] emphasised the participant's perception of those things. In this way, I hope to capture the development of gay-orientated digital media and a holistic account of individuals' uses of the internet.

3.4.5 Stories from Other Sides

Drawing upon Hine (2015)'s work, I see the field as fluid and networked, therefore, I prioritise my research objectives (in this case the Chinese gay males' experiences of the digital) in defining my research field which is non-spatial, i.e. not limited to a particular space. More importantly, I want to put those gay males' experiences of the digital into context which have been neglected in those textual analyses of gay digital platforms. Thus, additional to the ethnographical work carrying in Zhitong, I also conducted two interviews with senior members of other gay organizations in Guangzhou discussing the history of their organizations and the role of digital media to them and their organization as well.

As I have heard some stories from the gay men in Guangzhou, and they have told me their experiences in using those digital platforms, I felt that it would be a great compliment and a contextualization of their experiences if I was able to explore the media production as well. Thus, using the connection I had from the people met from Zhitong I was quite lucky to conduct an interview with a senior staff member of a previously well-known gay online forum (bulletin board system) in Guangdong province. In the interview she told me a lot of valuable information regarding the development of Chinese gay websites and forums which triggered my aspiration to explore more of the stories from inside of the gay digital media industry. Thus, I decided to close my fieldwork in Guangzhou and move to Beijing as those major gay digital media organizations are all in Beijing. This would enable me to start a "new" phase of my fieldwork which would not only provide me with opportunities to explore those media organization but also allow me to immerse myself in another big gay community in China.

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18 In most cases, I will just collect what information they usually look on public gay digital platforms, I rarely collect information of their personal profiles or accounts unless they allow me to. I remembered that a participant rejected to show me his profile on Blued as he was not comfortable, since that time I would not suggest my participants to show me their personal profiles unless they intended to.

19 "How do you feel about that" was the frequently asked question. In this way I wanted to emphasize my participants' subjectivity.

On 4th May 2017, I started my fieldwork in Beijing and through my connection from Zhitong I established contacts with some LGBT organizations in Beijing. However, I decided not to base myself in a single organization as I wanted to gain a general sense of how those organizations work in order to get a broader picture of gay politics in China. I attended many events and activities held by those organizations, and this enabled me to find more participants for interviews. Within those organization, I established valuable connections with the senior staff of what is perhaps the only gay magazine in China, who in turn introduced me to the CEO of a company operating a popular gay dating app and also a gay website. Thus, I was able to conduct an interview with him discussing his objectives and experience of running such a company in China. Introduced by one of my participants, I was able to speak to a former employee of Blued (the biggest gay social network in China).

Miao and Chan (2020a) have found "recent scholarship on gay social apps has largely focused on the experiences of their users". Few scholars have explored the production-side (p. 1). It is understandable that different studies have their own research focus and objectives. Although the aim of this PhD project is to explore Chinese gay males' use of digital media, the information that I collected from the production-side provides an important contextualization of my participants' use of digital media. Thus, I could give a more nuanced understanding of how digital media is implicated in gay identity in China.

3.4.6 Recruitment (Part 2)

Although my participation in different community events provided me with a valuable opportunity to engage with the gay men in Beijing, it proved not to be an effective way of recruiting participants[20]. Therefore, I decided to post an advertisement on the public WeChat account of the aforementioned gay magazine. Following the publication of the advertisement I received almost 100 immediate responses, in which I have conducted one-to-one interviews with 30 of them. Although I wrote in the advertisement that I preferred to conduct face to face interviews with people in Beijing, there were people from other parts of China who contacted me and showed their willingness to join

20 I am not suggesting that people in Beijing are less willing to take part in my research, but perhaps the city is so big and people are so busy, I just felt it was a bit difficult to arrange interviews with those gay men I met in those occasions. Furthermore, unlike in Guangzhou, where I was an intern in Zhitong, I did not belong to any gay organization in Beijing. Thus, it seems I lost a trustworthy label in the local gay community. This might be also caused the difficulty in recruiting participants in Beijing.

my research[21]. Taking this chance, I also conducted serval interviews via WeChat with people from elsewhere. By this mode, I was to able to get an interesting and theoretically valuable set of participants, for example, gay men from second or third-tier cities. The online interview procedure is exactly the same as what I have done with participants offline.

3.5 Reflections

So far, I have briefly reviewed the whole process of my fieldwork in China. There are a few points that I would like to discuss further which might help other researchers who also want to conduct empirical works in Chinese LGBT+ communities.

The first point is about getting access. Although I am a Chinese gay man, I was not an active member of the local gay community, and I have rarely attended community events organised by local gay organisations. Before I started my fieldwork, I did not know any gay organisations in Guangzhou and Beijing. Bian (2019) suggests that *guanxi* [personalised social relations] offers the basic social logic of how China works. Chinese people tend to rely on their guanxi to provide most of their needs, as Bian (2019) writes:

> You get a good job through your *guanxi* contacts. You start a new business with the money borrowed from and the business contact extended by your *guanxi* contacts. You manage an organization and sustain it through your *guanxi* networks of diverse ties (p. I).

I, thus, naturally wanted to find access to the field through my *guanxi* contacts. Through a PhD winter school, I was very lucky, I got to know a peer researcher who was also conducting research on Chinese gay digital culture. Before attending this winter school, he participated in a large international LGBT+ conference where he came to know the staff members of Zhitong. He then introduced the contact to me. Therefore, I started my fieldwork in Zhitong rather than other gay organisations in Guangzhou.

Here, I am not suggesting that if any researcher intends to do LGBT-related fieldwork in China, s/he must have a personal connection with the local gay organisation before the fieldwork commencing. Rather later on I found, even if a researcher does not have any personal contacts with local LGBT NGOs, s/he could simply find their contacts on the Internet and visit their office

21 A copy of the call for participants advertisement is attached in the appendix.

introducing him/her-self to the director of that organisation. This is because many gay organisations in China, at least, those I have visited, welcome researchers to work with them. Especially if the researcher could offer any kinds of volunteering work to that organisation, as most often, LGBT organisations are short of professional workers. In my case, at that time when I started my fieldwork, Zhitong was applying for funding from the embassies and consulates of certain Western countries in China. Thus, I helped them writing, translating finding proposals, for which that they were very appreciated.

While it seems that *guanxi* is less important when a researcher wants to work with Chinese LGBT organisations, *guanxi* proves to be vital for doing ethnographic word in relation to LGBT related media production. As the research seeks to understand how the development of digital media has shaped Chinese gay males' lives, many digital platforms mentioned by my research participants maybe not exist anymore. For example, many Guangzhou-based participants mentioned that they were very attracted to the Guangtong (online) forum when they started to explore their gay identity through the Internet. Although as a platform Guangtong was operating during the time I was in Guangzhou, but there was not a dedicated team that ran it. It is only through *guanxi* network that I built up in Zhitong, that I was able to find a senior staff member of Guangtong and conduct an interview with her.

Furthermore, perhaps because of market competition, (newer) gay-orientated digital companies are less likely to support academic research. Unless, the researcher has a strong connection with the owner or senior manager of that company. This might also depend on the personal attitude of that company director. For example, Baojun Ma, the CEO of BlueCity, was very cautious about any academic research related to their business. He would not like to see criticisms toward his company. Even if through *guanxi*, I managed to have some personal conversation with him, he is still not happy for me to conduct a formal interview with him.

The second point that I want to discuss further is recruiting and conducting research with self-identified sexual minorities in China. The advantage of being an insider in studying sexual minorities can be seen in those sociological studies on Chinese homosexuality (e.g., Bao, 2011, Kong, 2010). Being an outsider, Ho (2007) met some difficulties when she was conducting her fieldwork in Beijing. As "a non-gay female, a researcher from Australia, a citizen from Hong Kong, a visiting scholar of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, and a non-Beijing resident", she had difficulty in understanding Mandarin at first; her informants did not trust her; and she often

felt she was “gazed” at by people she encountered during her fieldwork (ibid., p.123). In contrast, Bao (2011) did not have any problems in finding interviewees and engaging with the LGBT community in China as he is a self-identified Chinese gay man who has lived in Beijing for six years and has engaged with the local gay community actively. His interviewees were often introduced by the LGBT NGO group leader, or by famous gay persons that he knows. Those participants were mainly NGO group members or the attenders of the events held by the NGO groups. Moreover, he “attended these events not only as an ethnographer and a researcher but as an active participant and sometimes an event organiser” (ibid, p.258).

I certainly benefitted from an insider position which allowed me to build trust and close relationship with some of my participants. Many of my participants were city dwellers with higher education, who were born after the 1980s and 1990s [*80 hou he 90 hou*], and thus belonged to a generation that has grown up entirely after China’s reform and opening-up. As a young Chinese gay man, I have also grown up in the same context, I shared the same formula story with them. Thus, I am able to create a “dialogue with informants beyond the self” (Anderson, 2006, p. 378). Through the interviewing process, most of my participants were feeling very comfortable with me, and very happy to share their stories.

Reflecting upon different participants recruiting methods that I have employed in the fieldwork; the advantages of a mixed-method strategy is clear. Arguably, the self-identified nature of gay man makes them a hard-to-reach research participant. Firstly, having staff members of local gay organizations as key informants “can clearly be of great help to the ethnographer and frequently provide a support that helps with the stress of fieldwork” (Bryman, 2008, p. 409). One of the great helps, in terms of recruiting research participants, is they will introduce you to many people they knew to participate in the research. Although, in my case, as I was working in Zhitong and meeting individuals through many ways, I was less reliant on the staff members to help me to find research participant; they still provided with me important connections with very active individuals in the Guangzhou gay community.

Furthermore, as a staff member of Zhitong I also helped them organising community events and activities, such as film screening, book club, etc., through those events and activities, people would first know me as a staff member of Zhitong and a PhD researcher, but they would not know anything about my research. Those regular Zhitong events attendees would have trust in Zhitong first and then when I asked if they would like to participate in my

research, they were very happy to do so. I believe that a certain part of their trust in me has come from the fact that I was a staff member of Zhitong.

Another important way to build rapport with potential research participants is to have more social interactions before inviting them to take part in the research project. As I discussed earlier, *guanxi* plays an important part in Chinese society; to build up *guanxi* contacts need efforts. Apart from Zhitong's own social events, I also attended the events and activities organized by other organizations or individuals as many as I can. This was not only a good way to observe and engage with the local gay community, but also proved to be a decent means to recruit research participants. In those social events, I had time to engage with people and got to know them first and vice versa. Again, they would know me a PhD research first, but might not have known any detail about my research. Later-on, when we have added each other on WeChat, I would then invite him to take part in my research. The rapport built in this way also facilitated a smooth interview and the research participants tended to my open toward me and sharing their private experience.

However, one major concern of recruiting research participants through local gay organisations is the sample's limited diversity. From my own observation, people attending community social events in Guangzhou and Beijing are just a small part of the local gay population. They tend to be very confident about their sexual identity and happy to disclose their sexuality to other people. They are often relatively young and with a good education background. Although we are not talking about representativeness in qualitative research, those gay males certainly just represent one small part of a large community of Chinese gay men. In both Guangzhou and Beijing, I have encountered discreet individuals who seek to have casual sex with me, but which resulted in a casual conversation about their experiences. They, of course, refused to take part in my research and let our conversation recorded. I respect them; thus, I only write down my thoughts in the field notes. Here is one extract after I had a talk with a migrant worker in Beijing:

> He added me on Blued, and the location showed that we were not far away at all. It then turned out he worked for a local restaurant. I knew I was doing research here, but still invited for a chat. We were initially meeting in the communal garden, but later, there were more people turned up in the garden, then we moved away to a quieter place. I could tell he was afraid to disclose his homosexuality. He was married, and had children, lived in a dormitory allocated by the restaurant with three other people who also came from the rural areas.

> So, he often deleted Blued after use, as he did not want his dormitory mates to find out his sexuality.
>
> The most memorable words I heard from him were “people like us are living in a very hard life”, “there are so many people on the app, but it is so difficult to find a suitable one”. He also told me that a person that he met through Blued told him that these apps were only for those who came out as the texts and voice messages you sent on the app would all know by others. This seemed to imply that the app could become a surveillance tool in the future, which would be suitable for people like him who was still in the closet.
>
> I told him that what he told me was very interesting and of great value to my research and asked him if he would like to participate in my research. He rejected directly and told me that he would not want others to find out his sexuality. I, then, stressed that all my research materials would be anonymised, he was still very hesitant, and at the end not willing to take part.
>
> 5th May 2017

Bryman (2008) suggest that “ethnographers have to ensure that they gain access to as wide a range of individuals relevant to the research question as possible, so that many different perspectives and ranges of activity are the focus of attention” (p. 414). I have certainly followed his suggestion, but, in the above case, it is certainly difficult to persuade that person to take part in my research. During my fieldwork, I have tried to encourage discreet people (who do not want their sexuality to be widely known) to join my research, however, none of them has agreed. Therefore, in my case, as a researcher, I can just try myself to recruit a diverse range of research participants, but I cannot control the final result.

The third, and related, point I am going to discuss is the “pros and cons” between recruiting participants in the physical life and recruiting participants through digital media platforms. Firstly, as I stated above, engaging with research participants in their everyday lives is a positive way to build rapport with them, and thus facilitate a smooth interview. But this can be time-consuming and less efficient. Although, normally, in a community event I would meet a number of gay individuals, it often ended up with only a few participated in my research. Compared with this, recruiting participants through digital media platforms is a quicker, easier, effortless way. If the researcher has selected the right platform to publish his/her call-for-participants advertisement, the result could be very fruitful. The digital platform where I posted my advertisement is a long-lasting community media outline.

It has built up a great number of readership and the readers are also interested in participating in community activities. Thus, as I aforementioned, just after my advertisement has been published, I received a great number of responses, but as it eventually transpired that I was only able to interview a certain percentage of them. However, in this case, it is not easy to know more about the research participants before the interview, and also the participants would not have limited social interactions with me too.

The means through which interviews were conducted also seems to have an impact on the outcome of the communication between the researcher and the participants. Clearly, as Opdenakker (2006) points out, no other interview methods could take more advantage of social cues than face to face interviews. He suggests that “social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language etc. of the interviewee can give the interviewer a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee on a question” (p.3). Indeed, when I was interviewing my research participants face to face, I can always sense their subtle facial expressions in terms of whether they want to discuss a particular question further or not. However, when I was conducting the interview via WeChat (voice chat), these kinds of social cues were reduced to voice, and language. Thus, sometimes I had to double confirm that these questions were acceptable for my interviewees.

Conducting interviews via digital media also has its own advantages. Some researchers have found that participants may feel more comfortable using computer mediated communication (CMC) to discuss sensitive topics, as they “may consider disclosing intimate and personal experiences to be embarrassing, humiliating and awkward” in face to face sittings (Elmir et al., 2011, p. 13). I also found that my participants seem more comfortable to discuss their erotic experiences when we were communicating through WeChat voice? call. Participants were more likely to share more details about their sexual experiences and practices when using audio only computer mediated communication.

3.6 Ethics

As a stigmatized group, gay people may encounter problems when they disclose their identity, and also, to some extent, homosexuality in China may be still considered as a sensitive topic. Therefore, particular and careful attention has been to be accorded to the ethical issues, although I do not see

these gay men as a vulnerable group[22]. A rigorous mechanism has been employed in this project to ensure the safety and well-being of the researcher and participants, and to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, has passed the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee's review (reference: PVAR 15-100).

All participation in this research is voluntary for each interviewee; an information sheet was provided to him before the interview. I also provided my research participants with a consent form to sign. However, during the early stage of my fieldwork, I found that some participants have signed their actual names on the form, which I did not request. I had concerns about the safety of storing these hard copies, as I was renting a room in an apartment hotel. I then tried to ask them to sign their initials on the form, but also caused confusions to my participants and I had to explain to them. Therefore, I decided to just use voice informed consent because it was not only a straightforward process but also protect the rights from both parties. Before each interview began, I would explain briefly explain what I have written on the information sheet and asked them if they were truly willing to participate in this study, and record this conversation.

Before the interview commenced, I would also encourage them to signal to me to stop should they feel uncomfortable about the questions. I would ask them if they wish to stop if I think they appear to be feeling uncomfortable or emotional, because during the interviews they were likely to expose their life histories and personal stories which could touch upon some painful events in their lives. Furthermore, some sensitive or highly personal questions may be asked in the interview such as their consumption of gay porn. Before asking such questions, I would tell them they have the right to not to respond if they so wish. Participants' personal gay social media accounts may be shown to me as a way to facilitate the discussion, but only if I could gain consent from them. These personal accounts could be analysed further only if they agree.

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22 The reasons are: a) gay people are self-identified, they are more likely to meet problems when they expose their gay identity; b) gay males have other more "visible" identities, which could provide them with certain level power/privilege, for example, their gender may be the primary identity before their other sexual identities; c) the acceptance and open attitude towards homosexuality among younger generations are increasing (UNDP, 2016).
Furthermore, the term "vulnerable" is typically defined as "a research participants' inability to make decisions that are in their own best interests (e.g., cognitively disabled individuals, children) and/or a power differential that subjects participants to potential coercion and undue influence by their superiors (e.g., students, employees, prisoners)" (Mustanski, 2011, p.16). LGBT individuals are not identified as "vulnerable" according to the common definition.

Participants' privacy and confidentiality were protected through a system of anonymization and data protection. First participants' legal names, and other information that could identify them were not required in this project. A pseudonym was given to each participant the first time they decide to take part in the research. There was a code sheet that contains the participants' name by which I know them[23] and the pseudonym that I gave them was only for the purpose of my own referencing. Pseudonyms were used throughout the course of the whole research process, and I was the only person that will be able to access the code sheet of pseudonyms. All the research data were stored in separate folders on the M: drive of the University of Leeds which was password-protected[24], and all paper documentation was stored in separate locked cases[25].

3.4 Approach to Analyses and Writing

Critical realists believe that "all knowledge is conceptually mediated and thus it is impossible to make neutral observations of 'facts' about reality" (ibid., Chapter 3, Section 1, para. 1). Scientific knowledge "builds on systematic development and the application of theories at different levels of abstraction" (ibid., Chapter 6, Section 8, Para. 1). Based on this, Danermark et al. (2019) summarise "a critical realist understanding of the relation between theory and observation/data" into three points:

1. In research, we can never understand, analyse, and explain reality (structures and mechanisms) without using a theoretical language of concepts.

2. These concepts are constantly being developed.

3. The development of concepts presupposes an (intransitive) reality independent of these concepts. The relation between theoretical concepts and the properties or objects the concepts are referring to, is not unambiguous and simple; neither is it arbitrary. All conceptualizations and theories are fallible but not equally fallible (Chapter 6, Section 2, Para. 2).

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23 This may not be their legal names.

24 All the research data, including all interview recordings, fieldwork notes, and the pseudonym code sheet will be put into separate folders.

25 Written materials include information sheet, fieldwork notes.

My research findings are presented in the guidance of the above three points, and the theories that generated and developed from the empirical material is based on a more inductive strategy. Generally inspired by ground theory, I try to approach data “in an open and relatively unbiased way” (ibid, Section 5, Para. 20), and my conceptualization is “grounded in individuals’ everyday understanding of reality, such as it appears in specific social and cultural contexts and discourses” (ibid. Para 22). In order to do so, I employed a coding process to all the empirical material, including 89 interview transcriptions and the fieldnote that I wrote during my ethnographic fieldwork in China. Danermark et al. (2019) simply describe coding as a procedure of “developing categories that discern and label common properties in data” (Chapter 6, Section 5, Para. 24). I have conducted this coding process by using NVivo. Firstly, all the interview transactions and fieldnote (in Chinese) were broken down “into sentences or paragraphs and label different incidents, ideas, etc., giving them names that communicate what these elements of the data represent” (ibid., Para. 26). Then those labels were further development into “categories that integrate different concepts seemingly describing the same type of phenomenon” (ibid.). Thus, in this way, the thematic analysis provided me with a systematic method to map content and topics across the data collected in my fieldwork.

I decided to conduct the coding process based upon all the empirical materials that I collected in Chinese rather than translate them into English. This was because I want to use people’s own words and language as much as possible. Huang (1982) claims that “a language” constitutes “an ontological world” which “defines and delimits what basic entities or categories exist and how declarative sentences in that world are to be interpreted” (p. 87). Cummings (2019) further notes that “if language is a key field within which social realities are constructed, then translation necessarily risks the fundamental alteration and obscuring of those realities” (p. 117). As a Chinese native speaker, I am more confident in abstracting meanings from Chinese language than from English. Thus, the coding procedure was performed upon data in Chinese. After the first coding phase, I reviewed all the codes and started to identify the main themes as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Connections between themes and different positions within a theme were also identified in this stage. These key themes have become the focus of the empirical chapters: negotiation between the (gay) self and society, the narrative construction of gay identity, and the neoliberalisation of Chinese gay lifestyle.

Following these processes, writing up the empirical chapters required an analytical narrative which is in dialogue with existing scholarly works and the range of conceptual perspectives drawn upon in this thesis. Thus, I had to rearrange, further categorise, expand and/or narrow themes and subthemes. It is impossible to cover all issues that participants raised during our interviews as relevant to their self-understandings and everyday lived experiences as Chinese gay individuals in a digital age. As such, the finding chapters presented detailed and complex accounts of the most concerning issues for the majority of participants which seeks to tell coherent stories.

Furthermore, I have presented excerpts from my research participants' interviews at length. Firstly, this is to provide "the native's point of view". Van Maanen (2011) notes:

> Extensive, closely edited quotations characterize realist tales, conveying to readers that the views put forward are not those of the fieldworker but are rather authentic and representative remarks transcribed straight from the horse's mouth.

As aforementioned, "a language" constitutes "an ontological world" (Huang, 1982, p. 87), presenting participant's words at length is a way to preserve their meaning-making processes. Secondly, informed by the narrative approach to identity (see 2.2.3), I quote participants' interview excerpts at length in order to keep all the narratives appeared in their words. All in all, I was trying to let the research participants speak as much as possible in the following chapters as this thesis is all about them.

Chapter 4
Identity in Process:
Negotiation Between the Self and Society

4.1 Introduction

This first empirical chapter address issues around self-awareness and self-acceptance of homosexuality. Drawing upon the Chinese gay individuals' stories from different generations, I not only want to provide a significant glimpse into the development of Chinese society, but more importantly, I want to investigate what is the "transformation" that the internet has brought to "this kind of people" in China. These life stories were constructed in a particular historical, social and cultural context, and they are, of course, individual narratives which are very personal. However, as Cohler and Hammack (2006a, p.151) argue, "shared meaning of life experience emerge[s] among members of a generation-cohort". These shared meanings of being gay in China are the core objects that I intended to explore in this project which set up three pillars for the thesis: (gay) identity, the digital and the Chinese context. This chapter provides the cornerstone of the empirical sections of the thesis from which I will further build on the complexities and nuances introduced here.

The personal aspect of gay identity was the initial driving force of this doctoral study. As a Chinese gay man, I found that since I realised my sexuality there have always been negotiations between myself and the outside world. If we define a gay identity as "the assumption of a particular sexual story, one in which same-sex desire is fully realised and integrated into the life story through social practice" (Cohler and Hammack, 2006a, p.152), then the integration of homosexual desire into an individual's life story has never been easy. Indeed, living with a gay identity proves to be particularly difficult in China, an issue discussed by Jeffreys (2015, p.69) when he argues that the idea of 'difficulty' is a recurrent theme across literature about and by gay people in China:

> The difficulty of coming out to parents and relatives; the difficulty of living a fulfilling homosexual life while remaining in the family home; the problems associated with parental expectations that children will enter a heterosexual marriage and have a child; the economic difficulties associated with making a living in a society which accept acts of social and institutional discrimination against gays; experiencing excitement and disappointment at the opportunities,

> potentials and limitations that the Internet has brought in tow; and feeling lonely and isolated (p.69).

However, this does not simply mean that being gay in China is to “suffer”, or that the Chinese government and society could not accommodate homosexuality. In fact, as I unfold the research participants’ stories later in the thesis (especially the younger ones), it is very apparent that this is certainly not the case. What I want to highlight here is that people’s lived experiences of gay identity are always situated in complex configurations of power and an individual has to negotiate this identity with dynamic aspects of his life situation within a specific Chinese social and cultural context. Thus, the focus of this chapter is to explore the negotiations around gay identity and what influences digital media have brought to this matter. In particular, I pay attention to the early stages when an individual first realised their sexuality. This is not only because I often asked my participants about when and how they first felt their sexual desires, but also because as Morgan (2013, p.52) suggests, “this developmental period offers an especially rich setting for studying how sexual identities are produced and maintained”. Indeed, in the conversations with my participants they have verified Morgan’s (2013) point by providing unforgettable stories of their early sexual development.

The topic of sexual-minority identity development has well been contested in the field of psychology, human development studies, and LGBT studies (e.g., Cass, 1979, Hammack et al., 2018, Savin-Williams, 2016). Colloquially the development of sexual identity is known as the process of “coming out” which normally includes a sequence of realisations, acceptance, and disclosures of same-sex sexual attraction (cited in Rendina et al., 2018). Early theorists developed models of homosexual identity development which normally included several stages from identity confusion to final acceptance of the identity (e.g., Cass, 1979, Troiden, 1989). These models “emphasised self-identification with and disclosure of a gay or lesbian label” and have been criticised for their lacking of multiplicity and fluidity (Morgan, 2013, p.53-54). Contemporary studies are more in favour of a framework of sexual identity “milestones” in which significant events mark one’s sexual identity development. These events normally are: “(1) initial awareness of same-sex attraction, (2) self-acceptance or self-identification as gay or bisexual, (3) first same-sex sexual experience, and (4) disclosure of sexual orientation to others or ‘coming out’” (Floyd & Stein, 2002, cited in Rendina et al., 2018). I will further illustrate my participants’ experiences regarding these “milestones” in

the following chapter with a particular focus on the role of (gay oriented) digital media in shaping such events.

Although these milestones indicate some patterns of sexual-minority identity development, individual differences also determine the significant variation of the timing and sequencing in the trajectories (Morgan, 2013, Rendina et al., 2018, Savin-Williams and Cohen, 2015). Despite this, an individual's sociodemographic characteristics and growing-up experiences may result in the difference in one's sexual identity development trajectory. More recent researchers have paid more attention to how the cultural-historical situation could influence one's marginalised identity development too (Weststrate and McLean, 2010). From narrative and life course perspectives, Hammack (2005) proposed a life-course model of sexual identity development in which he argues for "a moderate stance between essentialism and constructionism" (p.267). In this framework, sexual identity understood as narrative construction is both a personal and cultural process (Weststrate and McLean, 2010). This is to say we cannot only examine sexually marginalised identity through personal events (milestones), but also need to take into account cultural events (e.g., the Stonewall riots, the AIDS epidemic etc.). Indeed, across my participants, it is possible to discern broad commonalities among those who are of a similar age. As Coher and Hammock (2006) have argued, there seems to be a master narrative of sexual/gay identity among those individuals who came of age in the same cohort as they shared the meaning of the same particular significant cultural/historical events, as are cited below (Cohler and Hammack, 2006b, p.153).

Hammack et al. (2018) identify different generation-cohorts of American gay men that may "diverge considerably in their health and identity development" (p.59). American gay men who were coming of age after World War II, "experienced a time of social conservatism and stigmatization that fostered a hidden, subversive sexual identity"; whereas "[men] born in the decade of the 1950s who came of age in the 1970s experienced a time of enhanced acceptance for gay identity, as well as a series of political changes that led over the ensuing decades to 'virtual normality'" (Cohler and Hammack, 2006, p.153). For those gay men who came of age during the 1990s their gay identity was developed when the AIDS epidemic was widely spread. Being gay for them became "one of several (relatively) permissible sexual 'lifeways'" (ibid., p.154). Recently Cohler and Hammack (2006) have also suggested that the emergence of the Internet could "create yet another historical shift in gay and lesbian life experience".

Indeed, a growing body of literature has examined the Internet's role in the sexual identity development of gay and bisexual male adolescents. Studies suggest that the Internet has played an integral role in their psychosocial and sexual identity development and providing a range of functions: 1) increasing self-awareness of sexual identity, 2) learning about sexual identity and gay/bisexual community life, 3) communicating, connecting, and meeting with other gay/bisexual people, 4) finding comfort, acceptance, support with sexual identity, 5) facilitating the coming out process (Harper et al., 2016, Harper et al., 2009). Digital media and the Internet seem to offer "new resources and contexts that enable LGBTQ youth to achieve tasks associated with identity development that historically occurred offline" (Hatchel et al., 2016).

Drawing upon the above literature, this chapter reviews the sexual identity development process of Chinese gay males from different generation-cohorts. I examine how they make sense of their sexuality within a dynamic cultural context (an area which scholars have not yet sufficiently addressed). I acknowledge the "milestones" in their sexual identity but also consider the specific cultural, social, and historical context of the personal narratives. Furthermore, this chapter will also add to those social and cultural investigations of Chinese homosexuality (Bao, 2011, Cao and Lu, 2014, Kong, 2010) and elaborate how the "digital transformations" took place with a detailed examination of Chinese gay males' lived experiences.

4.2 Understanding Homosexuality: An Intergenerational Perspective

When examining the history of gay identity development in a Western context, generational distinctions are clearly marked with historical events. However, in an Eastern context, the idea of generational distinctions with regard to sexual identity is complicated by the fact that the modern identity label of "gay" did not appear in mainland China until the mid-1990s (Rofel, 2007, Wong, 2010) appearing to occur simultaneously with the emergence of the Internet (and also the AIDS threat) in China. Although there was a slow emergence in academic discussion on Chinese homosexuality in the early 1990s, its public influence was really limited. A survey conducted in three major cities in 1993 showed that "28.1 per cent of respondents had never heard of the word 'homosexuality', 46.8 per cent had only heard the word once, and 25.1 per cent had some familiarity with the term" (Wang and Wen 1994 cited in Zhang and Kaufman, 2005).

Indeed, the older participants (those who came of age before/in the 1990s) in my research generally reported a lack of critical awareness of the concept of homosexuality (tongxinlian/同性恋 in Chinese term) in their late adulthood. Although most of them had some concept of homosexuality, they generally viewed it as a form of sexual abnormality, and they could not explain more about it. For some of them, the label of homosexual was extremely negative, and they generally had a lot of difficulties in accepting their sexuality. For others, it seemed it was not a "big deal" for them, and they would disclose their sexual orientation to those people were close to them. Although most of them reported a certain degree of mental anguish because of their heavily internalised heteronormativity, there was no consensus on what homosexuality meant to them. The tension towards the self-acceptance of homosexuality has certainly eased with the younger participants (those who came of age after/in the 2000s) and they tend to show an earlier awareness and identification of their sexual identity.

Due to the retrospective nature of the research interviews, most participants described their sexual identity development as journeys and those "milestones" were clearly remembered by them. They also described the identity development process as an exploration in which one has a certain agency but at the same time one's ability was also shaped by the material reality or social structure. In other words, some participants were able to explore more about their sexuality when they realised it, others were inhibited from doing so, due to social, cultural, and economic locations.

4.2.1 Initial Awareness of Same-sex Attraction.

Almost all my participants recalled a certain degree of same-sex attraction during puberty through to young adulthood; some even recalled first same-sex arousal when they were around the age of ten. People within the same generation recalled their first sexual attraction at various ages too. Arguably, no one experienced the first stage of "sensitization" at the same time (Troiden, 1989), and the duration between first realising his same-sex sexual attraction to the acknowledgement of homosexuality varies dramatically among and within generations. However, it seems to appear that the age of first awareness of same-sex attraction has declined with the younger participants compared with the older generations. The findings are generally in line with Savin-Williams' (2005, p.117-122; 2016) empirical discoveries. Savin-Williams (2005) attributed this generational decrease to "the increased

visibility of alternative sexualities in the media" (p.121). As I unpack later, my participants' experiences seem to support this claim.

Participants' early memories of same-sex attraction include general attraction and fascination towards their teachers and classmates, or an emotional attachment and infatuation with their peers and friends, also including sexual fantasy and arousal towards real-life and fictional male personas. It is also noteworthy that participants' early same-sex desires and fantasies could be categorised into two aspects: the erotic and the romantic. This is the same as the classification of Savin-Williams (2016). Like many other participants, for example, Max (22, Guangzhou) [26] recognized his feelings towards a classmate had gone beyond normal friendship in high school. He wanted to be together with that guy all the time and he also felt jealous and uncomfortable if any other people wanted to be close to him. Commonly participants' feelings were more likely to be emotional attachment rather than sexual fantasy. Since the realisation of their same-sex romantic feelings participants reactions differ: many of them kept their feelings hidden, but Yi Lu (25, Guangzhou) told the guy he fancied in high school resulting in an awkward situation between him and the guy.

Participants' same-sex erotic arousal arisen from real or virtual materials developed at different ages. For many participants, their early objects of fantasies were male individuals whose body (partly or whole) were exposed. Luo Jie (32, Guangzhou) clearly remembered his first arousal was in the first year of his junior high school.

> It was in the summer. I just finished my class and walking through the playground; I saw one of my teachers was sitting on the bench. He was a bit stocky, not very tall. That day he was wearing a plain white shirt and a pair of formal trousers which was rolled up. He sat there, legs were crossed. I could see his legs were hairy. That moment, I felt that [he was] so sexy. I can still feel the heat as I am telling you this now.

Hao (26, Beijing) recalled a similarly moment also in his junior high school. It was a time when he saw a school mate playing basketball and topless. Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou) could recall that he really liked to have a shower with a particular young male neighbour when he just started work in his early 20s.

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26 All my participants' name here are pseudonyms I give to them which are kept similar to the nicknames that I knew when I first met them. In introducing them in the text I includes their age and place of living when the interview was conducted during 2016 to 2017.

Such figures could also be fictional. Tom (53, Beijing) felt excited when he watched Roman warriors wearing armour showing some naked muscular body parts in the films of 1960s and 70s. The subject of those erotic feelings could also not only be about a particular person but also a part of body/organ, a certain item etc. Very few participants recalled they had special interests in looking at other males' penis when they were in primary school. Yee (23, Guangzhou) remembered that he found sexual excitements towards men's feet, socks, saliva, and urine. Thinking and seeing those objects could already give him an erection even in primary school.

Pornographic materials (texts or videos) were another common source for the participants' erotic arousal. Some participants discovered their same-sex orientation when they found they gained more erotic pleasure from watching/reading about the male character(s) in heterosexual pornographic works. DS (aged 38, Tianjin) could not recall any particular crush in school time, but rather, he first sensed his same-sex desire through reading heterosexual erotic novels.

> Erotic novels were very popular in my high school, people circulated them secretly. When I was reading them, I just felt that the point that caused my sexual excitement seemed a bit different. Sometime I would imagine myself as the female protagonist.

Nowadays, the advance of ICTs has provided free and easy access to porn. It should be stressed that gay porn and straight porn in China are both illegal. Sexual contexts online have become major resources for teenagers' self-exploration of sexualities. Younger participants like Jia (24, Guangzhou) and Robin (21, Beijing) both found they were more excited towards the male character in porn videos when they were watching them with their junior high school mates. Thus, they discovered their same-sex attraction as soon as they were exploring their sexualities during puberty. A more detailed discussion on gay porn and its role in Chinese gay males' lives can be found in Chapter 6.

It is important to point out that although participants reported two aspects (the erotic and the romantic) of their first memories of same-sex attraction, this does not mean one can only have one or another way of same-sex attraction and these are just what they have remembered as a critical moment for them. The timing of their sexual attractions also varies but it appears that the younger generations[27] recalled their sexual arousal generally earlier than the

27 Younger generation refers to those who were in the 20s or younger when my interviews were conducted.

older generations[28], there are still exceptions. Moreover, the recognition of same-sex feelings is not an entirely personal matter. The institutional/social norms at a particular historical moment could shape one's realisation and exploration on this matter. Steve (43, Beijing) told me that he did not fully realise his same-sex feelings until the first year as a postgraduate.

> The time when I acknowledged [this matter] was relatively late. I just realised it when I was in my first year of my Master's study. Because in our time when you were studying, including undergraduate time, the school regulations stated that you could not develop romantic relationships. So most of the students were … [following the rules], in a class there were only one or two couples that were developing their relationships underground. They all kept it very secretly. So if you were a good student and also a cadre in the class, you would naturally follow the regulations. You would feel that this [not having a romantic relationship] was quite normal as most people did. It was not until my postgraduate time, because most people already had families, only a few individuals were [still single]. Then you started to feel a bit different, plus at that time you had some emotional attachments and attractions. You felt…ohm, why? It seemed that you were attracted by such a group. Then [I] started to realise [my same-sex attraction].

Clearly, from Steve's words we can tell that he attributed his 'late' discovery of his sexuality to the institutional norms and social location. He deliberately partitioned his sexual identity based on the power of social norms. As a result, we can also see that he prioritised his other aspects of life rather than his personal matters when he was receiving education. Steve's case demonstrates how an individual's construction of the self is subject to what Foucault (1979, 1980,1988) terms as "disciplinary power" and how education actually serve as mechanisms of domination, which I have discussed in Chapter 2.

Furthermore, we can observe from Steve's case that his (sexual) self is abstracted out of experience and engagements with the wider community and situated in social contexts (Mead, 1934). When he was in school, his teachers and classmates expected him to be "a good student" which meant that he should study hard not to develop romantic relationships. Therefore, he followed these norms, and behaved himself in accordance with their expectations. Later on, when he was entered graduate school, most of his friends were married, then he expected that he also would marry a woman.

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28 Older generation refers to those who were in their 30s or above during the interviews were conducted. These individuals came of age before the Internet was widely available in China.

However, this time he could not meet this expectation. Steve attributed this to his arousal of same-sex attraction. This, again, supports the “central point of Mead's thesis on the self: that the self is process not structure” (Jackson, 2010, p. 218). I will further demonstrate how the social context has shaped Chinese gay male’s identity development trajectory in the following section.

4.2.2 Identification and Self-acceptance

4.2.2.1 The Older Generation

In the case of the older generation, the recognition of same-sex feelings did not always lead to an immediate gay affirmation, rather it appears to be a process and the duration varies from individual to individual. However, it is apparent that different generation-cohorts of Chinese gay men diverge considerably in their identity development especially in the process of “coming out to oneself” (Hammack et al., 2018). Comparing the stories of participants who came of age before 2000 and those after 2000 a dramatic generational change is shown. In traditional sexual identity stage theories, the label of “homosexual” [tongxinlian/同性恋] is a significant identification mark which defines different stages (Cass, 1979, Troiden, 1989). However, as mentioned earlier, the modern identity label of “gay” did not appear in mainland China until the mid-1990s, and another identity label of “homosexuals” was criminalised and pathologised before the turn of this century (Rofel, 2007, Wong, 2010). Thus, there is a significant and particular historical issue of identification and social lexicon for certain generations of Chinese sexual minority men.

Although there was a slow emergence in academic discussion on Chinese homosexuality in the early 1990s, its public influence was really limited. Homosexuality was still a term that many people never heard of (Wang and Wen, 1994, cited in Zhang and Kaufman 2005). Indeed, the older participants in my research generally reported lack of critical awareness of the concept of homosexuality in their late adulthood.

Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou) recalled that for most people of his generation knowledge about sexual matters was extremely limited in all aspects, not only homosexuality. There was no formal sexual education during the time when Ah Shan grew up, and there was also little informational material about people’s sexuality (excluding pornographic/erotic materials). There seems to be a dearth of public discussion of sexuality in China before the 1990s which could be seen as the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. Hiong (2003) suggests

that “to discuss any aspect of personal life, romantic relationships or sex was considered bourgeois and hence taboo” in that period (p.143). Thus it was not only homosexuality that had been silenced in the public discourse, but also any form of sexualities was not something people could speak about around the table. Moreover, although sex education has been promoted in recent years, actual discussion of sexuality is still a relatively taboo topic in educational practice in China (Zhang et al., 2007).

Even later, when Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou) met his first boyfriend in 1989 he still did not have a clear concept of homosexuality.

> “One day, I asked him, as he attended medical school, I assumed he should have more knowledge [on the subject]. So I asked him, I said: according to the book, that is to say, if you had sex with someone more than three times, then you could be a homosexual, is that true? He said: are you crazy? You know, at that time I really did not have the concept. Although, he had been in the circle[29] longer than me, I was not sure he could explain this clearly even though he attended medical school. Of course, at that time we did not discuss this topic, even we had this kind of [sexual] behaviour, we could not give it a definition like what we do now. We would not say we are homosexual. It was not a concept of an identity. Just for example, first you know a friend, then you know other friends, you wouldn’t ask the question like ‘is he [gay]?’ but we all knew. **We all knew we like the same-sex. But we wouldn’t say we are homosexual**” (my emphasis).

One could easily interpret the above extract as an example of lacking of critical understanding of homosexuality. It could be easily counted as a legacy of Chinese homo-erotic tradition in which homosexuality was seen as a type of behaviour instead of an identity (Cao & Lu, 2014). This might be part of the story, but more importantly this could also reflect people’s fear to identify with a particular identity label - *tongxinglian* [同性恋/homosexuals] - which is a term with a pathologised and criminalised history.

As stated in Chapter 1, The term “homosexuality” [*tongxinglian*] was introduced to China in the 1920s as a result of the impact of modernisation and Westernisation (Kong, 2010; Chou, 2001). Western bio-medical knowledge was introduced into China by Chinese scholars[30]. They started to view homosexuality as a deviation, a temporary aberration or a mental

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29 The circle is a common term to refer the gay community. I will discuss this concept further in Chapter 7.

30 It was mainly Havelock Ellis’s medical theory of homosexuality dominating the discourse which dichotomized sexual normality and deviated non-normative sexualities (Kong, 2016).

disease (Chou, 2001; Kong, 2016). This negative view of homosexuality still lingers now. Channel 4 has reported that some Chinese hospitals [still] use drugs and electric shock therapy to “cure” gay people” (Connaire, 2015). For the civil enforcer, homosexuality was criminalised under the charge of ‘hooliganism’, which was introduced in into Criminal Law in 1979, although “it was not explicitly listed as a form of hooliganism” (Cao and Lu, 2014). “[H]omosexual men who were arrested and sentenced to re-education through labour” during the reform period in China (Worth et al., 2019, p. 38).

