The Conception and Formation of Families among Non-Heterosexual Women (*Lalas*) in Urban China

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which Chinese non-heterosexual women, who identify themselves as lalas, make sense of and form their families in urban China. It sheds new light on the complex interplay between structure and agency in lalas' experiences of family formation, including those of pursuing motherhood, in a context where same-sex relationships remain stigmatized. Based on in-depth interviews with 35 lala-identified women, this study reveals lalas' pursuit of agency in redefining who can be related to whom in their family-building processes and shows how and under what circumstances their strategies for forming female-led families reinforce or subvert established norms of gender, sexuality, and family. The findings also demonstrate the ways in which traditional and new beliefs about family ties, concerns about the stability of family life, and worries about later life come into play in lalas' decision-making processes regarding whether and how to have children. Furthermore, by exploring lalas' experiences of cyberspace, including their participation in both online and offline activities initiated by lala-targeted social networking sites and social media, this study shows how lalas use cyberspace to explore new meanings of family and ways of developing family life and yet constantly need to navigate tensions between their online and offline lives.

This study makes a distinctive contribution to a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of ongoing changes in family life within and beyond China. The findings highlight the importance of attending to the diversity of practices and meanings along different paths to family formation, which are interwoven with individuals' continued struggles to navigate the gendered, familial, material, and socio-political constraints in their local context. Studying lalas' family-building in China provides an important window into interlocking systems of inequality confronting people whose family aspirations and practices are considered deviant from the norm, and consequently are devalued or silenced.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed dramatic social and legal changes in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) people's family life worldwide. These changes notably include increasing societal acceptance of and expanded legal protection for LGBT individuals and couples (Flores et al., 2018; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016), the legalization of same-sex marriage (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Farr, 2019), and a growing number of lesbian and gay parents, particularly in Western developed countries (Gates, 2017; Jones, 2017; Patterson et al., 2014; Perales & Baxter, 2018). While these societal changes have been accompanied by a rapid expansion in social sciences research on family life formed by same-sex couples, mainly in North America and Europe (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Farr, 2019; Gates, 2012; Lambert, 2005; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Patterson, 2000), attention has rarely been paid to family formation experienced by sexual minority people in other contexts, where social and institutional support for same-sex partnerships is still absent. This research focuses on non-heterosexual Chinese women, who identify themselves as lalas[1] in urban China, and investigates their conception and formation of families in China, where same-sex relationships remain stigmatized (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho et al., 2018; Kam, 2013; Kong, 2016). As I demonstrate in this dissertation, studying these families in the Chinese context opens up new and important ways to understand the diversity of practices and meanings along different paths to family formation, which cannot be fully captured or explained by the existing empirical and theoretical work, which is largely modelled on Western experiences.

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[1] Lala is a Chinese identity category which is widely used for self-identification by women with same-sex desires in urban China. A note on terminology is provided later in this chapter to further explain this term.

Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 lala-identified women in Beijing, the capital of China, this study sheds new light on the complex interplay between structure and agency in lalas' experiences of family formation, including those of pursuing motherhood and redefining who can be related to whom. Lalas' formation of their own families can be seen as the very antithesis of conventional ideas of the family, particularly that endorsed by the older generations, in the Chinese context, where patriarchal values and heterosexual family norms remain deep-rooted (Davis & Friedman, 2014; Santos & Harrell, 2017). In recent years, a growing amount of research has specifically looked into the lived experiences of lalas, highlighting their doubly marginalized status as women and sexual minority people in patriarchal Chinese society (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). Compared with Chinese gay men, the existence and needs of lalas remain almost invisible and neglected in urban China (Ho, 2010; H. Liu, 2017). Whereas prior research on homosexuality has predominantly focused on issues of individual identity and community development (Engebretsen, 2014; Engebretsen et al., 2015; Kam, 2013) and has tackled how sexual minority individuals negotiate with their parents to respond to the imperative of opposite-sex marriage (Choi & Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; Wang, 2019), attention has rarely been given to lalas' active processes of creating and expanding their own families.