Many older participants seemed to struggle a lot in terms of accepting their sexuality and encountered difficulties in the process of self-categorization. Firstly, an individual who came of age before 2000 could suffer from the lack of conceptual understanding of homosexuality for a relative long period of time. He might have “ignored” his same-sex feelings so much that he could not cope. For example, Tom (50, Beijing) recalled that when he was in primary school, he already had a strong desire for those muscular characters who appeared on TV and he also ‘fancied’ his PE teacher that time. But he had no idea about homosexuality at that stage, and he simply left this relatively unexplored until his undergraduate time when his same-sex desires became increasingly strong and he started to be very upset about it.

> That time was … how to say…quite difficult to deal with mood, [don’t know] how to deal with my mind. For instance, I did not want to go home even very late, I was wandering around the place I was living, there was a small river nearby. When I was walking along with it in the dark looking at the stars in the sky, felt I have many words want to say, but there was nowhere to say. I was just hoping to meet someone…someone in the destiny. But you were not sure was there this kind of person? At that time, you did not know how to define yourself. You just know you hope something could happen.

In this extract, Tom (50, Beijing) seems to be suffering from two aspects. The first is his lack of comprehensive understanding of his sexuality which seems to contribute to an “identity crisis”. As Lawler (2015) points out, the notion of “identity” rests on a “paradoxical combination of sameness and difference” (p.1). Tom certainly noticed the “difference” but the social category which would accommodate such differences was not available for him at that time. The second aspect is the lack of ways to identify another person who shares this kind of “sameness”. This is more about the need to feel that you are not alone, rather than a question knowing who you are. I will further illustrate this point later in this chapter.

However, for many of my other older participants the social category was there but they were fearful of identifying with it. Although the detailed information on understanding homosexuality was not widely accessible in their time, there was still information they could reach related to this subject. But such information was all negative according to my participants' report. Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou) explains:

> Sometimes, you heard about people talking about two men [who] were doing something, you did not think it was something good. There were also few reports in the media, even those that did appear were all about AIDS. **All the information you received was negative** (my emphasis). So, I felt that homosexuality was something really bad. Interestingly, you know, I got a chance to visit the United States for a year in 1986-87, Even though I was in the US, I did not search anything about it [homosexuality], and also I did not want to contact those people or find those places. It was a kind of self-regulation, as I felt that if I met this kind of people I would be doing something really bad. Then I would bear serious consequence if I went back to China. I had lots of worries. You know although China's opening-up was from [19]79, [19]80 on, Chinese social environment was still very conservative even when I was in the US in 1986. As I was on a one-year exchange programme, I was still going to be back. So, I felt I could not make the first step forward [to explore this]. If I went to contact those people, I would do bad things. Then how about my family? If so I could not go back. Then how about if I was found out by *zuzhi*[31]? So, I had lots of worries.

There are numbers of interesting points we could unpack further from Ah Shan's (63, Guangzhou) words. First for him the same-sex sexual subjectivity was discursively constructed. His understanding of homosexuality was largely dependent on the discursive materials (i.e. people's words, news reports). Although those materials were not explicit, they could still become a powerful social construction. We could clearly observe that there was a "formula story" about homosexuality in those days, which was built on negative symbolic codes and emotion codes (Loseke, 2007, Loseke, 2012). This very narrative formula story on homosexuality has "prevented" him from exploring further on his sexuality. Furthermore, the implication of social norms on an individual's construction of self was also significant. He was expected to be normal and to behave like a good Chinese worker who should obey a certain code of practices. Ho et al. (2018) have critically observed that "since the establishment of the PRC, normality has been defined politically and enforced,

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31 Here "zuzhi (组织)" literally translate to "organization" in English. It refers to an institutional unites, which could be the university that he studied, or the local CCP unite.

to greater or lesser degrees, by the party state" (p. 493). Clearly, as a significant cultural theme normality has shaped Chinese individuals' construction of self at the time in 1980s to 1990s.

Another "disciplinary power" that shaped Ah Shan's (63, Guangzhou) construction of self could also be observed here. Yang (1988) explains how the state redistributive economy has provided new mode of power that shaped individuals' construction of self, and writes:

> Having fixed the population in regional, occupational, and work unit sites, it is better able to maintain its system of individual dossiers that record, monitor, and evaluate the moral-political nature of each individual. Normalized behaviour is ensured by the general anxiety of not knowing what has been written and what could be written in one's dossier, and what future disciplinary use could be made of the dossier records. The same effect is also achieved through work unit leaders requiring individuals to write "self-examinations" (*jiancha*) in which each person confesses and reflects upon any wrong- doing. Work units also provide the sites for holding political study sessions through which each person in the population comes to think and speak in the vocabulary of official discourse (p. 413).

Again, Ah Shan's case demonstrates how one's self was constructed in a particular social context in which people were expected to behave normally.

Second, for Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou), his sexuality was not the predominant factor that defined his life at that time, instead he would prioritise his other social roles. Again, this can be seen as a form of self-regulation through social norms. Miège (2009) argues that "sexual identity is not an individual's only identity, and it is elaborated in the tension between different normative systems and social roles (family, power, gender, etc.)" (p.41). For Ah Shan, his institutional role (as a master student), and family role (as a son) were his foreground identities which constrained his exploration of his sexuality. Arguably, "the traditional (social-oriented) Chinese self" was presented here, in which Ah Shan defined himself within social relationships, in particular, familial relations. Indeed, for Chinese gay individuals, there will always be a negotiation between one's same-sex sexual subject position and their other social positions. This power dynamic is one of the central focuses of this thesis. Third, although Ah Shan was in the USA he still perceived a sense of surveillance which demonstrates the intervention of Chinese state's power into individuals' everyday life, in particular, how an individual's understanding of their own sexuality was also shaped by the state. Again, as aforementioned, this normative force could be seen as part of the party state's regulation to its

citizens (Ho et al., 2018). This could also be interpreted as a legacy of the Cultural Revolution during which people were encouraged to reveal others' "wrongdoings". Moreover, as Ho et al. (2018) state, "the Mao era could be said to be one that was profoundly anti-sexual, with tight censorship severely restricting any open representation or discussion of sex" (p. 493). It is important to note that this repression of sexuality was not particularly against homosexuality but "sexuality [in general] was subject to rigid controls, confined to marriage, and not even a fit subject for scientific inquiry" (ibid.).

Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou) describes the situation as innocent and self-enclosed. Since he returned from the USA, although he did not pursue any girls intentionally, he did continue to date girls that his parents, friends, or colleagues introduced to him. This shows how powerful the internalised heteronormativity was, and it was also a consequence of lacking conceptual understanding of homosexuality. Thus, when Ah Shan was young, being homosexual was not even a possibility for him:

> I think I might have dated with 4-5 girls since I graduated with my Master's degree when I was 28. At that time, I took all the dates seriously. As you did not have the concept [of homosexuality] in mind, I still feel that I was at the right age to marry a girl because before then I was too busy concentrating on my studies, I did not think about personal matters. After I graduated, I felt that this thing [dating girls] was what I should do. I did not resist, and I did not feel that it was to cover up my real identity.

He kept dating girls for years, until 1989 when he first encountered another gay guy[32]. Again here, we can see from the above extract that individuals' pursuance of their sexuality could be put down if they prioritised other aspects of life. Here, for the older participants, these prioritisations were based on what was (socially) expected of them which was shaped by social norms. One has to prioritise these aspects of his personal life because there were no (or few) other possibilities.

Before I unfold his later story, I need to emphasise that a few of my older participants believed they could be heterosexual, could date with girls and eventually get married. This phenomenon spans an array of aged participants who came of age before mid-1990s. For me, this suggests that many of my older participants have deeply internalised heteronormativity. I will demonstrate this in the following case.

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32 Ah Shan was 35 in 1989.

Although Xiao Hu (36, Guangzhou) is much younger than Ah Shan, his journey of fully recognising his same-sex desire was even harder. He felt he had strong desires towards males when he was at a very young age. At college, he got to know about the concept of homosexuality from textbooks, but it was just a matter of knowing that there were such kinds of person. He did not identify with the concept, and in his words, he was unwilling to identify himself as being homosexual and he was also fearful of doing so:

> You know, in the 90s, it was a disease, which was labelled as abnormal, together with transvestite, transgender, it was seen as hooliganism and would be caught by the police. So, I was terrified at that time. I still dated women for years. You know, I was like a devout Christian. I was very sincere to every date that my parents arranged. I really wanted to find a girl and get married. I believed that I must be heterosexual. I was terrified to put myself in the homosexual circle, because I had never done anything abnormal before.

For Xiao Hu (36, Guangzhou) being homosexual was also not a possibility; he was so scared to identify with such category. As already stated homosexuality was criminalised under the charge of 'hooliganism', which was introduced in Criminal Law in 1979; although "it was not explicitly listed as a form of hooliganism", the civil enforcer would use such term to label many cruising gay men (Bao, 2011, p,292). Thus, it seemed easy to imagine that homosexuality was even more stigmatised when Xiao Hu came of age. Therefore, for him, the social identification of homosexuality was so stigmatised that he was "forced" to "assume" a heterosexual narrative. This means that Xiao Hu was too afraid to identify with homosexuality; rather, he chose to identify with heterosexuality which could make him normal and achieve the social expectation of others.

But he did not succeed; he felt he just could not marry a girl. As he was getting older and older, the pressure put on him to get married became even greater, then he became very upset. But it was also at that time that he finally accepted his sexual identity. He said: "it was the sexual instinct; I just could not get on with girls sexually. So I accepted. Then, I even attempted to commit suicide, as I felt I could not change my life. You know in my hometown, a small northern city, everyone knew everyone, you felt the surveillance from people surrounding you. I got depressed. Then, one day, I felt I really wanted to change, I needed to leave, to go to big cities".

So here we can see that "the forced heterosexual assumption" will collapse as Xiao Hu struggles and finally feels that his sexual desires are the intrinsic factor that he should accept. Moreover, this also demonstrates that Xiao Hu's

sexual subjectivity was subordinate to a social system. For him, he needed to maintain a responsible role of being a good person in the eyes of those people in his hometown first. The very closed social network in his hometown restricts the scope for him to develop an alternative way of living based on his sexuality. It is interesting to note that Xiao Hu also referred to the idea of surveillance that appeared in Ah Shan's (63, Guangzhou) story. This, again, suggests the powerful state's intervention into individual's self-construction.

This reminiscence of Xiao Hu (36, Guangzhou) was definitely a common occurrence in the narratives of my participants, and he was certainly not the only person to feel dreadful about their same-sex desires at that age and to have considered suicide. This suggests that there seemed to have been a generational narrative about homosexuality in China in which homosexuality was abnormal and painful. It is important to note Xiao Hu's experience is different in that he is more aware of the modern definitions of homosexuality as a medical condition and a criminalised label, whereas Ah Shan's generation was more likely to see the homosexual act as general wrongdoing, but they were less likely to identify specifically as "homosexual".

I am not claiming that my participants' experiences here are representative for their own generation, but I do want to highlight the "social influences in the development of the self-concept" (Cox & Gallois, 1996, p.10). I want to highlight that many gay individuals negotiated their sexual identity and desires in a highly stigmatised social environment. Cohler and Hammack (2006) demonstrate in their studies that gay men who came of age in the late 1960s had nearly always experienced a period of time which was characterized by "self-denial, suppression of sexual desire, and the false assumption of a straight identity" in the USA. By comparison, for my participants who came of age in the early 1990s were still experiencing this same narrative. More interestingly, for Ah Shan, Xiao Hu, and their peers, they once really, truly and deeply believed they could be heterosexual, and they were not only suffering from "the absence of any available social role for their identities" (ibid., 157), but also from the enforced and acceptable social role(s) of heterosexual society. Again, this demonstrates the power of social norms in a collectivist society.

However, there were exceptions, for example, Ah Han (43, Guangzhou) did not struggle much to accept his sexuality and he integrated his sexual orientation into his (public) life as an important way of defining himself much earlier than the other participants who came of age before mid-1990s. When Ah Han was 19 and had just entered university and was separated from his

high school mates; he missed those mates terribly and he felt those feelings were far beyond the ordinary long to see them again, then he suddenly thought of himself as homosexual, although he was not entirely sure what that meant. He could not help but tell those mates about his feeling towards them, and he told them that he liked boys. When Ah Han told me this, I was surprised as I generally felt that his generation would have been far more conservative and afraid to let people know about their sexuality. But as he explains further about his story, I was able to understand more the social context at that time he was coming to age.

> **Ah Han:** at that time, I was very simple-minded, the social atmosphere was very simple, as you know 20 years ago, [people] all believed that students should not have a romantic relationship. No matter if you are homosexual or heterosexual, we were not allowed to have love affairs. Even if you felt that you liked someone, you would not want to develop a relationship as you know you should not do so. That was not what you should do at the moment, even was not something you should think about [when you are a student]. Although I could not help to tell them my feeling, I did not intend to go any further. I did not think that much. I just told them I had this kind of feeling. I did not say 'I am [homosexual]', I just said I missed them very much.
>
> **RD:** so, did you actually tell them you like boys?
>
> **Ah Han:** yes, indeed.
>
> **RD:** so, what's their reaction? Were they very simple-minded too?
>
> **Ah Han:** Yes, they just said, that said..., well, I did try to ask them: "so now how do you feel about me", he said that: "for you as an individual, we are still best friends". But they were also very frank about homosexuality that time, as that time, they only had a vague understanding, they thought this [homosexuality] would not be something they would accept. However, they accepted me as their best friend.

He also very early on told his university dormitory mates about his same-sex sexuality. The reasons for doing that were twofold: first, he wanted to avoid awkwardness when they saw each other nude; second, he did not really want those mates to feel that if they chatted, they would become very close. Like Ah Han's high school best friends, his university mates also accepted him as who he was. They did not alienate him as they still believed he was a good person. They also did not have much knowledge about homosexuality. Even one of his mate was studying in the medical field, tried to find things out, but he did not get much information. He only knew it was a form of sexual

'perversion' may be caused by hormonal disorders. Therefore, his college mates just treated him as having a form of disease which was not infectious, and also a disease which was not his personal choice. For Ah Han, he also believed homosexuality was a form of disorder, so he even tried to see the doctors. However, the doctor did not give him much help.

> **Ah Han:** ……I told the doctor I am a homosexual.
>
> **RD:** did you use the word "homosexual" [*tongxinglian*] directly, or did you tell him that you like boys?
>
> **Ah Han:** something like that. Because at that time "homosexuality", how to say, was not a taboo topic yet, normal folks had not heard about it, only teachers, doctors, because this would be in their professional context. They could understand this word. However, He [the doctor] did not give me much help. He just asked me: 'have you went to bed with the same-sex?' At that time, I did not even think about this. I only knew I like [them], but never thought about the sexual aspect. So, I said no. Then he just said that you were immature in your mind and overthinking. He then told me I had neurasthenia and gave me some medicine for that. In fact, at that time I did not dare to ask more, just very disappointed, [I] thought even people as such claiming to be expert were also ignorant about this disorder [homosexuality]. Then I never turned to doctors for help regarding this matter.

Again, Ah Han's (43, Guangzhou) case demonstrates people's lack of comprehensive understanding of homosexuality before the 1990s in China. For both Ah Han and his school/university friends the label of "homosexual" was treated as a form of "disease/disorder" which is a vague term of sexual perversion, but they could not tell more about it. Moreover, for Ah Han's friends, sexual identity was not a predominant factor in defining other individuals. They valued more about their personal feeling and relationship towards an individual. Perhaps, we could also argue that sexuality was not understood as a social identity label, rather it was regarded as something very personal. Thus, compared with the Western culture in which sexual orientation is mostly understood through the "gay-straight" dichotomy, Chinese people's view on this matter seems to be more fluid[33]. In other words, sexuality is not regarded as identity-defining in this context, it is external to the individual (something they do, or have, not something they are). The link between sexuality and identity is not fixed.

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33 However, this view seems changed as many Chinese people have increasingly regards "homosexuality" a social identity which is on the dichotomy of "heterosexuality". I will discuss this issue further in the later chapters.

Even in an age when homosexuality was clearly listed as a form of mental illnesses, Steve's (aged 43, living in Beijing) doctor would not "diagnose" him as homosexual directly. Steve had gone to see a psychologist after he first realised his sexuality in his postgraduate years. From Steve and Ah Han's experiences of visiting a doctor, we are not sure whether the doctors lacked knowledge in this subject, or they just had a more flexible view of homosexuality. However, like Ah Han's friends, those doctors did not see one's sexuality should define one's life. They seemed to suggest that one's sexual desires are entirely a private matter; one should have priorities in other more important aspects in life. Again, this shows that (at a time) Chinese people's understanding of (one's) identity was quite simple that an individual should behave him/herself according to the collectivist social norms. This also suggests that not having a clearly defined identity category that of "homosexual" could have some degree of a positivity consequence, in fact, since it allows one to preserve friendships and avoid stigma.

Since people first realised their same-sex attractions, they naturally want to understand more about it. Although for the older generation that information on homosexuality was relatively limited, some individuals were still able to find more resources on this matter. To some extent, having access to such information could ease an individual's fear and anxiety. Although Ah Han (aged 43, Guangzhou) was really disappointed after his visit to the doctor, this did not stop him finding more information in the 1980s.

> You know because at that time in mainland China the resources [on this subject] were really limited. I could not find any relevant information on this matter at all. So, I then wrote to my uncle and aunt. They were in Hong Kong. I told them about this. They then collected relevant newspaper articles for me, and posted me the newspaper cuttings. Those articles were not news; they were like stories, anecdotes.
>
> For example, I got to understand the allusion of the bitten peach and the [passion of] cut sleeve[34] with which most of us would be very familiar now. And the tone of those articles was quite neutral, that is to say they were not negative ones, so it won't cause me to blame myself or feeling I was doing something wrong or sin. Therefore, I found out that in fact there were these kinds of things in ancient China. I then felt it might not be my own problem and I was not alone. It was not a big deal for me anymore.

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34 For detailed explanation of "the bitten peach" and "the passion of cut sleeve" please visit: http://chinese-story-collection.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-passion-of-cut-sleeve-duan-xiu-zhi.html

This extract not only shows Ah Han's strong willingness to understand their sexuality difference and the release of knowing that he was not alone, but also demonstrate that he was not fear to "come out" to his family in an age when most of the public was unfamiliar with the concept of homosexuality.

> In fact, I told my mum about it first. Living in a single-parent family, I was quite close to my mum. I would say any secrets to her. So, I told her about it. Her saying was quite like the doctor. She? said that I was not mature enough; you did not know the things between men and women; those things were just your random thoughts and fantasies. But I felt she was wrong, so I wrote to my uncle and aunt in Hong Kong.

Here, again, this demonstrates the lack of cultural visibility of homosexuality and homosexuality was not an identity-defining category before the 1990s in China. Moreover, it also shows there was an information gap between mainland China and Hong Kong. For Steve (aged 43, Beijing), he did not have relatives in Hong Kong. However, as a master student in the later 80s, he was able to get access to academic sources about homosexuality. When he first realised his same-sex attraction, he was terrified as he felt he was the only one in the world. So, he was eager to find out more about this:

> At that time, my academic skills were quite good. So, I started to research about myself, I wanted to know what exactly it was about. For the entire first year of my postgraduate, I was researching on this. I went to the library and searched all kinds of books, most of the books were foreign. Not much Chinese research on this subject. Then I got to know that these kinds of people have widely existed in the world. At that time, the popular definition of this matter was sexual inversion. Homosexuality was categorised into this. Perhaps also during that time, it had started to view it not as a disease in some academic discussions. So, you began to receive some positive information. Then, I felt I was not getting sick, but just being different from others. However, I still went to see a doctor. […] I felt that I could be this kind of people. However, for that half a year, I was still struggling to accept this. I had a lot of fears. It was a process of self-broken and rebuilt. Then you have to accept it as a matter of fact, and you became to feel better and better.

Indeed, the matter of knowing one's same-sex attraction is not a disease might give an individual encouragement to accept one's sexual identity. However, at a time when the social label of "homosexuals" was still very negative, an individual still has huge difficulties in embracing one's sexuality. It is important to point out that for the majority of my participants who came of age before the year of 2000, they did not have such access to detailed homosexuality related information. Many of them believed they were the only

gay person in the world for a long time until they accidentally meet another gay man. Thus meeting/knowing another gay man became another milestone for them.

Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou) clearly remembered that it was in 1989 that he found a gay cruising site by chance.

> I went to a public toilet one day, and I just found people were in and out in and out stealthily. I was about to use that toilet when, suddenly, I felt someone was looking at me. At that moment, I suddenly realised what that place was about. It was just like a switch had been put on. Later, a guy followed me out of the toilet and started to chat with me. Of course, I did not say I am gay, and he did not ask as well. But we all seemed to know we were the same kind of person. Then he told me that there were these kinds of places in Beijing too, but he did not tell me exactly where they were.

At that time, Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou) worked in Beijing. It was because of the Tiananmen Square protests that he went to Guangzhou to have some days off. He told me: “you know there was a **big event** happened in 1989, I also experienced a **big event**, then I felt that I suddenly [fully] recognised the issue of my identity” (my emphasis). It is interesting that he draws a parallel between the big event happened in the society and the big event happening to him in the development of his sexual identity. This shows how significant being able to meet another same-sex attracted men was to Ah Shan in an age when homosexuality was so stigmatised, and people had such limited understandings of the concept itself or of its meaning for individuals.

Commonly, for participants around Ah Shan’s age or younger, their first encounters of another gay man often happened in the spaces where male nudity could be exposed and same-sex eroticism could be facilitated, for example, public toilets or bathhouses which people often refer as “gay cruising sites”. Once they found the locations of such gay cruising sites, the older participants tended to visit those places quite often. Through this way Ah Shan found his first boyfriend and established a social circle in which “they all knew they like the same-sex but they would not say they are homosexual”. This indicates the problem of labelling, and the reluctance of gay people at that time to identify as “homosexual”.

In sum, most of the participants who came of age before late 1990s reported a lack of critical understanding of “homosexuality” as a distinct category. They did not identify with the criminalised and pathologised label of “homosexuals [*tongxinglian*]”, however, there was no consistent understanding of what their

same-sex attractions meant to them. It is clear that their exploration on this matter was constrained in many aspects: 1) most of them were not able to find more detail information on this subject; 2) there was a lack of means to identify another man who shares same-sex desires; 3) for some individual sexuality was not the prioritised aspect in life for a long period of time in their early adulthood, rather they have to fulfil their roles as a good student, son, and worker; 4) for people who were living in small towns, the much intimate (and conservative) social network also constrained their exploration of their sexuality. Overall, they intended to “regulate” their sexual desires and to do what the social norms asked them to do. Nevertheless, there were also some spaces for one to embracing their same-sex attraction.

My participants of this generation were generally lacking a critical understanding of “homosexuality” as a state of being. They were more anxious that they should not be treated differently by their society. They were more concerned with finding a private same-sex relationship than with asserting their own minority sexuality to society at large. Although, there was a certain degree of contingency involved, a few of my older participants were able to identify other same-sex attracted men and establishing a social network based on their same-sex attraction which could make them more accept their sexuality. This highlights the basic importance of having an alternative social network for an individual with a collectivist orientation: a space where individuals are still part of the Chinese society, but they are not forced into normative behaviour. The togetherness and collective belonging are at the heart of this alternative space as without it most of these individuals are just surviving, at least in their emotional life. I will elaborate on the theme of gay identity and networks in chapter 7, but now let us turn our attention to the younger generation.

4.2.2.2 The Younger Generation

Although like their older “brothers”, most younger participants (who came of age after late 1990s) were still “developing their sexual identity without supportive individuals, institutions, and communities to assist them” (Harper et al., 2009, section 4, para.1), they reported much less confusions, fears, and pain in acknowledging and accepting their same-sex attractions, especially for those who were born in the 1990s. For many of the younger participants homosexuality was no longer a big deal. They quickly and naturally accepted their sexuality once they had realised their same-sex attraction, although a few of them felt slightly depressed and lonely.

Ren's (26, Shanghai) words could summarise many younger participants' narratives in the process of sexual identification: "I had no pain, there was nothing special. I knew how to search those stuff [online], [so I knew] what it really means". Indeed, many of the younger participants had no struggle in accepting their sexual identity. For teenagers nowadays, more and more of them reported a very short period of "identity confusion" (Cass, 1979). No more was "homosexuality" an unfamiliar label for them. They have heard of it from the mass media, from their classmates, and more importantly, from the Internet. We can observe a dramatic and crucial generational change in the fact that there is much broader social awareness of homosexuality which was attributed to the three forces that I have discussed in Chapter 1. Thus, many young Chinese gay men like Ren (26, Shanghai) when they first realised their same-sex desires during puberty or before, they would search the issue online and quickly learnt more about sexual identity and gay culture (Harper et al., 2009a).

It is not my intention to set up an old-young dichotomy in this chapter, but by reviewing the sexual identity development process of Chinese gay males from different generation-cohorts, I want to highlight the changing perceptions of what "homosexuality" meant to my participants. More importantly, I do not want to frame the introduction of the Internet to Chinese gay men's life as a magic moment that suddenly changed people's lives.

Indeed, even when the Internet had been introduced to their life, a few participants who were born in the late 1980s still reported struggles in accepting their same-sex attraction[35]. Although SKT (29, Beijing) had been very close to some males in high school (in the early 2000s), he did not identify as homosexual until he first encountered the concept in an Internet café in his second year of university. He told me he was so scared and nervous on the night when he identified himself with the concept of homosexuality in the Internet café.

> **SKT:** I did not think about this question before. It was never a concept in my mind. I did not have any understanding of it. But at that moment I felt I am [gay], however, I hope… I did not want to accept it and I did not want to face the fact… After I accidentally saw that word in the Internet café, I have never dared to touch computers for a long time. And I have not searched for this kind of information anymore. Oh no, I am sure that time must be the first year of my undergraduate,

35 Of course, participants born in the 1990s also reported struggle, but they often appear to be less severe.

because later on in the summer vacation I tried to know more [about homosexuality]. Then I had more in-depth understanding at that time.

RD: So, what did you see this time?

SKT: Just…I just saw some articles, there were some posts perhaps in a tongzhi related Tieba [online forum], or something like that. Oh, I am sure it must be Tieba because I feel that I must see some things [related to this] on Tieba. […] Just something like…some information. I just saw some people posted dating ads. Some people posed his self-introduction and what he wants for boyfriends. Something like this. Erm…yes, also…I also saw some articles posted by others but can't remember what they were exactly about. Perhaps about their own experiences. Then I remember that I also wrote something [online] at that time. Like keeping a blog, but I also can't remember clearly. [It] could be a place where I wanted to express my emotion and feeling also some memories about my junior high school and stories in my high school, things like that.

RD: How did you feel at that time?

SKT: I felt so desperate, I felt there was no … [hope]...no…the life path was grey… I did not [expect this]. My mind was like this at that time. Just felt that I could immediately foresee this kind ... this kind of path would be very hard.

RD: Why?

SKT: I thought this went against all my understandings and also against the [Chinese] social traditions. I did not think I fully understood this and what did I mean for my future, but I just felt there was no future. I did not have any idea about it in high school. Even when I was very close to a classmate of mine. People sometime would joke about it saying you were a couple or something like that. But that guy was very clamming about this, so I did not feel that this was not good. But now it seems that they perhaps were hostile about it.

Again here, SKT (29, Beijing) reported little conceptual understanding of homosexuality in high school. When he suddenly identified with the concept of homosexuality, he could not accept it at first. Even after he had explored more about it online, he was still overwhelmed by it. His fears seemed to come from the uncertainty and unfamiliarity about homosexuality, and also from being different and being against Chinese traditional values. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the Internet here has already provided SKT a private, safe channel to access a range of information that the older generation did not have. Even though, this does not allay the fears, which still indicates a powerful request and an exception of one should be normal that is the same as the older generation. This, again, suggests one's self is

constructed in a particular social context. Similarly, when TA (aged 29, Beijing) identified his sexuality, he was also shocked. Although now he would call those “bromance” relationships in high school a bit “special” but he still dated and had a few relationships with girls. It was not until he broke up with his girlfriend late in 2009, he was very sad and watched the film *Love of Siam*[36]. He related himself to the protagonist in the film and thus validated his same-sex attraction.

> **TA:** At that period, I broke up with my girlfriend. I watched a lot of films during that period. I had download Love of Siam half a year ago, but did not get chance to watch it. So that night, after I watch it. I cried. All my dorm roommates were asleep. I held my laptop in bed, it was about 4 or 5 am in the morning, I cried but could not cry loudly…I just felt that I was the same with him [the protagonist], I could feel the same feeling, then at that moment I made sure, and then I came out to my friend, my best friend in uni.
>
> **RD:** Why did you choose to tell him straight away?
>
> **TA:** Because we did not have a secret to each other. We could say anything to each other.it seems like a cliché, just like when you were at the crossroads, you had no courage, you wanted someone to push you or give you a hand. I did not hope that he would push me or what I just hoped that there would be a place to release. At that time, I did not know who to talk to. It was impossible to tell my parents because this was too…you know, in my hometown that kind of small city. It [homosexuality] was a disease, then [people would ask] if you were sick. It was in the same category as drug addict or AIDS, although they also liked Leslie Cheung[37]. Although my mother liked Leslie Cheung very much but she would not flaunt this kind of thing.

Here, we can observe that homosexuality has already gained certain visibility in the popular culture. An individual could not only access more information on this issue, but also could obtain foreign gay cultural products which are certainly related to China’s economic reform and opening up (see, e.g., Ho, 2007). Furthermore, the general public has also become familiar with the modern Chinese terms for homosexuality such as tongxinglian and tongzhi as they were increasingly visible in the mass media.

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36 For description of Love of Siam please visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_of_Siam

37 Leslie Cheung was one of the biggest starts in Hong Kong and one of the first celebrities to come out as gay in Asia. For more information on Leslie Cheung please visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leslie_Cheung

However, the increasing visibility of homosexuality in China had not immediately changed people's perception. We can still see how influential the old negative label of homosexuality was from TA's words, which may also indicate that dramatic social transformation which China has undergone is not evenly distributed. Although people from small cities have been recognised as members of the mass of audience of popular culture, the influence of traditional social values and norms were still strong. This reminds us that when we are celebrating the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in metropolitans, we should not ignore that people in less developed areas might still hold some conservative social values.

Indeed, the place where participants grow up or live shapes their identity development trajectory. Mr P (27, Beijing) grew up in a small town which he describes as "a very remote small place". He realised his same-sex romantic feeling in high school and had a crush on a classmate. Therefore, he wanted strongly to learn more about his same-sex attraction.

> **Mr P:** You know, the Internet was not developed in such a small place, so I have to go to the bookshop, the only bookshop in town. It had two floors, all the ground floor was selling students' reference books aiming to let students get a good mark and go to a good university, which seemed to be the only meaning of the existence of that bookshop. All the other books were on the first floor. Clearly, they did not update their stock often. There were a few books about psychology. Homosexuality was categorised as sexual inversion or sexual perversion. According to the description, I knew I must be that. Now you know it was wrong, it was a wrong identification. If I remember right, it was already 2007 when I found out this.
>
> **RD:** Yes, it was already officially de-pathologised in 2001, clearly, they didn't update. So, after you found out this, how did you feel?
>
> **Mr P:** Honestly, I don't think I have much feeling that time, perhaps, was a little bit…wanted to correct it…but I did not particularly care about this as living in a small place all your family hoped you to get in a good university which would be the only chance to leave that small place. So, all my focus was on my study and wanted to get in a good university. So I did not care about it [same-sex attraction], I was just studying hard. So I never tried to find a friend or something. Now, I think I am delighted that I did not think more about this, if so I wouldn't be able to enter a good university.

There are further points we could draw from Mr P's words. Firstly, his case leads us to consider more about the digital divide in China. As Liu (2011)

points out the “digital divide in terms of access in China remains striking” and the current Chinese Internet “is still mainly an urban youth phenomenon”. Many gay youths today living in remote towns and rural areas may still not have equal Internet access, compared with their urban peers. Thus, if we are going to make an argument about digital empowerment then we must identify who the empowered individuals actually are. Secondly, Mr P’s case still indicated that there was a dearth of information about sexuality in the educational environment, information on homosexuality was not available to him in the early 2000s.

Furthermore, the information which he could access at that time was not up to date and unreliable. Books describing homosexuality as a sexual perversion were still circulated in small towns. In fact, Chinese gay rights activists are still working on this issue and are seeking to remove textbooks that describe homosexuality as a mental disorder (The Independent, 2016). This also suggests that compared with traditional means of publication (i.e. books), the Internet could provide up-to-date information which could become a very important way of access sexuality-related information (please see Chapter 5 for more detailed discussion on this point). Thirdly, like some of my older participants, Mr P prioritised the pursuit of his educational career rather than his same-sex attraction when he was in high school. This indicates that individuals certainly have control in their sexual identity development trajectory according to their life priorities. Additionally, as I pointed out before, people who live in smaller places seem to be constrained more by the dominant social norms. Instead of pursuing an alternative life path, with all its difficulties, it was easier for individuals to leave that social environment[38]. In Mr P’s case, he had to study hard in high school so that he could escape through the only mobility that the educational system provides – access to a university in an urban setting. Thus, again, we need to position a person’s sexual identity development contextually and within a range of other influences and events.

4.3 The Internet’s Role in Sexual Identity Development

I have already demonstrated certain aspects of the changes that the Internet has brought to Chinese gay men, and in the section, I will further elaborate on the role of the Internet in relation to my participants’ sexual identity

38 This is also evidenced in Xiao Hu’s (36, Guangzhou) story in the earlier part of this chapter.

development. First, as shown in the cases of TA (aged 29, Beijing) and SKT (aged 29, Beijing), it is the Internet that helped them to validate their sexuality. They identified with the concept of homosexuality online or with the help of a digital media product. For Kevin (aged 35, Hebei), he clearly remembered the "enlightening event" which helped him towards his sexual identification.

> When I went to university, as there was no Internet in my home, I always went to the Internet café to go online. One time, I went to the Internet café. You know when your money runs out the computer will be locked automatically, but the computer won't switch off. That day, I topped my account at the counter, and the staff activated a computer for me, the computer was not switched off, so the applications the pervious guy opened was still on the desktop. Then was a website called 'homo sky' or something similar. It was just such a website. Oh, I had a look then understand it was that, was such [a thing] … It was like that I found my last home. I just had a look then I understood that this was I wanted. Then things like 1 and 0, no one explained for me, but I just understood [from the context].

Before he chanced upon the gay website online, Kevin had little conceptual understanding of his same-sex attraction. He reported some homo-erotic desires during high school, and he was very close or even sexually intimate with his classmates. But at that time, he did not know such behaviour and desires could be categorised as "homosexual/gay". The Internet became the first place where he acknowledged that such sexual identity existed.

Besides acting as a validating/enlightening tool, for many of my participants, the Internet is an information tool where they came to know the concept of homosexuality or discover more about it. For Bao (28, Guangzhou) the Internet initially provided a conceptual understanding of homosexuality first and later he gradually attached himself to the concept.

> It was perhaps in my junior high school time that I got to know the notion [of homosexuality]. I did not search it deliberately [online]. I was searching for other things, but this term popped up by chance, so I clicked and had a look. Then I found out this term. And then when I searched this term, I found the definition. In fact, the definition was relatively vague, because I did not have much understanding about this notion [homosexuality]. Later, gradually, as this definition was already in your heart, when you were exposed to such things gradually, you would frame yourself into that [box].

For others, the process may have been reversed, in that the Internet helped them to make sense of their initial same-sex attractions. L (19, Guangzhou)

could recall early memories of same-sex attraction back to primary school, but he disregarded then. It was not until when he got into junior high school, he full realised that he is attracted by the same sex. Then he started to search online.

> **RD:** What did you search online?
>
> **L:** Something like “same-sex”, or “boys like boys”.
>
> **RD:** Then what did you find?
>
> **L:** So, you will find some websites, you will find there are many people like me, then you will know more and more …

Through this way L (19, Guangzhou) has developed increasing self-awareness of sexual identity. Harper et al. (2009) would call this kind of exploration “anonymous exploration” which is characterised as “primarily searching and reading Web sites in order to obtain information about their same-gender sexual feelings, attractions, and desires” (section7, para.4). Comparing with the order participants who had a long period of “identity confusion” (Cass 1979), L’s confusion of his same-sex attraction seemed to be easily solved by online searching. At least, when he searched online about this matter he would definitely find “many people like him”. It is important to note that the recognition of the “gay circle” online does not mean identification. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 5 and 7, this “anonymous exploration” online could cause reluctance to become actually involved.

However, finding the other same-sex attracted men online is still certainly an important revelation that the Internet has brought to the Chinese gay males. In an interview I conducted (it isn’t clear) with a senior staff member of one of the earliest well-known online gay forums, Xiao Mi, she reviews the early development of Guangtong[39], she points out this important argument in relation to the role of digital media/the Internet in Chinese gay men’s everyday life. She explains:

> In fact, the early form of Guangtong was just a web page for personal expression. At that time there were no channels to know or label such a thing [homosexuality], so Ruo Zhe was just to use the website for personal expression. He was one of the earliest people who could get online. Then he started to know [homosexuality] from foreign websites, email lists, and forums. He first designed a web page to express himself. As a result, there were many people who emailed him

39 Guangtong might be short for Guangdong/Guangzhou Tongzhi. It implies this online forum is for gay individuals living in Guangdong.

> immediately. You know, at that time in China, there was no relevant platform. There were only English ones, no Chinese. So, he then made this web page into an online visitors' book, then an online forum, because he found there was not only one person contacted him, but rather a larger number of people started to contact him. I guess at that time; he would not have the concept of a community. At that time, you would normally feel you were the only one, then you found out actually there was a second person, then the third, until you found out there were more than one hundred. You feel there was a demand, you know people need to feel the need, then you would think that it would be an opportunity, I could do something. So, in the dark, you found that there were people as such, you will be so pleased.

In Xiao Mi's account, she stresses that before the Internet, gay individuals in China were lacking channels via which gay males could identify each other. To realise that there were other gay individuals and that they were able to identify conveniently with these gay men marked a significant moment in Chinese gay males' development of sexual identity. There were two aspects of this transformation: the first is the togetherness and collective belonging that the Internet has created; second is the connectivity that the Internet has provided. In this chapter, I only deal with the first theme, I will explore the second theme in the next chapter. Borrowing Carey's (2009) ritual view of communication in which he suggests that "new produces collective identity as much as it distributes information" (cited in Carlson and Lewis, 2018, p.30), I would argue that the Internet has produced togetherness for same-sex attracted individuals in China, building on which collective identity could be formed.

Before going further, I need to bring back my older participants' stories before the digital age. As mentioned earlier, in the "dark age", finding/identifying another gay male was not easy for the older participants. All of them reported that identifying another same-sex attracted involved a certain degree of contingency. Their first encounters of another gay man often happened in the spaces where male nudity could be exposed and same-sex eroticism could be facilitated, for example public toilets or bathhouses which people often refer as "gay cruising sites".

Although I have told Ah Shan's (63, Guangzhou) experiences of how he found such gay cruising sites, I have to tell a similar story here in order to provide more insights on this issue. Tom's (55, Beijing) discovery of the cruising site was very dramatic. He experienced a period of time when his sexual desire was increasingly strong; he could not stop seeking ways to find sexual

satisfaction. During that time when he was wandering in the streets at nights, he tried to fulfil his sexual desires even in a risky way such as touching builders who slept in camps beside streets and sleep with a street store vendor. Then, suddenly, one day he was on a bus, he felt someone was rubbing his butt with their penis. Tom followed that guy off the bus and had a long conversation during which the guy mentioned there was a park where he might find other guys. So then, he had found his first cruising site. It was also around that time when he went to a public bathhouse, he was touched by a guy. Following this incident, he discovered other cruising sites by accident. Tom them became a regular visitor to a famous cruising site - a public toilet room in Dongdan Park - in Beijing for five to six years. He could still recall the surprise when he first found out the site:

> […] I was wandering around in Dongdan Park, then suddenly I found some men were all walking towards one place in a hurry, in and out, in and out, then I found that was the public toilet room, the famous public toilet room! Then I went in, it really opened my eyes! So, I knew what they were doing there, in fact was nothing outrageous, perhaps there were a few people wanking but no further actions. People in the toilet room would look at each other, if they felt they had clicked they would go out, then make a greeting to each other. It was just such a procedure. When I went into the room, I felt super excited, you know, I found the new world, I felt I finally found it. […] I had just started my professional career, my working unit was quite close to the site, so after work, I would always cycle there no matter how busy my day was—almost every day.

Again here, being able to meet another same-sex attracted men marks a significant event to Tom. Both Ah Shan and Tom's experiences make us wonder how gay men would go about identifying another same-sex attracted man in the pre-digital age. As aforementioned most of my order participants reported a lack of critical understanding of homosexuality when they came of age before mid-1990s. Some of my participants once believed they were "the only gay in the world". Indeed, Ah Shan and Tom's stories demonstrate what Xiao Mi believes that finding another gay individual was not an easy task in the "dark age" and people often felt they were isolated.

Although gay cruising sites were established in big cities, such as Beijing and Guangzhou, before the Internet was widely available, there were few studies documenting the scale, accessibility and popularity of those sites. Indeed some of those participants who came of age before the late 90s reported that they did not meet another gay guy until they could get online. DS (38, Tianjin) felt he was not "lucky" as he did not bump into another guy who could lead

him into the gay “circle”. He said: “although I had this kind of thought, I had no idea how to find one, or where to find. You know, at that time we did not have cell phones”. DS did not encounter other gay men until he graduated from college when the Internet had come available.

DS felt it was the Internet that opened the door for him. When he graduated from university, lots of Internet cafés emerged. He felt he was almost addicted to online chatrooms and BBS (Bulletin Board System). He said:

> Because it was only me in the journey [of developing sexual identity], I did not know how to find [others] and through what way, but, those chatrooms provided me with a [new] platform. I was extremely happy. You know that time, it was more than 10 yuan per hour [to go online in the Internet cafes], and the speed was very slow, at that period, I always stayed overnight in those cafes. I was just graduated; I nearly spent all my salary to get online.

It is clear that he was so excited to find means to contact others who shared the same sexual attractions. It is easy to observe that DS also described that being able to identify another same-sex attracted male as a life-changing event which is exactly the same narrative appeared in Ah Shan and Tom’s stories when they first found out the gay cruising site. Again, this is about finding “you are not alone” which would be such a release for DS which marks a significant step in his sexual identity development.

DS also told me that the early online gay chatrooms were all nationwide not regionally-based, and people could create their own chatroom from a web portal. People started to chat based on their shared interests, for example, people would talk about military topics. Once they became familiar with each other they then started to talk about their sexuality:

> “After people got along with each other, in fact, just like we are chatting now, people started to be interested in others’ experiences…how to find another one, how one got into the ‘circle’, what interesting stories [happened in the process], topics as such.”

He also told me that an important part in those chats was just to share each other’s experiences, each other’s feeling [about homosexuality], each other’s confusion, each other’s troubles, difficulties encountered by others, and also how to deal with the resultant stress. He felt very happy chatting with others online. Perhaps, what was important here was not really about finding solutions to deal with one’s sexuality, but rather, finding other people who share the same sexual interests and the togetherness formed in these online

spaces were more important to DS and his peers who have explored their sexualities alone.

Similarly, Xiao Hu (aged 36, living in Guangzhou) did not meet another gay guy until he got access to the Internet. Before then he struggled to accept his sexuality (as I mentioned earlier). His great internal conflicts finally made him fully accept his same-sex desire and it was also happened to be around that time he discovered some gay websites and chatrooms. I am not claiming that the Internet made him to accept his sexuality but rather he does believe the Internet as an important factor which facilitated his self-acceptance of his sexuality.

More importantly, he also got a chance to do a business trip to Beijing that time. So, before he went, he checked gay bars in Beijing online. In Beijing he went to a gay bar, it was there he first saw many gay guys, and it was on that night he had his first same-sex encounter in a gay sauna. “Seeing many people like me, and also having sexual encounters made me surer about my sexual identity,” he said. Since he got back to his hometown, he began to chat with gay people online, especially those from big cities.

Here for Xiao Hu the Internet was firstly a vital information tool which helped him to identify the gay bars in Beijing. Before the Internet was introduced to Chinese gay males’ lives, the ability for them to find a cruising site or encounter another same-sex attracted individual involved a certain degree of contingency. Now that information was made widely available online so people could find such places easily. Moreover, Xiao Hu’s experience shows that even in the very early stage of the development of the Internet, it was used as a tool to facilitate offline activities.

Xiao Hu also reported that when he first found online gay chatrooms he was addicted: “it’s like finding a home, I was addicted, I had to go every day, even to not join the conversation, just to watch them. [It was] just like the feeling like you could not get off drugs”. He told me at that time people could find gay chatrooms in almost all major web-portals, and leading mainstream chatroom providers also had gay chatrooms. He had looked around a few chatrooms but not long he fixed himself to a specific chat room provided by Sina.com . His reason was because people in this chatroom were from all over China and the topics they were discussing were not limited. He found that there were chatrooms that were more about sex and hook-up, but he was not interested in those. When he was chatting in the chatroom he deliberately looked for people who were living in big cities as mentioned early for he felt the only way

he could deal with his sexuality was to go to a big city. Indeed, in this way, he soon made a few good friends.

> “I also made two particularly good friends, one is in Shenzhen, and we still have contact, but not as much as before. The other one lives in Chengdu. We also exchanged our emails and sent photos to each other. Those two friends have made a profound influence on me. They even made a few phone calls to me before I left my hometown, they encouraged me a lot, and the guy in Chengdu even helped me to send my resume around, helping me to find a job. You know it was a very pure relationship. Not like now, at that time there were no cheaters, no MB [money boys], no blackmails, on the Internet. It was very simple, you could easily find someone to chat along with and once you talked a lot, feeling a match in temperament, you would exchange emails and chat through email. They would tell me what kind of jobs they were doing. I felt that they really wanted to help me. You know, we never talked about sexual topics, we really didn’t talk about it, rather more, we shared our confusions, difficulties, and our grown-up experiences. For example, the guy in Shenzhen told me a lot about his work as he knew I wanted to move down Southern China.”

There are two themes I will unpack further in Xiao Hu’s words, the first is the negative association with the current gay “circle” online which I will be discussed in following chapters, the second one will be elaborated here: that is the role of early Internet engagement in the formation of “gay” connectivity and collectiveness which further contribute to the formation of the imagined gay community. In the pre-Internet era, my older participants’ encounters with other same-sex attracted men were largely restricted by physical spaces. The gay circles formed via cruising sites were only in the same city where they lived. However, the national gay chatrooms provided a platform for potential broader social connections throughout the country. A gay individual could utilise those connections strategically according to one’s future life plan.

It is easy to imagine how affirming those online chats mentioned by Xiao Hu and DS could be in terms of emotional support, and it is also easy to assume that during the exchange of this personal narrative of the same-sex desire facilitated the development of sexual identity among those gay individuals. Brooks-Gunn and Graber (1999) define sexual identity formation as “the process of mastering emerging sexual feelings and forming a sense of oneself as a sexual being” (p. 158). This process occurs within multiple contexts including intra-personal, interpersonal and societal contexts (Brooks-Gunn & Graber, 1999). Hammack and Cohler (2009) argue that the construction of sexual identity is always a comparative process via narrative engagement.

Certainly, those online interactions facilitate this narrative engagement on same-sex subjectivity in China (I will further demonstrate the implications of narrative engagement on the construction of gay identity in the next chapter). More importantly, those early online communication platforms created “an imagined community, an inverted tradition which enables and empowers” (Weeks, 2000, p.192).

Weeks (2000) suggests that this “imagined community”:

> “provides the context for the articulation of identity, the vocabulary of values through which ways of life can be developed, the accumulated skills by which new possibilities can be explored and hazards negotiated, and the context for the emergence of social movements and political campaigns which seek to challenge the existing order” (p.192).

Xiao Hu and DS cases demonstrate how online chatrooms could serve as the “imagined community” in regards to certain features that Weeks (2000) claims.

First of all, by exchanging personal narratives about individuals’ sex-same experiences, those online chatrooms provided important social spaces where the “articulation of identity” could take place and were easily accessible to those who were able to get online. This space was extremely valuable in relation to the specific Chinese historical context where people lack a critical understanding of homosexuality and the label of homosexual was largely not an affirmative identification. Xiao Hu recalls: “in the 90s, it was a disease, which was labelled as abnormal, together with transvestite, transgender, it was seen as hooliganism and would be caught by the police. So I was terrified at that time”. Although homosexuality was “decriminalised” in 1997, many of my participants still fear to disclose their sexual orientation. It is easy to imagine that during the early stage of Chinese Internet development in the early 2000s, those chatrooms would be most convenient and safe space for them to discuss such issue due to the anonymity provided by the Internet[40].

Secondly, by connecting people from all over the nation, those online chatrooms gave new possibilities for Chinese gay individuals who were living in a more enclosed town to imagine the life in big cities. For Xiao Hu, he deeply believed that there would not be any future for him to integrate his same-sex desires in his hometown. Through chatting with people who were living and working in top tier cities online, he was able to know what the lives were like

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40 It is important to note that is a different ear for the Internet in China, in which the online surveillance was less severe. This might because the state had not yet realised the potential of the Internet as a place for “other(ed)” citizens.

in big cities which encouraged him to develop a life which is based on the choice of accepting his sexuality.

Last, both Xiao Hu and DS reported that an important part of the conversations in those chatrooms was about how to deal with the difficulties that they encountered in integrating their sexual desires into their lives. Thus, skills were accumulated by which “new possibilities can be explored, and hazards negotiated”. However, from Xiao Hu and DS’s narratives about early gay online chatrooms it seems the focus of those only conversations were more about the practicalities of how to embrace their sexualities rather than anything bigger in relation to the potential political mobility. This is not to say the Internet would not provide potential political mobility. In fact, to what extent the Internet could provide the context for “the emergence of social movements and political campaigns which seek to challenge the existing order” is still contested nowadays. I will come back to discuss this issue later in this thesis.

So here, we could better understand Xiao Mi’s claim that “the first Chinese gay community was actually formed online” in its symbolic and imaginary power. This so-called “community” online is different from the ones which I discussed earlier in the pre-digital age which was somehow difficult to access, and were fragmented, and location-specific. These “online communities” are certainly easy to assess and have no spatial constraints. The Internet has provided Chinese gay men with the affordance to form “online community”.

The concept of affordance needs further unpacking here as it is at the heart of understanding the relationship between the Internet and these online communities. Affordance indicates the notion of “opportunities for action” (Gibson, 1986). Stoffregen (2003) originally defines affordances as “properties of the animal-environment system that determine what can be done” (p. 124). Cabiddu et al. (2014) further explain that “an affordance exists when the properties of an object intersect with the ability of a social agent” (p.177). In the case of the formation of Chinese gay (online) communities and the Internet, the Internet has the technological features that facilitate a greater connection among gay individuals, but those features are only activated in the hands of a Chinese gay man who intend to find information and engaging with other individuals through these spaces. This is clearly evidenced in the story of Ruo Zhi that Xiao Mi told us. Therefore, the discussion on the “digital transformation” to Chinese gay men is really a discussion of what affordances that the Internet has brought to them, rather than claiming how digital technology has performed an essentially beneficial function (Buckingham, 2008). Furthermore, we should also remember that technology and society

mutually shape each other (see chapter 2). we cannot consider these digital affordances without contextualising the social reality. I will continue to discuss these technology affordances that the Internet and its various (digital) applications have brought to Chinese gay individuals.

4.4 Conclusion

From a cross-generational perspective, this chapter demonstrates the social construction of gay identity in China and illustrates the “digital transformation” that the Internet has brought to Chinese gay males. It is clear that all the research participants regard their sexual identity development as a journey, and in which there are several “milestones”. However, their trajectories of achieving identity “milestones” vary in timing. In general, though, there seems to be a generational narrative of gay identity which is marked by the introduction of the Internet to Chinese peoples’ life, and also, of course, along with the greater social transformation happened after China’s opening up. For the older generations (who came of age before 2000), they are more likely to have a painful period of time acknowledging and accepting their sexualities. They tend to regulate and discipline themselves through the dominate social norms at that time, resulting in an internalised “heteronormativity”. For the younger participants, they would embrace more about their sexualities, but this does not mean they do not have any problem in accepting this. Their exploration of gay identity is still constrained by the social norms (I will continue to demonstrate this in the later chapters), especially for those who live in smaller towns or cities.

With the arrival of the Internet, many Chinese gay men first found and met another same-sex attracted men. They could share their general interests and also telling each other their stories of getting into the “gay circle”. Therefore, the Internet has provided a vital “imagined community” (Weeks, 2000) where they could exchange their personal narratives, form connections beyond spatial constrain, embrace the possibilities of living a gay life.

For the younger research participants, the Internet has become their first (and perhaps the main) information source to access relevant information. They could explore their sexual identity anonymously and safely before they physically meet another gay man. Through “narrative engagement” (Hammack and Cohler, 2009), they negotiate with different discursive elements about gay identity in China on the Internet.

Chapter 5
Identity Through Identification: Representation, Storytelling, and the Construction of the Gay-self

5.1 Introduction

From the viewpoint of symbolic interactionism, identity is “a complex process of interpretation, negotiation, and declaration that unfolds in interaction” (Rosenfeld, 2009, section 1, para. 1). It is the product of “interpretive work conducted in the context of shifting, and often complex and unclear, discursive fields” (Rosenfeld, 2009, section 1, para. 3). Thus, individuals build their personhoods upon “historically specific discourses of subjectivity and social action” (ibid.). What this suggests for my project is that at the very least, when we think about identity, we need to be aware of the context in which an individual conducted his interpretive work; we need to think about the processes of identity construction - of which talking (in my opinion) is an intrinsic (but not final) element; we need to understand the ‘declarations’ of my interviewees as moments of identifications which were not fixed.

Indeed, Hammack and Cohler (2009) theorise this process of identification as “narrative engagement” for sexual minorities (and also the general population):

> As individuals navigate the discursive waters of a given social ecology, as they come to recognize the meaning of the social categories of identity available to them in a given cultural context, they must make decisions (conscious or otherwise) about the relationship between their own sexual desire and the discourse available to make sense of that desire (section 4, para. 5).

In this view, identity is seen as “the formation of a personal narrative” which is constructed and reconstructed during the life course (Hammack, 2015, p.21). This process involves “engagement with ‘master narratives’ or dominant storylines about the meaning of social categories” in a given culture (ibid., p.23). “Master narrative” is defined here as “culturally shared stories that provide frameworks within which individuals can and story their own experiences” (McLean et al., 2018, p.633). These master narratives are “not stories of individuals’ lives (i.e., personal narratives), but are broad culture-specific stories that are available for individuals to potentially internalize and resist, both consciously and unconsciously” (McLean and Syed, 2015, p.323).

Taken together, all this suggests that identities are constituted within representation (Hall, 1996b), which in turn we can understand as “the production of meaning through language” (Hall: 1997 p.16). The term “language” is used in a loose way of referring to written language, spoken language, visual images, and “some other means when they are used to express meaning” (ibid., p.18). Identities are, therefore, “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall, 1996b, p.6). Hence, what lies at the heart of identities is identification.

If identification is at the heart of identity, then identification also highlights the active process of the production of the self. Thus, what matters is how individuals relate to, or interact with, certain cultural representations. Identification also implies a “temporalized understanding of the self” in which the self can be seen as coherent but also change through time (McNay, 2000, p.74). For me, this suggests that the interviewees are constantly and actively creating and generating new and iterative identifications that were just situated at the moment that our conversations took place. Furthermore, the notion of identification emphasises “the narrative construction of self-identity” (ibid., p.80) not least because it highlights the interaction between the self and the master narratives, but also because it entails intentionality to the self, i.e. individuals are their own authors of their selves (see section 2.2.3).

In the previous chapter, I explored how same-sex attracted Chinese men make sense of gay identity through the broader negotiation between the self and the society, and what the “major” transformation that the Internet has brought to Chinese gay men. I briefly touched upon the theme of the representation of homosexuality in China where gay identity understood as a wrong (and abnormal) activity and was given a highly stigmatised label, and the how digital media have become the major information source for younger participants. With the emphasis of self-narration, this chapter provides an account for “the lived, dynamic aspects of self-identity” (ibid., p.82) in order to demonstrate the discursive construction of gay identity.

This chapter also focuses on how individuals identify with different narratives around gay identity in the Chinese context. This is a particularly relevant and important issue in relation to the construction of gay identity in China. While sexual minorities have been a fixed feature in Western (mainstream) media, LGBT visibility in China remains a struggle. Undoubtedly, this situation reflects the wider cultural politics in each society. As a legacy of the gay liberation movement, queer visibility has become part of the representational politics in Western society (Chambers 2009). Although general progressions have been

achieved in terms of televisual portrays of LGBT individuals, there are still issues of lack of diversity (age, racial, and genre diversities, lack of lesbians and bisexuals), and stereotyping representation (BBC, 2010, BBC, 2012, Fisher et al., 2007, Raley and Lucas, 2006, Stonewall, 2006, Stonewall, 2010). Although queer visibility has generally increased in China since 2001, Jeffreys (2015) critically assesses that "this visibility primarily involved 'experts' talking about 'homosexuals', and functioned to stigmatize homosexuality through its association with a life-threatening disease" (p.82). Positive portrayals and (re)presentations of LGBT people in contemporary Chinese mainstream media landscape (TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines) remain rare. Thus, this situation implies Chinese gay males would have little choice in terms of identification from the mainstream media.

However, this does not mean that there is no queer visibility in China. The internet has proven to be "a pioneering force in building indigenous *tongzhi* discourse in China" (Chou 2000, p. 134). A variety of online platforms have contributed to the explosion of personal storytelling of LGBT individuals which has been "overwhelmed by the outpouring of emotions in heart-breaking narratives about same-sex attraction and ensuing family dramas" (Jeffreys, 2015, p.82). Similarly, Ho (2007) notes "[g]ay netizens in China are increasingly exposed to the transnational gay scene via the Internet, where notions of 'coming out', 'gay rights', 'gay marriage' or 'individualism' are widely promoted" (p.20). She further suggests that although these notions could "enhance general awareness of identity and community", they also "tend to lead some gay netizens in China to imagine the Western gay world as a gay haven" (Ho 2007, p.20). Continuing Ho's (2007) line of investigation, this chapter provide a more recent in-depth insight into Chinese gay males' digital culture by presenting their own view on this matter. Through demonstrating how my participants identify with different narratives, I intend to highlight the complexity of the online "leaning process" of gay identity and culture(s) and contextualise such process.

The above scholarly arguments are meaningful because of two points. Firstly, as Thumim (2017) reminds us, "digital cultures are located" (p.60). Academic understandings of gay digital culture are still predominantly about the West. My intention is not to create any binary opposition in our understandings of meaning and uses of the (re)presentations and narratives of selves online, rather I want to contextualise our knowledge about the construction of (gay) self through narratives in digital culture. Secondly, studies on Chinese LGBT representations and narratives are more likely to examine the textual quality

of such representation, and provide close readings of *tongzhi* texts and their discursive implications (Bao, 2011; Cristini, 2005; Yang and Xu, 2015). Departing from these studies, the chapter explores people's perceptions of the representation and engagement with the co-construction of their own group. It presents a social-technical understanding of Chinese gay males' everyday digital culture in which I foreground participants' agency and position their self-narration within the "intertwinement of both material and symbolic practices" (McNay, 2000, p.14).

5.2 Narratives of Gay Identity in China

I have demonstrated in chapter 4 that the Internet has provided important social spaces where Chinese same-sex attracted men could articulate their experiences and these online social spaces could foster an important "imagined community". This chapter focus on the question of what has been articulated in these spaces and how Chinese gay males perceive and identify with them.

Undoubtedly, cultural representations, in particular, stories, around same-sex matters have played an important role in all my participants' sexual identity development journey. During their "anonymous exploration" online, they not only developed increasing self-awareness of sexual identity but also, more importantly, learned about sexual identity and gay culture (Harper et al., 2009). The following words from DYF (22, Beijing) could best summarise this process:

> When you searched for a [homosexuality] related term, it would lead you to another term. So step by step, term after term, you would know more and more. For example, is homosexual a disease? Can it be cured? What are gay people like in other countries? The legalization of homosexuality. There were so many related topics. I read and searched for different aspects of it. After seeing this stuff online, I could make better sense of homosexuality.

Indeed, as Cerulo (1997) suggests that "[n]ew communication technologies have freed interaction from the requirements of physical copresence; these technologies have expanded the array of generalized others contributing to the construction of the self" (p.386). The Internet and its various applications have become the major information source for my younger participants. Through engaging with different kinds of narratives about gay identity in the digital spaces, they were making, and continue to make, sense of their sexual identity.

Furthermore, I agree with Harper et al. (2009) that this process of accessing sexuality-related information online should be regarded as “learning”. This is because most of my younger participants had not received any formal education on this matter[41]. They acquired this new information mostly online. As shown in DYF’s words, being gay relate to a series of questions, he and his peers often found out the answers through the process of “online learning”. Therefore, this process is more than identification.

There are two important points that I will unpack further from DYF’s (22, Beijing) words. Firstly, in his account gay identity constitutes a series of questions or issues, which indicates a journey of active searching and meaning-making. That, again, highlights the significance of conceptual understanding of homosexuality to an individual. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate later, like many other participants, he found the (temporal) “answers” through different stories articulated in Chinese digital spaces. The questions and topics have become the points of identification where Chinese gay men take up their own positions through “narrative engagement” (Hammack and Cohler, 2009). Thus, this chapter is organised around these central issues and questions about being gay in China. I reveal those popular narratives and show how my participants interpret them. Secondly, although DYF (22, Beijing) simply categorises all the information he accessed through the Internet as “online”, it is important to pay attention to the variable (digital) media of narratives. Different digital platforms have provided an ecosystem in which diverse narratives of gay identity are (re)presented. This further nuances our conceptions of identity and identification because we also need to consider the spaces where cultural representations have been produced and circulated.

Before I go to illustrate these narratives and my participants’ position in relation to them, I need to stress that the discursive construction of gay identity in China is complicated. I have no intention to trace the genealogy of gay identity or map the discursive waters of it in China. Rather, I just want to highlight some common narratives that my participants have encountered in their identity development journey and to understand identity in its sociality. This enables me to demonstrate how my participants negotiate and identify with such narratives. Furthermore, although I mainly demonstrate what kinds

41 It is worth noting that non-hetero-sexualities and relationships are still not a part of Chinese government approved school curriculum. Although there was a movement of advocating a comprehensive sexuality education in China, it is still not institutionalised. Interestingly, a series of sex education book for primary schools contents sexual organs, positions and sexual minorities has stirred huge controversy, after which book series were pulled off the market and asked to revise (Ye, 2017).

of narratives of gay identity are available in the digital sphere, I do not suggest the narratives of gay identity are only articulated in these digital spaces. Nor do I wish to say that the representations of gay identity “online” are more powerful than elsewhere. In fact, as I have shown in chapter 4 the discursive (or narrative) construction of gay identity in China has its long tradition and history long before the introduction of the Internet to Chinese gay men’s lives. This chapter will then extend the discursive landscape not only by illustrating how the discourses around homosexuality have developed but also by demonstrating how different media platforms have contributed to the construction of gay identity.

5.2.1 Sexual Health Aspects

One of the (negative) discursive “legacies” from the pre-digital era that still lingers today is the pathological stigmatisation of homosexuality. Scholars attribute this as the impact of modernisation and Westernisation in which certain western bio-medical knowledge was introduced to China resulting to view homosexuality as a deviation, a temporary aberration or a mental disease (Cao and Lu, 2014, Chou, 2001, Kong, 2016). Homosexuality’s association with disease is central to the modern discursive construction of gay identity in China, and it is still a popular theme in Chinese gay men’s digital culture. On the one hand, Chinese gay males definitely gained visibility in the mainstream media and on government agendas “due to the need to develop AIDS prevention strategies” (Cao and Lu, 2014, p.843). On the other hand,

Chinese gay men's identity seems to be reduced to a public health label: Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM)[42].

Indeed, my participants were constantly being reminded that they should "be responsible for their own (sexual) health" through different media platforms. For some of the participants who came of age after 2000, they recalled seeing news coverages and articles about homosexuality and HIV in mainstream websites. These media texts could be categorised into what Chinese people often refer to as social news (and/or anecdotes) [*shehui xinwen/yishi* 社会新闻/轶事]. ET (23, Guangzhou) remembered that he first came across the concept of homosexuality from such media texts before he identified himself as homosexual in his high school time.

> **ET:** You know when you use QQ it always pops up a news page. I would always roughly go through them. Sometimes I have seen such news. I cannot recall what they were exactly about, but I am sure they were [sexually transmitted] diseases related. Perhaps it was about the HIV infection among university students.
>
> **RD:** What did you think when you read such news at that time?
>
> **ET:** I don't think I had more thought about this, because at that time I did not think I am gay. So I would also not contact this group of people. Since I had contacted with this group of people, of course, sometimes I would Baidu such content. And they were the same kind of news and stories. People were saying that they did not take proper safety measures [and caught STDs]. So I had some general understanding of it.

It is important to note that according to ET's (23, Guangzhou) memory that these media texts did not regard homosexuality as a form of the disease but

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42 To further demonstrate this point, I want to share an interesting story that happened on the first day of my fieldwork in Zhitong Guangzhou. As I pointed out earlier gay organizations could be seen as "partners" of the Chinese government to carry out HIV/AIDS prevention projects, Zhitong is not an expectation. In that afternoon, Miss Yang, a Ph.D. researcher in the policy-making department of Chinese Centre of Disease Control, was also visiting Zhitong. She was collaborating with Zhitong to send out her questionnaires about MSM sexual practices and HIV infection. She was checking the questionnaire simples with Zhitong staff. I clearly remembered two questions that she asked. First, there was a question on whether the participant wore condom throughout the whole sexual intercourse or not. The staff told Yang that some participants selected yes, but later told them the condom might drop out in the latter half of the intercourse. Yang was not happy about this, she stressed that they should really check with every participants if they were fully protected during their anal sex. She said: "if the participants told you the condom were falling off at any point of their sexual intercourse, it was, clearly, not wearing condom all the way through". Second, when Yang was checking though those samples she found out that there was a participant aged 25 answered that he just had sex once during the recent 6 months. She then asked: "do you really believe that a 25-year-old guy just had sex once in 6 months? I don't believe it. Next time when you see similar cases you need to ask them more, make sure they are not lying". It is very clear that, for Yang, the point that she cares about Chinese gay men is their sexual practices and the HIV infection rate. Gay men's experiences are quantified in terms of a series of question such as: how many sexes do they have? With whom? and whether they use condom or not?

rather just stated its association with disease. To some extent, this confirms Jeffreys' (2015) observation. There might be an experts' voice hidden in the news on QQ homepage in which homosexuality could be objectified and simplified as statistics of HIV/STD infection rate. Through their textual analysis of homosexuality related newspaper coverages, Wu and Jia (2010) point out that 53%[43] of *People's Daily*'s news reports on the homosexual group were related to HIV/AIDS between 2000 to 2009. In these news articles, they did not claim a simple causality between homosexuality and HIV, but they did stress it as a major factor. This supports the argument of Cao and Lu (2014) in which they claim that "homosexuality came into the purview of the mainstream media and onto government agendas due to the need to develop AIDS prevention strategies" (p.843).

ET (23, Guangzhou) did not identify himself as a same-sex attracted man when he came across such news reports. Although this did not make a negative impact on ET's self-acceptance, he still wanted to know more about this issue when he started to contact other same-sex attracted men. This shows ET had already taken this association with the disease into his understanding of homosexuality in China, which means to a certain extent, he has identified with the narrative. He then tended to rely more on the media texts generated within the community to understand these issues better.

In fact, many younger participants reported that when they were "anonymous exploring" online regarding sexual identity, they recalled seeing HIV/AIDS-related content from major community media outlets and online forums. Danlan.org was the most commonly mentioned community media outlet where they have seen such media contents. Qi (35, Guangzhou) was particularly attracted to (sexual) health-related information on danlan.org, in particular information on how to prevent HIV. Thus, he would reject those individuals he met online who invited him to have casual sex directly when they just started a conversation. He regards this as "being responsible for your own health". This seems to demonstrate "a positive result" of his online "learning" on gay identity.

Qi (35, Guangzhou) held a neutral understanding towards the relationship between having homosexual sex and sexually transmitted diseases, however, there were a few participants reported fear in terms of having gay sex. Bei's (20, Beijing) words exemplify this:

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43 35 out of 66 news articles.

> Yes, from Danlan, you know that there are only three ways you can be infected. But knowing and seeing this information does not mean you have accepted it. You will still have fears when you heard this kind of thing, also, even when you have sex with someone you trust, you would still have worries. Fears would not stop.

This notion of fear is similar to what I have discussed in chapter 4 in which I suggest that older participants' fear to identify with the negative label of "homosexual" not only because they were lacking a critical understanding of the concept but also because of the heavy social stigma. Yet, for many Chinese gay individuals, HIV prevention was one of the first things that they "learned" online in relation to their sexual identity. They have been feeding and/or actively seeking information on this subject, but this has not eased their fears towards this issue. This, again, demonstrates that "language is at the heart of the constitution of the self" (Elliott, 2008, p. 31). HIV and its related issues do not only act as a symbolic code to the cultural construction of gay identity, but also it could be seen as an emotion code in which "cultural ways of feeling" are deployed (see Chapter 2). Arguably, to some extent these discourses could result in fear of the self (which is echoed in the previous chapter), and hence the need to self-manage and self-discipline.

If the disturbing HIV prevention-related contexts in community media outlets did not ease some individuals' fear towards this, the articulations of personal stories about HIV in gay online discussion forums also might not have helped. FX (26, Beijing) clearly remembered a story in Tongzhi Ba[44]:

> It was such a story. The person [who posed this in Tongzhi Ba] claimed himself as a former staff of danlan.org. He said that the official statistics of HIV infection is fake. The real situation was even more serious. Most of those [who were infected] were 15 to 25 who were sexually active, and many of them were students. Some even were infected when they just had their first-time sex. They were at the similar age with me, [they were] still young and have not yet entered the society. [However], they just became like this [infected]. It seemed that all of their lives were ruined. [……] So, at that time, I felt that I would better not to contact so many [other homosexual] people. Nor to have excessive contacts with this group of people.

There are a few points we could unpack here. Firstly, for FX (26, Beijing), personal stories and accounts are more vivid and impactful in his memories. When he told me this story, it was like it was still fresh to him. Secondly, there

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44 One of the biggest gay online discussion forums based in Baidu Tieba [tieba.baidu.com].

was a lack of trust in Chinese official statistics. People tend to believe and trust those so-call “insiders’ stories” rather than what the government announced. Thirdly, and more importantly, what makes this story distinctive from common HIV prevention information of danlan.org is that this story has an intriguing plot. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s work, Lawler (2015b) argues plot is the central component of narrative which fundamentally “*makes* the narratives” (p.24). Plot links “different events and episodes into a meaningful whole” (ibid.).

The plot being told here is that: “HIV/AIDS is a serious issue among the Chinese gay community today”. Although the story criticises the credibility of officially released figures on the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it does not conflict with the main message which the state wants to convey to the gay community in China. However, what makes FX integrate this story into his personal narrative is the relevance and closeness to the characters in the narrative. There is also a temporal aspect of his narrative engagement with this story. FX’s interpretation of the above HIV epidemic narrative was a particular point of “temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall, 1996, p.6). In other words, when FX identified with the above narrative of HIV and gay identity, he was just started to explore his sexuality. Subsequently, when he has had engaged more with other gay individuals, his view could change.

Like FX (26, Beijing), many younger participants encountered the media representations about (parts of) their identity “online” first and then they went “offline” to explore. This has particular consequences for their journey. As we can see from FX’s case, negative representations of gay identity in China could result in a reluctance to participate in community engagement. Throughout this chapter, I will continue to illustrate these consequences.

From a public health perspective, the association between homosexuality and HIV epidemic seems to be a “successful” discursive strategy in relation to increasing the awareness of HIV/AIDS in Chinese gay community. Indeed, Muessig et al. (2015) find that the Internet has become the primary source of information about sexual health for Chinese MSM (men who have sex with men), and use of the Internet has also “enable[d] HIV testing opportunities by facilitating connections with both the gay community and health care provider” (p.1). Although many participants reported fears towards this issue, most of them were critically aware of the prevention means[45]. However, as I

45 It is important to note that most of my participants are well educated who hold degrees.

demonstrated above, this strategy does not come without its consequences. A senior staff member of Zhitong told me that he felt the HIV prevention (especially the early) strategy involved a degree of intimidating propaganda, which could cause the stigmatisation of gay casual sex and result in an internalised HIV-phobic. Again, this demonstrates how Chinese state intervention has affected people's construction of sexuality.

Many participants reported ambiguity towards gay sex, which is related to the cultural representations of gay experiences. L (19, Guangzhou) became a visitor of danlan.org when he was 13 and just starting to explore his sexual identity.

> **RD:** What the overall impression did you get when you read the stories on danlan at that time?
>
> **L:** Em…How to say. I just felt that sex and love were the dominant themes.
>
> **RD:** What's about sex and love?
>
> L: Em…Perhaps, I just found that same-sex this kind of thing should have sex first and then love.

L's (19, Guangzhou) overall impression did not build on a particular (type) of media text, but rather from a diverse range of media text, including fictional and non-fictional. He could not remember particular news or stories he read on danlan.org, but he found there was a general pattern in those media texts.

> For many… how to say… the fastest way to get to know each other was through hooking-up [yuepao/ 约炮]. After that [having sex] they would develop a relationship. Yep, it was not like heterosexual couples that they could form their relationship through slow contacts. I mean, for them, they could take it slowly, don't have to be together that quick.

Clearly, from L's (19, Guangzhou) words, we can tell that he has identified a certain pattern of gay relationship through the "anonymous exploration" online. This pattern seemed to be contradictory to his previous understandings of romance and relationships. Regardless of whether L's impression reflects the reality or not, those media texts had already constructed a gay world for him at such a young age before he went "offline" to meet other gay individuals in the physical world. This forces him to make a decision about the "relationship between [his] own sexual desire and the discourse available to make sense of that desire" (Hammack and Cohler, 2009, section 4, para. 5).

Participants' impression of sex is being prioritised in the gay circle did not only come from (online) community media outlets like danlan.org, but also from

gay discussion forums. Lemon (19, Guangzhou) recalled seeing many negative stories about the gay circle in Tieba [tieba.baidu.com].

> I have read a lot of negative things. For example, after one man slept with another man, he just threatened that person and tried to blackmail him and to tell his family. And also, there was STD-related stuff which was written in an appalling way. I was a little bit scared because I was still young.

The “messiness” of the gay circle was further reinforced by word of mouth. Hao (26, Beijing) remembered that people were commonly discussion of how messy the gay circle is in groups.

> That was around 2011 or 2012. There was a period when I was perplexed. Because they always told me this circle is very messy. For instance, some older guys would tell the younger ones that many people just come here for hook-ups. No one would like to develop a long-term relationship with you.

Harper et al. (2009) suggest that gay and bisexual male adolescents in the US “learned about the realities of living as a gay/bisexual man by reading life narratives and stories of other gay/bisexual individuals posted Web sites, blogs, chat rooms, and discussion boards” (section 4, para. 10). Their assertion is being supported here. However, the “realities” constructed here are really not positive. The harsh realities have clearly resulted in certain reluctance in community engagement among many of my participants which I will discuss in the later chapters. On the one hand, it is always better to be well informed and prepared before they get into the circle, because the actual behaviour is still relatively taboo and, to a certain degree, there are risks involved. On the other hand, we should be cautious about the negative interpretations which my participants place on these experiences because of the stigma attached to them. This over emphasis on the negative perspectives of gay identity might still arise from the stigmatised situation of homosexuality in China (see Chapter 4), which reduces the willingness of my participants to identify with a certain gay identity.

Furthermore, as I have argued in Chapter 4 that the Internet has brought the affordance of Chinese gay males to be relatively easily connected and sharing information on the digital spaces where a certain togetherness and collective belongings have been facilitated. Here this kind of togetherness and collective belonging are still there, however, these digital platforms could also be used as spaces to address concerns about gay-related issues creating a “harsh reality” for Chinese young gay males, which is culturally, socially and politically specific to them.

5.2.2 Family Issues

Along with sexual health issues, the second issue to note in relation to identity and identification is coming out to families (or "coming home"). This section explores my participants' views towards the homosexuality-related domestic issues. Arguably, "coming home" narratives became another significant component constituting the "harsh realities" of being gay in China. Huang (20, Beijing) told me that he had only just started to identify with his same-sex attraction one and a half years ago. He told me that he felt he is still on the journey of finding out what sexual identity means to him. He considered that he was lucky because there were relatively more social resources available for him within his university and the city, so he could accept his identity slowly with the help of these LGBT groups and organisations. However, he still has concerns, one of which is the family issue:

> I have read some stories on CW[46] [public WeChat account] which were all about people's personal experiences. [There was a story about] one classmate who came out to his parents resulting in a two-year suspension of study. I felt so sad for him. I just told myself that I would never come out to my parents.

Here, we see narratives shared on social media, against which personal issues are measured. The digital representations of living as a Chinese gay man discuss the "harsh realities" with which or against which Huang (20, Beijing) is negotiating and, as we can see from this excerpt, he accepts this given narrative of coming out struggle. He explains the reason:

> My parents were originally farmers, although they are not farmers now. They grew up in a very traditional cultural environment, and still live there. In addition, from my own observations of their everyday words and deeds, I feel that they are still very conservative. I do not think they would accept me. This is my thoughts now, a decision based on my current circumstances.

This is a typical moment of what Hammack and Cohler (2009) call "narrative engagement" in which an individual has taken up a subject position in relation to a given cultural narrative, in this case, a reflection on his parents' social setting, which may explain their response to his coming out. Thus, Lawler (2015b) suggests "narrative gives us a means to understand identity in its sociality" (p.29). It is important to note here that HY identified with the personal narrative of "coming home" not only because it might be a story happened

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[46] CW is a student run LGBT group in HY's university.

around him, but also because this narrative fitted with his exception of the "harsh realities" of homosexual lives in China. Thanks to social media, individuals could easily share their own personal narratives, those narratives eventually form a master narrative about their own lives for the later people to identify.

Huang's (20, Beijing) current decision on coming out reflects a common practice of many Chinese gay men in terms of their family issues. Huang (2016) describes this as "coming with" strategy. She suggests "the communication of sexuality between Chinese queer subjects and their families often relies on reticence/silence, leaving the issue of sexuality unspoken and thus unconfronted" (p.23). Huang (2016) also identifies another non-confrontational strategy that is *xinghun* [a cooperative marriage between lesbian and gay man].

YLY (27, Guangzhou) gives his reason why he would like to employ a *xinghun*-like strategy:

> **YLY:** At the time I knew I am gay, I thought I would not get married. I don't think it is fair for the girl. I have read some things about gay men's wives [*tongqi*/同妻] online.
>
> **RD:** Have your parents given you any pressure on this?
>
> **YLY:** I didn' t receive much pressure. In fact, when I came out at work, how to say, maybe I was a bit "no conscience" [*meiliangxin*/没良心]. I didn't care much about my parents' view on this. No matter what they think or what they do, I will still tell them I will definitely take care of you when you are elder. However, when I went home for Chinese New Year, I just found that they have little choice in that kind of environment. They still have pressure from other people around. Because people are all married in my small hometown, if your child did not get married people would make irresponsible remarks [*shuosan daosi*/说三道四] on you. That' s just the nature of that small community. As I do not live there, I don't care. However, my parents would still suffer from those words. So I just think I might just find a girl, just a random female friend, to hold a fake wedding ceremony. Just a play, a show for them, and then move my parents to the city. Because if you escape from the small circle, you would not care.

There are a number of issues to note from YLY's (27, Guangzhou) words. In the first instance and in keeping with Jeffreys (2015) arguments about coming out; YLY's main concern is around his parents. Indeed, as Jeffreys notes, "literature on being gay in China, whether research papers or personal accounts, show that the major pain and dilemma felt by most same-sex

attracted people in China centres on the issue of whether or not to tell their parents that they are gay or lesbian, and how to avoid heterosexual marriage" (p.88). For many of my younger participants, although they have not yet thought about it when they initially realised their sexual identity, coming out to their family has already become a projected issue for them. This implies that the influence of Chinese traditional values is still very strong, and suggests filial piety are still very important. We cannot deny that under China's "feudal"/traditional and predominantly Confucian cultural traditions, Chinese gay men are "especially pressured to compromise their sexual desire to meet the expectations of their families, that is, to marry and procreate" (ibid.). In a similar vein, Huang (2016) also argues that the family issue of LGBT individuals is essentially the "moral tension between 'selfish me' and 'my sacrificing parents'" (p.157). The traditional filial piety would make an individual to give up his "selfish me" and to prioritize the family obligations. Therefore, *xinghun* becomes a middle ground choice for many Chinese sexual minorities who perform heterosexual marriage for the sake of their families and friends.

However and in relation to YLY's comments, the second issue to note is that there are nuanced differences between YLY's case and more common *xinghun* practices. Unlike the common *xinghun* practice in which one maintains a long-term performance of heterosexual marriage, YLY just wants to perform a fake wedding to satisfy his parents' local community. This implies that he thinks he could still come out to his parents, and they would accept his sexuality. What he foresees as the central problem is the people from his hometown and the social environment. Thus, the only resolution is to move his parents to the city. YLY's account of the family issue might be idealistic and simplistic, it shows his strong determination to maintaining a gay self, but without causing unnecessary conflict.

The third issue to note in relation to YLY's comments relate to the emphasis on mobility. Whilst YLY imagines he can resolve the pressures of coming out by making his parents mobile (and move to the city), mobility is a common theme across many of my participants' narratives. Indeed, mobility (moving to the city, being financially independent) is what is recounted by many of my participants as enabling them to pursue their private lives. Most of my participants either study or work in Beijing and Guangzhou: they are away from their parents who might still be living in their hometown. As I demonstrated in the second empirical chapter, facilitated by the digital connectivity, they could easily manage a "gay life".

This, again, directs us to think further about the unevenness of Chinese cultural norms, as I have briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. From my participants' stories, we can still suggest that the rural and the urban are now very different. While Chinese cultural norms might significantly shape the everyday lives of gay individuals in less developed areas in China, people who are living in the top-tier cities embrace “individual-orientated (modern) Western understanding of self” (Lu, 2008), which is intertwined with neo-liberal ideas[47]. Thus, it raises a question of how far the opening up of China has really progressed and to what extent it has an impact on the construction of identity across China. Most of my participants still choose to conceal their sexual identity from their family and relatives. However, there are also many participants who have already come out to their families. A number of participants reject the idea that one should sacrifice the “selfish me” to fulfil family obligations. QZW’s (22, Beijing) position is very clear in regards to this:

> **QZW:** Anyway I would never get married [to a female]. What a pity. You could live a good life, why you need to get married? Clearly, you are not willing to get married then why you have to push yourself even if it’s xinhun [marriage of convenience]. I don’t care about the social pressure. What the fuck is social pressure. At the worst, you just have to cut off your connection with family members. Why you cannot make a living on your own? It is really not necessary to get married.
>
> **RD:** So you don’t mind to tell your parents?
>
> **QZW:** I told my mum. She asked about it. I felt that they seemed to have no problem to accept. My dad does not know yet, but I told him I would not get married.

It is very clear that QZW (22, Beijing) has prioritised the pursuit of his gay self and he would not lie to his parents. This is a rejection of non-confrontational negotiation with the family (i.e. “coming with” or *xinghun*). Of course, we could relate this to a more individualistic, postmodernist, and neoliberal account of an individual in which the pursuit of personal desires are more important. However, we should also notice that the (assumed) dramatic episode of family rejection did not happen to him. QZW’s mother has accepted his sexual identity. This raises a question about whether are we over dramatizing the gay males’ family issue in China.

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47 I will discuss this point further in the next chapter.