To address this research gap, this study seeks to explore two overarching research questions: (1) How do lalas make sense of and form their own families in China? (2) To what extent and how have socio-cultural, economic, and political constraints and opportunities shaped their conception of family and practices of doing family?

The objectives of this study are twofold. Firstly, it marks the first attempt to provide empirical evidence of lalas' processes of same-sex family formation in urban China. As I further explain in the following sections, I focus on three different and yet interrelated

aspects of lalas' family-building experiences: how they navigate their relationships with their families of origin (Chapter 4), their decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children (Chapter 5), and their experiences of exploring alternative paths to family formation via cyberspace (Chapter 6). While this study is not an attempt to map every kind of strategy and practice involved in lalas' family-building processes, it does seek to demonstrate the complex interplay between individual agency and social norms in lalas' lived experiences of forming their own families. It also reveals the multiple inequalities confronting female-led, same-sex families, who have been largely overlooked and deprived of parental, societal, and legal recognition in China.

Secondly, this study aims to expand the ongoing discussion about the diverse meanings, forms, and practices of families and provide critical insights into theoretical debates on gender, sexuality, and family change. By revealing the oft-neglected family life of lalas, my study draws attention to a variety of possible resistance strategies and family constellations, which, to a large extent, depart from the liberal, "out and proud" model of coming-out and family-building celebrated in many Western contexts (Decena, 2008; Horton, 2018). Scholars studying Asian sexualities argue that most of the existing empirical and theoretical studies on sexualities remain ethnocentric and fail to fully account for the lived experiences of individuals, especially those in the global South (Brainer, 2019; Cho, 2009; Horton, 2018; Jackson & Ho, 2018; Kong, 2016; Pai, 2017). Echoing their call to attend to local specificities when studying sexualities, I argue that a contextualized study of lalas' family formation in China enables us to question Western theoretical models, which are insufficient in addressing the complexity of family processes in China, and particularly that of family-building processes among same-sex couples. This study serves to explore changing norms of gender, sexuality, and family in China and, equally

importantly, to illuminate the significance of family connectedness, despite its changing meanings and forms, in a context of wider global changes in family life.

In this introductory chapter, I situate my study of lalas' family formation within the broader political, socio-cultural, and economic context of Beijing, thereby explaining the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of my study. Secondly, I highlight my theoretical approach to studying same-sex family formation in China and the key focuses of my study. Thirdly, I provide a brief discussion of my research methodology. Fourthly, I provide a note on terminology in order to explain some key terms used in this study, particularly the term lala. I end this chapter by outlining the structure of the dissertation and the arguments presented in the coming chapters.

Lalas' family formation in the Beijing context: Opportunities and constraints

This study brings together my detailed analysis of lalas' diverse perspectives on and experiences of building their own families and a critical engagement with existing scholarship on gender, sexuality, and family issues. I posit that the political authority of the Chinese government, social and familial norms, and market-driven cyberspace are key to understanding lalas' conception and formation of families.

As the capital of China, Beijing represents a unique site for an investigation into the dynamic processes and huge challenges of same-sex family formation among lalas. Previous research has suggested that strict political authority constitutes one of the important reasons behind lalas' invisibility and the challenges they face (Engebretsen, 2014). In China, same-sex couples are denied legal access to marriage or adoption. The use of assisted reproductive technology (ART) is also restricted to infertile, married, opposite-sex couples only. In Beijing in particular, many of the street demonstrations and public gatherings organized by LGBT communities have been spied on or suppressed by the

Chinese government (Chen & Chen, 2007; Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). In other words, the social exclusion faced by LGBT communities in Beijing is likely to be more severe than that in other major cities in China, where LGBT events such as the Pride Week in Shanghai and the Pride Parade in Hong Kong can be launched as public events.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the Chinese government's attitude towards homosexuality is by no means clear-cut. It is generally believed that the government upholds the "Three-Nos" policy – no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion – with regard to homosexuality (United Nations Development Program, 2016; Zhang, 2014). Thus, despite a high degree of political control in Beijing, especially that of large-scale public LGBT events and activism, Beijing is often seen as the "political and cultural centre" of China's LGBT movement by LGBT activists and communities (Bao, 2018, p. 14), with many significant LGBT-related cultural events originating in Beijing and being spread to other Chinese cities, such as film festivals and public same-sex weddings, with the aim of increasing the public visibility of same-sex relationships. Given the coexistence of authoritarian control and a certain degree of freedom, the extent to which lalas can validate their self-identities, form same-sex relationships, and develop their own versions of family is still a grey area that warrants further study. The government's ambiguous attitude towards homosexuality will be further delineated in the next chapter (Literature Review).