In fact, there are narratives from the community in the digital spaces, which illustrate the possibility of family acceptance and inclusion. These narratives could be very empowering to some of my participants. When Xiao Nuo (26, Shanghai) started “anonymous exploration” online (Harper et al., 2009), he accidentally came across a blog by Youjian Wu whose son is gay. This has not only facilitated him to accept his sexual identity but also provided hope for family acceptance. Xiao Nuo explains:

> At that time, towards the end of high school, I found the blog. She was so supportive of her son. You know, in 2008 or 2009, you could not see many positive things about tongzhi. I just thought it would be so great if she could be my mum.

The stories of Youjian Wu is significant particularly in Chinese public discourse on homosexuality. As Chou (2000) point out, the major problem for Chinese *tongzhi* is not “coming out” but “coming home” that is the family acceptance of one’s sexual identity. The fact the Wu’s supportive stories have been shared widely on the Internet could be seen as social acts of empowerment. It could also be regarded as a political process in which knowledge and meanings have been reproduced (Plummer, 1995).

Indeed, the narrative of “coming home” has become a particular political (with a small p) device utilised by PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) China in their (digital) media campaign[48]. In my interview with Ah Qiang, the executive director of PFLAG China, he acknowledged that they deliberately used Youjian Wu and other Chinese parents’ stories to promote the family acceptance of sexual minorities in the early development of PFLAG China. This suggests that multiple narratives could be circulated on digital media. An individual or institution could carefully construct stories to promote certain narratives. This also suggests that if the dominant narrative about “coming home” is negative, people might resist this narrative and thus identify with alternative narratives.

Luo (26, Henan) was particularly moved by the stories in which parents have eventually accepted their gay child. He encountered the mum of a gay man. She was also a volunteer of PFLAG China on Blued at the early stage of his identity development journey. This mum introduced him to PFLAG China and also sent him a number of links of their videos:

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48 It is important to note that Wu Youjia was one of the funding member of PFLAG China.

> After watching those videos, especially a short documentary film call Mama Rainbow [caihong ban wo xin][49], I cried in that night. I cried until 2 a.m. in the morning. It was so touching. To my surprise, those mums could actually accept their kids. I just lost my control of emotion. I suddenly collapsed. Could not stop my tears. These parents were almost 50 to 60 years old, and they could accept their children in their social environment. I suddenly could not help myself. I have endured it for many years, and I have been very depressed. Because I always felt that I might be able to change myself.

We can imagine how powerful this "coming home" narrative was to Luo (26, Henan). It is worthy to note that Luo is grown up and living in a third-tier city in Henan Provence where the social environment might be different from big metropolis such as Beijing and Guangzhou. He has really struggled to embrace the gay self that is conflicting with the social roles of a "filial son". Again, this highlights the need "to understand identity in its sociality" (Lawler, 2015b, p.26). Moreover, the idea of "sociality" is not fixed, by which I mean those digital narratives also construct new elements into the issue of social acceptance, and bring new possibilities for the individual.

However, this emphasis on "coming home" narrative is not totally unproblematic. Luo Jie (32, Guangzhou) details how this narrative of social acceptance by parents has become overly stereotyped and boring:

> I also read Wu's blog when I? was younger. She did not only write her son's story but also many other *tongzhi*'s stories. Those stories for whom she has consulted[50]. However, you would find that most of the stories were quite similar: you told them, then there was a quarrel between you and your parents, you went away, after a few years or a period, they finally accepted you. I am not saying family acceptance is not important for Chinese gay men. I just feel this is a boring storyline. Personally, I feel coming out to family might be a key point in my life, but it is just a very small point.

I think the central question here is: do we have to set up a binary position? Such a position forces one to choose either coming home or not, and also sets up 'coming home' as the only happy ending for a gay life. In doing so, we might neglect the grey area where individuals might take up a position somewhere in between. Again, an individual claims his identity in a given sociality. Moreover, Luo Jie's (32, Guangzhou) rejection to the "positive

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49 For a detailed description of Mama Rainbow please visit: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2332754/

50 After Wu became well known, she started to run a hotline for Chinese sexual minorities to help them get accepted by their family.

coming home" narrative suggests there is tension between contemporary neoliberal culture and traditional Chinese values. This is also a tension embedded in the "Chinese bicultural self" (Lu and Yang, 2006) as I have discussed in Chapter 2. This tension is played and replayed through assumed binaries, such as coming out or coming home, about which my participants have to take a position. In this regards, digital media and the narratives articulated in those spaces provide Chinese gay men a reflective tool through which one could make up their own decision about which life path he will take on.

5.2.3 A Transnational Gay Lifestyle

If we see "coming home" as a very "Chinese" narrative, then, there are also narratives articulated in the digital spaces which could be seen as transnational. In this section, I explore how my participants perceive those narratives. Before we go any further, I want to highlight, again, how digital media have facilitated Chinese individuals to articulate their voices.

TX (22, Beijing) was the administrator of Chugui Ba [coming out forum/出柜吧] on Baidu Tieba during his late high school to early undergraduate years. Chugui Ba is an online forum in which coming out stories are shared and coming out actions are promoted. Storytelling is the major discursive strategy used by the administration team of Chugui Ba. One of the popular forms of storytelling by them is interviewing.

> As I am a student in broadcasting journalism, I contributed lots of interviewing articles. Conducting interviews was not only meaningful for the community; it was also meaningful for the interviewees that provided them a channel to express themselves. For me, personally, it was also an opportunity to know other people [' life stories] and thus to reflect myself. These interviews were all conducted with the members of Chugui Ba on their experiences of coming out. However, this was not limited to gay men, it also included bisexual and transgender individuals. [To see] how do they view this issue, and how do they see LGBT people's pursuit of the rights to live in the sunshine.

Clearly, for the administration team telling coming out stories is also a political strategy. As written in Chugui Ba's short statement that "if there is no LGBT come out, then there is no LGBT movement", they have already adopted the Western identity politics' ideology. This understanding is rooted in the gay liberation movement which came about in the late 1960s in the United States, signalled by the Stonewall Riots in 1969, following the examples of the black,

anti-war, and feminist movements (Chambers, 2009, p.11). This particular political strategy has become a part of ‘identity politics’ with the goal of achieving ‘gay rights’ by claiming that sexual orientation is “a fixed sexual identity” whose rights should be protected (ibid.).

By producing localised coming out stories, they are engaging in a transnational gay scene (Ho, 2007). Plummer (2002) explains how these coming out stories work politically and became a global phenomenon:

> Put simply, small sufferings seek solutions, both on a personal and social scale; successful solutions generate stories, cultural resources, that can be drawn up by successive generations facing similar sufferings; a snowball, amplifying effect follows (p.88).

As I have well demonstrated earlier, “suffering” has become a harsh narrative plot of gay identity in China in the digital spaces. Yet, coming out has been promoted as a solution in such “realities”, but does it have to be the only solution? And, to what extent does a solution matter to the gay life, i.e. does every problem in life require a solution? For many of my younger participants, they did not “suffer” in accepting their sexual identity. They live their gay lives away from their family (for work or study). Thus, “coming home” is also a projected problem. What matters more for them is how to live a colourful gay lifestyle. In other words, many participants push these gay related issues aside for the future as they are living in the present. In this sense, they are identified with the so-called “metropolitan model of homosexuality” (Mowlabocus, 2012; Sender, 2004). This seems to suggest that for many Chinese individuals, instead of taking a clear position in the “battle” between individualism and traditional filial values, they are more likely to take a flexible location. On the one hand, they increasingly accept contemporary neoliberal ideas; on the other hand, they are also not likely to go directly against the traditional Chinese culture. It is important to note here that this is a position of privilege. As I mentioned earlier, gay individuals living in less developed areas may be more constrained by Chinese cultural norms. Mobility is the key for many of my participants who grew up in small towns or rural areas.

Undoubtedly, it is the Internet and its digital application that has helped them to keep updated in the transnational gay scene. Firstly, as Ho (2007) points out earlier Chinese gay individual are increasingly exposed to the transnational identity gay. Notions of “coming out”, “gay rights”, “gay marriage” were widely promoted online (ibid. p.20). When my younger participants started to explore their identity online, they would often come across such concepts. Ah Nan (24, Guangzhou) offers a typical account here:

> **Ah Nan:** When I searched *tongzhi* online, I first found the website Danlan. There were many sections such as male pictures, tongzhi literature, discussion forums, and also international news about LGBT. I first learned about the Stonewall Riots there.
>
> **RD:** How did you feel after seeing such news?
>
> **Ah Nan:** Um, at that time I didn't have any special feelings about it. It was just knowing that such a movement exists.

In their sexual narrative engagement theoretical framework, Hammack and Cohler (2009) particular emphasise that "we cannot make sense of sexual identity without careful attention to the discourse of sexual identity that characterizes a time and place" (section 4, para. 8). Namely, our meaning-making process is shaped by the given "social lexicon of our cultural surround" (ibid.). I agree with their claims, but I want to direct us to think further about the making of the social lexicon in a digital age. Comparing with the older generations, the social lexicon about gay identity has already been expanded for the younger participants in the context of globalisation and digitisation. However, we should also be cautious about the "digital production" of the social lexicon. Firstly, as I mentioned earlier not everyone could get access to the Internet, the digital divide is still evident in China. For those who live in smaller towns and villages may just have access to the Internet in their late adulthood, but urban individuals may have access from a very young age. Secondly, we cannot simply assume that gay content is "just there" on the Internet. Content is being pushed and carefully curated, as is clear from the above cases. Wider power and politics could be involved in the production of such content.

Many younger participants could position themselves in a transnational gay scene. A few participants actually follow such LGBT news accounts on Weibo and WeChat and keep themselves updated with the process of the global LGBT movement. Yi Lu (25, Guangzhou) follows a Weibo account call Global Tongzhi News.

> In this account, you could see what happened about *tongzhi* around the world, no matter good or bad news. Some are stories about individuals, some are more like a news report, or perhaps some positive developments in law and policy towards LGBT issues. There are some sad news about people having difficulties. People would comment on each weibo post, you could definitely see different views about things.

When Yi Lu read such news he did not show special emotions or feeling to the western gay world. In other words, I would not say he is imagining “the Western gay world as gay haven” (Ho, 2007, p.20). Arguably, he held a relatively critical view towards LGBT issues in China and worldwide.

> Even in the western world, there are still obstacles [in the LGBT movement]. The major one is religion. Yet, many western people’s faith has become faded, and people won’t directly say they are against it. However, the situation in China is different. Firstly, there is no dominant religion in China, most of the Chinese people are not religious. But most Chinese people believe in a kind of social tradition, which means you have to have descendants as a man. So, in theory, you have the freedom of reproduction, but more often it might be the request from your family, especially the elders.

It is clear that Yi Lu understands the development of the LGBT movement in Western countries, and he also understands the social situation in China. Knowing what happens in relation to the LGBT issues in other countries can make him reflexive about being gay in China and contextualise his sexual identity. Moreover, with increasing global mobility and the advance of digital technology, certain young and affluent Chinese gay men do not simply limit themselves as only a Chinese cultural citizen but rather they like to position themselves in a global perspective. I will further demonstrate this point in the following cases.

Besides accessing global LGBT news and information, what is apparent from my research is that my younger participants also like to consume global gay popular cultural products/texts via the Internet. This suggests that with the development of ICT, Chinese individuals have increasingly more choices in terms of cultural representation, and of course of narratives. Thus, they are able to identify with transnational narratives about gay identity.

Jeff (22, Bejing) believes those foreign gay-themed films and TV series played an important role in this identity development journey. He watched a lot of gay-themed films and TV series on the Internet during his junior high school to high school years. He believes this was the main way to explore his sexual identity and learn the gay culture:

> I just found I was a bit like the boy in Love of Siam, although my experiences were not exactly the same. But this film made me realise that, in fact, I could like a boy. However, at that time, I was fearful to acknowledge because I did not want to be different from others. I grow up in Sichuang, not in Chengdu City, it was a small town near Chengdu. There was not much information on this and also it

> was conservative. I was growing up on my own, my mum worked outside the town, and my dad stayed in the laboratory all day. So those [gay-themed] films and videos accompanied me growing up, they were my source of information. Love of Siam was the enlightenment for me, and then I searched for lots of western films and TV series.
>
> […]
>
> Honestly, I started to watch Queer as folk[51] just for learning English. Perhaps also to see what their lives were like. I think I watched many European shows. A friend of mine once asked me why my English scores were good since junior high school. To be honestly the only reason and motivation was I felt foreign males are handsome; I wanted to communicate with them. You know, there were many sexual scenes in western [gay] programmes. As a boy at puberty, there were always butterflies in your stomach. Watching those films was very toughing.

As we can see that through watching gay-themed films and TV series Jeff (22, Beijing) was not only able to understand more about what his sexual identity means to him, but also, more importantly, he could imagine being part of the global gay culture. Arthurs (2004) claims that queer dramas could function as "a space for psychological complexity and pleasurable fantasy" for LGBT individuals which "goes beyond the demand for citizenship rights in an 'oppositional public sphere'" (ibid.). This is evidenced in Jeff's case.

Furthermore, Jeff's (22, Beijing) consumption of those transnational gay cultural product was not a simple one-dimensional relationship. There were negotiations in his case. Firstly, as mentioned in Chapter 4, the exploration of sexuality is shaped by one's social location. Jeff grew up in a small town where there were less gay cultural resources that he could explore in a physical way. Getting access to gay cultural products via the Internet thus became an important means for him to explore this sexual identity. Secondly, the family issue is also present here. When Jeff started to watch those gay-themed films and TV series, he had just entered high school. Obviously, he kept his sexuality as a secret from his family. He only was able to watch those televisual products because his parents were rarely at home. Thirdly, Jeff's recognition of those transnational national narratives does not mean he would identify with them. I shall explore this point later in this section.

My participants are and have always been engaging with foreign popular cultural products in relation to homosexuality. Many of them are actively

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51 For a detailed account of Queer as Folk please visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_as_Folk_(British_TV_series)

searching and engaging with western up-to-date pop-cultural products via the Internet. During my fieldwork, a few of my participants had already watched recent released gay TV series – Looking (2014)[52], and they seemed to have no difficulties in decoding such cultural texts. Wu (25, Guangzhou) enjoyed watching this series very much.

> I found it very realistic. On the one hand, perhaps it was shot in San Francisco. I really like San Francisco. On the other hand, the storyline is more rounded. Three protagonists' stories all felt real. They are not stereotypes. You can imagine the stories actually happen in real lives.

Wu (25, Guangzhou) has not been to San Francisco yet, but he can certainly imagine the gay life there. Rather than saying Wu identifies with this narrative, it seems more accurate to say the stories in *Looking* (2014) constructed an alternative narrative which is far away from his social location. Borrowing Barker (2014) conceptualisation of (sexual) fantasy, Wu's consumption of Looking (2014) could be understood as "a visitation to a distant realm of desires and activities" (cited in Mercer, 2017, chapter 1, section 2, para. 2). In general, Wu's case shows the power of "global gayness" which could also be seen as an aspect of cultural imperialism. Yet this may promote a certain gay lifestyle, but we should also aware that audience can actively interpret cultural texts. Ah Zhe (25, Guangzhou) also enjoyed watching *Looking*.

> I watched *Looking*, which was called the gay version of *Sex and City*. The main character is handsome, but a bit short. Then I just found their dating culture is a bit too open for me. How to say, I would admire that kind of situation. But for now, I am still a bit conservative. I feel that the characters might be a little bit promiscuous.

Indeed, many young participants would admire the western gay lifestyle, but this does not mean they regard western countries as "gay haven". These (Western) popular cultural texts provide my participants' opportunities to engage with narratives within the "metropolitan model of homosexuality", but they still conduct their interpretational work with the local cultural contexts. Moreover, it is also important to note that since the opening up, the individuals have been able to live a very modern lifestyle that is little different from their Western counterparts. Statistics show that "between 2006 and 2016, urban households doubled their consumption expenditure, and China currently ranks second behind the United States in the global consumption of passenger cars, apparel, cosmetics and personal care products" (Yep et al.,

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52 For a detailed description of Looking please visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Looking_(TV_series)

2019p. 2). This certainly provides my younger participants with a material environment that might further facilitate their interpretational work of narratives of “metropolitan model of homosexuality”.

In Ho (2007)’s view, as stated earlier, the western gayness and *tongzhi* subject are all parts of the “fragmented same-sex identity” in China, which can best be understood within the paradigm of China’s opening up to the current globalising world. Indeed, she argues “[g]ay netizens in China are increasingly exposed to the transnational gay scene via the Internet, where notions of ‘coming out’, ‘gay rights’, ‘gay marriage’ or ‘individualism’ are widely promoted” (p.20). She further suggests that although these notions could “enhance general awareness of identity and community”, they also “tend to lead some gay netizens in China to imagine the Western gay world as a gay haven” (Ho 2007, p.20). However, for Wong (2010) and Plumer (2010), gay identity in China is actually a hybridization. It is not my intention to join the above debate to argue if Chinese gay identity is either holistic or fragmented. My argument here is that due to the process of globalisation and digitisation, Chinese gay men, especially the younger generation, are definitely having more cultural resources that provide them with diverse narratives with which they can engage, and which enable them to take up their own positions in China’s opening up. In other words, although the discursive waters of gay identity in China have become ever more complicated, one still must understand identity in its own sociality.

5.2.4 Gay Romance

In this final section, I want to discuss the narratives around gay romance, which is a particular popular theme in the transnational gay cultural products. Inevitably, films and TV series that my participants mentioned are all related to the issue of homosexual love and relationships.

Of course, Chinese gay men draw on cultural resources/representations to understand gay romance. As I mentioned before, many of the younger participants were deliberately searching gay-themed film and TV series in their early stage of sexual identity development. Despite the fact that many the resources they found were foreign, there were still some Chinese produced gay-themed films available. The film Lan Yu (2001) was one of the frequently mentioned “classic” gay films by participants across generations. Scholarly readings of Lan Yu tend to highlight the historical context and the class struggle of this film (Bao 2018; Eng 2010), however, many of my participants

viewed it as another gay romance tragedy in which reflected “the harsh realities of the gay world in China” (Ho, 2010, p.112). This, again, suggest that individuals actively interpret cultural works according to their own needs and life situations. The following words of Max (22, Guangzhou) exemplifies this view:

> In fact, I am not sure I understood that film [Lan Yu] well, I am not sure, what after all, this film wanted to address. However, I can tell that, for sure, the pressure on Tongzhi groups is still huge, as the male protagonist was still married to a woman, and the other one died at the end perhaps.

Like Max (22, Guangzhou), most participants acknowledged that for a certain period (perhaps the early years of the new century) the (fictional) representation of Chinese homosexual relationships often involved a bit of sadness/bitterness. Bao (2018) builds on Rofel’s (1999) work and suggests that “telling bitterness” [*suku*/诉苦], or narrating tragic experiences, “was one of the most important ways for people in post-Mao China to construct their new subjectivities”. He claims that “tragic endings in gay fiction […] help both the author and reader to imagine a shared identity and community based on their shared experiences and affects in the reading of fiction” (p.74).

Indeed, this “bitterness” of gay romance is culturally meaningful. Although many young participants may not necessarily identify with such narrative, it still has certain impacts on their personal construction of sexual identity. Although many young participants are taking a rejected position to this narrative embedded in the classic gay-themed film like Lan Yu, it would be relatively difficult for them to miss out such cultural representation because when they first started to explore their sexual identity online these cultural products would be the first things that they found online. Thus, we could argue that the Internet has produced an archive of (indigenous) narratives for young Chinese same-sex attracted males to engage which could be seen as an “intergenerational multilogue” (Hostetler, 2009).

While I am not disputing Bao’s (2018) above claim, this “bitterness” narrative seems to be not very welcomed by many of my young participants. Very few participants even told me they do not watch (Chinese) gay-themed films online as they felt these films are always telling the same kind of stories. Comparing gay romantic narratives articulated in fictional cultural text, many of them paid more attention to those love stories of “real” Chinese gay men. For example, EM (24, Beijing) follows Ted and Fred, a well-known gay couple on Weibo.

> I started to follow them when I was in my first year or second-year university. Initially, I saw their story in Tieba. At that time, they were very famous in the gay community and even beyond. Many media platforms have interviewed them. They were both graduated from Peking University. Because one of them had better academic performance, he had been accepted to continue further studies in an American university. But the other one seemed less lucky in his academic career, he tried several times, and finally got accepted. Anyway, it was a hard journey for them to be united in the US. Now they are living in the States. They share their everyday lives on Weibo, and sometimes they will also post a little bit *daigou*[53] information.

Certainly, we can see that real person narratives matter more to EM (24, Beijing). His identification with such lived narratives seems to suggest there is a rejection of mass media narratives on Chinese homosexuality. Many participants seem "had enough" with the "bitterness" narrative, therefore, they are more likely to look for alternative narratives that could be more positive, especially, those narratives are also from "real" people.

R (19, Guangzhou) also follows gay accounts on Weibo in which Chinese gay individuals are actively documenting their relationships and everyday lives.

> They are not those super handsome ones, just average looking or above, just feel that they can be very warm together, just very comfortable that you really admire them.

It is clear that both R (19, Guangzhou) and EM (24, Beijing) did not follow these accounts for his fantasy, but rather it is a kind of longing. As I mentioned earlier, like other participants around their age, their first impression about the gay circle "learned online" was also about the unstable relationships. Although they might confirm this "harsh reality" through their own engagement and observation with the gay circle. Following these weibo accounts could still provide them "positive energy". By actively engaging the "happy stories", individuals embrace more positive possibilities of the gay experiences. In this sense, we could see such everyday romantic narrative as a resistant force.

Apparently, those positive narratives about gay romance play an important role in the construction of an imagined gay identity/live. EM (24, Beijing) followed "real" love stories posted in Tieba from his high school to university. He explains:

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53 Daigou is a type of freelance retail consultant who are based in the Western countries and buying goods for Chinese consumers.

> Most of the stories I saw were relatively positive. For example, there was a couple posting their everyday stories in Tieba. They were together for years. When I first follow them, they were just in a relationship for two years. One guy was in Xi'an, the other guy was in Beijing. They were trying very hard to live together. One of them even resigned his job and paid a big amount of liquidated damages. […] It was like watching a TV series, you would really like to know the ending. If they were living together happily. […] This gave me hopes and perspectives for the future.

Again, as "bitterness" seems to be a big element in the discursive construction of gay identity in China, one could easily imagine the power of such an alternative narrative. Many Chinese gay men identify with the Tieba Stories not only because it is a "real" person narrative, but also because it offers possibilities from which they would look forward to. Xiao Zhu's (24, Guangzhou) words could better summarise the reason why positive narratives about gay love in China are powerful: "after seeing films or real stories that portrayed a happy ending, I always felt how wonderful if I could find a guy that I love and live together happily". Indeed, most of my participants are looking for a happy love story in their lives, however, as we can imagine this is definitely not easy. I shall discuss this issue further in the next chapter in which I explore my participants sexual and relational practices in the digital age.

However, we should also be cautious about this type of narrative. Because of the promotional nature of Weibo (and Tieba), people might just perform a happy ending story to attract more followers. Moreover, it is not too difficult to sense a hidden neoliberal ideology behind this typical narrative. At least, it is very obvious that Ted and Fred's story is classed (i.e. falls into a very middle class narrative). They were educated in one of the top universities in China and had the chance to live in the USA. This narrative seems to give the false picture that all gay men are well educated, middle class, etc. This, again, echoes what I have discussed above regarding my participants' readings of the narratives in *Looking* (2014) which only represent a "metropolitan model of homosexuality". Mobility is the key in order to achieve such a lifestyle for many participants who grew up in less developed areas of China. This issue here is not only about the diversity of gay lifestyles, but more importantly, could imply that being happy/successful and gay is only available to a certain class of gay individuals in China. I shall address the issues of class in Chinese gay community in Chapter 7.

5.3 Conclusion

Papacharissi (2018) critically notes that “storytelling for human beings is a way of understanding who we are and imagining who we would like to be” (p.1). Throughout this chapter, we can easily see that Chinese gay males do make sense of their identity via stories/representations. In particular, I have demonstrated how gay identity is attained and imagined through identification, and in particular, through narrative engagement.

Yet, we can see the transnational influences on the discursive construction of gay identity. But there are also things specific to the Chinese context. For many of my younger participants, their exploration of sexuality online commonly started with a series of questions relating to different issues of being a gay man in China. These issues include: HIV (or sexually transmitted diseases in general), coming out, and relational development etc. Narratives of such problems have been created and recreated in the digital spaces which provide Chinese gay male with resources in terms of narrative engagement. For many younger gay men, although they are critically aware the problems and difficulties in relation to gay identity, they chose to “live” with it rather than “deal” with it, which can be seen as a general non-confrontational strategy towards their sexual identity.

Rofel (2007) argues that in the context of China’s opening up “lesbians and gay men provide both a compelling and ambivalent challenge to post-socialist construction of desire” in China (p.86). In the early part of this chapter, I have briefly noted there is a popular perception of the gay circle in China, in which people tend to see it as promiscuous. That is to say, people in the gay circle are more likely to foreground their sexual desires rather than relational desires. In the next chapter, I will fully unpack Chinese gay sexual (and digital) culture by exploring my participants’ construction of sexual desires and relational goals.

Chapter 6
Identity in Practices: Embodied Experiences and Materiality

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the Internet has become the first space where Chinese (young) gay males started to learn about their sexual identity and gay culture. If we understand this process as “online learning”, then the previous chapter is more about “learning the overall understanding of gay identity and community”. This chapter will continue to demonstrate this “learning process” by focusing on the specific sexual aspects. Then, I will explore what this “online learning” eventually leads to. Here I am not suggesting that we should look at gay identity development as separated between online and offline. In fact, as I stated in the introduction of this thesis (Chapter 1), gay male digital cultural is always an embodied experience. Therefore, I discuss the “online” and “offline” separately, not because they are unrelated, but because this provides me with a critical way of analysing what different social and technological spaces mean to my participants.

Undoubtedly, same-sex attracted individuals are “defined by [their] corporeal selves, [their] sexual desires and affectional preferences” (Gibson et al., 2013, p.350). Indeed, Bell and Binnie (2000) argue that “for queers eroticism is the basis of community” (p.87). This is not to emphasise that sexuality is a physically determined phenomenon, but rather, throughout this chapter, I will demonstrate that for (Chinese) gay men the sexual is the social. As Hirst (2004) suggests, “sexual body has to be understood as socially embedded” (p.65). This chapter contextualises Chinese gay men’s embodied experiences in the emerging capitalist economy which Rofel (2007) calls “desiring China”.

Furthermore, this chapter supports Mowlabocus’ (2010a) argument in which he sees “gay male digital culture as being an embodied - and erotic - experience” (p.2). That is to say (gay) digital culture constitutes Chinese gay males’ daily lives; it is part of their everyday experiences. This is what Floridi (2011) calls “onlife”, a term he uses to refer to “the new experience of a hyperconnected reality within which it is no longer sensible to ask whether one may be online or offline” (Floridi, 2014, p.1). Mowlabocus (2010) argues that “gay male subculture (offline) and gay men’s digital culture (online) are part and parcel of the same thing” (p.15), and in keeping with this line of thought, this chapter explores the lived and embodied experience of digital culture.

More specifically, the chapter will continue to unpack the specific roles of digital media, and in particular, it will try to address the question of to what extent, if at all, these digital spaces have empowered Chinese gay men. It examines the implications of using gay-orientated digital media platforms on their construction of corporeal selves, sexual desires, and dating practices.

To address the above question(s) I draw particularly on Mowlabocus' (2010) framework/meta-narrative of "cybercarnality" as a useful tool to comprehend Chinese gay male digital culture in a global age. He suggests that this framework "highlights the processes of commodification apparent within gay male digital culture as the pornographic lens through which bodies are represented online engenders questions of objectification, knowledge production, and consumption" (p.81). Indeed, as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, the idea of "commodification" has become a central issue of Chinese gay males' everyday life, which renders them both opportunities and constraints. Another theoretical aspect within this framework of cybercarnality is the notion of surveillance. According to Mowlabocus (2010), "cybercarnality positions gay male subculture's involvement with digital communication technologies as mobilising new techniques of (self) surveillance for multiple reasons and with diverse effects" (p. 81). This claim is vividly evidenced in the lived experiences of my participants, as described below.

Furthermore, the idea of "cybercarnality" highlights the "pornified" nature of gay culture. As Maddison (2017) puts it: this "necessitates a discussion of the question of consumption: how have gay men been obtaining all this porn, and how have exchange practices developed over time and shaped gay culture and gay subjectivity?" (p.142). These questions are also at the centre of this chapter. However, we also need to understand the above discussion of gay men's erotic and cultural life is contextualised in the Anglo-American societies which could be generally categorised as "advanced" democracies. This "condition" is witnessed in Maddison's (2017) further claim:

> The pornification of gay men suggests that we are entrepreneurial voyeurs whose individual and subcultural journeys towards 'hard imaginings' (Waugh1996, 5) have produced a subjectivity organized around the accumulation and appreciation of our human capital to a degree that implies we are ideal neoliberals (p.144).

Before we can begin to explore the concept of cybercarnality in the Chinese context, we have to keep in mind that Mowlabocus (2010) put forward this framework based on the "material-historical discussion of British gay male culture" (p.58). Comparing the legal and social history of gay men in Britain,

and generally in the West, China has its own distinctive social culture history resulting in a different condition/environment in which gay male subculture is constructed. Regarding this context, there are two points that I want to highlight in addressing the concept of cybercarnality in China. First, Mowlabocus (2010) suggests that "the gay press has long been involved in revealing and eroticising the male body" in the UK. However, the making and distribution of sexually explicit materials (homosexual or heterosexual) are illegal in China, and the government has increasingly tightened its control and censorship of pornography on the Internet (Wu et al., 2010). Second, "self-surveillance and self-monitoring of the gay male body" is not only an issue within the public health framework[54] (Mowlabocus, 2010, p. 71-78), but it also subjects to the idea of being a "socially responsible citizen" with (high) *suzhi* [human quality] (Bao, 2018, p.53-55). More generally, China has long been criticised on the issue of surveillance. Many scholars regard information technology "as an instrument of repression" in China (Walton, 2001).

With the above circumstances in mind, I shall begin to tell the sexual stories of Chinese gay men. Based on the empirical findings, my analysis in this chapter specifically focuses on the implications of online gay pornography for the construction of corporeal selves and sexual desires, and how Chinese gay men's interpersonal relationships and dating practices are mediated by digital technologies within an emerging capitalist economy.

6.2 The Pornographic Remediation of the Gay Male Body

Although pornography is still illegal in China, and the government has increasingly stepped further its policy of "purification of the internet"[55], this never fully prevented the Chinese people from accessing to pornographic materials online (Wu et al., 2010). Indeed, all of my participants accessed porn via the Internet and its various applications. On the one hand, as I stated in Chapter 4, a few participants first realised their same-sex sexuality when they were watching straight pornography as, during their junior to senior high school time, they found they were more interested in seeing the male actor

54 Please also see chapter 3 where I discussed the HIV discourse in relation to the construction of homosexuality in China.

55 This is a series of official campaign against "vulgar" online content jointly launched by seven government departments in early 2009. In late 2010, Chinese authorities turned the control of "obscene and pornographic content transmitted online and via mobile phones" into a regular and continuous pursuit (see Yan 2015).

and his private parts. A few others also “confirmed” their sexuality when they were reading homoerotic novels on their mobile phones around this period. This supports the claim of Harper et al. (2019) that gay and bisexual youth “found the Internet useful in helping them to understand and acknowledge their sexual attraction to other males” (section 4, para.9).

On the other hand, for the majority of (young) participants when they first started their “anonymous exploration” (Harper et al., 2009b) on their sexual identity online, they would naturally encounter pornographic contents. Thus they started the erotic perspective of their identity development journey. That is to say, when they started the online exploration, they had already identified their homosexuality. Specifically, many participants from post-1980s’ and post-1990s’ generations [80 后和 90 后] often reported that when they first searched about homosexuality online, they found sexually explicit materials immediately. Edd (21, Beijing) offers a typical account here:

> When I searched keywords such as “gay”,“*tongxinglian*” [homosexuality/同性恋] or “*nantong*” [male homosexual/男同] on Baidu [.com], the materials I found were mostly little yellow videos [porn videos/小黄片], shall I say there were many sexual contexts. Of course, when I was in junior high school, Baidu was not strictly censored, you could find many yellow websites [porn websites/黄色网站] .

His words reveal two points that I will develop further in this chapter. Firstly, the sexual/erotic aspect is vital to the construction of gay identity. The Internet has become Chinese gay men’s major (if not only) information source for sexually explicit materials. In fact, when many of my younger participants accessed information on homosexuality online, they found that sexually explicit material was the first thing that turned up, which suggests that homoeroticism is inseparable in the construction of gay identity. Secondly, this access is not free from censorship or state control. Many participants noticed the government’s tightening-up censorship on Internet (gay) pornography. They often expressed that getting access to gay porn online was much easier when they were younger as the Chinese authorities have not yet “step[ped] up the anti-pornography campaigns as part of China’s Internet regulation” (Wu et al., 2010).

6.2.1 Negotiating the Censorship

Despite the Chinese government’s tight control of the Internet, Chinese individuals can still access porn via the Internet, especially as social media provide new ways to disseminate porn. Mao (2015) has demonstrated that

Weibo can be used as a way of disseminating gay porn. Porn (usually western productions) can be shared on Weibo by gay individuals who are usually well educated, have specific IT skills, and speak English or study in western countries, as a way of self-promoting and or a money-making business (ibid., p.88-92). My participants have reported similar cases in which they get access to sexually explicit materials through WeChat. For instance, Max (22, Guangzhou) actively follows a few WeChat public accounts that share "resources" in which they will post the online drive links of gay porn videos. Ka Fei (24, Guangzhou) paid to be added into some WeChat groups where gay porn videos and links are shared.

It is worth note that WeChat has now also tightened its censorship of pornographic contents. Whether this is because of direct government directive, is difficult to know. In late November 2018, WeChat published an official announcement about the control of pornographic contents on WeChat personal accounts and by the time of this announcement published they had shut done more than 810 WeChat groups and 3500 individual accounts (weixinsrc, 2018). News also reported that there was one WeChat group admin member jailed for members' porn-sharing (Ni, 2018). The decision to prosecute this group was probably meant as a warning to others.

Indeed, as Huang (2017) suggests that "watching porn on China's censored internet is an infinitely evolving cat-and-mouse game" (no page number). Qiu's (21, Beijing) experience demonstrate this point:

> **Qiu:** Initially, I did not know where to find those resources [gay videos]; I was just reading homoerotic novels and searching (semi) nude male pictures online. Then one day I just posted a post in Baidu Zhidao[56] asking how to get these resources and someone sent me a resource cracking toolkit.
>
> **RD:** How did you ask the question in that post?
>
> **Qiu:** Of course, I played with my language; I used "internet harmonious vocabulary". I asked how can I find 'GV ***zhiyuan***' [汁源], as the '***zhi***' in fruit juice[57]. So that guy sent me a toolkit which was like a search engine. You typed

56 Baidu Knows is a Chinese language collaborative Web-based collective intelligence by question and answer provided by the Chinese search engine Baidu.

57 The Chinese word for resources is ziyuan [资源]; zhi [汁] means juice. Instead of using the zi, Chinese netizen use zhi, a character with similar pronunciation, to avoid censorship. Moreover, the word zhi also has some erotic connotation.

> in key words it would generate a torrent file for you and use that you could download the video through Xunlei[58].

In this incident, we can clearly see that Qiu was fully aware of the illegal situation of online pornography and he deliberately try to aware the Internet censorship by using euphemism[59]. Furthermore, the fact that there were individuals actually developed software to help people to find pornographic resources also shows how seriously everyday Chinese citizens are involved in the "cat-and-mouse game". Qiu's case is not special at all; almost all my participants have actively searched for gay porn online and have a deep attachment to pornography. Moreover, in contrast with Jacobs' (2012) observation in which she found that Chinese young (heterosexual) adults "are mostly quite shy and hesitant to discuss pornography", the majority of my participants are very open and happy to discuss pornography with me. Clearly, as shown above, Chinese gay men have strong desires for gay pornography even in a context where pornography is strictly forbidden. This again highlights the crucial role of pornography to gay men (Jeffreys, 2002).

Yet, there are many new means of disseminating gay porn facilitated by (new) digital technologies. Some people could quickly adapt them and gain access to gay porn; others might be less capable or less willing to do so. Fan (30, Beijing) offers an interesting example here:

> **RD:** What's your channel of getting gay porn?
>
> **Fan:** Channel? My channels are almost all shut down by the state. All the websites I used to watch [gay porn] are all not able to access anymore. I don't know what should I do now. Occasionally I found there is someone sharing a link I would just download. Sometimes, I feel that our situation is pretty tragic. Yet, the government is not supporting us in any substantial way, now they are banning all the stuff on the Internet. I don't think this is very humane.
>
> **RD:** So, have you tried to use VPN [virtual private network]?
>
> **Fan:** Not really, it's too troublesome. I mean I am not bothered to do so. I am too lazy. I don't want to download an app or software, and you know most of the time you have to pay for a stable VPN service. I won't pay for it; I would rather use that money to buy some pirated records. So if I find someone shares these kinds of resources I will download and watch, if not I am not bothered.

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58 A Chinese P2SP downloading service software.

59 For a more detailed discussion on the topic of Chinese people's linguistic practices and internet censorship please see Wang et al. (2016).

It is clear that Fan (30, Beijing) has developed grudging acceptance about the situation of consuming gay porn. His attitude represents a number of other participants' views. They were critically aware that "sexuality in China is interwoven with the political system" (Ho et al., 2018, p.486), and they are clearly not happy with the current situation. However, they all felt that they could not do anything about it. In regards to gay porn consumption, like Fan, there are a few participants who are not bothered with searching for new pornographic resources or they just watch their own collection of gay porn build up over the years. Again, this fits in their general non-confrontational strategy in dealing with gay identity that I have discussed in previous chapters.

Furthermore, the negotiation of gaining access to gay porn further demonstrates that "gay male subculture (offline) and gay men's digital culture (online) are part and parcel of the same thing" (Mowlabocus, 2010a, p. 15). In this case, Chinese gay individuals have to constantly deal with the party state's intervention into their construction of sexuality.

6.2.2 Objectified Male Body

The majority of my participants are aged between 20 to 30. They have experienced a time that the censorship towards pornographic was not that tight. In particular, when they initially started to explore their sexual identities during puberty (or beyond) on the Internet, they could easily find sexually explicit materials [as demonstrated in Edd's (21, Beijing) quote]. Many of them reported a similar pattern in terms of this online sexual exploration journey. I shall unpack this journey and discuss some implications of this on the construction of corporeal selves and sexual desires.

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, danlan.org was a gay online portal for many of my participants. This website does not only provide worldwide information on the issue of LGBT, but more importantly, it also provides many (semi-) erotic contents. Many participants reported that when they found danlan.org they were first attracted to the erotic novels and pictures of semi-nude men. For example, Xiao Chen (22, Beijing) did not care much about the global LGBT news on danlan; his main purpose was to look at pictures of handsome men:

> I remembered that there were some news reports, and some things about the LGBT movement. I might occasionally look at them, but I did not pay much attention. Because when I was checking danlan I just wanted to look at the flesh, and I was so excited about them.

Indeed, many other participants were also very excited when they first saw those pictures on danlan.org. FX (26, Beijing) could clearly recall this excitement of seeing nude pictures online:

> I clearly remembered the first time when I saw a set of [semi] nude pictures. My breath became heavy and all my blood seemed flashed to my brain, that kind of extreme excitement. It was a studio shot male nude picture; of course, you could not see his private part. But even though, looking at his sexy muscles was already very stimulating.

Figure 6.1 A Screenshot of 29th November 2010's Danlan.org

For both Xiao Chen and FX, the (gay) male body was certainly being consumed, objectified, and subject to a homoerotic gaze. It is important to note, unlike the UK (or other developed western countries) where gay press has existed for a long period of time before the internet was prevalent (Mowlabocus, 2010a, p.60), an interest in the "carnal" (gay) male body was arguably introduced by those websites.

In order to better understand the implication of this, I have to remind you of the older generation's stories that I have discussed in chapter 4. In order to

fulfil his sexual desires Tom (55, Beijing) when he was young even risked to touch builders who slept in camps beside streets and to sleep with street store vendors. Ah Shan (63, Guangzhou) desired his young male neighbour, and thus often ask that man to take shower together with him in the public bathroom. This was the only way for Ah Shan to satisfy his sexual desires in his early 20s. Their experiences demonstrate how strong one's homoerotic desire could be and how risky it was to pursue sexual desires, in a relatively conservative environment in which homoerotism was largely invisible.

Arguably, these websites, like danlan.org, provided Chinese gay males with affordances to explore their sexuality in a relatively easy and safe way. These websites first digitalised the male body and also made it widely available to the gay population in China. The carnality of gay males was first acknowledged and commodified by these websites to such a scale[60] and, perhaps, even further used by these websites to gain wider internet traffic . This set up the initial "erotic economy of gay male corporeality" in China (Mowlabocus, 2010a, p.60). In this case, Mowalboucus' (2010) framework of cybercarnality helps us to understand the (re) production of gay male body in the digital environments.

6.2.3 Sexual Representation: Global vs. Local Gay Porn

Apparently, danlan.org was just the start of many participants' sexual exploration journey, and they were soon not satisfied with the pictures on danlan.org. Song (23, Bejing) explains why he abandoned danlan.org:

> I was frequently viewing danlan when I was in junior high school; then when I entered senior high school, I started to look at gay porn websites. Because the pictures on danlan did not show the most important part. But, I still needed to thank danlan. Because some pictures posted on danlan were from foreign websites or screenshots of porn videos, they often left their logo on the picture. So, then I could trace up the original websites. Thus, I found a number of western gay porn websites. […] I just started to watch European and American gay porn. There were also Japanese ones available, but I didn't like them. The guys were ugly and their [penis] sizes were small. They just could not stimulate me, and excite me. The guys in Western porn are all handsome with six-pack.

60 This is not to say that homoeroticism was not recognised in China, in fact, homoeroticism could be traced back to Imperial China. For example, it has been appeared in Chinese literature (see Stevenson and Wu, 2013). But these cultural products were less accessible to the general public.

It is obvious that Song (23, Beijing) watching gay porn mainly to satisfy his sexual desires, and the desires became increasingly intensified during his sexual identity development. Therefore, the penis covered male nude pictures on danlan.org could not meet his satisfaction anymore. He then quickly found pleasure in the (western) homoerotic bodies. Unsurprisingly, this type of erotic coding of masculinity was welcomed by many of my young participants. Qui (21, Beijing) further compares the difference between Western gay porn and Japanese gay porn:

> I really like the BelAmi[61] studio ['s production]. Is it produced in the Czech Republic? I am very sure. Anyway, the performers employed by the studio are all white, having beautiful muscles and very strong. Plus, their private parts are relatively big and thick. Their actions are powerful, and they shout energetically. This is so different from the Asian series. BelAmi really makes you think about how a male body could be this nice. And then, you have to admire that they are really a different race. Our Asians are really in a disadvantaged position. Yes, some Japanese are pretty, for example when you see them walking on the street you will still think they are very nice. But if you take their clothes off, they would not have strong chest, no six-pack, and no nice butt, more importantly, their penises are relatively small. Think about it, won't you feel disappointed? So western guys still give you the most sensory stimulation.

This hyper-connection with the idealised image of the Western male body certainly deserves further exploration. Through reviewing studies of Chinese men (and male body) Kong (2012) points out that "[traditional] Chinese masculinity is somewhat different from the Western notion of masculinity in three aspects: the strong Chinese association of male identity with morality, the tolerance of femininity, and the tolerance of homosexuality" (p.302). Clearly, this type of Chinese masculinity did not provide sexual fantasies to many participants like Song and Qiu.

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61 BelAmi is a gay pornographic film studio with offices in Bratislava, Prague and Budapest. It was established in 1993 by filmmaker George Duroy, a Slovak native who took his pseudonym from the protagonist Georges Duroy in Guy de Maupassant's novel Bel Ami.

Figure 6.2 The Stars of BelAmi Studio[62]

Mowlabocus (2010a) identifies that “an interest in the ‘carnal’ gay male body pre-dates the Internet” (p. 60). Gay press, such as *Timm, Him and Spartacus*, “has long been involved in revealing and eroticising the male body” (ibid.). However, in the “absence” of a gay press, it is the Internet which introduced the “carnal” gay male body to many my younger participants.

Furthermore, their connection with the idealised versions of masculinity and bodies, could also be broadly attributed to the “sexualization of culture” (Attwood, 2009) in a framework of “transnationalizing desire” (Howe and Rigi, 2009). Jeffreys (2015) also terms this as “the sexualization of youth culture in present-day China”. She critically puts:

> China’s post-1980s and post-1990s generation has grown up in an era marked by market-based economic reform, increased interaction with the rest of the world, changing family structures, and the spread of new media and communication technologies. They are generally viewed, and indeed sometimes view themselves, as being at the forefront of a ‘me culture’ and a ‘sexual revolution’ in China (p. 46).

Indeed, Qiu’s (21, Beijing) words show that some young Chinese gay men have already developed a specific taste towards West gay porn production from a very young age under such transnational sexualization of culture. Many

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62 Image from:
https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&source=images&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj979nMrs7kAhVB5uAKHeUQAZ8QjRx6BAgBEAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.flickr.com%2Fphotos%2Ffredspoonphotos%2F36559774056&psig=AOvVaw0U8Fzy_QpooLW06YZTjDT0&ust=1568483432644181

young participants reposted that they had particular favourable Western porn stars and porn studios. Mao (2015) demonstrates how piracy copies of Men of Montreal production were circulated and celebrated by the Chinese audience through Weibo. In fact, this is not a new phenomenon at all; many of my participants reported that they could get access to western studio-produced gay porn from the early age of gay online forums.

Many participants mentioned a popular gay (pornographic) forum called soutong (stboy.net) where they have frequently visited to access gay porn. In have also been a member of this online forum since 2006. I note that the basic format of this forum has not changed much. There are mainly two big sections: gay pictures and gay movies. The pictures sections are arranged by sub-categorises such as self-portraits, candid pictures, handsome male pictures (not nude), erotic male pictures (nude). Within both handsome men and erotic categories, pictures are organised by their subject origins, namely Western or Asian. In the gay movie section, sub-sections are organised by different watching/downloading means. Within each sub-section, gay porn posts are also arranged by their origins.

Although Soutong has been frequently changing their web address to avoid censorship, individuals are still able to find the new address through soutong's notices and word of mouth by its members. Sexually explicit materials are constantly being posted on Soutong. Apparently, many of them are piracy copies of western studio gay porn videos. Via such online forums, like Soutong and other similar digital media platforms, many participants are keen consumers of Western porn studios, such as Lucas Entertainment, Sean Cody, Peter Lee, Men at play, and Men.com[63] etc.

Interestingly, some participants who were born around1985-1995 reported that when they started to explore their sexuality online, the majority of gay porn they could find were western produced. This might be because Google service was still available at that time to the Chinese public and western gay porn production was already well established before Japanese gay porn emerged. The reason for this is unclear. This could be because of the language they used in the online search: many younger participants reported using the English word "gay" in their online exploration; this could also be because of the development of gay porn markets.

63 Just to name a few studios that my participants have mentioned.

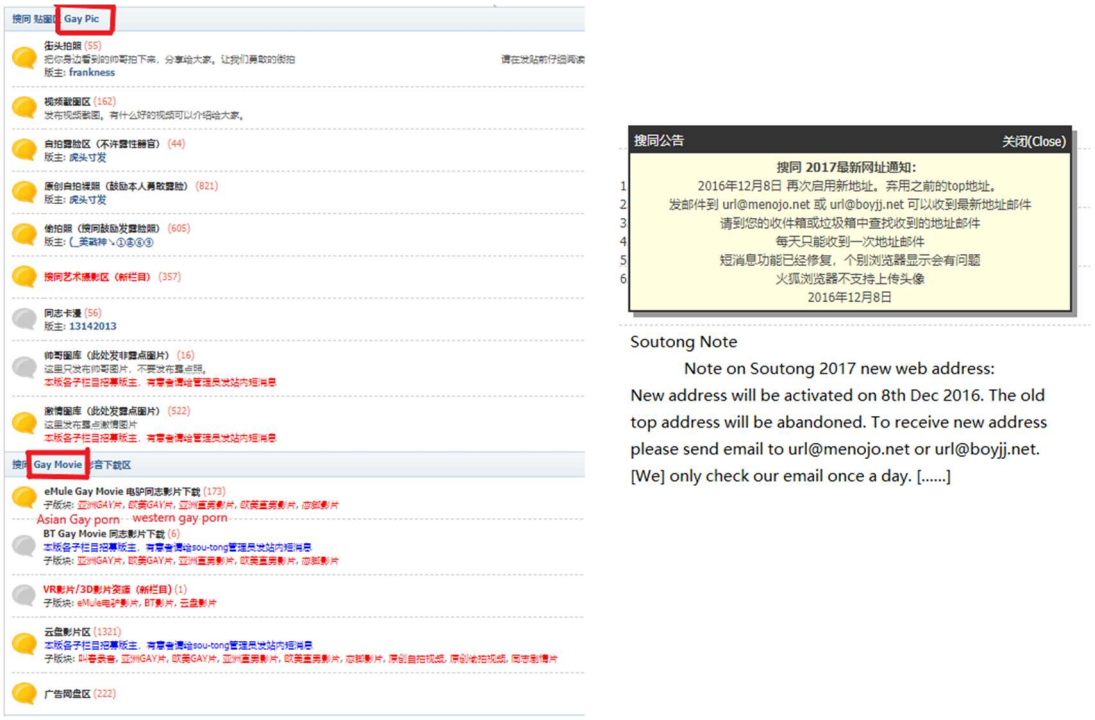

Figure 6.3 A Screenshot of Soutong and Its Notice

From the above cases, we can see that "[g]ay netizens in China are [not only] increasingly exposed to the transnational gay scene via the Internet, where notions of 'coming out', 'gay rights', 'gay marriage' or 'individualism' are widely promoted" (Ho, 2007, p.20), but they also exposed to the Western erotic coding of gay sexuality from the early days. This suggests that cybercarnality has always been the heart of Chinese digital culture and this cybercarnality has always been shaped by the transnational construction of masculinity. However, this is not a claim about technology determinism, as we should also understand the context of this is the broader economic reform and opening up as discussed above.

It is important to note here that participants were exposed to both aspects of the transnational gay scene via the Internet: the civil and the sexual. Although there is no conflation of these two aspects, many of my participants tend to practice them separately. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, younger participants do treat the civil aspect in a non-confrontational way, and they tend to "live" with these issues rather than "deal" with them (Chapter 5). However, here, they are more likely to embrace the Western erotic coding of gay sexuality in an integrated way. This is, perhaps, because many of my participants are treating gay identity as a private/personal issue about which they have more control, rather than social/civil matter that is largely shaped by the Chinese cultural traditions and the power of the state.

Within this context, a few participants reported a strong preference for Western (white) men. They jokingly used the term “western food girl” [potato queen/西餐妹] to describe themselves. For example, Jay (21, Guangzhou) was a member of the LGBT WeChat group in Guangzhou through which he enjoyed hanging out with westerners and even developed a few short-term relationships. He traced his preference back to gay porn watching in high school:

> **RD:** So, you like Westerns?
>
> **Jay:** Yeah, mostly, I am a Western food girl [laughing]. You know what I think when I was in high school, I just found that I didn’t fancy the Asian performers in gay porn. I just didn’t like watching Asian gay porn. Personally, I think I just like Western appearances and their body shape.

I do not claim the causality between watching Western gay porn and individuals’ dating preference. I am highlighting here is how the Internet has further opened up Chinese gay males' sexual fantasy towards western gay men and their bodies in an age of globalisation. As I have demonstrated in the early chapters, gay identity in China has been significantly shaped by the global forces. However, the influence of this on the sexual dimension seems more extensive than other dimensions.

Katrien Jacobs (2012) points out two particular forms of heterosexual video pornography that widely circulated on the Chinese Internet: ‘Chinese DIY (Do-It-Yourself) versus Japanese AV (Adult Video)’ (p.31). She describes this new line of DIY video porn as ‘sex videos shot by young adults in everyday locations such as classrooms, bathhouses, computer labs and city parks’ which show recorded secret sexual behaviour, knowingly or otherwise, of ordinary Chinese individuals. Her research participants believe that the popularity of this DIY porn is attributed to its novelty and the gap in the ‘market’, which can be seen as an example of sexual freedom (Jacobs, 2012). Indeed, many participants reported that they have also seen Chinese produced gay porn videos circulated on the Internet. Some of them prefer Chinese gay porn as they felt those videos are more realistic. Thus, they have more attachment to them. Song (23, Beijing) reported a changing taste in gay porn consumption:

> **Song:** since I had a boyfriend and began to have sex. I started to like Chinese [gay porn] as I felt they are more realistic.
>
> **RD:** Why?
>
> **Song:** because they are Chinese, so you will have more empathy, I am you can imagine yourself in the sexual scene. Because, after all, I still feel the distance is

far when I am watching western ones, they are just televisual works. Yet, they may be visually exciting, but when I am in a relationship, it seems I don't need that many excitements. Moreover, the western ones are mostly shot in a studio or a set-up scene, such as swimming pool or military camp. Of course, I won't have sex in these places. They are not in real-life settings. Chinese ones are more realistic because you can see they are often shot in a budget hotel.

Figure 6.4 A Screenshot of Chitu Gay Porn Videos[64]

Perhaps, when Song (23, Beijing) was watching gay porn in high school it was all about providing him fantasy, thus he enjoyed watching western gay porn. However, since he had sexual experiences in university, the authenticity of gay porn became a critical matter. Therefore, he found he could relate himself more to the Chinese local produced gay porn. Again, Song and many other participants' preference towards Chinese gay porn not only show that "pornography is crucial to gay men's survival, to their identities, and to their ability to do sex" (Jeffreys, 2002, p.78) but more importantly it suggests who is doing sex is crucial to Chinese gay men too. When Jacobs (2012) conducted her fieldwork, she observed that "sexual imagination has been hijacked by a peculiar kind of erotic-cultural imperialism" and suggested "a reclaiming of Chinese sexual bodies through home-made pornography content would be important to even up dominant scripting of eroticism and perversity by overseas producers" (p.38). Indeed, in relation to Song we can

64 Chitu is a series of Chinese locally produced gay porn films. For a detailed analysis of Chinese gay porn production and perception, please see Ding (2020).

see the importance of the erotic representation of Chinese bodies. I agree with her claim, as demonstrated above, the “real” representation of Chinese gay sex has a specific role in the construction of Chinese gay males’ everyday sexualities.

Song’s (23, Beijing) comments also resonate Mowlabocus’ (2010a) work when he draws upon Foucault’s (1977, p.189) arguments to suggest that gay porn can be “considered a ‘field of documentation’” and has “the productive power of its documentary” (p.66). Song’s (23, Beijing) case certainly demonstrates this productive power of Chinese local produced gay porn. As a form of documenting a Chinese cosmopolitan gay sexual script, this locally produced gay porn has a notable cultural and political significance in relation to the concept of representation. The idea of seeing Chinese gay sexualised bodies is significant to many of my participants. This is because these porn videos deploy cultural codes of sex that similar to their everyday experiences (Wong and Yau, 2014). However, many participants reported a dislike of how they are documenting the gay sexual. For example, Yi Lu (25, Guangzhou) expresses a typical view towards Chinese produced gay porn:

> [For western gay porn] first, there is a plotline, a narrative. Second, the shooting angle is better; then the picture quality is good. This is why I don’t like the Chinese ones, they seem like doing something in a small dark room that cannot be seen by others, feels like doing something dirty. And the shooting…they don’t have professional lighting. Then the picture quality is poor. However, the western ones, they will give you a kind of [feeling], move positive and cheerful. The overall tone is bright, and their [the performers’] bodies are nicer. They have better body shape and big dick. So visually, they are more intriguing.

Indeed, the enjoyment of sexual pleasure has become the centre of today’s ‘sexual revolution’ in China and contribute to a desiring subjectivity (Rofel, 2007). Like Yi Lu (25, Guangzhou), many participants think gay sex should be enjoyable and cheerful. Although their view towards gay sex and gay porn is not the same, we can see that, at least for Yi Lu, his view towards gay sex is reflected in his taste concerning of gay porn.

Although they appreciated Chinese locally produced gay porn because of its cultural specificity, many felt these porn videos were low in their quality. By “quality” they meant two aspects: a), production quality (cutting, editing, lighting, and picture quality etc.); b) the quality of the performers (their physical appearance). This can be seen as a form of erotic-cultural imperialism. As I demonstrated earlier, young Chinese gay men were growing up with the access of western gay porn via the Internet. Before accessing locally

produced, Chinese gay porn they had already become familiar with Western (and Japanese) studio pornography, which provided a ‘standard fantasy’. The mainstream physical aesthetics and idealized gay male bodies found in Western gay porn were preferred.

Furthermore, this notion of “quality” is a particular important concept under neoliberalism. It implies a market mentality that people chose a product by evaluating its quality. Thus, Yi Lu (25, Guangzhou) well demonstrates how market values and economic sphere dominate all other aspects of living in neoliberal times (Wrenn, 2014). I will continue to elaborate how the idea of “quality” shapes my participants dating practices and what is the implication of this on their identity construction later in this chapter.

Figure 6.5 A Screenshot of Danlan.org (on 19/09/2019)

Before we go any further, I would like to address some concerns under current censorship against pornography. Many participants mentioned that they found although gay porn is circulated in new media platforms, they have become less able to get access. The post-1980s’ and post-1990s’ generations experienced little censorship against pornography when they started to explore their sexuality online. Although I am not claiming that “gay pornography serves an affirmative purpose” (Bishop, 2015), their experiences suggest, at least, watching gay porn has given their particular pleasure and excitement, and for a (long) period this was the only way for them to explore their erotic desires, needs, and curiosities during puberty to late puberty. Therefore, I wonder what the experience would be like when today’s Chinese

young gay men start to explore their erotic desires online, and what the implications are of the tighten censorship. Indeed, if we go on danlan.org now, we will not find any trace of homoerotism or porn; instead, it seems to be purely a gay health outreach platform. This also suggests there seems to be a general de-sexualised gay identity and return to conceptions of homosexuality as a sexual health "condition" (see Chapter 5).

6.3 Sexual Explorations

6.3.1 First Physical Sexual Exploration

Many young participants started exploring their sexual desires online in their middle school; by the end of high school, some of them had already experienced their first sexual intercourse. The internet played a key role in this process. The majority of participants met their first sexual partner online when they wanted to have something happen. For many, their first sexual intercourse was often just a one-off experience, namely, they did not develop a relationship with that man. There are two particular themes/aspects that I want to unpack regarding my participants' experiences.

The first theme is "affordance" by which I mean the ability to do sex conveniently. From the early stage, Chinese gay men have used the Internet as a means to find sexual encounters. Of course, this is not unique in China, Campbell (2004) has well demonstrated how American gay men used Internet Relay Chat channels to explore their erotic desires and how online interaction could facilitate offline meetings. Indeed, many older participants remembered there were hooking-up conversations in the chatrooms, although they did not report their own engagements in such activities. Early online chatrooms also facilitated commercial sexual practices. For instance, DS's (38, Tianjing) first sexual experience happened with a money boy [male prostitution] whom he found online. I have shared his story in the earlier chapters. He did not know any gay people until he went online. Then, quickly through BBS he met a good friend that he had a crush on, but that man did not really want to develop a romantic relationship. DS described this man as a brother who actually guided him into the local gay circles. It was also this man suggested that DS should try out gay sex.

> **DS:** I was too picky, at that time I thought if I selected one then I needed to share the rest of my life with him. Also, I was [sexually] conservative, I did believe that my first time should give to a guy that I loved. However, my brother told me that

if you were 18, you could be this naïve, but you were 28 at that time. It was in 2007. So he just thought I should not continue like this, I should not place myself above the common populace. So, he helped me found an MB [money boy].
Then I decided to have a go. As we were just discussing my stories in the circle, I haven't told you [what happened in] my real life. Actually, as a 28-year-old man, you did have lots of pressure from real life. I had already been forced to date [females]. Of course, no success. I should say I did not want it to succeed at all, as I have no interest. At that time, most *tongzhi* at a similar age would hope to get married to a woman, give birth and meanwhile keep their secret life in the *tongzhi* circle. I didn't want to do that. Because first, I had not found true love in the circle so I couldn't invest myself to date a girl. So my brother suggested that I should try out gay sex. It had ceremonial [or symbolic] value, even if then I decided to date a girl, or whatever way I chose, at least I have tried.
So he just helped me to find one [MB]. As web-camera was already available in late 2007. So, he accompanied me in an internet café, we online interviewed a few boys and then selected one.

RD: How did you find them online then?

DS: At that time, every area had its own chatroom, there were many MBs promoting themselves in the chatrooms. So we just add their QQ numbers and have a video chat with them. The one I chose was a 17-year-old boy. After that, it seemed to open a door to a completely new world. It was a very different experience compared to masturbation. It turned out that such experience was so exciting, then I felt why I had wasted 28 years of my life.

There are numbers of interesting points we could unpack further from DS's (38, Tianjin) case. First, we can still see resonances of pressures to be "normal". That is to say, DS was forced by his parents to date girls. Because of this social pressure and expectation, many Chinese gay men do get married as a cover-up of their homosexuality. Second, under such situation, doing gay sex had symbolic meaning to him. It seemed, to him and his brother, having gay sex become a task which did not only bring him to the "reality" but also enabling him to make a more informed decision that he would never regret. Third, since the earlier days, the Internet has been utilised by Chinese individuals to promote commercial sex. Chinese gay men could get access to commercial sex easily. As demonstrated in DS's case, the whole process of getting an MB was very convenient and efficient. Furthermore, the fact that both DS and his "brother" believed commercial sex would be the easiest solution to having gay sex also shows the fact that gay sex is objectified. That is to say, they did not feel unconformable with having commercial gay sex.

Again, this suggests that the enjoyment of sexual pleasure has become, for many gay men, centre to today's 'sexual revolution' in a neoliberal market China.

Furthermore, the above case also relates back to a few points that I have made in previous chapters. It is the negotiation of a "bicultural self" in China (Lu and Yang, 2006). In order to satisfy his parents' expectations, DS sacrifices himself to date females, and even though going into heterosexual marriage to cover up his same-sex attractions. However, the discourses of individualism also shape his construction of self. There is a strong sense of agency and control in his actions, and he believes he is in control of his life. Thus, he has to make choices and decisions. The core of his self is "the independent and individual way of being" (Lu, 2008p. 349) that he does not intend to follow other people's life path (i.e. going into heterosexual marriage and live a "double life").

VM's (21, Shanghai) story further demonstrates how market values have become venerated in the sexual sphere. When VM moved to Shanghai after university, he had more opportunities to hook-up and have casual sex. He then called for an MB in order to learn more sexual skills:

> When I moved to Shanghai, I started to be top[65] more often. But I felt I don't have enough experience in being a top. So I thought I could find an MB and learn a few tips from him and develop my lovemaking skills. You know, on Blued, there are some profiles that you told tell they are MB. So I just talked to one who was close to me. It was an awful experience. That guy was ugly, not tall, and his dick is super small, the smallest I have even seen. I just did not know how he had the confidence to be an MB.

Indeed, VM (21, Shanghai) was not only pursuing his own sexual pleasure, but also he believed that he should offer other people sexual pleasure. Therefore, he intended to improve his loving making techniques. In order to do so, he decided to call a Money Boy. This implies VM believed that commercial sex was the easiest option to learn lovemaking skills. This, again, shows how a market mentality has been brought to people's private sphere. It implies that improve loving making techniques could put one in a better position in a "competitive" carnal market. This also related back to the "quality" discourse that I have discussed in relation to gay porn.

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65 "Top" is the dominant or inserting sexual partner in gay relationships.

Moreover, we can see as gay men's social networking platforms develop, Money Boys have quickly adapted them as promotional channels. This is not just to say the digital media platform has facilitated (gay male) commercial sex. However, they certainly provide Chinese gay men with the affordance to engage with convenient commercial sex. This affordance was introduced by the internet from a very early age; the development of geolocation apps further facilitated the convenience of casual sex seeking. Popular gay social applications, like Blued, have also continuously reminded Chinese gay males that Money Boys are available to them anytime and anywhere (in major cities).

Furthermore, we can see that the whole process of having commercial sex is no different from other commercial services. VM just regarded the Money Boy as a service provider and evaluated his physical features. In particular, the fact that he was not happy with the MB' penis size simply demonstrates VM did not only capitalise the male body but also had adopted a particular code of masculinity which could trace back to the consumption of Western gay porn. Arguably, this can be seen as one of the impacts of "a peculiar kind of erotic-cultural imperialism" (Jacobs, 2012) which seems to standardise gay males' sexual fantasy.

When Chinese gay male participants are celebrating the digital media facilitated easy access of (gay) casual sex, they also have concerns about the perceived risk of casual sex. As I mentioned in the early chapters that there was a reported negative perception of casual sex in the Chinese gay community. Many Chinese gay men criticised the circle as promiscuous. They may initially feel reluctant to engage with other gay males for sexual purposes. However, for most of them, curiosity and desires often overcome the fears. Robin (21, Beijing) offers a typical story:

> **Robin:** It was in the second semester of my first-year university, perhaps in March, I suddenly had a weird idea that I wanted to hook-up.
>
> **RD:** Why?
>
> **Robin: I** don't know. […] I think I already got to know this term in high school because I remember seeing some information online saying that gay guys like to hook-up with each other and sexually messy. In Tieba, I often saw some thread starters exposing their stories saying he had a hook-up with someone last night, how did that guy look and how good or bad that guy's sexual skills were. Then, there were people often joking that he should be careful to catch the "big A[IDS] gift".
>
> **RD:** How did you feel at that time after reading that?

Robin: It was amusing, however, at that time my main focus was on the study. Also, I thought it might be risky, so I kept a bit distance [from it]. Now, when I recall those stories [that I read online during high school], I still cannot imagine what the hooking-up experiences would be like in my hometown. For example, when I was in my hometown, I did see some secret signs in public toilets, such as “leave your phone number” and “for oral sex” etc. Sometimes, I also noticed that [when I was in some public toilets] there were people leering at me. I wouldn’t dare to do anything with them, I felt it was too risky.

[…]

Robin: When I went to university, I downloaded Blued, and started to chat with people. I found many people were just looking for casual sex. Because not after chatting for 2 sentences, they would ask you “where do you live, you like to be bottom or top, do you want to have fun?” At first, I was reluctant, because at that time the fears and worries were more about hurt by other people rather than HIV, I mean something like drugging and sexually assaulting. I thought if I wear condoms throughout I would not be like others that easily to catch HIV. [….]

Robin: Anyway, not long since I had the idea to hook-up, a guy nearby sent me greetings and we exchanged photos, then he sent me his GPS location, then we met. Then I found out he used fake photo, the picture he sent to me was not him. At that time, although I said damn it to myself, I still went for it. I didn’t poke his lies. Then he took me to his home. We had sex.

RD: Was it like what you expected?

Robin: No really. Because I was in pain in the whole process. When I was watching GV [gay porn videos], I felt that the bottoms were all ecstatic. However, in fact, when I was in intercourse it was really painful. Then that guy used RUSH [amyl nitrate]. He let me smell, but at first, because I didn’t know what it was, I did not smell. I just pretended that I have smelled. Then he smelled it himself. You know, if you don’t smell it your muscles won’t get relaxed. So, he wanted me to smell it again, then the second time I did. After breathed in, I could clearly hear my heartbeat, bang bang bang, so fast. I was also particularly excited, and perhaps even a bit lost consciousness. At that moment, I kept telling myself that I should keep my consciousness and never be raped.

There are so many points we need to unpack from Robin’s (21, Beijing) story. First, as demonstrated previously the Internet has become the major information source for Chinese gay men to understand their sexual identity and learn about the gay culture (see Chapter 5). Robin’s initial impression of the gay community was based on the stories in online discussion forums. HIV

infection was one of the issues that he could recall. Relatedly, hooking-up has become a common practice within the urban gay community. Individuals documented and discussed their causal sexual encounters online. Again, this is the evidence of the Chinese sexual revolution in which people prioritise their enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Indeed, the (digital) media have constructed a gay world for many young Chinese gay males before they have physically entered the gay community (see chapter 5). Although some of them were uncertain about these negative online narratives, these online narratives still had an impact on them. For example, Robin was aware of the prevention of HIV, but he still feared that he might be raped when he was hooking up with strangers. Although his first anal sex was condom-protected, he did smell some “unknown” chemical under persuasion. This could have a potential risk.

Moreover, Robin’s expectation of gay sex only came from watching gay porn videos. He had strong curiosities about it, but his first-time anal sex was not as he expected. Indeed, like Robin many young participants reported disappointment about their first anal sex experiences. For a slightly “extreme” example, Yong (28, Guangzhou) told me that he never enjoyed anal sex and would just prefer “hand jobs”:

> I have tried [anal sex] for two or three times. The experiences were not very good, so I just like to wank each other off. It [anal sex] was just painful, I didn’t enjoy at all. This was not like what’s described in the [online erotic] novels and gay porn videos. I also feel I am a bit offended [when I am having anal sex]. It may be too much to say “offended” because I intended to do it, but it was so suffering, so I thought I would have to do it [again].

Again, we can see here, Yong’s (28, Guangzhou) sexual knowledge was mainly gay online pornographic contexts [novels and videos]. He has tried anal sex for a couple of times but did not enjoy it. Thus, he prefers to have other kinds of sexual activities. We should respect every individuals’ sexual choice. Nevertheless, we also need to better inform Chinese gay males how to get the most pleasure from their sexual activities safely and healthily. Here, I do not intend to join the debate on the effects of pornography (Bishop, 2015) as I cannot claim any causal relationship between watching porn and individuals’ sexual preference. However, their sorites do highlight that special sexuality education for sexual minorities is needed in China.

Secondly, (gay) mobility is another reoccurring theme in Robin’s (21, Beijing) story. When we were discussing his sexual experiences, he naturally brought up a question about what if he was hooking-up in his hometown that was a small southern coastal city. Robin realised his same-sex desires in junior high

school, by the time he finished high school he had ready watched gay porn and frequently visited online forums. He could recall seeing sexual invitation signs in gay cruising sites, but he felt that was too risky. Therefore, he would not dare to participate in those sexual activities. This shows that Robin's exploration of his sexuality was relatively an internal journey before he entered university and downloaded gay dating apps. The reasons behind this could perhaps be because: a) he prioritised his study (see chapter 1). b) He was constrained by the social environment in his hometown. Sexual minorities tend to be relatively conservative in smaller towns. They might have to cover-up their gay identity and just seeking for same-sex pleasure. Many participants told me that when they went back to their hometown for Chinese New Year, they checked Blued, but they could just find very few people close to them. Moreover, a few people would also change their profile picture to hide their own identity when they go back to their hometown as they fear to be identified by others they might know. Again, this suggests that gay male digital culture is shaped by the physical social environment. Yet, one could argue that digital media facilitated a certain gay connectivity which could also be beneficial for gay males who are living in smaller towns and cities. The question here is, to what extent, the digital media could liberate them from the social and cultural constraints. I will illustrate this point in regard to the issue of fake profile picture later in this chapter (Robin also mention the issue of the fake picture in his story).

6.3.2 Sexual Roles and Norms

As I have already shown, sex is an important part of Chinese gay men's lives. Although some people do not prefer anal sex, the label/symbol referring to sexual roles during penetrative sex do connote certain self-identifications and social meanings. Zheng (2015) observes that "1" and "0" are pervasive used sexual categories in Chinese gay communities (p.75-95). She suggests that "1, symbolizing the penis, is identified within the community as the male role, whereas 0, symbolizing the vagina, is associated with the female role" (ibid., p.75). Indeed, we need to look at the specific cultural and social meanings of such sexual roles, but we should not overemphasis this division. In this sense, I agree with Wei (2016) who suggests that "the 1/0 division is quite fluid" (p.827). This is witnessed in several participants' experiences. For example, in the early section VM's (21, Shanghai) mentioned when he moved to Shanghai, he became a top. Before then he saw himself as "0.5":

> At that time when I started using that app [blued], I used to put “0.5” there. Because I had no sex before and I don’t know if I am ‘gong’ [top] or ‘shou’ [bottom]. So when I had my first sex, for a long time I was ‘shou’. Because at that time I wanted to reverse, my sexual partner at the time strongly rejected this idea. I just wanted to try and see whether I am “1” or “0”.

There are a number of points that we need to unpack further. Firstly, VM saw the 1/0 [also 0.5] more as a label for sexual position rather than gender roles that Zhang (2015) stressed. In fact, VM is not a unique case, a few participants just see the 1/0 system more as sexual position references which may or may not indicate an individual’s gender expression. Secondly, the fluidity of 1/0 division is complicated and depend on individuals’ personal expectations and experiences towards sex and relationships. In VM’s case, the changing of sexual position was not an “active” choice:

> I think it is the regional difference. Because I am quite tall, and also looks manly. Many southern boys won’t wait until I tell them my sexual roles, many of them started to call me [their] husband [*laogong*, 老公]. So I just start to play the role they set out for me. Therefore, since I moved here, I have generally been ‘1’, only one or two times been ‘0’.

Yet, the above extract does show that people still have particular expectations towards gendered expression in the 1/0 system. Many gay individuals do expect that the “1s” should perform masculinity. As Zheng (2015) suggests that “same-sex-attracted men usually call each other ‘husband’ (*laogong*) and ‘wife’ (*laopo*) in alignment with their gender roles” (p.78). However, these gender roles could be easily performed by VM. This certainly demonstrates Butler (2011)’s notion of gender “performativity” in which she claims:

> Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender (p.45).

Indeed, if we understand gender roles as “performed” then the question here is not only how to we perform our gender roles, but also, in which circumstances individuals would change their “performing strategy”. In VM’s case, he was performing the masculine role of being ‘1’ in order to keep hooking up and have casual sex activities with other same-sex attracted men

in Shanghai. Similarly, DS's (38, Tianjing) self-identification in the 1/0 system had also changed during the years. As mentioned early DS's had his first sex with a MB, and in that sexual intercourse he took the insertive role (i.e. 1/top), after which he has mostly been "1". However, before he had his first sex he always thought he would be 0.5. He explains the reason:

> According to my "brother" that I am a stubborn person, that I like to put a label on myself and one I put on it will be difficult to change. So at that time because I had not yet had sex, I was not sure if I am 1 or 0. But because I was courting my 'brother' and he is 0.5. […] So I wanted to find a guy like him [my 'brother'] who is kind, knowledgeable, mature and caring. So I thought I was 0. For a couple of years, I was looking for a 1 like him. Although I dated some interesting people, but I had still not had sex until 2007. Because I still had the idea that I want to find one to spend my whole life with. If not I wouldn't have sex with him.

We can see DS's (38, Tianjin) initial identification in terms of the 1/0 system was depending on relational desires, which implied certain exceptions toward gender roles. As mentioned in early chapters, DS had a romantic attachment with a man he met through an online gay forum. Although that man rejected his romantic pursuit, he became a mentor and a good friend for DS in the gay circle. As DS never had gay sex before 2007, he defined his sexual roles in relation to his brother's sexual identification. However, DS's sexual identification changed since he had his first sex with a 17-year-old money boy. He was "1" at that event and he really enjoyed that sexual experience. DS marked this first sex as a significant changing point not only because it was his first sex with another male but also because it "reserved" his sexual role:

> Before that I always thought I was '0'. But after that I found I especially like the feeling of subjugation. Since then, when I choice people to date I would choice someone younger than me. It is also the younger the better. I don't mind even if someone is underage. And in terms of the sexual role I have always been '1', apart a few occasions. But I never achieved organism when I was '0'.

Again, DS's words not only demonstrate the fluidity of 1/0 system, but more importantly it shows that there are issues of power involved in the gay sex, specifically with regard to sexual roles. This is not Chinese specific, as Kendall (2005) argues that there is a power oppression in gay porn (both its consumption and production) which reinforce the male (top) dominance. Thus, I agree with Wei's (2016) criticism of Zheng's (2015) work:

> Zheng refers to other cultural contexts that contain similar gender-denoted same-sex relationships, but she misses the most comparable counterpart: the 'top'/

> ‘bottom’ division (including the category of ‘versatile’, which is equivalent to ‘0.5’) in American gay communities (p.827).

Indeed, many of my younger participants use the ‘1/0’ and ‘top/bottom’ systems interchangeably when they refer to their sexual roles. For example, when Robin (21, Beijing) asked his gay friend what is ‘1’ and ‘0’. He told Robin that “1 is top, 0 is bottom, and 0.5 is in the middle of top and bottom”. Then Robin thought he might be bottom, because when he watched GV he would put himself into the bottom role. Unlike DS who identified his sexual role depended on the relational desires in a situation in which he was actively perusing a romance. Robin defined his sexual role according to his erotic desires. Moreover, this self-identification process is facilitated by the access to gay porn on the Internet that I have discussed earlier. Similarly, YLY (27, Guangzhou) believed that reading online same-sex erotic novels helped him to identify his sexual roles. This demonstrates, again, that the digital media has played a particular role in the construction of Chinese gay males’ sexual identity. As mentioned early in this chapter (and pervious chapters), Chinese young gay men have learned many things about their sexuality and gay culture online before they have actually encountered another gay male in their physical lives. This “online learning” process has constructed a particular gay “reality” for them.

Acknowledging this, we need to think further about Zheng’s (2015) claim that “before entering the *tongzhi* community, same-sex-attracted men are not aware of the gender division between 1 and 0. […] New members in the community, who have no clue whether they are 1s or 0s, find themselves slowly socialized into these two categories” (p.75). While I am not disputing her claim, there are a number of issues with their argument. Firstly, it would be a difficult question of how to define the entering point to the *tongzhi* community. As aforementioned younger participants have a period of online exploration about their sexuality before they start to engage with other gay males in the physical world. Should we count this period of online exploration as “entered” the community? Secondly, she suggests that new members will “find themselves slowly socialized into these two categories”. The first question is how “slow” one could socialise into their sexual categories. As I have illustrated in Chapter 4, some individuals could identify with his sexual identity in a moment or a relatively short of time others might take longer. This time variation is also true in relation to their self-acceptance. In terms of identification in the 1/0 system, as shown in the above cases, many participants could quite quickly adapt their sexual roles, but others maybe not.

Third, and most problematically, Zheng (2015) tends to stress the division in the 1/0 system. Although she does not really suggest that one could only either be 1 or 0, she seems to highlight the essentialisation of such identification. As aforementioned, we can see the fluidity of 1/0 system. Furthermore, many younger participants reported less care about the gay sexual division. For example, Yee (23, Guangzhou) explained the reason why he put "0.5" on Blued:

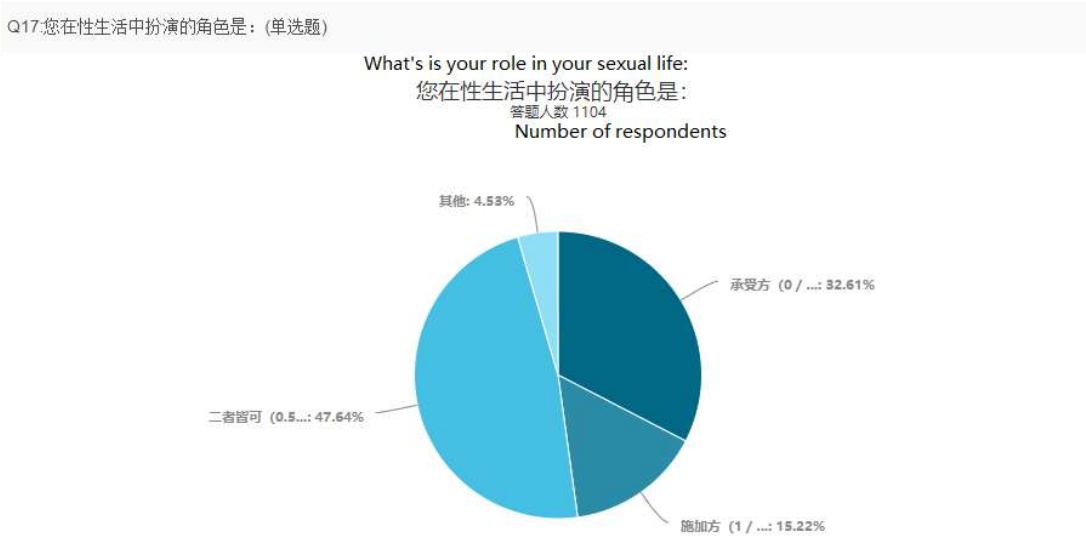
> Although I put 0.5 on my Blued, I do not think this [the sexual role] should be that important. When I was in junior and senior high school, my self-identification was 0. Because at that time, my sexual fantasy was towards those strong and muscular men. But then I gradually found that this was not my whole self. It perhaps was the stories I read online, and the friends around pushed me into that identification and then I presented more about it. Later on, I found that sometimes I would really like those guys who are really cute, who are stereotypically defined as 'shou' [0/bottom]. Then I knew I can go with those guys. Now, I feel that it does not matter if I like to be subjugating or be subjugated. It is also does not matter if he is more masculine or feminine. Now I just do not care much about these, the person who can get along with me is more important.

Yee's case does not only demonstrate, again, the fluidity of 1/0 system, but he also developed certain resistance to the 1/0 division during the years. He seems to be very open about his sexual roles and also refuse to use stereotypes to define himself and others. Huang (20, Beijing) also put "0.5" on Blued, however, his reason was slightly different from EE:

> **Huang:** I put 0.5 there. Although I have not had sex yet, I don't feel I am clearly a 'shou' [0/bottom] or 'gong' [1/top]. I don't think there is a clear and simple cut between [the two categories].
>
> **RD:** Then why do you want to put this label there [on blued], I think there is another option that you can choose not to tell.
>
> **Huang:** Yes, I know. But I saw most of the people put their sexual roles there, so I thought I should do that too. Also, don't you feel that if you do not put your role their it will make profile less likely to convey information effectively.

Again, Huang (20, Beijing) is relatively open about his sexual roles. He was trying to explore the possibilities and did not want to fix it. Indeed, a community survey (n=1104) that I conducted for another project shows 47.64% respondents identify themselves as "0.5" (Ding, 2018). The above cases might provide some reasons for this result. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the sexual roles for (Chinese) gay men are definitely not only just "two

categories". Furthermore, although EE and Huang do not view 1/0 system as significant for them, they both put "0.5" as their sexual role on gay social apps. This suggests that the digital media have played a significant and particular role in Chinese gay males' everyday lives. In order to maximise their dating possibilities, many of my participants have adopted some strategies in using such platforms. I will unpack these strategies and their social implications in the following section.



选项	回复情况
承受方（0 / Bottom)	32.61%
施加方（1 / Top)	15.22%
二者皆可（0.5 / Vers)	47.64%
其他	4.53%
回答人数：1104	

Figure 6.6 Chinese Gay Men's Self-identification of Sexual Roles

6.4 Dating in a Digital Age

A number of studies have suggested that the emergence of digital media has transformed the way of gay male networking and their social relations (Wu and Ward, 2018). "Gay bar" is a longstanding metaphor of such online gay dating platforms and applications. Campbell (2004) carried out one of the first studies which investigated three gay male Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels: #gaymuscle (a community that celebrates the muscular male body), #gaychub (a community that celebrates male obesity), and #gaymusclebear (where the muscular "bear" type of male body is preferred). He claims these niche gay

channels function like a “virtual gay bar” where online interaction often leads to an offline encounter. When Grindr was introduced to the (Western) gay world, it was described as “the world’s biggest gay bar”(Kapp, 2011). More recently, on the one hand, popular media make an argument that “Grindr is killing the gay bar” (Renninger, 2019); on the other hand, scholars also observed the phenomena of “leaving Grindr” and “a culture of participatory reluctance” in the Western gay communities (Brubaker et al., 2016, Cassidy, 2018). Again, these arguments bring us back to a question that Rodat (2014) raised after she reviewed the field of “cyberqueer research”:

> To what extent is cyberspace a democratic, liberating, even ‘revolutionary’ place for queer individuals, contributing to the general emancipation of societies in this respect? […] Or, on the contrary, is the internet a space that reproduces the social and cultural inequalities and asymmetries, prejudices, stereotypes, discriminatory patterns and unflattering/invective apprehensions concerning queer individuals?