Furthermore, as in many other parts of Asia, heteronormative family discourses still prevail in China and same-sex relationships remain socially stigmatized (Chow & Cheng, 2010; Kong, 2010). Heteronormativity, as conceptualized by Berlant and Warner (1998), refers to "the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations" that make heterosexuality privileged and endowed with "invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness" (p. 548). At the socio-cultural level, it is generally taken for granted that the "family" in Chinese society is composed of a heterosexual married couple and, ideally, a single child,

or two children under the current two-child policy.[2] Prejudice against non-heterosexual practices and relationships has been perpetuated by long-standing Chinese values surrounding the continuity of the family line, leading the public to perceive non-heterosexual people as deviant and abnormal. Research has shown that Chinese sexual minority individuals rank the pressure from their families of origin as their biggest concern (Hildebrandt, 2019). There is intense familial and societal pressure for both men and women to get married and have children in urban China. Worse still, reinforced by state propaganda, social stigma is generally attached to single women who are not yet married by their late 20s in the major cities of China, and they are consequently classified as "leftover women" (Fincher, 2014; Ji, 2015b). Lalas are thus doubly marginalized by the heteronormative discourse of marriage and family due to their non-heterosexual sexual identity and unmarried status (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). By studying lalas' active processes of building their own families, including their strategies for resisting and/or accommodating social and familial norms, this study generates new understandings of how individuals juggle traditional family obligations and non-normative aspirations to build their own families.

While political control and social and familial norms constitute major forces restricting lalas' agency and freedom, it is important to highlight that the market has played a key role in providing both online and offline spaces for Chinese sexual minority people to explore their sexual identities and develop intimate and family relationships. Not only

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[2] China's two-child policy, announced in October 2015, permits all opposite-sex couples to have two children. Before that, the one-child policy had been in force for over 35 years, since its introduction in 1979. The one-child policy was part of the family planning campaign launched by the government restricting couples to having only one child, with the aim of reducing the adverse impact of huge population pressure on economic and social development, whereas the current two-child policy is intended to address the problems associated with China's stagnating population growth and ageing population (Zeng & Hesketh, 2016). In my study, the majority of participants were born in the 1980s, so they were single children under the previous one-child policy.

has the market provided them with more public spaces, such as gay and lala bars, clubs, and cafes but, more importantly, it has also served as one of the push factors for the rapid development of gay- and lala-oriented cyberspace, such as online forums and social networking mobile applications, which widely facilitate the dissemination of information and images about same-sex desires and relationships in China (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2010; Liang, 2005). Ho's (2010) conceptualization of cyberspace is particularly useful for my research because it interprets it as "both an imagined and real space" (p. 101), in which one's online experiences are closely linked to offline ones. Cyberspace is both "imagined" and "real" in the sense that interactions in cyberspace have enabled the creation of online virtual identities and other imaginary representations, while at the same time becoming part of everyday real lives (Ho, 2010).

Despite continuing state censorship and intermittent crackdowns on Internet sites whose content is perceived by the state as "inappropriate" or a threat to regime stability, research has shown that cyberspace has offered new and diverse opportunities for lalas and gay men to develop their identities and communities in the digital era in China (Bao, 2018; Engebretsen et al., 2015; Shaw & Zhang, 2018). However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which different new technologies shape and change sexual minority people's conception and formation of families. My research aims to address the literature gap and investigate both the opportunities and the constraints brought by cyberspace to lalas' processes of same-sex family formation.