Although in this view Rodat (2014) considers the Internet has a distinct space that separates the “online” and “offline” which is not a position I am taking here, the points she addressed are relevant here in examining the role of digital media in gay individuals’ everyday lives, in particular their dating experience.

In addressing this, and following Wu and Ward’s (2018) call for examining “how dating apps are reconfigured in a local context” (p. 7), I analyse my participants mediated experiences of dating from a media ecology perceptive. This is because most aforementioned studies only examine user experience of only one website or one smartphone application. However, people are likely to use more than one online dating platform, given that many platforms are available and provide different functions.

In fact, Chinese gay men use a number of conventional dating platforms, such as Grindr, Jack’d, Blued and Aloha; they also utilise many other un-conventional digital platforms for sexual and relational purpose. Although in this chapter, I am mainly addressing Chinese gay men’s user experiences of conventional dating platforms, I will cover some un-conventional digital platforms when I discuss the theme of “leaving dating apps” in order to demonstrate how the nature of a particular digital platform may provide Chinese gay men with different affordances.

Generally, the majority of my participants perceive these gay social apps as hooking-up apps, that is to say they see the main purpose of using such apps is to achieve sexual gorals. For example, Blued, the most popular gay social

app, is commonly referred as AIDS Blue (*aizi lan*/艾滋蓝) to demote the promiscuity and health risk of hooking-up on Blued. Ah Zhe (26, Guangzhou) explains:

> You know when you get on Blued, you will always receive hooking-up messages. Many just simply text '*yue*? [wanna (a shag)?, 约？]'. Even you put something like you are not looking for quick sex in your profile people still ignore you. And some time you will also receive some text like '*hai ma*? [wanna high? 嗨吗？]'. I did not understand what they meant at first, I thought they were just greeting. But then I found out that they want to have on drug sex. In those occasions you just have to admit that there is a reason why people call Blued as AIDS Blue.

Indeed, as mentioned early, when the Internet was introduced to China, it had already become a channel to find casual sex. Recently location-based gay social apps have made this sexual search even more convenient. Ah Hua (29, Guangzhou) reflects on his hooking-up experiences during the years and concludes that: it is easier and easier to hook-up with someone, it has become quicker and quicker.

> I have a very deep impression on this. When I was using PHS [Personal Handy-phone System/*xiao lingtong*] to hook-up with others, no matter before or after [the sex] we would have many conversations. Then when I went to university and had QQ, hooking-up become very easy. In the QQ groups, [I just wrote] '*yue bu*' [to hook-up?]. [If he is] OK. Then we would arrange a place and have sex, later on we would not keep any contacts. Then until, I started to use Jack'd, the hooking-up process becomes even quicker. The hooking-up process became very direct. For example, when you see someone you like you will just text him on the app. You can actively select someone. At that time, apart from checking his sexual role, height, weight, and appearance, I also look at his bio, his self-introduction in which would states his hobbies, but more importantly, what he was looking for. This seemed like a job interview. I mean I would see if I meet his requirement or not. It was like employing a sex [mate]. Then we will chat briefly. If [things] were OK, we would have sex.

In his view, it is the technological development makes the hooking-up process easier and quicker, and dating apps have provided further affordances to Ah Hua in relation to find casual sex. His view is in line with the research findings of Chan (2017b), in which he argues that five affordances distinguish dating apps from dating websites: (a) mobility, (b) proximity, (c) immediacy, (d) authenticity, and (e) visual dominance. Firstly, dating apps provide its users with mobility. One can use dating apps at any time anywhere because they are embedded on the user's portable devices (e.g., mobile phones and

tablets). Secondly, geo-location-based dating apps connect users in their immediate proximity, namely, users could be connected to people who are spatially very close to them. Thus, thirdly, dating apps would help users to arrange impromptu offline meetings immediately. Fourthly, dating app users could also link their other social media accounts (e.g., Instagram) which could provide a certain level of authenticity. Lastly, dating apps' interface designs often highlight users profile pictures while dating websites are providing more textual descriptions.

In Ah Hua's account, these technological features certainly facilitated a more convenient hooking-up process. Again, there is a market mentality embedded in his view which suggests the more cost-effective the better. Fan (30, Beijing) further explains the efficiency of hooking-up on mobile apps:

> I think Blued provides us a quick consumption model that is designed for hooking-up. First of all, it offers you to see their sexual roles directly, there will be a 1, 0, or 0.5 under the corner of your profile picture[66]. And it also allows you to filter profiles according to a particular sexual role. You can select an area and then it will show the result, then, you start to choose from these [people]. **It is like buying vegetables in a market** (my emphasis)**.** However, it is very fair. When you choose others, others also choose you.

Fan's view supports the claim of Yeo and Fung (2018) that "the interface design [of gay mobile dating apps], which foregrounds profile photos and backgrounds textual self-description, was perceived to structure the sequence of browsing and screening in favour of physical appearance and users seeking casual hook-ups" (p. 3). Furthermore, in Fan's view, gay dating apps (in particular Blued) also offers yet another affordance which enable him to identity other individuals' sexual roles directly and immediately which further facilitates his hooking-up practices. Indeed, many participants use the app filtering function to only show 1s or 0s around them. For many of them, this 1/0 division is still an important indication of one's sexual identity and gender performativity, depending on which my participants selectively finding potential gay men to arrange casual sex and/or develop social relationships.

It is important to note this 1/0 based selection function dates back to the era of gay dating websites. For example, YLY (27, Guangzhou) still remembers the joy and excitement of a gay dating website - named BF99 - to him:

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66 Interestingly, at the early stage of my filed work, in the end of 2017, Blued deleted the feature of showing one's sexual roles on their profile picture. This caused many complaints in the community and Blued soon restored this feature back to the app.

> At first, I did not think the 1/0 matters that much until I found BF99 when I was in my undergraduate. Everyone would say if they are 1 or 0, like the apps now. Then people would also state their hobbies and interests as well. It was so convenient.

Again, like YLY, many participants aged 25-30 celebrate the affordances that gay dating websites brought to them. They often view it as "a brand-new start" of their dating experience because, for them, it was the first time that they could find so many gay individuals in the same city with them. Although local gay online chat rooms and QQ groups existed before gay dating websites, the number of people in these platforms were relatively limited and also the exchange of personal information was mostly on a one-to-one basis. Gay dating websites, such as BF99, first presented a large number of gay individuals in the same city to my relatively younger participants and they were able to select their potential dates by simply checking through their profiles. Again, comparing with the older Chinese gay men who have to go to cruising sites to find other gay individuals, the technological advance has provided the younger gay males with great efficiency and convenience to develop potential dates and sexual encounters.

Indeed, taking advantage of such technology affordances, most participants reported that their use of dating websites and apps is very purposeful whether to find sexual partners or develop romantic relationships. Song's (23, Beijing) words exemplify this point:

> I am on the apps because I want to make friends or just for sexual needs. I am very purposeful. I don't like those people who put 0.5 or prefer to not to say in their profiles. Why you need to be that ambiguous. I am 0, and I want to find 1, that's very simple. I don't need to find a bestie or a sister. I have many gay friends around me which is already enough. **Why I need to waste time to chat with another 0 on the app** (my emphasis)**.** So, I use the filter function on Blued: 1, taller than 180 [cm], and weigh around 70-80 kg. Because I like guys with a nice figure.

Song's words echo a few points that I have discussed early, such as the using 1/0 system as sexual identity indicator, using the filter function to facilitate efficient and practical dating outcomes. More importantly, his words demonstrate a very intensified neoliberal/market mindset towards (gay) dating. It is clear he intends to maximise the efficiency/productivity of dating/hooking-up process to achieve his goal. This is very much like the analogy which Fan (30, Beijing) used earlier that dating/hooking-up through apps is like "buying vegetables in a market".

Indeed, many participants used the same or similar analogy to describe their digital dating/hooking-up experiences. While some find this business-like dating practices helpful, others are not comfortable with it. For instance, YQT (28, Guangzhou) feels apprehensive about this overtly purposive dating habit:

> Scanning through Blued is like walking around in a vegetable market where everyone has a price. I know it may sound fair. But I just don't like the feeling of being selected. Dating shouldn't like a market exchange.

Here, YQT (28, Guangzhou) questions the very nature of dating in a digital age, in which an individual is quantified into certain figures in his bio information, which can be used as filtering settings such as sexual role, age, height, and weight. Besides these simple indexed categories, (gay) dating apps also commonly provide tags for the body type, personality, what the user is looking for, and relationship status in the registration process. Indeed, Wang (2020a) argues "this registration process demonstrates the technology for the classification of gay men into standard data units, both numeric numbers and non-numeric tags" (p. 186). He also found that this process of datafication of gay men can be culturally specific as he identifies that "12 personality tags are a speciality of Blued that are not found in its Western counterpart Grindr" (ibid. p. 182). However, from YQT's no matter how sophisticated this datafication process can be, he is not comfortable about the very nature that being selected by these simply classifications. For him, the process of digital dating should not be like a market-based activity.

Many participants agree with YQT (28, Guangzhou), but most of them feel that they cannot do anything to change this phenomenon. Thus, they have developed sophisticated strategies to maximise a positive dating/hooking-up outcome via these gay social networking apps. Wu and Ward (2019) have found that "single gay users of dating apps in Chinese metropolises tend to be open to all possible relations, sexual or nonsexual" (p. 14). Indeed, "be open" a common attitude that many of my participants hold to obtain greater relationship potential, however, they have also employed very specific strategies to help them achieve their dating or sexual goals. Before I unpack such strategies, I want to highlight how (Chinese specific) social context has shaped my participants' use of such gay apps, in particular, I demonstrate how they negotiate and (re)present their identities on these apps in relation to the issue of profile picture.

For most of my participants, whether to upload a face picture is related to the issue of identifiability. Woo (2006) refers the concept of identifiability to the degree to which an online identity can be linked to a known person. Woo (2006)

suggests that profile pictures on dating sites are openly identifying for those who know and recognize an individual. Thus, such information “must be shared carefully, so a key consideration is how much information to disclose in one’s profile” (Blackwell et al., 2015, p. 1122). This is particularly relevant to gay male (or men who have sex with men) users of “location-based real-time dating” (LBRTD) applications “because both sex with men and one-time sexual encounters may be stigmatized” (ibid.). As I shall explore in this section, Chinese gay men’s experience certainly supports this argument. Their strategies for self-presentation are complicated and are shaped by Chinese specific cultural and social contexts.

Firstly, many participants are not willing to post their face pictures on Blued because they do not want to be identified by people they know. This is particularly observable when an individual was using Blued in relatively collective social settings, such as schools and (state-owned) working units. Edd (20, Beijing) was an undergraduate student in one of the top universities which could be seen as a relatively open place (both academically and socially), but he was still not willing to be identified by others, thus updating a face picture on Blued was never a choice for him. He explains the reason:

> Although, I am out to my friends, but it is not necessary to be out to everyone, especially strangers. You know, school is a special environment where everyone knows everyone. Moreover, people like gossips, and talk behind someone. It is not like, say, you are in a street where you don’t know anyone, and they also don’t know you. Under this particular environment, many students do not dare to admit their identity to others. Once if I expose [my identity to others], I feel a certain degree of unsafeness, especially in such a close environment. […] Although I know the public acceptance of homosexuality is increasing, but you cannot say everyone has accepted it, and especially, there are still a few people against it. So you don’t want to standout which potentially could let you be isolated. This is the same with most of the things in China, you don’t want to standout, you want to please the mass, the majority.

Edd’s (20, Beijing) view is representative of a good number of my participants. There are two points we can unpack further from his words. Firstly, we can still trace the influences of the traditional (social-oriented) Chinese model of self on him. This is to say rather than entailing a strong notion of “individuality”, he behaves himself in order not to “stand out” from the “mass” (Hall and Ames, 1998, p. 23). Thus, he sees his sexuality as something private to him, rather than an identity that he intends to claim to make him be identified. I will return to this point in the next chapter.

However, this is not to say Edd (20, Beijing) has not accepted his sexual identity, in fact he is comfortable living with homosexuality. His main concern, and as of many other young participants, is more like to be information control in Goffman's (1963) term, that they should take care in disclosing their personal identity to others in social interactions. Indeed, most of my research participants tend to "come out" selectively. This is in line with the observation of Bao (2011) that he claims:

> For many gays and lesbians in China, one does not need to be completely 'in' or 'out'. Being 'in' and 'out' depends on the particular social setting and on the person that they are with. When to conceal and when to disclose one's identity, together with to whom, becomes a matter of politics (p.231).

Thus, for many participants, having their face picture on their LBRTD applications, in particular, Blued, means they lose their control of this in/out dynamic. As Edd (20, Beijing) mentioned above, he is willing to be out to his friends, but not willing to be out to everyone, especially the strangers who might gossip about his sexual orientation without his awareness. Thus, in order to avoid this, he refuses to put face picture in his Blued profile.

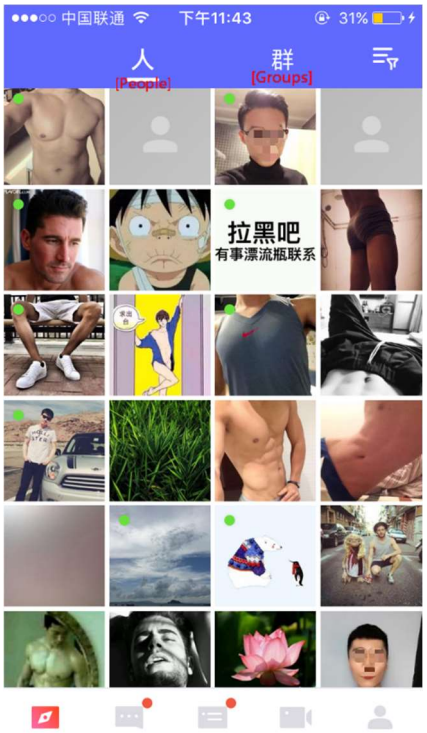

Figure 6.7 A screen shot of Blued's interface.

DS (38, Tianjin) used to put his face picture on Blued, but an incident had changed his mind:

> I used to put face picture there but had an incident. Someone in my working unit [danwei] found me. Then he started to chat with me in the app and called my name. However, when I asked who he is, he didn't say anything, so I blacklisted him. […] I used to know some friends who were very afraid of going to a gay bar, or a gay party, or any kind of gay gatherings. The reason is what if they meet someone they know. I found it very difficult to understand, and then I said that when you meet someone you know, it proved that you also know him. Your relation is fair and equal. So, what were you afraid of? But that time, the problem was it was not fair and equal. He knew who I am, but I did not know him.

Again, DS's (38, Tianjin) comments highlight how important information control is in relation to disclosing his sexual identity. While Goffman's (1963) concept of information control emphasises on the power dynamics between "stigmatized individuals" and the "normal others", DS's case directs us to think further about the power dynamics within the "stigmatized individuals". DS took off his face picture on Blued because he was identified by his colleague whom DS could not identify. To a large degree, this person should also share the same sexual identity with DS, but DS was still not comfortable with it. He felt this is unfair and unequal, as it might cause certain unsafeness. This is to say DS would not know what the person would do after finding out his sexual identity, which might cause some troubles or inconveniences that he could not control. This further demonstrate the idea that "when to conceal and when to disclose one's identity, together with to whom, becomes a matter of politics [in China]" (Bao, 2011, p. 231). Indeed, a national survey has found out that:

> Only around 5% of them [Chinese LGBTI people] choose to disclose their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression at school, in the workplace, or in the religious communities. More are choosing to come out to their close family members, but still no more than 15% have the courage to do so. Most strikingly, the workplace remains the last place where Chinese LGBTI people feel comfortable living openly (The United Nations Development Programme, 2016, p. 8).

During to their sampling method, the above results may not be representative to the whole LGBTI community in China. However, these findings do highlight a number of issues that I have discussed in the previous chapters, and I will continue to demonstrate the in/out dynamics in the next chapter in which I shall explore the implications of (digital) networks on the construction of

Chinese gay life. Now let us focus on the view of those participants who tend to upload their face pictures on LBRTD applications.

It is important to note that those participants who choose to show their faces on LBRTD applications, are not concerned about disclosing their personal identity to others. In fact, most of them are still carefully managing their in/out status; only very few of them feel it is not a big deal for them to disclose their sexual identity. Yee (23, Guangzhou) is one of the few who are very open about his sexuality. When he started to use Blued, he had uploaded his face picture. He explains:

> **Yee:** I came out around the age of 14, to my mum, when I was in junior high school. Then entered high school, I was almost openly out, and my teachers and classmates all treated me very well. […] When I just entered university, I got to know Blued and I updated all my real information on there. My profile name was my real name and I also put in my school and major. I was hoping perhaps through this way I would meet some people close to me and in the same university. Then, later on, when Blued first launched a function that you could verify your profile picture, I verified my profile picture immediately.
>
> **RD:** Why?
>
> **Yee:** Because I was never afraid of letting others know [my sexual orientation]. People all know I am gay, so I am not afraid. I mean I am not afraid of exposing my identity. Furthermore, I feel no matter what, you need to be sincere in making friends. If I verified my picture, then when someone likes my look, they would be confident to chat with me.

Yee's (23, Guangzhou) story demonstrates that although sociocultural context shapes an individual's self-(re)presentation strategies (Chan, 2016), how he presents himself on LBRTD applications largely depends on his perceived audience and relational purposes. This support a symbolic interactionist view towards self-presentation which is referred as "a product appearing on the front stage, consisting of what is 'given' (i.e., communicated deliberately) and 'given off' (i.e., communicated unintentionally)" (Chan, 2016, p. 6041). I will continue to illustrate this point in the following sections.

Like Yee (23, Guangzhou), there are a number of participants also unloaded their face pictures on Blued. Their reasons are similar to what Yee has mentioned. But unlike Yee, they are mainly out to their close friends. They believe that only gay people will use Blued and their (heterosexual) friends, family members, and relatives would not use Blued. Again, this suggests that

an individual's self-presentation on LBRTD applications is shaped by social context.

Yee (23, Guangzhou) also mentioned another point which is worth unpacking. He sees having a face picture on Blued is an indication of sincerity in developing potential relationship. Indeed, a few participants have the same view towards having face pictures on LBRTD applications, especially on Blued. Their view is in line with the observation of Mowlabocus (2010a) on Western gay urban online culture. He claims:

> The face-pic articulates the issues of self-identification, honesty and integrity and many users value this form of self-representation most highly, not least because they see it as validating profile; to many it is an act of investment and confirmation that can never be afforded a faceless profile (p. 103).

Additionally, some participants understand that a recognisable face picture signifies a higher degree of self-acceptance, in other words, having a face picture means one is comfortable with one's sexuality. Ah Zhe's words (25, Guangzhou) exemplify this view:

> Comparing those who use landscape, cartoon, or photos of celebrities, those who use their real face picture as their profile picture at least show there are serious about making friends. But how many people are using their real face picture on Blued, not many. […] Now Blued has also designed a function for them to exchange picture. When you ask them to give you a face picture, Blued could allow you to send a self-destroyed one. I mean once you clicked their picture, it will only show you for 3 second, then the picture will be destroyed automatically. So now, they would feel safe. Now it becomes like a custom. If someone sends you a picture directly, you will doubt if it is real or not. Every time when I meet those people sending me self-destroyed photos. I would often take a screen shot, and send the screen shot back and say: hahaha, I got you. Or if I am with a friend, I will ask my friend to use his phone to take a picture of that, and then send it back. I just want to tease them. Why they are so cautious about their identities. […] Anyway, I really despise those men who are in the deep of the closet. Why they cannot accept their sexuality and be pride.

Here, we can clearly sense that Ah Zhe has actively adopted a "come out and/with pride" discourse which has long been embedded in Western LGBTQ movement. He believes visibility matters and thus dislikes people who are hiding in the deep of the closet. Consequently, he often makes fun with those people who send the self-destroyed photos on Blued, and he sees them as not comfortable with their own sexuality. This is consistent with Mowlabocus'

(2010a) observation of Gaydar, a western popular gay dating site, that face-pics can be considered as a promise of what an individual can expect in real life. His research respondents also ascribe a great deal of value to face-pics on Gaydar: “being ‘proud’ of who they are, questions of ‘integrity’, of not wanting to ‘hide’ or be seen to be ‘afraid’” (p. 104). Although Ah Zhe’s view seems to be slightly aggressive, in particular the way how he teases those people sending self-destroyed pictures, it does highlight the transnational influence on Chinese gay males’ identity construction (see Chapter 5).

However, there are also some participants who celebrate Blued’s self-destroyed photo function, they see it as one of the successful localisations of Blued. For example, Xiao Bei (36, Guangzhou) believes this function helps Chinese gay men to better manage their privacy:

> Before Blued introduced this function. Someone actually stole my photo and used it as his. This kind of embezzlement would greatly affect my own privacy. For example, if there were people hanging my photos everywhere, then I would feel very unsafe. […] Say, if one’s picture was widely used by different people in an area, then people might assume they were chatting with the same guy, and then perhaps, someone might say: I know who he is, what he is doing, he is xxxx. If you were that guy [whose picture was stealing by others], you would feel that you are exposed in bright daylight. Furthermore, you don’t how who is using your picture and for what purpose.

Again, Xiao Bei’s (36, Guangzhou) words highlight the significance of information control to some Chinese gay men as I have discussed earlier. His words also direct us to think further about the role of face picture in Chinese gay (digital) dating culture. Perhaps those who do not update their own face picture on LBRTD applications also acknowledge that “a face-pic demonstrates your investment in this space and your willingness to openly identify as gay or bisexual” (Mowlabocus, 2010a, p. 103); thus in order to attract more people they would risk to use other people’s picture. Indeed, I have noticed that in some individuals’ Blued profile they state that “the picture/photo is not my own”. This does highlight a dilemma Chinese gay males’ use of social network application, as one of my participants David Chen (26, Guangzhou) points out, that “on the one hand, I want to make more friends; but on the other hand, I do want to keep this as a private issue”.

Continuing with this point, many participants reported general negative view towards Blued users which is particularly related to how their users present themselves. For example, Xiao Hu’s (36, Guangzhou) view represents a few of my participants:

Xiao Hu: Overall, I don't have good impression about the people on Blued; I mean their *suzhi* (human quality) is too low; particularly low.

RD: What do you mean by low *suzhi*?

Xiao Hu: By *suzhi* (human quality) I mean a number of things. Most of them are not sincere and genuine. For example, at the peak time, there might be 100 people sent private chat to you, but at least half of them, or even 70% of them do not have any of their photos. No bio information. Some people use landscape or food photos. Then when you asked them for pictures, either they did not want to give you and making many excuses, or they would send you a self-destroyed picture. Every time if I meet those people, I will block them, even if I found they are my type through the self-destroyed photos. This shows a kind of attitude. Even if you want to hook-up or arrange a casual sex you should also be sincere and genuine.

[…]

Now I don't often actively find people to chat. I used to send people texts, but after a few times I found many people were using fake pictures. I really hate this. For example, they would use the pictures of some micro-celebrities on Weibo. You know there are people on Weibo they like to share their lives. Some users on Blued will use their photos to act as their own. A few times if I could sense that picture might not be his own, I would ask him direct: is this your own picture? He would say yes. But then I mentioned that it seems I have seen it from somewhere else. Often, he would deny or not reply. Then, gradually, I feel the time has a cost, so I don't want to waste my time too much. Because the experiences [of using Blued] is like an audition, it is too time-consuming. Especially, when you have already paid your time and emotion, and then you find that guy is fake; you would be very disappointed.

It is interesting to note that Xiao Hu's experience relates to a few themes that I have discussed earlier. First, it is the issue of self-(re)presentation in Chinese gay digital dating culture. Xiao Hu's observation confirms the research findings of Chan (2016). Through comparing Chinese and American users' profiles on Jack'd (another popular gay dating application), he shows "that 64.2% of the U.S. profiles had at least one photo showing a face, but only 36.8% of the Chinese profiles had at least one such photo" (p. 6052). Chan (2016) believes that "the gap between the U.S. and Chinese profiles is consistent with the argument that a stronger stigma toward homosexuality exists in China" (ibid.). As I have demonstrated above, this claim seems to be true. However, we should also understand, this "stigma" is mostly a "perceived stigma". Many of

my participants have acknowledged that there is an increasing acceptance of homosexuality in Chinese society, but they still choose to disclose their personal identity carefully in order to avoid unnecessary troubles or inconveniences. This again, could be included in the non-confrontational strategy in dealing with homosexuality in China (see Chapter 5). Secondly, Xiao Hu's (36, Guangzhou) case shows again how market mentality has shaped Chinese gay males' (digital) dating culture. He believes digital dating involves both temporal and emotional investment, thus he was not willing to waste both time and affection on someone who was using fake profile picture.

Thirdly, and most interestingly, many participants, like Xiao Hu (36, Guangzhou), link the issue of self-(re)presentation, in particular face picture, as a cue of one's *suzhi* (human quality/素质). Rofel (2007) has first discussed the issue of *suzhi* within Chinese gay men, she claims that "when gay men use the term *suzhi*, they do so must often to express displeasure with or anxiety about male prostitution for men" (p. 104). She also notes that "many urban-born gay men have anxieties, paradoxically, about exploitation by rural migrants and associate money boy [male prostitute] with rurality (and also with effeminacy, since in their view acts of prostitution effeminate men)" (p.105). Thus, *suzhi* discourse "imbricates desires for proper cultural citizenship" and "constitute[s] class subjectivity" (ibid.).

Although my research participants' use of *suzhi* is related to a class subjectivity, it has less to do with male prostitution for men. Rather, they seem to use the term as a de-politicalised idiom which replace the over-politicized idiom of class (Anagnost, 2004). *Suzhi* is used vaguely by most of my participants to refer certain economic and cultural capitals that indicate one has good educational attainment and other forms of embodied cultivation, good manner, and living in a decent life, which all associate to a particular neoliberal narrative in China. I shall unpack this further in relation to my participants' use of another popular gay social application - Aloha[67].

In contrast to seeing Blued users as possessing low *suzhi*, many young participants view Aloha users generally have high *suzhi*. Through comparing Blued and Aloha, R (19, Guangzhou) offers a view on the issue of *suzhi*:

RD: Do you think Blued and Aloha are different?

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67 Aloha is a Chinese designed Tinder like gay social application. Unlike geo-location-based dating apps which connect users in their immediate proximity, namely, users could be connected to people who are spatially very close to them. Aloha offers connectivity within in a particular area (typically within a city). It does not show users in grid or list view, rather it feeds an individual a time on screen for the user to match. Only matched individuals can start a private conversion.

> **R:** Yes, hugely, first it is about people's suzhi. Lots of people only looking for casual sex nearby on Blued. However, on Aloha, the scale is bigger, and it is one to one, it is easy to use, you can just slide your finger, then if you like some on then just press "like". However, on Blued, you have to scroll? down. I just feel the quality is better on Aloha.
>
> **RD:** How would you define quality?
>
> **R:** Their appearance, their face, their body or sometimes even if they do not post the pictures of themselves, they just post photos that they took, and I also feel those photos are beautiful.

We can see from R's (19, Guangzhou) words, the notion of *suzhi* has also related to one's sexual practices. For him looking for casual sex has been defined as low *suzhi*. This is related to what I have discussed in Chapter 5 that there is a stigmatisation towards causal sex among some Chinese gay men. Bao (2018) claims that "the rhetoric of *suzhi* (quality) seems to dominate in the construction of *tongzhi* identity: *tongzhi* are characterized by *gao suzhi* (high quality)" (p. 54). Thus, he distinguishes gay and *tongzhi* identity in China:

> 'Gay' often conjures up the image of promiscuous, sexually aggressive and emotionally unstable Western men. By contrast, *tongzhi* attaches more importance to *qing* (emotional attachment) instead of *xing* (sex). *Tongzhi* are also socially responsible citizens (p.54).

Although many participants do view *qing* (emotional attachment/情) and serious relationship is associated with *gao suzhi* (high quality/高素质), but most of them would not make a distinction between *tongzhi* and gay. For them there two terms are roughly the same as identity labels, and most of the time they could use them interchangeably. Furthermore, from my observation more younger participants would call themselves gay rather than *tongzhi*. Therefore, instead of seeing *suzhi* as a particular issue related to construction of *tongzhi* identity, I would argue for a broader understanding of *suzhi* among Chinese gay community. I will continue to discuss this issue in the next chapter.

Similar to R's (19, Guangzhou) comments on Aloha, Xiao Hu's (36, Guangzhou) view extends the issue of *suzhi* to a particular neoliberal lifestyle:

> At least I am not feeling I am wasting my time on Aloha. People tend to present their face pictures on Aloha, and they also present their lives, from which you get a glance into their everyday lives. So you would have a general understanding of that person. And their profile information is relatively detailed, at least they are earnest not like Blued [users]. Moreover, their *suzhi* is high. Even the money

> boys [on Aloha] are high *suzhi* money boys. At least they went to the gym every day, wearing a designer brand. This all does not come cheap.

Xiao Hu's (36, Guangzhou) view directs us to think further about Rofel's (2007) observation on Chinese gay men's displeasure with or anxiety about male prostitution for men in relation to the issue of suzhi. Here, in Xiao Hu's (36, Guangzhou) opinion, Chinese male prostitutes could also have high suzhi if they invest themselves on bodybuilding, and fashion styling. This is seems to be a perfect example to support Wrenn's (2014) claim that "within neoliberalism, identity is not something that an individual can claim; identity is bestowed upon the individual - the financially successful individual is assigned identity and assured validity" (p. 503). Money boy is not devalued in this case as they have gained financial stability and able to maintain a metropolitan gay lifestyle.

Indeed, many Chinese gay men, not only money boys, are keen on presenting a "metropolitan model of homosexuality" (Mowlabocus, 2012, Sender, 2004) on gay social networking applications, in particular on Aloha. George (24, Hangzhou) offers us a very interesting story which could demonstrate how a particular neoliberal lifestyle is apricated among Chinese gay men:

> My high-school-friend recommended Aloha to me. He always, almost every day, tells me that there are how many people say hi to him on Aloha, and say that they are all very good looking, have been studied abroad, very rich, own BMW etc. […] His Aloha is also fake and even worse. All the photos he posted on Aloha were other people's picture, often from those *mingyuan* [gay micro-celebrities]. These so-called *mingyuan* often go to Thailand or Tibet for travel, go to high-end restaurants, stay in 5-star hotels, eat exquisite world delicacies, [which] all shows their chic identity. […]
>
> Although he used their picture, he always edits [the pictures] diligently. [For example,] he would carefully draft some text to go with the pictures, and sometimes even to add some posh English [words]! Furthermore, if you look at the flow of his pictures or the displayed dates, you will not feel they are fake pictures. He is very crafty. For example, this week he is still in China, then he will say what he will play in Thailand next week. Then in the week after, he will post "his" pictures in Thailand. So, when you scan through [his profile] you will find it very real. All in all, he would do his best to operate his Aloha. […] Of course, he would not meet anyone offline. He just wants to maintain such status and enjoys being liked by others. And, of course, he has many fans [followers], perhaps more than 4000. I think this is all for his self-satisfaction.

The story George's (24, Hangzhou) friend relates to a number of points that I have discussed earlier. First, it is the issue of self-(re)presentation on gay social applications. Although many of my participants do use other people's photos as their profile pictures, such as pictures of male models or other random good-looking males, they often do not pretend to be their own. They will either state it clear in their profile or select those photos that are easily identifiable to someone else due to the quality and genre of those pictures. This could be seen as a strategic way of information control, namely, they do not want to reveal their personal identity, but they also want to be visually attractive to others.

However, the case of George's (24, Hangzhou) friend seems not to be like the above. His online identity disconnects from a "real" to a "virtual" space, which reminds us of the earlier academic discussion on identity building by creating online personas (e.g., Turkle, 1996). In this case, George's friend is actively creating and maintaining a "virtual" persona on Aloha for his personal satisfaction which will not lead to any offline interactions. This persona he crafted online might represent a vision, a dream, a fantasy etc. for him, but we are not able to know the exact motivation for him to do so.

Yet, this online persona might not be "real"; the practice of constructing such online identity is not disembodied from its social context. In fact, it does emphasis how social context has shaped one's engagement with the digital media. Rofel (2007) argues that new forms of subjectivity have developed along with post-socialist transformations after China's economic reform that "initiated the process of creating 'desiring China'", which operates through an individual's sexual, material and affective self-interest motivating them to participate in an emerging neoliberal marketplace, (p. 7). George's (24, Hangzhou) friend is just one of the individuals who is engaging with the "desiring subject" in his own way.

Secondly, the case of George's (24, Hangzhou) friend also relates to the issue of transnational influence of the construction of gay identity what I have discussed in Chapter 5 that "homosexuality becomes a particularly obvious measure of globalisation" (Altman, 2002, p. 100). However, we can also see from the above, and throughout this thesis, that Chinese gay identity is definitely not a replica of Western gay identity. Especially, in the case of George's (24, Hangzhou) friend, Western gay identity and lifestyle is just an imagery that he might want to realise or just keep it as a "fantasy". Thirdly, the above case also supports the claim of Bao (2018) that "to be gay is a kind of 'sexual capital' that places one in certain social strata and with particular class

privileges" (p. 49). Again, this relates to what I have discussed about the issue of *suzhi* in relation to homosexuality in China. In the view of George's (24, Hangzhou) friend, to be a "popular" gay male, one has to have good education, good income and savings, speak English, be able to travel around the world, afford high-end hotels and luxurious dining etc.

Furthermore, this sexual capital also comprises certain physical attributes. For example, as mentioned earlier, R (19, Guangzhou) defines a dating app user's "quality" by evaluating his appearance and body type. He prefers to use Aloha rather than Blued because he feels there are more good-looking and fit individuals on Aloha. Indeed, many of my participants reported that they often use Aloha to check on handsome gay men with well-sculpted body.

Yanzhi [颜值] and *Shencai [身材]* are two common concepts that my participants used to evaluate a person showing on their gay social applications. *Yanzhi* literally means "value of a person's face" which indicates how good-looking a person is. Wang (2020a) has recently demonstrated gay men are evaluated by the *yanzhi* algorithm on Blued Live, and he argues "algorithms have become ritual tools for gay sociality on Blued" (p. 181). Although Aloha has not yet provided its users with a *yanzhi* metric, many participants rate other Aloha users in a similar way. Many participants reported *yanzhi* is the most significant factor distinguishes Aloha users from Blued users; they believe Aloha users are more likely to have high *yanzhi*.

This phenomenon is particularly worth unpacking if we bring back the social context that we have discussed before in relation to the use of Blued. As mentioned before, Chinese gay men are very careful in terms of information control; many of them are not willing to show their identifiable face pictures on LBRTD applications. Blued has also designed a self-destroying function to facilitate safe picture exchange. Then, how can Aloha users be willing to show their face pictures and also happen to be all handsome? Ren (32, Shenzhen) was one of Aloha's earliest users, he explains:

> In opening up the market, when Aloha first launched, they invited many *mingyuan* [gay micro-celebrities/名媛] to use their app. These *mingyuan* are already very well-known in the gay circles, as they were on other social media too. And for a period of time, Aloha was invitation only, which means only the initial users were able to invite their friends to join. Thus, it was Aloha's strategy to differentiate it from Blued.

Arguably, through this way, Aloha was able to create habitats for those who are willing to share their sexual identity, and thus, perhaps, further facilitates

other people to share their sexuality too. This might also explain why George's (24, Hangzhou) friend operates a fake account on Aloha. Although Aloha's decision was a market behaviour, it thus suggests the stratified nature of Chinese gay community which I will continue to illustrate in the next chapter.

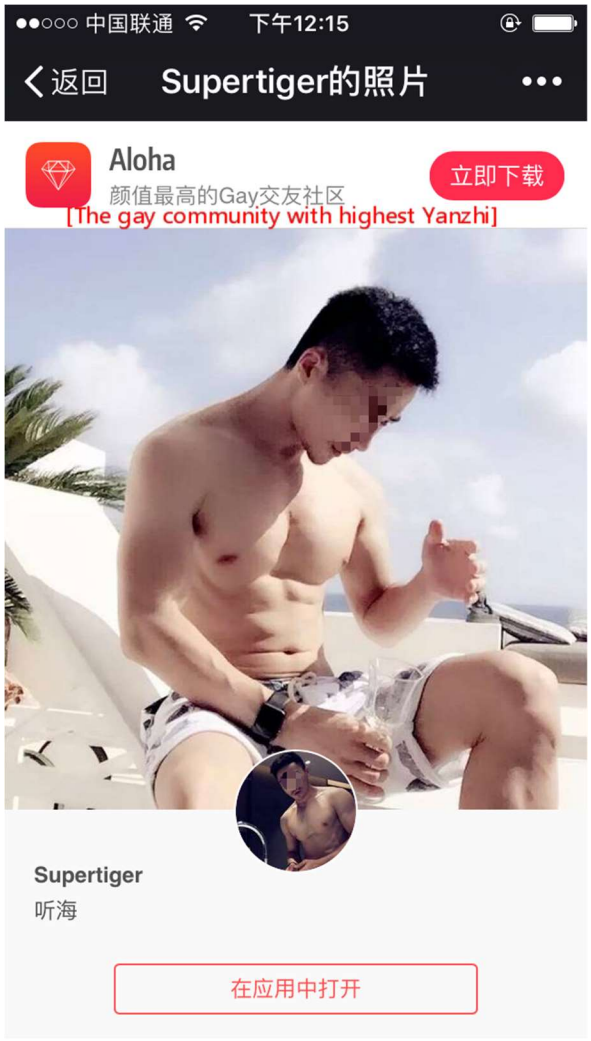

Figure 6.8 An Aloha profile that my participant shared with me.

Shencai literately means body shape or figure, however, in the context of Aloha it often refers to well-defined or worked-out bodies. Yong (28, Guangzhou) observes that showing one's body is one of the most popular activities that users do on Aloha:

> Many people on Aloha tend to show their body figure/shape pictures which are often taken in the gyms. For example, they will pull up their shirts to show their abs or take topless pictures in the changing room.

Robin (21, Beijing) also told me that he has noticed that there are many people posting their naked pictures to attract followers, and delete them after a short period of time on Aloha. Hakim (2018) points out that it has become increasingly common for young British (heterosexual) to share their worked-out bodies on social media platforms since 2008, as this could let them feel valuable in the neoliberal digital culture. Popular media commentators have coined the term “spornosexual” to describe the “the rise of men attending the gym primarily for reasons of appearance (instead of fitness or health) and then sharing images of their bodies on social media platforms” (Hakim, 2018, p. 232).

As my participants observed, being spornosexual could also add one’s sexual capital in the digital gay dating market. Those worked-out bodies on Aloha not only provide my participants with fantasy, but also further act a form of “disciplinary power”. Yong (28, Guangzhou) reported that scanning through the pictures of worked-out bodies on Aloha always stimulates him to go to the gym and keep his body shape. Indeed, many participants do go to the gym regularly and most of them have observed a noticeable increase in terms of followers on Aloha, and or more people contact them on other gay social networking platforms. QZW’s (22, Beijing) words exemplify this:

> Since I started going into the gym, I posted one or two pictures on Aloha. Of course, I was not topless; I was wearing a simple T-shirt. Even though, I think the number of my followers was doubled or even tripled.

From the above cases, we can see that “spornosexual” pictures have become a part of Chinese gay men’s sexual capital on gay social networking platforms. On the one hand, many participants enjoy looking at these pictures which provides them with certain fantasy. On the other hand, these pictures also work as a form of “disciplinary power” which defines “a popular gay male body”. Yet this phenomena can be positioned within a general neoliberal digital culture (Hakim, 2018), for gay males this could be also linked to Mowlabocus’ (2010a) concept of “cybercarnality” which highlights the “pornified” nature of gay culture. Specifically, for Chinese gay men, this “pornified” nature of gay culture relates back to the early introduction of western studio gay porn to them through the Internet which I have discussed earlier in this chapter.

However, what if someone does not (or not want to) fit in with this neoliberal aesthetic and lifestyle in the current Chinese gay male (urban) digital culture[68]. Bei's (20, Wuhan) words would lead us to think further about this question:

> **RD:** have you posted any pictures of yourself on Aloha.
>
> **Bei:** No, I feel people on Aloha are too "shiny". If you do have any [social] capital, you are too shy to post anything on Aloha. I mean when I am scanning through people's profiles, and occasionally, I find someone who do not know how to take a picture, or who are not very good-looking, I would also say to myself that: OMG, how can he post such ugly picture. Therefore, I don't want to be the subject of being teased.

Bei's (20, Wuhan) brief words bring up the theme that I am discussing in this chapter which of the neoliberal intervention into people's private sphere. He actually used the term "capital" in regard to the digital dating culture, and clearly, he is not only critically evaluating others but also himself according to the mainstream standard. Consequently, he decides not to put his own picture on Aloha. This is less related to the issue of information control that I have discussed earlier, but more about a type of peer pressure or the unconfident feeling of being teased against his appearance.

Bei's (20, Wuhan) experience also directs us to think further how a digital platform could shape the way in which an individual presents oneself. As aforementioned, Aloha was designed for those who are willing to share their sexual identity and it strategically used *mingyuan* (gay micro-celebrities) for promotion. Embedded in a self-promotion nature, the *mingyuan* phenomena further demonstrates the nuanced relationship between neoliberalism and identity in a digital age, which implies that claiming a gay identity is not a problem only if you are affluent, good-looking, and having nicely worked-out body.

Furthermore, his words suggest that although he is not confident to upload his own picture on Aloha, but he is still enjoying using it. This might link to another issue I will demonstrate later, that although many participants are generally unhappy about these gay social networking/dating platforms, fewer of them

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68 Here, I am not talking about those who lives smaller towns and less developed areas of China, those who are facing significantly social stigma and or those who do not willing to expose their sexual identity. As what I have demonstrated before, they have already used to certain digital practices (i.e. not having a real face-picture). They are more likely to use Blued rather than Aloha, again, this demonstrates the stratified nature of Chinese gay community (see the next chapter).

could leave such platform completely as these platforms have become the most convenient way for them to know other gay individuals in China.

Comparing Bei's (20, Wuhan) "fear" of being teased by someone on Aloha, Ah Hua (29, Guangzhou) actually experienced bullying in his early hooking-up experience on Jack'd[69]:

> **Ah Hua:** When I just started to use Jack'd, I used to write a lot about myself on there, including what kind of books I like, my star sign, and what I was looking for, my ideal man. Then some people started to pick on me. They would say something like 'who do you think who you are'. They were very mean. Perhaps they felt that with the face and body I have how I can look for a guy with such high *suzhi* [quality].
>
> **RD:** What did you say about what were you looking for at that time?
>
> **Ah Hua:** First one is that a person must have higher education with a bachelor's degree, something like that. Then second is that should be in good shape, third…I cannot remember. Anyway, just a few requirements like that. So, some people started to pick on me. They would call my name directly. Say something like how you dare to find this kind of people, something like that. After this event, and also seeing other gay people's stories around me. I started hooking up. I cannot say it is this event caused me to just focus on hooking-up. However, after a few times [of hooking-up], I do feel those [bio] information is useless. Not important at all.
>
> **RD:** What do you think is important?
>
> **Ah Hua:** Erm, in fact, just big organ and good skills. Hahaha. Yes, nothing else. I just feel that no one want to communicate with you or have anything more.

Ah Hua's (29, Guangzhou) experience further explains how social capital words in gay digital dating culture. People actually evaluate one's dating goals against his social capitals which mainly includes one's *yanzhi* and *shencai.* This implies an individual should only set up "realistic" dating goals based upon one's own social capitals. People who exceed this standard are considered wishful thinking and should be blamed. Again, this demonstrates an aggressive example of how market mentality has heavily impacted on people's (digital) dating experience.

Furthermore, Ah Hua's (29, Guangzhou) case also demonstrates that the dating app use is far more complicated than a market-based activity.

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69 Jack'd is another popular gay LBRTD application, which was popular among Chinese gay males before Blued was launched.

Individuals' social and affective involvements in such digital practices can be intense, which might have a significant consequence on one's life. In this case, Ah Hua was hurt by this event, which might influence his later dating and hooking-up practices. Clearly, at a point, AH was disappointed by the nature of gay dating applications and believed these applications might not be able to help him develop a serious relationship.

Indeed, the majority of my participants reported that they want to develop a long-term relationship through LBRTD applications, although many of them has less and less hope with it. In this context, some individuals like Ah Hua (29, Guangzhou) tend to only seek casual sex through these applications, while others might still persist in their original dating goals. Relatedly, there is a "stigmatization" of hooking-up practices among some of my participants. For example, when QZW's (23, Beijing) friend knew he was dating a senior schoolmate in his university, the friend told him that person was hooking-up crazily. He had hooked-up most individuals on Blued that he could hook up with. The friend wanted QZW to be careful with that person. QZW explains: "because he told me that guy often hooks up, then I became less like him. I just don't like people who like to hook-up. I don't think it's healthy. I have a little bit 'germophobic'". A few participants think if people want to find a serious relationship, then they should not hook-up. They see the individuals who enjoy hooking-up have a lower moral standard. This relates to what I have discussed in Chapter 5 that there is a general perception of seeing the gay circle as promiscuous.

But there are also many participants view hooking-up (arranging casual sex) as a natural practice. They understand people have sexual needs, but they emphasise that those needs should be fulfilled only to a moderate degree. Indeed, it seems not an exact binary opposition between hooking up and seeking a serious relationship. This is in line with the findings of Chen and Ding (2020) that they suggest many Chinese gay men does not distinguish sexual and relational goals when they use LBRTD applications in order to maximise their dating possibilities. Even though, most of them still agree with SRS's (23, Beijing) view that "finding a boyfriend on Blued is difficult but finding someone to have sex is easy". Thus, many Chinese gay men who are looking for serious relationships start to explore other ways of finding potential dates.

6.5 Leaving the Apps

Yee's (23, Guangzhou) story offers a nuanced account of present-day Chinese gay dating culture and his attempt to change, which highlights a general question of why my participants are looking for the alternative ways of dating. He and his friend have formed a team to organise gay social events and advertise their events through a WeChat public account they set up named "*Tong Sheng Xiao Wu*" [a little room of gay voices]. Yee explains the motivation behind running such a team:

> I met our co-founder in a Zhitong's social event, we had a chat, then somehow, we mentioned the idea of establishing a serious dating and matchmaking platform that does not for the purpose of hooking-up. At that time, he said that he also had the same idea. We hit it off and started to plan. Then we set up *Tong Sheng Xiao Wu*.
>
> There were two main reasons [behind this]. The first is to meet my own needs. I don't think the current social media can satisfy me. Everyone is too insincere, too exaggerated, too impetuous, and too fast. The second one is to make some positive contribution to the community. At that time, I was very interested in the public good, thus I attended lots of activities and events run by local LGBT NGOs. So if we could success launch such a platform it would be super good for the community. I used to say that we could use our own power to change the atmosphere of the *Tongzhi* circle, so that it could be less impetuous and more sincere. However, later on it turns out that there is no way [to change]. Because … I feel that no matter impetuous or insincere, there are more complicated reasons behind it. Even if we could launch the website that we carefully designed, I don't expect many people to use it. Because this is not just about saying social media is bad, it relates to deeper reasons.
>
> […]
>
> I think these things are very complicated. For example, in fact, if Blued want to build a website like the mode what I intended to do, they can do it in minutes. And if they want to do offline dating activities, they can do it in minutes. And in fact, Blued actually organised some offline events, but they did not continue. Then Zank started to run offline events, and this lasted for a while. Indeed, they intended to provide us with a less impetuous and more sincere platform, but they did not succeed. In fact, as you know Zank was banned recently. But even before it was banned, I felt Zank has already become like Blued. So, I think the reason is not that these who run such apps had not thought about doing something like what I wanted, or design related functions. However, I think, in fact, these people

> who run the app, or people like us who organise activities or events, we actually have very little power, we are in fact pushed by the whole gay circle. Yep, since I realised this point, I felt that the reason why we, *Tongzhi*, have formed such a social atmosphere attribute to something deeper and essential, not only simply because of social media.

Yee's (23, Guangzhou) words are so insightful and interesting, which highlights a number of critical issues in the Chinese gay digital culture. Firstly, his words, again, stress the very purposeful and impatient nature of today's Chinese gay male dating culture under neoliberalised China as I have demonstrated above. He believes current gay social and dating culture is formed along with the dramatic social and economic changes in China, individuals have limited power to resist. This view brings us back to one of the central issues this thesis seeks to address which is "the problem of structure and agency". Clearly what Yee is stressing here is the structural qualities of society, and capacity of the human agency is unlikely to go beyond these structures. Indeed, this seems to be a very common view among my participants. This view can also be observed in the above discussion regarding my participants' self-(re)presentation strategies on LBRTD applications. This suggests that although digital media have provided Chinese gay males with certain affordances to be able to identify and connect with other gay men conveniently, they are still facing structural constraints.

Secondly, Yee implies a different experience of socializing with people offline and online which suggest a special role of physical social events played in these urban gay men's lives. Although digital media has become a constitutive part of Chinese gay males' everyday lives, most of my participants still feel there is a significant distinction between online and offline social interactions or encounters. For example, Ah Han (36, Guangzhou) provides an interesting analogy in terms of this online and offline distinction:

> I prefer the app - Zank as it offers opportunities for offline events. You know when you watch gay porn, you still like those videos with plotline, plot development, you feel those are more interesting than those only showing sexual intercourse. You need some emotional appeal.

Similarly, Robin (21, Beijing) also told me that he feels "looking through 1000 picture of a person on social media is no better than meet him in real life once". Clearly, for Ah Han, Robin, and other likeminded participants, meeting someone in the physical environment means so much more than meeting online.

Hence, what is special about the “offline”? Firstly, many participants perceive the “offline” as more affection oriented. This is related to the division between *qing* (emotional attachment) and *xing* (sex) which I have discussed earlier. The use of gay LBRTD applications has been seen as a contributing factor to the promiscuous gay circle by many Chinese gay men. In contrast, as Ah Han (36, Guangzhou) mentioned, the “offline” seems to the place for more serious relationships. This also relates to my participants' disappointment with online dating as I have discussed above. Online dating has often been regard as quick exchange of (social) capital, and people on these dating platforms are often seen as insincere, exaggerated, impetuous.

Thus, many participants reported removal of LBRTD applications from their phone. Some of them would re-install them after a period of time, but others would live without these applications for a very long time. Often these who are able to leave the gay social networking platform have already established a stable circle of gay friends. Others who install the application back usually reported a lack of means of social networking with other gay individuals. River (26, Yunnan) speaks out for these individuals after several times of deleting and reinstalling those applications:

> Yes I am disappointed about online dating and I really do not feel that I could find the right one though those apps, but I still want to have a check on them, as I don’t think there are other convenient ways of identifying another gay person in China. Straight guys could meet each other in different ways, they will know each other longer before they start dating. But our gay people can’t.

River’s (26, Yunnan) view, again, highlights the affordances that digital media has provided with Chinese gay men as I have suggested earlier in this Chapter. Arguably, a large percentage of Chinese gay men is still not willing to participate in offline social events. The reason for this could be similar to the reason why they are not willing to upload face-picture on LBRTD applications. Therefore, these digital networking platforms still plays an important role in their social lives as they have not yet found better alternatives.

The second issue that separates the offline from the online is the notion of authenticity. As I have elaborated earlier, in relation to the issue of face picture, trust is always an issue in Chinese digital dating culture. However, here, authenticity is more than the issue of trust. It is more likely to be an interrogation of the nature of social media ethos, as King (23, Guangzhou) explains:

> If, say, all gays could go back to offline; [if] we could all hang out together; [if] we could all open our hearts, and be true to what we want, be true to our desires. Then I don't believe that everyone would need the self-promotion method to market yourself online. [If] you go back to that kind of [offline] environment, you would find someone who belongs to you. Back to the most primitive things.

From King's (23, Guangzhou) words, we see that he is very self-reflexive and showing certain resistance to current digital culture, or at least trying to resist the self-promoting nature of social media. However, in doing so, he seems also to have constructed the "offline" as a "pure" land which everyone could be true to themselves and be open to their desires. In his words, the idea of authenticity seems to take off all the "filters" individuals put on for self-promotion in a neoliberal culture. This, again, might be the reason why some participants have left LBRTD applications to seek alternative ways of social networking.

Thus, many participants tend to use non-dating platforms as a way of finding potential dates, such as Zhihu, a Q&A web community and Douban, interests based sharing website, and also weibo, where they do not need to foreground their sexual desires, and show more about their personality. Those posts are often text-based rather visual-based. They provide richer deceptions of this and what one's thoughts and interests. This move is similar to "the shift from Gaydar to a Gaydar/Facebook symbiosis in the early 2000s, to a broad ecology of applications, including, for example, Grindr, Instagram, Snapchat, Tinder and others in the early to mid-2010s" that Cassidy (2018) has observed in Western gay digital culture. I will further explain this shift in digital platforms and the implications of this in relation to the construction of (gay) community in the next chapter.

Here the issue of authenticity seems to be about a more rounded representation of oneself in a digital culture. However, as Robin (21, Beijing) mentioned earlier "looking through 1000 picture of a person on social media is no better than meeting him in real life once". Many participants still regard an individual's self-(re)presentation online is not exactly the same with one's "true" self, while the "true" self seems to be embedded offline.

This, again, relates to the issue of trust in online dating. For example, Edd (21, Beijing) told me that all his successful relationships were known offline, some through (community) social events, some are introduced by his friends. He says:

> Relations are interesting in China, as Chinese society is formed through relations, you always feel better if this person is introduced by your friends. Sometimes I don't trust those who I met online, [as] you don't know them much. But if one is introduced by your friends, at least your friends know him. You have shared friends which is safer. Then you [would] have more things in common.

Again, I should stress that not every Chinese gay man would like to go to local gay social events, and the chance that one's friends would introduce a gay friend is also unreliable. Thus, the affordances brought be digital platforms are more accessible to most of the Chinese gay individuals. I shall address the issue of connectivity, and how digital media has facilitated different gay circles in Chinese metropolitans in the next chapter.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the desires of gay males, their sexualities, and relationships are embodied in a neoliberalised China, and the way in which the use of digital media has further complicated the gay males' sexual and relational experiences. I illustrated how the concept of "cybercarnality" works in Chinese gay digital cultures and further complicate this idea by elaborating how the Chinese party-state has intervened into people's construction of sexuality.

Furthermore, I examined the affordances that LBRTD applications have brought to Chinese gay men, as well as the social and cultural issues around the use of these applications. Hobbs et al. (2017) examined how the affordances of dating apps influence users' view of relationships and sexual practices. They found that apps have constituted a network of intimacy that expands users' social capital and increases their chances of finding a romantic relationship. While I am not arguing against it here, as we can see from the above cases that the Chinese gay males' dating strategies and practices are far more complicated than this simple claim, as their usage of such applications are deeply embedded in the broad social, cultural, political, and economic context of modern China. In particular, I have shown how the neoliberal discourse of *suzhi* has shaped Chinese gay male's digital (dating) culture.

In the coming Chapter, I will continue to contextualise Chinese gay men's use of digital media in relation to the concepts of network and connectivity and

explore the implications of such digital mediated networks in relation to the concepts of “community” and “networked society”.

Chapter 7
Identity in the Circle: Networked Gay Individuals?

7.1 Introduction

If we see gay identity development as a journey (see chapter 4), then it is possibly also a peer-learning process. Every encounter with members of the gay community shapes people's own perceptions about gay identity in China. Thus, the idea of network comes up again and again in the fieldwork which links to other important concepts related to gay identity (I.e. relationality, connectivity, social connection, identification, information, the circle, social capital etc.). In this chapter, I draw on the experiences of different generations of Chinese gay men to demonstrate the networks/connectivity that the Internet and different digital media platforms have brought to Chinese gay males. My intention is not only to demonstrate what kinds of connections/networks have been made possible by the using of digital media, but to explore the implications of such networks in relation to the concepts of "community" and "networked society" in the Chinese context.

The idea of network/connectivity intersects the three pillars of the thesis: (gay) identity, the digital and the Chinese context. Firstly, identity literature presumes a social context that shapes how an individual perceives and performs his/her identities. Identity is a concept that "links individual cognition with the social world of meaning and categorization" (Hammack, 2015, p.12). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, identity processes in social interaction (ibid., p.19). In social identity theory, through a social comparison process an individual categorises him/herself as in-group or out-group. A person defines his/her in-group status in relation to the others (Hornsey and Compass, 2008, Stets and Burke, 2000). Thus, sexual identity offers an interesting case in this regard. Unlike racial and ethnic minorities, homosexual individuals are "not necessarily easily identifiable by others"[70] (Gross, 1991, p.20). As I demonstrated in the last chapter, Chinese gay men, especially who came of age before the mid-1990s, could long believe that they were the only gay individuals in the world and could not make sense of their "otherness". For them to find a group that they belong to is vital to their identity development and self-acceptance. In this chapter, by bringing the voices from different ages

70 Sometimes people assume that effeminate men or masculine women might be homosexual; however, there is no direct connection between these.

of Chinese gay men, I will continue to show how the notion of community is perceived and experienced.

Secondly, key theories and studies about the Internet and digital cultures suggest that the Internet and other forms of digital media are not just information tools, and online interactions do not “simply add on to existing social relationships” (Gane, 2005, p.475). With the rise of the internet, theoretical interventions began to examine the nature of modern society. For theorists, “the network form is the dominant form of power in modern society” which “emerges as a result of the reconfiguration of work relations in post-industrial capitalism” (Cavanagh, 2010, p.40). This has been conceptualised as ‘a network society’ which is “a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies” (Castells, 2004, p.3). Three major features of networks have been identified in the new technological environment: 1) flexibility - networks can find new connections in a changing environment and reconfigure themselves to keep their goals; 2) scalability - the sizes of networks are changeable which can expand or shrink easily; 3) survivability - networks have no centres and they can resist attacks on their nodes (Castells, 2004, p.6). Therefore, the issue of community as a form of network becomes a further scholarly interest in the digital age. Cavanagh (2010) critically notes that the studies of online/offline communities have reached two opposing points of views: “first, that the internet, and mass media more generally, lead to a decline in offline communities and, second, that they actually enhance offline life” (p.11). In this chapter, by examining what (gay) networks mean to my participants, I address the issue of ‘gay community’ in the digital age in China.

Thirdly, the concept of network is particularly interesting in the Chinese context, not only because of its socialist history, but also because of the new social nature of Chinese society after the economic reform and opening-up. A liberation from restrictive identities could be observed since the early 1990s in which “the desiring subject” has been positioned as its core (Rofel, 2007). This allows “the self to be multiply penetrated by market forces” (Beck 1992, cited in Cavanagh, 2010). In particular, for gay individuals in China, their social networks were transformed due to new social and technical forces. First, under the name of “AIDS prevention”, many gay organizations and groups were founded all over the country in order to help the government get in touch with gay communities in the late 1990s and into the new millennium (Cao and Lu, 2014, Wei, 2015). Those organizations run many interest groups, clubs, and social activities forming valuable social networks. Meanwhile, the

commercial gay scenes in different metropolitan cities are also growing rapidly. Those gay bars and clubs are the social sites for young urban and well-off gay individuals, and foreign visitors. Lastly, perhaps most significantly, the internet and other digital media have become a vital part of their social networking. The internet has not only been the major source of gay identity (see Chapter 4), but also, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, it facilitates new ways of connections. In particular, mobile technology has also enabled Chinese gay men, more easily than before, to identify others who share the same identity. I have discussed this idea in the previous chapter in relation to my participants dating experience, in this chapter, I extend this further in addressing how digital media have played in their general social lives.

I have demonstrated how the introduction of the Internet transformed Chinese gay males' lives in Chapter 4. In particular I have illustrated this digital "transformation" in relation to Weeks' (2000) notion of "imagined community". Although we cannot simply conclude that it was the internet that connected Chinese gay men, it is fair to say that the internet had made these connections more affordable than before to certain Chinese same-sex attracted gay men. Social networks based on one's sexual attraction were thus formed online. In the following sections I will continue to demonstrate detailed characteristics of such digitally mediated networks and how the development of the Internet technology has further shaped these networks. Through the experiences of participants of different ages, I will not only show the development of gay digital social networking platforms, but also, more importantly, I want to highlight the continuity in how they make sense of such digital facilitated networks.

7.2 Scales of Connection

Many participants aged around 35-45 recalled that the early gay online chatrooms were all subordinate to larger web-portals or bigger mainstream chatroom providers. This seems to suggest that these early gay online chatrooms were created by same-sex attracted Chinese men themselves based on the existing digital framework. These online chatrooms could be nation-wide or locally specific and the topic in these chatrooms also was also diversified. Thus, these platforms could facilitate connections beyond the local area. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Xiao Hu (36, Guangzhou) clearly remembered that the chatroom that he enjoyed most was the one provided by

Sina.com[71] in the very early stage of the development of the Internet. He explains the reasons for his choice:

> I finally decided to stick to the chatroom on Sina, firstly because there were more serious people. I mean they talked more about their lives, their dreams. The topics of discussion were not limited. Not like other chatrooms that were largely dominated by hook-up talks and self-promotions. Secondly, people in this chatroom were from all over China, and many are from big cities. As you know I had already wanted to escape from my hometown, then I had to go to big cities. It [the chatroom] was a window for me to know more about the outside world

There are a number of points we need to unpack further in Xiao Hu's case. Firstly, the *qing* (emotional attachment) and *xing* (sex) division has long been existing in Chinese gay community. From Xiao Hu's words we can see that even in the age of gay online chatrooms, Chinese gay individuals would actively select the digital platforms according to their sexual or relational goals. Secondly, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, mobility is a central issue for gay males who live in smaller towns or less developed areas in China. For them, going to "big cities" seems to be the solution to living with gay identity. Clearly, this is a very individualist idea, which supports Rofel's (2007) claim that Chinese citizens have developed "a self-conscious enthusiasm for coherence in their search for a new cosmopolitan humanity" which "emerged out of the upheavals and excitement within the uncertainties of social life" (p. 197). Thus, we could argue that Xiao Hu benefited from the connectivity that the internet had brought to same-sex attracted men. He used the internet instrumentally to enable positional connections based on his life plan, which is predominantly shaped by his sexual identity. The internet was still seen as a tool in his case which offered him the opportunity to know more about the life experiences of the outside world. These national gay chatrooms provided a platform for potential wider social connections throughout the country. One could utilise those connections strategically according to one's future life plan.

For Xiao Hu (36, Guangzhou), he wanted to use the internet as a window to see the outside world and thus escape from his hometown where he could not integrate his sexual identity into his life. Thus, trans-regional digital networks matter more for him. However, for Xiao Hu's urban peers, their need was to develop their own local networks. For example, Xiao Bei's (36, Beijing) most

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71 Sina.com is still one of the most influential web-portal in China, but there is no more a designated space specially for same-sex attracted men.

memorable chatroom was the one called 'Beijing *Tongzhi*' in *Biliao*[72], which was a localised online space for same-attracted men in Beijing. His use of these online spaces was also instrumental with a clear aim to find a boyfriend.

> **Xiao Bei:** At the beginning, I was not sure what to chat with them. So sometimes, I was just observing them quietly. Then step by step, you started to become clear about what type [of person] you would like. So, you would say something about what I was looking for here, and some of my own information. Then I started to meet up people in the same city.
>
> **RD:** so, what did you chat in the chatrooms.
>
> **Xiao Bei:** there was not much difference compared what you would chat now on an app, but perhaps, at that time people were not that direct. They were a bit reserved. Also, it was not a one to one environment. So, the things that attracted you was what he talked about. For example, if he liked pop-music, or mention a name of a song, or expressed some aspects of his life. Through the fragments of things, you would imagine what he would be like. Then I would send him a private message and ask where he lived. And I would say where I lived, I would not say a precise location which seemed to suggest asking him to come over. I would just tell him a rough area that I was living in. For example, if he said he was living in Dongcheng [east city] district and I was living in Xicheng [west city] district. Then it was not too far. Gradually, you would say how old I was and he would say how old he was. Maybe people were a bit shy or conservative; they were not like now people will start the conversation by asking you demographic details.

The above extract leads us to consider a few points in relation to the early Chinese gay digital networks. Firstly, it is the question of what the purpose of those networks was. Clearly, for many participants around Xiao Bei's age and who lived in top tier cities in China, these networks became a major and most convenient way to develop personal relationships. The Beijing *Tongzhi* chatroom was just one of the early examples of such digital platforms. It was observed that there were around 360 *tongzhi* websites operating in China by the end of May 2004, and a large percentage of them were specifically serving regional LGBT individuals which were developed from big cities to medium or small size cities (Ho, 2009, Jiang, 2005). Each of the website would have their own chatrooms for local same-sex attracted individuals.

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72 Biliao [碧聊] was one of the largest online chatroom platform. It closed its services in 2011.

Secondly, although the nature of these online chatrooms was to facilitate public discussion, individuals used them to identify an individual hook-up or dating potential. Through these networks same-sex attracted Chinese men were still looking for one to one conversations. I will further illustrate this pattern of social interaction later in relation to newer forms of digital media. In addition, we can see that an individual's online interaction often leads to an offline encounter. Thus, I agree with Campbell's (2014, originally 2004) claim that homosexual "individuals integrating their online and offline experiences into a broader understanding of the reality of everyday life", in other words, the online social dynamics are still shaped by the offline social positions of individuals (p.12).

Thirdly, unlike in the pre-digital age same-sex attracted males were slowly developing their understanding of gay culture, and building the social networks through gay cruising sites, which usually took a period of time. Xiao Bei could easily observe the social interactions happening in the chatrooms. This relates to what I have discussed in Chapter 5, that more and more Chinese gay individuals have learnt about their sexual identity and cultures through related online explorations, which means they would construct a "imagined" gay community online, then explore it offline. I have discussed the implications of this in the previous chapters, I shall continue to illustrate this in this chapter.

Following the same logic of online chatrooms, when QQ became popular with my participants, there were also regional and trans-regional QQ groups. ET (23, Guangzhou) describes them as the small circle and big circle respectively.

> I started to engage with this kind of people when I was in my second year of university. Just through QQ groups. Then I knew there are big circles and small circles. For big circles, they are like national chatrooms, or BBS. That is to say, they are nation-wide or global-wide. There might be more than 2-3 thousand people in a group. Small circles are like regional ones. They are more likely to be people in the same city in it.

ET (23, Guangzhou) mentioned an important concept here - the (gay) circle. As Wei (2011) points out, the term "community" is not in the vocabulary of ordinary gay individuals in China; for them *quanzi* (circle) is the most common form of collective identification. In Chinese gay men's everyday lives, *quanzi* exists in multiple levels associated with different degrees of identification (ibid.). At micro-level, *quanzi* refers to a (gay) individual's personal social network, and at macro-level it refers to the gay community as a whole. Sometimes it can also refer to the wider scale of the social group in which people share similar background and interests. For example, "the student

circle" refers to gay university students, and "married *tongzhi* circle" refers to gay men who have married women (Wei, 2011). Feng and Zhao (2016) suggest that for most Chinese gay men the "circle" is the only public space where they can expose their same-sex identity. Chapman et al. (2009) points out that the "*tongzhi* circle" in Shenzhen can be best described as "a shifting network characterised by 'weak ties'". They suggest that the nature of such a network appears extended with limitless encounters involving "friends of friends", and that the Internet has played a prominent role in shaping such networks (Chapman et al., 2009). It is important to note here that in the above scholarly context the "*tongzhi* circle" places more emphasis on the social network and the shared interests, which do not necessarily imply a particular sense of solidarity. In the following sections, I will continue to discuss how digital media have facilitated different gay circles.

Before doing so, I need to note one important implication of the transition from gay online chatrooms to QQ groups. Unlike online chatrooms where participants were not fixed to one particular space, members in a QQ group could be relatively stable. In other words, QQ groups have provided Chinese gay males with stable connectivity with a certain group of gay men. Although the social connections formed through these QQ groups might still be "weak ties", they do provide the possibility of forming strong social circles. Ah Nan (24, Guangzhou) explains how he established his gay-friend circles through QQ groups when he just entered university:

> It was after I graduated from high school, I just started to have contact with people in the circle. It was through QQ groups that I found online. They were often QQ groups within the university. […] I got to know all my friends in the circle through QQ groups. You know there are regional groups that are just for the students in that area. It would be a big group, around 200 people. Then, people would just chat in the group. After some time, they would organise a meet-up event. They would encourage all the group members to take part in, but of course, not everyone would be able to join. So, after the group meeting, you would find some people you would like to play with, and some people you were happy to get alone with further. Then you would create a new QQ group just for these people, and you would just chat in your small group, and arrange meetings in it. For example, go to eat or KTV together. Then I just dropped out from the big QQ group. I am still chatting with those people online now.

Therefore, the gay circle for Ah Nan (24, Guangzhou) is a friends' circle where he could spend his leisure time. Digital media platforms (like QQ groups) are the channels through which he could establish such social networks, and

further maintain such social networks. Apparently, he was selective in this process. Beyond the basis of shared sexual identity, he was also looking for more shared identities. For instance, at that time he was a university student, so he just searched local gay student QQ groups to join. This again demonstrates Chinese gay men's active use of digital media.

Furthermore, unlike the regional gay chatroom which seemed to only facilitate one-to-one offline meetings, university QQ groups have acted like a club or society which promote one to many or many to many social interactions offline. Therefore, QQ groups have provided my participants with the connectivity with local gay individuals, and thus facilitate the formation of gay circles which are gay individuals' personal social networks. Comparing online chatrooms serving as the "imagined community", the implication of which is in its symbolic and imaginary power (see Chapter 4); the QQ groups have created more practical social networks where individuals are able expose their same-sex identity comfortably (Feng and Zhao, 2016). Recently, with the prevalence of WeChat in Chinese people's everyday lives, instead of using QQ groups more and more Chinese gay males are using WeChat groups. However, the social dynamic and nature of WeChat groups are very similar to QQ groups. I shall illustrate how gay WeChat groups works in Chinese gay males' everyday lives later in this Chapter.

7.3 Modes of Connections

From age of chatrooms to now, one of the most common modes of connection in the gay circle is by the shared interests. As DS (38, Tianjin) revealed in Chapter 4 no matter in nationwide or regional-specific online gay chatrooms people often started chatting based on their shared interests. For example, if someone liked the military, he would intitiate a military-related topic and other members would join in the conversation if they are interested. He further explains:

> Because we all share the same identity in the circle, if we then have shared interests or hobbies, we will feel even more close. For example, at that time there were some common topics that most people would be interested in, such as music, film, and literature.

Indeed, as DS (38, Tianjin) mentioned sexual identity seems to be the base of further deeper social connections, which looks like, for many Chinese gay men, sharing sexuality is not "enough" to form close social connections and

circles. This is also evidenced in Ah Nan's (24, Guangzhou) that people actively form (and or join) different gay circles depending on their own interests and preferences. This suggests that, from a gay individual point of view, the very nature of the gay circle is a group of friends.

If early online chatrooms were essentially about one-to-one connection, then the arrival of same-sex originated Bulletin Board System (BBS) or online forums seem to change the nature of this social interaction. Xiao Mi, a senior staff member of Guangtong, believes that the Chinese gay community actually formed online first then went offline (see Chapter 4). In her view, the social interactions happening in Guangtong were not only about finding and developing personal relationships, rather they created a social environment which was more akin to a group of friends. Xiao Mi informed me that when she first joined Guangtong it already had around 20 sections (or unites) in 2002. It included sections for gay subculture groups such as bears, mid-ages, and military. It also included functional sections like image sharing, tongzhi literature, feelings and emotions sharing. For Xiao Mi, her most memorable section was called "Mood Diary". It was a section where individuals could express their personal matters (e.g., emotions, concerns, and love stories). She believes that the sections like "Mood Diary" had provided an important channel for (local) Chinese same-sex attracted men to speak out their personal experiences and emotions. In the section, individuals could not only establish boyfriends, but also build normal friendships, more importantly, it was a much-needed space for people to tell own stories. Indeed, for Ken Plummer (1995) telling one's subjective sexual stories is important, as it is an important source for individuals to understand their same-sex identity (see Chapter 5).

Furthermore, in order to further stimulate social interactions on Guangtong, the team also designed games for its member. These games normally encouraged users to achieve certain tasks in the online forum and then they would have particular privilege in using different functions in Guangtong. In this way, there were a number of very active users who have been well-known among Guangtong members. Xiao Mi further describes the nature of Guangtong:

> People would not regard it [Gongtong] as a very serious place. In fact, people would see it as a place like a friend's home. When I am off work or off school, I go to this place to play and relax. It is about a group of friends staying together and playing together.

Xiao Mi's words demonstrate how gay online forums could provide a comforting social space for Chinese gay males to socialise with each other for not purely sexual/relational purpose. Comparing the LBRTD applications, these online forums have provided Chinese gay men with a broader and more general way of social networking. DS (38, Tianjin) further illustrates how gay BBS had provided him with an important social space:

> Online forums were different from chatrooms. The topics in online chatrooms were quite random. But on BBS the sections were clearly categorised. So, you could choose the sections that you liked to take part in. For example, there were sections about literature, music, some sections for self-expression and self-promotion, and also sexual [health] related sections. **I felt BBS had met most of my needs.** At that time, I posted stuff on *Yangguang Didai* [sunshine zoon], and chatting [with others]. We discussed topics that I liked and issues around my life. We also read [*tongzhi*] literature together. I also had made a few [online] friends [through this way]. So, I had already formed a relatively closed social circle.

From DS's (38, Tianjin) we can see that how BBS could act as an integrated social space for Chinese gay, which offers a variety of features that are closed related to Chinese gay men's need. Firstly, as mentioned above it provides a space for self-expression where individuals could post their personal stories and issues (e.g.; the "Mood Diary" section in Guangtong). Secondly, it is also an information channel in which gay individuals would find different gay related issues and topics (see Chapter 5). Thirdly, more generally, the structure of online forums seems facilities closer social networks as people are connected by their tastes in music and literature etc.

Bradshaw (2008) defines community as "the networks of people tied together by solidarity, a shared identity and set of norms" (p.5). In DS's (38, Tianjin) case, we can see that individuals were tied together not only by their sexual identity, but also by their personal interests and tastes in general. Social norms were also articulated and created in individuals' subjective sexual stories (a detailed discussion on this point could be found in Chapter 5). Arguably, a certain solidarity was also created in these online spaces. People were supporting and helping each other. DS's (38, Tianjin) later story exemplifies this point:

> **DS:** I started to know this man in a BBS; I just found the things he posted were very knowledgeable. Then we began to chat on QQ. I told him that I like him and wanted to meet him. But he rejected me as he felt I was very innocent. He said he was very experienced; if we got together, there would not be a happy end.

> So, he deleted me on QQ. I was very sad. Perhaps because I was still young that time. I then posted a post in the BBS asking people to talk to him for me with long paragraphs about my adoration for him. So, our common friends [in the BBS] helped me to leave messages for him. Time after time, he finally relied to me and agreed to meet.
>
> **RD:** So, the whole BBS knew you were approaching him?
>
> **DS:** That was a bit over-exaggerated. Because I was not that crazy, and also you know a BBS was just like a community now. It was like the sea; you would just be one of the waves.

DS (38, Tianjin) clearly refers BBS as a community. This seems to support Xiao Mi's idea about "the Chinese gay community was actually formed online first". For almost four years since he graduated from university, DS had spent almost most of his spare time in gay BBSs. The internet became the only place where he could socialise with other Chinese same-sex attracted men before he actually met another gay man in the physical world. Indeed, many research participants who are now in their 30s recall that for a period of time that gay BBSs were their major means of engagement with the gay community where they had not only "learnt" about their sexual identity (see Chapter 5), but also constituted a big part of their social lives both online and offline.

Xiao Mi recalls that people started to organise offline activities since the second year of Guangtong's establishment in 1999. Initially, it was those active members who got to know each other well via Guangtong who started to hang out offline. Then in 2002, Guangtong started to organise official events, for example, a hiking tour to the local mountain. Xiao Mi further explains the social gatherings and events in relation to Guangtong:

> People's social interactions online were very frequent and close, people would feel safe [in our environment], however, when you were online you were still not able to be face to face. You would have the need to be face-to-face [with someone you have quite gotten along with], then you always hoped that there could be an action from online to offline. […]
>
> There were two kind of social gatherings or events: the official and the non-official. Non-official gatherings were often organised by those active members in the community. For example, they would say in their posts that "Let's should play Majiang this weekend, or let's go somewhere to have a meal this weekend". There were also many interests' groups on Guangtong, they would organise their own regular events and activities, for example, there were badminton group, baseball group, and circling group.

> Then there were our official events, which held by Guangtong. As a community website, our goal was community build. They what even people would need, we would fulfil them. Say if they wanted networking then we would hold social networking events. […]
>
> I took part in organising offline social events in 2006. At that time, for normal social events there would be dozens of people attending; for our annual hiking event there would be more than 100 people attending as it just once a year. We went to the Baiyun Mountain. Then we would have different gaming sections [during the hiking]. However, we rarely took photos [of the events] because people still feared to expose their identity.

Xiao Mi's words highlight a number of issues related to the notion of connectivity and network. Firstly, since the very early stage when the Internet was introduced to Chinese gay men, it has facilitated offline social gatherings. For many of them, online social interactions on BBSs would transfer to the physical words. Online interactions and engagement become a way of knowing and familiarizing with local gay individuals. This is in line with Campbell's (2014, originally 2004) observation in which he also suggests online practices are often followed by offline meetings in person via gay male Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels.

Secondly and relatedly, from Xiao Mi's words we can further understand the modes and scales of the offline social networks facilitated by online gay forums: a) active individual members of Guangtong could use the platform to organise their own offline social gatherings which helped them to form different circles of friends; b) interest-based groups ran regular offline events; c) social events organised by the online forums. The first two types of social gatherings and events' scales would be smaller than social events organised by the digital platform. Jinshu (33, Guangzhou) was a regular attendee of the sports event on Guangtong. He informed me that those events were initially organised by different individuals then some groups became bigger and more popular, and there would be around 30 people in the big group. Through attending sports events, Jinshu (33, Guangzhou) made a number of friends and also a boyfriend. Again, these gay circles formed by shared interests are just personal social networks among a group of gay friends. The popular digital platform of a particular time would help these groups to form and maintain. Often, these groups were formed on gay BBSs, stabilised via QQ groups, and now became WeChat groups. This seems to suggest that there has been "a growing convergence between mainstream social networking

services and gay men's digital culture" (Cassidy, 2018, p. 4). I will continue demonstrate this point later in this chapter.

In terms of social events organised by gay online forums the scales have been varied, as Xiao Mi mentioned normal social events would attract dozens of people, however, their annual event would have more than 100 participants. Arguably, a social event at this level would consider being very large within Chinese gay community. Although none of my participants had attended these large social events organised by Guangtong and other online forums, it would be easy to imagine that a better sense of community could emerge from these social interactions than people's personal social gatherings.

However, since Guangtong has faded in its influence, these larger social events/gatherings organised or promoted by digital media platforms have become rarer, especially in the age of gay social/dating applications. Although the precise reasons for this are unclear, many phenomena would indicate that this is down to the Chinese government's control and the clampdown on civil society and LGBTQ rights. During my fieldwork in Guangzhou I have experienced several events all support the above claim. Firstly, when I was helping Zhitong in organizing their new year eve party in collaboration with PFLAG China, our constant worry was that the police might cancel our event. Fortunately, the event took place successfully. After the event, senior staff members of Zhitong reflected upon the event and all agreed that advertising this event as a commercial activity and holding it in a normal pub could be the reason why the police did not disturb them. However, later in the year (2017) two major events in the Guangzhou LGBT Pride Month were withdrawn due to the government's intervention, only small screening events took place in the spaces of foreign consulates in Guangzhou. More recently, the shut down of China's longest-running annual celebration of sexual minorities – Shanghai Pride further indicates the shrinking (public) space for LGBTQ community in China (Jiang, 2020). This is an important context that could be regarded as one of the shaping forces of Chinese gay male digital culture at the structural level. Arguably, the Chinese party-state seems to prevent the solidarity formed in any minority community that could have potential political implications.

Although same-sex originated BBSs like Guangtong and Yangguang Didai generally lost their popularity compared with current gay social media platforms such as Blued and Aloha, this has not undermined the social interactions in online forums. I would suggest that gay forums seem to facilitate more solidarity than the current social applications in terms of the

concept of “community”. TX (22, Beijing) offers a good example in this regard. He was the administrator of Chugui Ba [come out bar][73] around 2013-2014.

> I became a regular member of Chugui Ba when I just finished my Higher Education Entrance Examination [gaokao/高考]. I saw this forum posted an advertisement in Tongxinglian Ba [homosexual bar] which was a call for participants of an [online] debate. The issue was about should economic independence be the premise of coming out. So I took part in and won the best debater. […] I felt those discussions on Chigui Ba were still meaningful today. They are still the essential questions [around the issue of being gay in China]. […] At that time, we organized those debates; we really hoped we could discuss those topics from a diverse perspective. Therefore, how did each debater really think about that issue was not the matter, the real matter was that we could discuss those topics. Because at that time, in 2013, we were not able to deal with these problems. We were not proposing solutions, but rather we would like to talk about the possibilities.

As shown in the above extract, these online networks provided a vital space for Chinese same-sex attracted men to discuss issues around their sexual identity. Thus, digital media, like online forums, could provide Chinese gay men with the connectivity in regarding certain social issues. This is still about the significant question of “how to deal with same-sex attraction”. These questions allow for the construction of a social world around the community under Chinese own economic, political, and cultural contexts (and norms). Arguably, the significance of these discussions does not lie in answers/solutions of each issue. What matters in these discussions is the call for people to face these issues in their own way. Through such discussion, individuals could take their own answers. It is interesting to note here that the question of coming out or not is associated with economic independence shows a strong marketised/neoliberal logic that the individual’s personal and social identities subordinate to her place and rank in the economy (Wrenn, 2014). Nevertheless, because these debates created certain public awareness, the people who were participating in the discussion could also form special bonds with each other. Thus, we could see these online forums as online communities which are bonded by the shared identity and tied together by solidarity.

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73 Chugui Ba is one of the online forums based on Baidu Tieba.

7.4 Natures of Gay (Digital) Networks

As demonstrated above that most networks facilitated by digital connectivity are individuals' personal friends' circles, thus people are able to actively create and maintain their own gay circles via different digital media platforms. Harwit (2017) observes that the market dominance of WeChat in contemporary China suggests a significant move in how Chinese individuals are experiencing the Internet. This is, of course, also true to the gay males in China. As I shall demonstrate in this section, WeChat has become their major means to maintain their gay identity and gay circles. However, before we go any further, we have to first understand how my participants perceive their identity and the gay circles in a general way.

For most of my research participants being gay is a latent identity which is highly private, and they do not position themselves in a collective sense of "community". If we agree that the concept of community is based on sharing identity (Bradshaw 2008), then it is important to point out that most of the participants invoke their sexuality as a major component to define themselves, but they are not willing to prioritise this as they feel that homosexuality is still "contradictory" to the mainstream social norms and which could cause them unnecessary difficulties[74]. This is not to say that those individuals are seeking to deny their sexual identity; in fact, nearly all my participants have already accepted their sexuality (as we can see from Chapter 4). Chou (2001) observes that de-politicisation and a non-confrontational approach has long been adopted by many gay organizations in China. In the 1998 Tongzhi conference in Hongkong, "there seemed to be a consensus concerning the strategy of depoliticization and nonconfrontational approach; the attendees suggested replacing the category tongzhi 'movement' with tongzhi 'work' or 'culture' because the term 'movement' in the last forty years has been derogatory and disastrous in mainland China" (Chou, 2001, p.139). Similarly, these strategies are commonly employed by my participants. In Chapter 5, I have illustrated these strategies in relation to the issue of coming out and "coming home", here I describe their general views. Huang's (24, Shenzhen) words could best exemplify the everyday practices of such strategies.

RD: Do you think you are in the tongzhi circle?

Huang: Er…Yes, naturally, I am… but I won't show it deliberately, that is to say… like my other identities… I don't really care [to expose]. I know I am tongzhi, but

74 I have demonstrated this point in the previous chapters too.

> this identity is not something on the table, unlike other identities, you can say it loudly. This identity [homosexuality] could cause me some inconvenience. For example, I had a boyfriend in my undergraduate. He wanted to take me to his place where he shares with others. Before we went there, we had a rehearsal about what I should say to his flatmate. Just to say I am his cousin. It was not about the fear of discrimination, it is just to avoid unnecessary troubles.

Ah Hua (29, Guangzhou) also claims that gay identity for him is something that he does not need to highlight in his social life. He said: "[gay identity] is balanced among my other identities, just like I am a student, I am a working man; meanwhile I am also gay, no differences with the other [identities]". Ye (27, Guangzhou) feels that we should not underline gay identity in our daily life too. He felt a little bit uncomfortable when he was dragged by his friend to attend a gay community event organised by Zhitong in which they watched a gay romance film. He told me that he felt that event was like having a party lecture in order to "enhance our mentality/cognition" of being gay. He would prefer to watch a "normal" movie which will make him feel he is a member of the public rather than a specific group of people. It seems for some of my participants that being gay is just an aspect of his life, and it just happens that he likes males.

This, again, relates to what I have discussed in Chapter 5 that for the many younger Chinese gay men, although they are critically aware the problems and difficulties in relation to the gay identity, they chose to "live" with it rather than "deal" with it. Moreover, most of my participants tend to see being gay is more of a personal issue which links to a choice of lifestyle rather than a political (with a big P) matter for themselves. This does not mean they do not acknowledge the political dimension of gay identity; in fact most of them believe the Chinese government is deliberately ignoring the sexual minorities' issues in China. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 5 that many Chinese gay men have been introduced to the ideas of (Western) LGBT movement via the Internet when they started to explore their sexual identity online. However, many of them do not believe that they can do anything to change the political and cultural environment in China. Xiao Zhu's (24, Guangzhou) might represent a number of participants:

> Of course, the movement sometimes censures gay-related media content which I am not very happy about. But I would not say they are suppressing gay people. Yet, if the government shows its attitude to support gay people because this will definitely change the public's view. However, it might be too radical for the government to do so. Homosexuality is an issue that goes against the traditional

> values, which are very stable. For men, you must get marry and have a descendant. These cultural norms are highly unlikely to change at least in the next few generations. So, what can I do? I cannot do anything.

Again, Xiao Zhu's words demonstrate how an individual perceives the social and political constraints in China. This seemingly passive view emphases more on structural qualities of society and limit of human agency, which is commonly reported by many of my participants (also see Chapter 5).

Under this context, some of my participants tend to separate their gay life from the other aspects of their life. For example, Ah Nan (24, Guangzhou) tries to maintain two "circles" as separate. Although he did not keep his sexual orientation secret, he tends only to tell those people really close to him. He set up groups in his WeChat account in order to manage his identities. This is a common practice among my participants, many of whom set up group tags in their WeChat so gay-related contexts are only shown to certain people. A few of my participants even have two WeChat accounts, one is for gay, and another is for the others. However, I do not see this as deliberately maintaining "a double life" in which same-sex attracted individuals tend to "split self in public and in private" and to cover up their sexual identity in public spaces (Zhang, 2015). In fact, most of my participants do not pretend or hide their sexual identity, rather it is like a "don't ask don't tell" practice. I feel most of my participants have integrated their sexual identity into their everyday life and increasingly try to live a lifestyle which is a "metropolitan model of homosexuality" as I have demonstrated in previous chapters (Mowlabocus, 2012, Sender, 2004).

Indeed, this "don't ask don't tell" practice is frequently employed by many participants in their workplace. For example, Robin (21, Beijing), a final year undergraduate student, told me that for him being gay in China means he needs to protect his identity carefully. He was going to be an intern in a state-owned company and he felt that his sexual identity might cause a bit trouble in the office politics, and especially he found it difficult to join colleagues' conversations when they talked about romance and marriage. However, this is not to say he was presenting himself as being heterosexual, he just did not come out to his colleagues. Again, this suggests "coming out" cannot be regarded as holistic status, rather the issue is really about "coming out to whom".

Similarly, Xiao Wu (28, Beijing), a cloth designer, has only come out to very few colleagues who have been very close to him, although he felt that his working environment is more tolerant towards sexual minorities. He explains:

“my work is just my work, after 8 hours a day, I don’t have to hang out with my colleagues. I don’t really care about how they think about my sexual orientation”. He added: “now most of my friends are gay, my flatmate is gay, we always invite our [gay] friends into our flat to spend the weekend together. You do not have to make friends with you colleague, if it happens you are friends, then you are friends”. From Xiao Wu’s words we can further understand what the gay circle means to many Chinese gay individuals. For them, the gay circle is where they can comfortably expose their same-sex identity (Feng and Zhao, 2016).

Given this general nature of the gay circle (at a broader level), in the following section I will illustrate how I have created my gay circle with the help of WeChat during my fieldwork in China. Through my own experiences I intend to further unpack the nature of these gay (digital) social networks and what they mean to a Chinese gay man.

Not long after I started my fieldwork in Guangzhou, one of my key informants added me to a WeChat group called “LGBT in GZ” which was founded by a few foreigners in Guangzhou. Initially, it was just for their own use, which was to enable LGBT foreigners to meet, but then more and more Chinese people were invited to the group. Most of the time people were chatting in English. They often organised private events and parties. Through this WeChat group I became friends with a number of like-minded males including a few white men with whom I was able to spend my leisure time. We normally went to eat western cuisine and drink cocktails or crafted beer. Therefore, I was able to maintain a social life which was relative similar to what I had back to England.

For me, this WeChat group has helped me in establishing a small friend circle within a very short period of time. It provided me with Social Networking Services (SNS) like communicative affordances to achieve my communicative outcome efficiently. This was a similar process to the one that I have explained earlier in relation to how Ah Nan (24, Guangzhou) has established his gay friends’ circles through QQ groups. Both of us were seeking to meet and form friendships with local gay males.

In Beijing, one of my participants recommended me to another gay WeChat group as he felt that the people in that group might be willing to participate in my research. I contacted the group organiser and asked if I could join as I was looking for more research participants. He kindly agreed for me to join, but he asked me to see my student ID; the requirement was to have at least a master’s degree (or to be studying for such a degree) as he said it was the way to keep the group’s “quality”. As I did not have my student card with me,

I sent him my school's web profile as proof of my identity. This was the first occasion where I felt slightly awkward about using my degree to show I have "*suzhi*" (quality). This shows that the suzhi discourse is not only dominating Chinese gay males' (digital) dating practices (Chapter 6), but also has been more widely embedded in their everyday social life.

Again, through this WeChat group I was able to make a number of friends and to form my own gay circle in Beijing. The following extract from my fieldnotes further illustrate how these digital facilitated gay social networks have offered me：

> Yesterday, someone in our small 9 people (WeChat) group asked if anyone want to have dinner together. By that time, I just conducted a research interview and seemed very close to the suggested place. Then I took the metro to meet them. Besides a new friend I haven't know before, all the other 3 I have met before. This new friend was doing a PhD too and just travelled back from Georgia. He shared his story in Georgia with us during the meal. He said the guys there were very handsome, and the condoms were all XXL in the supermarkets. He then told us that he had won a 1 RMB visa application service for Thailand Visa. Then we started to chat about money boys and the special massage service in Thailand. Sky also told us that if we go to Thailand, he could introduce a few good places. He knew a few [gay] friends who live in Thailand, and he also knew a friend through the swimming [WeChat/QQ] group who is a diving tutor in Thailand.
>
> In the dinner, our topics were mostly gay-related, we also made sexual-related jokes. However, this was nothing different from what straight guys do. It was just a friend reunion, we cared about each other and wanted to catch up with each other. The only difference might be we were taking gay-related topics. We were all comfortable with our sexual identity and did not feel there was anything special about it (14/08/2017).

Again, the gay circle for us is just a friend network in which we are very comfortable to expose our sexual identity, and the gay circle to some extend is the social network in which we are spending our private lives. Our gay circle certainly relates to the so-called "metropolitan model of homosexuality" (Mowlabocus, 2012, Sender, 2004) what I have discussed throughout the thesis. The existence of such gay circles could not only be attributed to the mediation of different digital media platforms, but more importantly it relates to the general neoliberalistion in China. I cannot deny my gay circle is very much class-based. Indeed, Wei (2011) criticises that "tongzhi circles" are

largely organised by social classes and that different circles are distinctive to each other, which obstructs the development of a collective identification.

While I acknowledge the issue of “class” within the Chinese gay community, I want to highlight a few points which could direct think further about this issue. First, social stratification and polarization is not only an issue within the gay community but more generally exists in the society. Guo (2009) has observed that social polarization has been continued to soar since the late 1970s after China’s economic reform. Shi and Chuliang (2010) also note that “China is a rural-urban divide society with a striking feature of enormous income gap between rural and urban households” (p. 7151). Secondly, and related, as I have discussed in the previous chapters, mobility is a key issue for many of my participants who grew up in less developed or rural areas in China. Through educational path many young participants have escaped from their hometowns and pursue a metropolitan gay lifestyle in the big cities. Arguably, the gay circle seems to always be linked to the top-tier cities in China. Thirdly, due to the participants recurring methods (see Chapter 3), those who took part in this research project largely “held professional or management positions and/or were upwardly mobile by means of higher education” which might be categorised as middle class (Yu, 2020, p. 869). Thus, their gay circles are more liked to be middle class, and their use of digital media would also facilitate the formation classed social networks.

7.5 Gay Circles as Resources

Understanding such nature of the gay circle, the question of what the gay circle means to Chinese gay men related to what they can obtain from the circle. The very obvious answer is for their relational goals. As I have noted in the previous chapter, many participants regard the gay circle as their dating pool. Qing Shi (33, Beijing) organises dozens of gay WeChat groups, and he knows perhaps more than a thousand gay people in China. He well describes the gay circle:

> There were many gay men in the circle, but once when they found their partners, they will leave the circle. Thus, the circle is like a poor village, once people started to live a good life they would move out. Then the village would become poorer and poorer.

In order to change this “poor village” and trying to keep “good” gay males in the circle, Qing Shi (33, Beijing) started to organise gay WeChat groups for

gay men around China according to their occupations, graduated universities, current locations and so on. In his words, he is trying to connect more and more "good" gay males in China and help them to obtain more valuable things not just limited to a boyfriend. Using one of his WeChat group's notice, I will explain what he means by a "good" gay man.

> This group is for the [information] exchange and sharing of outstanding LGBT talents in Hong Kong, Macau and Guangdong. Everyone is welcome to discuss useful topics such as views towards life, career and academic development, literature and movies, travel and leisure. Mainland friends should respect some of the positions and feelings of Hong Kong and Macao friends, and promote good interactions between them as much as possible. Encourage discussion on various topics, discourage three or two people from obsessively posting irrelevant material, irrational or emotional discussion, pornography, pure commercial advertising, and promoting small game programs. Culture-related advertisements can be posted but must be controlled.
>
> Everyone is welcomed to bring in friends with reliable character and good quality, so that this group will flourish and grow, and set a model for the culture of friendship-making for gay men in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao to a new height.

Qing Shi's (33, Beijing) idea of being a "good" gay man links to the *suzhi* discourse that I have discussed in the previous chapters. The notion of *suzhi* relates higher education, professional occupation, positive attitude towards life, socially responsible and having hobbies, which reflex certain neoliberal ethos. Furthermore, from this notice, we can see that people are not encouraged to foreground their sexual desires, instead, they are encouraged to form a connection based on shared interests, educational background, and professional positions. This seems to be a way to make the gay circle more resourceful and keep more people active in the circle, which could be seen as a resistance force to the promiscuous nature of gay circle (see Chapter 5). Therefore, Qing Shi (33, Beijing) were very proud of how he has achieved in running such gay WeChat groups:

> Some people met each other in my groups and founded a quite successful company; people's thoughts inspires each other and even provide positive impact on someone's PhD thesis; some people found other like-minded young talents to join their team; many people found satisfying jobs, satisfactory properties, doctors who saved their lives, and of course sweet loves through my WeChat groups. But what makes me the happiest is that many friends who had positive changes since they knew me. Before they might be in the deep of the

> “closet” or confused [about their sexuality]; now they have established their gay circles, some even told me that they get to know all their friends in their gay circles from my WeChat groups.

Again, Qing Shi’s (33, Beijing) words emphases the diverse possibilities that the gay circle could offer to Chinese gay males. These digital networks are more than just friends’ circles, which are more likely to have a more community-oriented nature. However, it is important to note that these networks are just for high *suzhi* gay men who lives in big cities, have good education, have their own professional careers. Arguably, these digital facilitated networks are exclusive rather than illusive.

Like Qing Shi (33, Beijing), there are other individuals who want take advantage of the digital connectivity to make the gay circle more resourceful. Steven, a middle-aged America man, runs a charity called WorkForLGBT which is dedicated to promoting an LGBT friendly working environment in China (GS, 2016). Apart from running regular gatherings for Chinese LGBT professionals to broaden their social networks and connections, they also organise gay job fairs. It is true that the majority of companies involved in the job fair are still western firms, but we are starting to see more Chinese companies’ names on the list (ChinaNewswire, 2016).

It was in WorkForLGBT’s gathering event in Beijing that I met Phil (30, Beijing) who works for an international insurance company. He told me he found many clients from this network. It is interesting to note that WorkForLGBT mainly promotes their events on their WeChat account and also maintain the social network through WeChat. I first saw their advertisement in a gay WeChat group, then later after the social event, I was added to the WorkForLGBT Beijing WeChat group. Only work-related topics are allowed to be discussed in the group. People posting irrelevant information (such as call for boyfriend or posting irrelevant advertisement) will be invited to leave the group. Phil also told me that many people do find a new job through the group where gay individuals could feel comfortable with their sexuality.

Arguably, this gay circle is still for the young urban professionals, where they are enabled to be gay comfortably in their workspaces. To some extent, this gay circle could integrate into some mainstream social circles which show some degree of mobility. But one should also be cautious about the condition of such mobility. Indeed, the neo-liberal political economy together with the spreading ideology of individualism since the late 1990s has brought a huge transformation into normal Chinese lives. Sexual minorities in China are able to start their own “pink” businesses and younger gay males are able to work

in an environment where they can embrace homosexuality. However, the condition of such mobilization is the sexual minorities' contribution to the market economy, rather to make any political claims. Furthermore, as I demonstrated throughout the thesis that although the neoliberalision in China has helped certain Chinese gay male to live in a metropolitan gay lifestyle, it does not to a great extent change the (mainstream and traditional) Chinese social and cultural norms that are still constrain many Chinese gay men, no matter young or old.

7.6 Conclusion

Different digital platforms provide different forms of connectivity and form different social circles for my participants. This could be better understood through Peter Sloterdijk's concept of "social foam" in which he argues that "we live in a plurality of spheres". Foam is an aggregate of micro-spheres – bubbles – adjacent but without being accessible to or separable from, each other. Each bubble in the foam is what Sloterdijk calls a "co-isolated association" (cited in Wakeford, 2011). Some (gay/tongzhi) circles emphasise more on the way in which people could be connected through shared interests (i.e. it highlights the network), but other circles could form stronger social ties. Participants still conceptualise the digital as a tool, which they could use instrumentally and functionally. However, their digital and social practices are still shaped by the Chinese social norms.

Overall, I agree with Wei (2011) that the gay community in China is indeed an imagined community; it has a useful and vital imaginary power. The Internet certainly contributed to the formation/construction of such gay community in China. However, such imaginary could become a paradox in the digital age. It makes certain aspects of the "community" more visible to my participants than other aspects. In addition, it is fair to conclude that some of my urban participants certainly benefited from the social networks the Internet and other digital media provided them. Again, we can see how neoliberalism in China has brought my participants in relation to living with gay identity. The (digitally mediated) gay circles are integrated into their everyday living provide them with a way of organising and maintaining their social lives. We can also see how the gay circles are enlarging into their work and professional lives, however, there seems still a long way to go.

Chapter 8
Concluding Remarks

8.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I have set up a relative ambitious task to investigate the role that digital media plays in the everyday lives of Chinese gay males, and to further explore the implications of such digital practices relating to the construction of gay identity. There are three central concepts in this project: that of (gay) identity, the digital aspect in general, and the particular Chinese context. As I have demonstrated in the literature review (Chapter 2), each of these concepts has its own long pedigree, and is theoretically laden in different and/or even oppositional canons. Acknowledging this nature, I have taken an exploratory and empirical-lead approach to examine my Chinese gay male research participants' lived experiences of identity and the use of digital media to articulate that identity. In order to collect materials for the investigation, I carried out a nine-month ethnographic fieldwork in Guangzhou and Beijing respectively from December 2016 to August 2017.

During the fieldwork, I interviewed 89 demographically diverse gay men and discussed their life stories since they "realised" their sexuality with a particular focus of the relevant use of digital media (the Internet, and its various social/digital applications). My interest was in what people say and how they articulate their experiences to express their embodied identity and pleasure. Furthermore, I worked for a local gay organisation in Guangzhou for five months and spent four months in Beijing, where I attended various activities and events engaging with different LGBT organisations and individuals. Through this intensive engagement with local gay individuals and communities, I was not only able to make a more comprehensive understanding of individuals' life stories, but also contextualise their experiences within a wider cultural, social, and political context of China.

This Ph.D. project revealed that digital media has indeed played a significant role in the everyday lives of different generations of Chinese gay men, as it has become their vital sources of learning and understanding about sexual identity and gay community life, their main venue of communicating, connecting and meeting with other same-sex attracted men. However, their use of digital media is still shaped by Chinese social norms and social locations. Firstly, although digital media have introduced Chinese gay men to

up-to-date transnational gay cultural products, the digital representation of homosexuality still highlights a discourse of “how to deal with the marginalised sexual identity regarding the Chinese context”. Secondly, although digital media have facilitated greater connectivity between Chinese gay males and helped them to manage and maintain different gay circles, it does not necessarily produce solidarity in the community. These gay circles are often stratified by the nature of the social class.

In this final chapter, I synthesise the empirical findings and link these to the existing academic debates that I have highlighted throughout the thesis. By doing so, I do not want to simply summarise the results of this research, but also, I want to shed light on potential further studies on sexual identities and digital media in China. Finally, I also reflect on the limitations of this research project and point out future research directions.

8.2 The Role of Digital Media in Chinese Gay Males’ Everyday lives

Studies on Chinese homosexuality tend to argue that the rise of the Internet in China has transformed the lives of same-sex attracted males (e.g.: Cao and Lu, 2014; Zhang and Kaufman, 2005). While scholars disagree over issues of “empowerment” online, they nevertheless all argue for the transformational impact of the Internet. Despite the tendency towards technology determinism embedded in such arguments, none of these studies has illustrated this “digital transformation” to Chinese gay communities in great detail.

Through the life stories from different generations of Chinese gay men, this thesis shows the Internet has provided Chinese gay men with the affordances to form an “imagined community” (Weeks, 2000) where they can exchange their personal narratives, form connections beyond spatial constraints, and embrace the possibilities of living a gay life. With the arrival of the Internet, many Chinese gay men first found and met another same-sex attracted men. Using the spaces provided by online gay chatrooms, and forums (BBSs) etc., they could share their general interests, tell each other their stories of getting into the “gay circle”, and talk about how to deal with the difficulties that they encountered in integrating their sexual desires into their lives. Thus, these digital platforms have brought previously largely isolated gay individuals together, which could be beneficial to some participants’ development of sexual identity.

For the younger research participants, the Internet has become their major information source to understand their sexual identity and learn about gay culture. Through “narrative engagement” (Hammack and Cohler, 2009), they negotiate different discursive elements related to gay identity in China. For many participants, being gay poses a series of questions or issues they need (or try) to find an answer or solution, which indicates a journey of active searching and meaning-making in the digital spaces. These issues include sexual health, coming out to family members (especially parents), and finding love with someone of the same sex. Through engaging with different narratives around gay identity in China, younger research participants are critically aware the (cultural and social specific) problems and difficulties in relation to sexuality, however, most of the time, they chose to “live” with it rather than “deal” with it. In other words, they push these issues aside for the future because they are living in the present.

The Internet also provides my research participants (especially the younger generation) with spaces to explore their corporeal selves and sexual desires. From a very early stage of their sexual identity development, they would be able to access erotic and pornographic materials, however, the access is often limited and controlled by the Chinese government’s censorship. Facilitated by the Internet and its various digital platforms, many participants could also arrange casual (or commercial) sex easily. Comparatively, finding a gay romance in the digital age is easy. Many participants reported a dislike of the current overtly market-orientated digital dating culture. Nevertheless, most of them are struggling to find alternative ways.

Digital media platforms have become most participants’ main way of establishing and maintaining their gay friends’ circles in which they can comfortably expose their sexual identity and spend their private social life. These digitally mediated gay circles are often formed on the basis of social class which are more likely to be exclusive rather than inclusive of men from different backgrounds. Yet, it is positive to see that these gay circles are enlarging into many participants’ work and professional lives. They do not just perceive the gay circle as a dating pool or friend networks, but they believe the gay circle could be more resourceful in providing a more integrated gay life.

8.3 Tensions and Dynamics in Chinese Gay Men's Everyday Lives and Their Identity Construction

Having understood my research participants' everyday use of the digital media, we also need to recognise the social and cultural context that shape such digital practices, and their understanding of gay identity. First of all, greater social and economic transformation has taken place after China's opening up at the same time as the development of the information and communications technology. Generational narratives of gay identity have appeared under such techno-social context. For the older generations (who came of age before 2000), they are more likely to have a painful period of time acknowledging and accepting their sexualities. They tend to regulate and discipline themselves through the dominate social norms at that time, resulting in an internalised "heteronormativity". For the younger participants (who came of age after 2000), they find it easier to embrace their sexualities. Even so, they still have problems in accepting themselves completely. Their exploration of gay identity is still constrained by the social norms, especially for those who live in smaller towns or cities.

Western influence on my (younger) participants' gay identity construction can be easily observed. In Ho (2007)'s view, the western gayness and *tongzhi* subject are all parts of the "fragmented same-sex identity" in China, which can best be understood within the paradigm of China's opening up to the current globalising world. Indeed she argues "[g]ay netizens in China are increasingly exposed to the transnational gay scene via the Internet, where notions of 'coming out', 'gay rights', 'gay marriage' or 'individualism' are widely promoted" (p.20). She further suggests that although these notions could "enhance general awareness of identity and community", they also "tend to lead some gay netizens in China to imagine the Western gay world as a gay haven" (Ho 2007, p.20). However, for Wong (2010) and Plumer (2010), gay identity in China is actually a hybridization.

It is not my intention to join the above debate to argue if there is a holistic Chinese gay identity or a fragmented one. My argument here is that due to the process of globalisation and digitisation, Chinese gay men, especially the younger generation definitely have more cultural resources afforded by China's opening up, which enable them to establish their own identity and self-esteem. During this process, the social lexicon about gay identity has already been expanded. As Ho (2007) suggests, Chinese gay men are "increasingly exposed to the transnational gay scene via the Internet" (p. 20). For many younger participants, when they started to explore their sexual identity on the

Internet they would come across “notions of ‘coming out’, ‘gay rights’, ‘gay marriage’” and be familiar with the development of the LGBT movement in Western countries.

Besides accessing global LGBT news and information, many of my participants also like to consume global gay popular cultural products/texts via the Internet. This suggests that with the development of ICT, Chinese individuals have increasingly more choices in terms of cultural representation. With increasing global mobility and the advance of digital technology, certain young and affluent Chinese gay men do not simply limit themselves as only a Chinese cultural citizen but rather they like to position themselves in a global perspective. However, this has not yet completely undermined the Chinese traditional values and norms. My research participants still understand their identity in its own social and cultural context.

The influence of a particular kind of erotic-cultural imperialism (Jacobs, 2012) on my participants’ construction of gay identity could also be observed. The Internet has opened up Chinese gay males' sexual fantasy towards Western gay men and their bodies in an age of globalisation. Many participants reported that when they started to explore their sexuality online, most of the gay porn they could find were Western produced. From a very stage many young participants have become very familiar with the Western erotic coding of gay sexuality. This seemed to affect some participants construction of gay desires.

Besides the Western influence, Chinese traditional values and norms still shape most of my participant’s construction and practice of gay identity. A model of “Chinese bicultural self” (Lu and Yang, 2006) can be observed in relation to the participants' life experience of being gay in China. On the one hand, many participants, especially the younger ones, are increasingly embracing an individual-orientated self. They celebrate “the independent and individual way of being” in metropolitan cities, such as Beijing and Guangzhou (Lu, 2008, p. 349). On the other hand, they are still not able to entirely reject “the traditional (social-oriented) Chinese self” (Lu and Yang, 2006). They understand the “harsh reality” associated with being gay in China, but many of them are trying to push it aside for the future as they are living in the present. Essentially, rather than challenging these traditional values and norms, many participants seem to come to some kind of co-existence with them. This can be seen as a general non-confrontational strategy towards their sexual identity.

Under such general strategy, for many participants, being gay is a latent identity which is highly private and social contextual dependent. Thus, “coming

out", for many Chinese gay men, cannot be regarded as automatically providing a holistic identity: rather the issue is really about "coming out to whom" (Bao, 2011). Indeed, as Feng and Zhao (2016) suggest, for most Chinese gay men the "circle" is the only public space where they can expose their same-sex identity. Today, as I have mentioned earlier, my participants' gay circles are often formed and maintained with the help of WeChat. These gay circles place more emphasis on the social network and the shared interests, but it does not necessarily form a more comprehensive sense of solidarity in the face of the larger society.

Neoliberalism is another great force that shapes my participants' construction of gay identity. Peck et al. (2018) suggest that, as a "strong discourse" neoliberalism has "deeply enmeshed with the primary circuits of financial, cultural, and corporate power" with the intensification of capitalism in the late 20th century (p.3). This is also evident in China, under the general liberalisation which began in the 1980s, Chinese individual's fabric of identity and social life have profoundly transformed. Market ideas and proxies dominate all aspects of people's everyday lives. In particular, neoliberal discourses, such as *suzhi* has greatly shaped Chinese gay males' digital (dating) culture. Dating and hooking-up practices on LBRTD applications sometimes become an exchange of (social) capitals, which for some participants can be overtly purposeful and impatient. Thus, some participants reported removal of LBRTD applications from their phone and look for alternative ways of dating and socialising with other gay men.

The decision of some of the participants to abandon dating apps reflects an interesting tension in their perception between "online" and "offline". This tension raises further questions about gay males' everyday use of digital media and the development of social media in China. As I stated in Chapter 4, Xiao Mi, a senior staff member of one of the earliest well-known online gay forums, believes that Chinese gay community was formed online first and then went offline. It was the Internet that brought previously often isolated gay men together. The experience of my participants who are now in their 30s or over also seems to support Xiao Mi's view. This community developmental trajectory is certainly different from that of the West, where LGBT communities were first formed in a pre-digital world. They gradually established communities in the "physical world" and went through a political struggle which slowly gained social and political recognition from the wider society.

In comparison, to what extent can we argue for the existence of "solid" (offline) LGBT communities in China? My participants' stories seem to suggest that

one to one online social interaction could often lead to offline meetings. Digital media platforms could also facilitate small group of social gatherings among a small number of gay men. However, any form of social gathering with potential for political mobility is largely prevented by the Chinese government which is evident from the recently shut down of Shanghai Pride in August 2020. This suggests that gaining public recognition for LGBT groups in China is still a struggle.

Under this context and relating back to the general non-confrontational strategy towards sexual identity, the Political (with a big P) issues of gay identity has been put aside by many participants and also the digital media platforms (see the example of Blued in Chapter 1). Thus, for many participants living in Guangzhou and Beijing, being gay has become their lifestyle choice, and digital media for them seems to be just a "tool" to help them form, manage, and maintain such lifestyle. In this sense, to what extent can we argue that the digital media is empowering Chinese gay men? My answer would be in slightly negative tone. That is to say most of my participants are still constrained by structural qualities of Chinese society, digital media has not yet largely liberated them from these structural issues.

8.4 Further Research Directions

This research project has focused on the Chinese gay males' use of digital media because of three reasons. First, Chinese male same-sex behaviour can be traced through a long and distinctive history. Male homosexual behaviours have been recorded in the past "between emperors and ministers, masters and servants, teachers and students, and scholar-bureaucrats and opera players" (Cao and Lu, 2014, p.841). Those homosexual practices were "inextricably bound up with structures of social power" as explored earlier (ibid.). Therefore, historically, male homosexuality has been involved in power negotiation.

Second, it is because there is "a more urgent concern of stigma against gay men" (Sim, 2014, p.4-5). The traditional view of family and marriage put huge pressure on Chinese men to get married and have descendants (Chou, 2000, Sim, 2014). This pressure seemed to be increasing after the Chinese government introduced the One-Child-Policy in 1979 (Sim, 2014). Moreover, as gay males are identified as a high-risk group of HIV, the general public

easily equates, negatively, the spread of AIDS with the gay male community (Cao and Lu, 2014).

Third, in the western world, it seems that historically gay men have been “more visible than lesbians” (D'Emilio, 1997, p.172). This perhaps could be explained within these capitalist societies that men “could easily construct a personal life independent of attachments to the opposite sex” (ibid., p.173). Thus, the discovery and emergence of the “gay market” and the metropolitan lifestyle gay model tend to be male-dominated as well. This dominance still can also be seen in cyberspace (Bhugra, 2009, p. 497). This seems to be true in China, as from what I have observed that larger and more numerate markets are only for gay males rather than lesbian or other sexual minorities. For example, as Lee (2015) identifies “most Chinese apps targeting the gay community are male-dominated” (n.p.).

Therefore, the Chinese lesbians would face a different social situation and dynamics; their role of digital media in their everyday lives also deserves further academic attention. There have been studies focused on Chinese lesbians (lalas) use of a particular digital platform (e.g.: Liu, 2017), however, holistic accounts of Chinese lesbian experience with the Internet and its various applications are still limited.

Furthermore, this research only focuses on Chinese urban gay men’s experiences with gay identity and digital media. Throughout the thesis, we can see that gay individuals’ experiences in smaller towns and villages seem to be largely different from their metropolitan counterparts. The stories of these individuals could also be informative in revealing the role of digital media to Chinese gay men.

Apart from the above two directions of research, specific points could be explored further in this thesis. First is the role of pornography in Chinese gay men’s construction of sexuality. Thirty years of scholarly examination of gay porn have reached ‘one striking consensus’ - that ‘gay cultures are especially ‘pornified’ in the Western world (Maddison. 2017, p.139). Jeffreys (2002, p.78) also claims that ‘pornography is crucial to gay men’s survival, to their identities, and to their ability to do sex’. Although I have examined the role of gay porn in relation to my participants' gay identity development in Chapter 6, there are still many questions which could investigate further in regarding this matter.

Second, the development of gay-orientated ICT and what this means to different generations of Chinese gay men could also be explored further. In this research, I found many research participants who were born in the 1980s

often reported a nostalgic view towards the development of gay digital spaces. They particularly valued the period during which BBSs (online forums) were the most popular gay social platforms, because they felt the people on BBSs were friendly, honest, and more likely to develop serious relationships. Additionally, some participants (aged 25 -27) cherished a gay social website called Feizan (feizan.com) which could be described as the Chinese gay version of Facebook; they believed that this website provided them with a space where they could fully present themselves and share more social and cultural interests. However, now many younger participants (aged 19-24) are expressing disappointment towards gay digital dating culture and some of them even reported withdrawing from gay digital media. Thus, more attention could be paid to investigate the development of Chinese gay-orientated ICT, and how it has shaped the experiences of different gay men in different generations.

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Appendix A
Participants Information

No.	Name	Age	Place of living	Education	Occupation	Recruit Method	Ways of Interview
1	Yi Lu	25	Guangzhou	BA	Office Worker	Zhitong	FtF
2	Huanzhe	25	Guangzhou	MA	Student	Community Event	FtF
3	king	23	Guangzhou	BA	Student	WeChat Group	FtF
4	Jia	24	Guangzhou	MA	Student	Zhitong	FtF
5	Cao	27	Guangzhou	BA	Salesman	Zhitong	FtF
6	AB	33	Guangzhou	BA	Salesman	Snowballing	FtF
7	Ah Nan	24	Guangzhou	Msc	Student	Snowballing	FtF
8	Xiao Xiao	28	Guangzhou	MA	Student	Snowballing	FtF
9	Max	22	Guangzhou	BSc	Student	Snowballing	FtF
10	ET	23	Guangzhou	BA	Student	Community Event	FtF
11	Ahan	48	Guangzhou	BA	Semi-retired Engineer	Zhitong	FtF
12	Xiao Bei	36	Guangzhou	MA	HR manager	Zhitong	FtF
13	lemon	19	Guangzhou	BA	Student	Zhitong	FtF

14	Divad Chen	26	Guangzhou	BA	Business Owner	Zhitong	FtF
15	Jinshu	33	Guangzhou	BA	Office Worker	Zhitong	FtF
16	YQT	28	Guangzhou	MA	Office Worker	Zhitong	FtF
17	KFS	27	Guangzhou	MA	Research Assisant	Snowballing	FtF
18	Xiao Zhu	24	Guangzhou	BA	NGO Worker	Zhitong	FtF
19	Luo Jie	32	Guangzhou	BA	NGO Worker	Zhitong	FtF
20	Ka Fei	24	Guangzhou	College or below	Office Worker	Zhitong	FtF
21	Yin	30	Guangzhou	College or below	Freelancer	Zhitong	FtF
22	Ah Shan	63	Guangzhou	MA	Retired manager	Snowballing	FtF
23	Xiao Hu	35	Guangzhou	BA	Amatur actor	Zhitong	FtF
24	Hou	23	Guangzhou	BA	Poilt trainee	Zhitong	FtF
25	YLY	27	Guangzhou	BA	HR officer	Zhitong	FtF
26	Luo	26	Henan	BA	Office Worker	Zhitong	Online
27	Li Jun	23	Guangzhou	BA	Designer	Community Event	FtF
28	Zhang Run	25	Guangzhou	BA	Salesman	Zhitong	FtF

29	Ah Hua	29	Guangzhou	BA	Office Worker	Zhitong	FtF
30	Feng	28	Guangzhou	ba	Researcher	Zhitong	FtF
31	R	19	Guangzhou	College & below	Student	Snowballing	FtF
32	Jay	21	Guangzhou	College & below	Student	Snowballing	FtF
33	L	19	Guangzhou	BA	Student	Snowballing	FtF
34	Qi	35	Guangzhou	BA	Teacher	Blued	FtF
35	Fei	19	Guangzhou	College & below	Worker	Snowballing	FtF
36	Bao	28	Guangzhou	PhD	Student	Snowballing	FtF
37	ZLS	22	Guangzhou	BA	Media Industry Worker	Blued	FtF
38	Wu	25	Guangzhou	BA	Student	Blued	FtF
39	Yee	23	Guangzhou	BA	Student	Snowballing	FtF
40	Hobi	18	Guangzhou	College & below	Working in Family Business	Snowballing	FtF
41	Lan Shan	26	Guangzhou	BA	Media Industry Worker	Community Event	FtF
42	Jie Mo	20	Guangzhou	BA	Student	Blued	FtF

43	Cai Yi	26	Guangzhou	BA	Media Industry Worker	Zhitong	FtF
44	HLY	22	Beijing	BA	Student	Snowballing	FtF
45	Huang	20	Beijing	BA	Student	Community Event	FtF
46	PKT	26	Beijing	BA	Analyst	Community Event	FtF
47	Xiao Chen	22	Beijing	BA	Beijing Gender Inte	Snowballing	FtF
48	Chen Daxi	24	Beijing	College & Below	Retail Worker	Snowballing	FtF
49	Fan	30	Beijing	MA	Office Worker	Snowballing	FtF
50	Frank	25	Beijing	MA	Office Worker	Community Event	FtF
51	HH	19	Beijing	BA	Student	Community Event	FtF
52	Phil	30	Beijing	BA	Insurance Businessman	Community Event	FtF
53	DYF	22	Beijing	BA	Student	Community Event	FtF
54	Song	23	Beijing	MA	Student	Snowballing	FtF
55	Sam	43	Beijing	MA	Marketing Manager	GS Ad	FtF
56	Bei	20	Beijing	BA	student	GS Ad	FtF
57	Jeff	25	Beijing	BA	Film Industry Worker	GS Ad	FtF

58	Xing	34	Beijing	MA	Engineer	GS Ad	FtF
59	Mr. S	20	Shenzhen	BA	Police officer	GS Ad	Online
60	River	26	Yunnan	BA	Architect	GS Ad	Online
61	Shan Shui	26	Ningxia	BA	Sales Manager	GS Ad	Online
62	Robin	21	Beijing	BA	Student	GS Ad	FtF
63	Peter	31	Beijing	BA	Designer	GS Ad	FtF
64	SRS	23	Beijing	BA	Unemployed	GS Ad	FtF
65	Hao	26	Beijing	College & Below	IT Worker	GS Ad	FtF
66	Qui	21	Beijing	BA	Student	GS Ad	FtF
67	Ren	26	Shanghai	BA	PR Officer	GS Ad	Online
68	Edd	21	Beijing	BA	Student	GS Ad	FtF
69	Mr. P	27	Beijing	PhD	Student	GS Ad	Online
70	Li Peng	25	Beijing	BA	University Administrator	GS Ad	Online
71	Xiao Wu	28	Beijing	BA	Designer	GS Ad	FtF
72	Lun Lun	21	Chongqing	BA	Student	GS Ad	Online
73	EM	24	Beijing	BA	IT Worker	GS Ad	FtF
74	Xiao Xin	24	Beijing	MA	Student	GS Ad	FtF
75	DS	38	Tianjin	BA	Government Officer	GS Ad	Online
76	Xiao Nuo	26	Shanghai	BA	IT Worker	GS Ad	FtF

77	TX	22	Beijing	MA	Student	GS Ad	FtF
78	Georg e	24	Hangzho u	MA	Student	GS Ad	Online
79	TA	29	Beijing	BA	Media Industry Worker	GS Ad	FtF
80	Cui Chen	22	Beijing	MA	Student	GS Ad	FtF
81	ZGL	29	Beijing	MA	Journalist	GS Ad	FtF
82	Tom	50	Beijing	PhD	Manager	WeChat Group	FtF
83	Wei Bai	46	Beijing	College & Below	Office Worker	Blued	FtF
84	VM	21	Shangha i	BA	Worker	GS Ad	Online
85	Sky	37	Beijing	PhD	Manager	WeChat Group	FtF
86	Qing Shi	33	Beijing	MA	Manager	Snowballi ng	FtF
87	Kevin	35	Hebei	BA	DJ	GS Ad	FtF
88	QZW	22	Beijing	MA	Student	WeChat Group	FtF
89	SKT	29	Beijing	MA	IT	GS Ad	FtF

Appendix B
An English Leaflet of Zhitong

ABOUT ZHITONG :

We grounded ourselves in the community, advocating the equality of LGBTI and gender diversity into public services. We innovated gay-friendly clinic in Guangdong and the first community self-empowering model of peer health services in Xi'an. Meanwhile, we work intensively with the government, the United Nations, and enterprises to promote comprehensive gender and sex education. Our services include: peer education, health education outreach, gender/medical social workers, HIV/STD testing and counseling, gay-friendly doctor recommendation, HIV+ caring, **4006991201 LGBTI hotline, LGBTI leadership** training and supporting, public lectures, the first Guangzhou Tower AISD walk, gay pride month, chores/dancing club, and book club etc. We serve for more than 10,000 people every year.

OUR SERVICE FEATURES :

Innovation in community empowerment and public health services

We innovated the gay-friendly clinic model in Guangzhou, which integrates peer supporting, social work, and professional hospital services, bringing the concept of "gay-friendly" into the mainstream sexual health services in public hospitals. We also grounded ourselves in the LGBTI community in Xi'an and surrounding areas carrying out the sexual health outreach activities online/offline and various social and cultural events within the community, we integrate public health services with community self-empowerment. We have been provided services for over 1,000,000 people.

The national network of gender equality and LGBTI rights advocacy

Zhitong was a project about gender equality and Anti-HIV-discrimination supported by Chiheng Foundation, worked on related issues in more than 20 cities. We launched the first free LGBT hotline in China, served over 3,000 people, providing consultation on mental, physical health and legal issues. We have been received support nationally and internationally from: LGBTI communities, government, UN, universities, enterprises, woman and children charities and other related NGOs. We now have over 500 volunteers national-wide and 10 full-time staff. We registered officially in Guangzhou and Xi'an. We have been in the committee of Chinese LGBTI conference and Rainbow Awards for 3 years. We are trustee of Barry & Martin's Trust and the sister organization of LA LGBT center. We held the first AIDS-walk on Guangzhou's landmark Canton-Tower. We are also actively involving in the capacity building within and out LGBT community; we have provided trainings for over 1,000 social workers, teachers, medical doctors, nurses, and NGO workers.

Promoting comprehensive gender and sex education with local Government Educational Department

We have been working with UN women and lunched the first ever comprehensive gender and sex education project under China Gender Fund. By lobbying in the local government's educational department and cooperating with public health department and woman/children NGO, we have been able to accomplish the first comprehensive gender and sex education training for elementary and high school teachers, covered more 10,000 students, which meets the Essential Guideline for Gender and Sex Education of UNESCO.

Innovation on gender social work

We integrate the diverse values of gender and sexuality into the social work technics. We are an internship site of Sun Yat-Sen University. We found the first LGBT chore in southern China. We also held LGBT Pride Month and various kinds of social and cultural events. We worked with Fudan University and Sun Yat-Sen University launched open courses on gender and sexuality.

VISION, MISSION, AND VALUE :

Our vision: to achieve the equal rights of Women, LGBTI community, youth, in policy making, public service, and other social and cultural aspects in China.

Our mission: is to make better service for Chinese LBGTI community through the integration of resources from policy making, health service, social work, popular culture and the Internet.

Our value: heath, equality, diversity. Independent souls and bodies.

SOCIAL NETWORK :

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Account Holder's Name: 广州市越秀区智同公益服务中心

Account Number: 602666698

Bank Name: 西安银行（玉祥门支行）

Account Holder's Name: 西安市智同艾防公益中心

Account Number: 604011580000129239

We together, make the community better!

智同
ZHITONG