My theoretical approach to studying families in the Chinese context and the significance of my research

The patriarchal, heteronormative, and family-oriented culture in China (Davis & Friedman, 2014; Santos & Harrell, 2017), coupled with the rapidly growing economy and

expansion of cyberspace (Bao, 2018; Engebretsen et al., 2015; Ho, 2010), makes China an important site for investigating the formation of same-sex families, which are enabled and constrained in various ways. Understanding the political, socio-cultural, and economic conditions in China not only allows us to unravel lalas' experiences of tensions, challenges, and opportunities in their processes of family formation, but it also foregrounds the ways in which unequal power relations shape and structure family life. This study aims to contribute to our understanding not only of female same-sex family formation in the Chinese context but also of how same-sex families work in tandem with other relationships and institutions. This section outlines different and yet interrelated theoretical concepts and approaches that are key to the development of my thesis. It also delineates how the major focuses of my study can make scholarly contributions.

One of the major focuses of my study is to look into the ways in which lalas' family formation has been shaped by and also shapes the deep-rooted heteronormative institution of the family. Institutions can be understood as social formations through which individuals, groups, and communities are organized into meaningful relations over time (Ferree, 2010; P. Martin, 2004). The institution of the Chinese family, like other institutions, is socially constructed and thus subject to change. My study engages with and contributes to ongoing academic and public discussions about the extent to which individuals are changing their attitudes towards gender and family relationships in China amidst rapid social changes, particularly the introduction of market-oriented reforms in China and the global trend towards individualization (Liu et al., 2019; Yan, 2013). The individualization thesis posits that individuals are becoming less constrained by traditional conventions and institutions and more capable of exercising their own choices (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Nevertheless, rather than assuming individualization to be a linear or universal process, scholars have alerted us to the need to understand the continued importance of intimate

relationships and their consequences for social obligations among individuals (Jackson & Liu, 2017; J. Liu, 2016). In particular, Qi (2016) argues that the individualization thesis "fails to appreciate a third possibility, namely the Chinese relational self" (p. 40), who embraces more choices to pursue self-interest nowadays, but simultaneously continues to be responsible for working together with his/her family members to maximize the interests of the family. How do we position Chinese female-led, same-sex families within the wider landscape of family continuity and change? And how can lalas' family-building experiences inform our understanding of gender, sexuality, and family issues? Drawing on previous studies about Chinese families and the notion of "the Chinese relational self" (Qi, 2016), I argue that it is impossible to fully understand lalas' family-building processes without examining their relational ties within the generational and gendered hierarchies of Chinese families, which will be developed at considerable length in the coming chapters.

In addition, engaging with Western scholarship on family change and attending to the local context in China, this study draws on the notions of "family practices" (Morgan, 1996, 2011) and "family imaginaries" (Nordqvist, 2017) to capture lalas' conception and formation of families, particularly the connections and tensions between what they feel about heterosexual norms and intergenerational connectedness and what they do to develop their families with their same-sex partners. Rather than seeing "the family" as a static entity, a focus on "family practices" draws our attention to the very acts that create and sustain close personal relationships (Gabb, 2008; Jamieson, 1998, 2011). Building on Morgan's (1996, 2011) notion of "family practices," Nordqvist's (2017) study on heterosexual and lesbian families with donor conceived children in the UK revealed the processes by which genetic relationships were made meaningful in these families. As termed by Nordqvist (2017), "genetic thinking" could be found in, for instance, non-genetic parents' perceived need to do extra work to "prove" themselves as competent parents (p. 872). Her study has

highlighted the need for future researchers to pay attention to not only "family practices" but also "family imaginaries" (Nordqvist, 2017), which have the conceptual capacity to illustrate the role of norms in shaping people's ways of doing family (Nordqvist, 2017; Smart, 2007).

Responding to this call and interrogating the concepts of "family practices" (Morgan, 1996, 2011) and "family imaginaries" (Nordqvist, 2017) in the family-centered Chinese context, where intergenerational relationships remain robust, this study attends to not only what lalas do to create family ties but also how they feel about those family ties and their lives. Chapter 5 demonstrates that lalas' decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children entail a complex interplay of family practices and family imaginaries. It highlights the tensions between lalas' feelings towards family connectedness, which are, to a large extent, bound by familial and social norms and roles, and individuals' pursuit of agency in redefining who can be related to whom. While Chapters 4 and 6 focus on different aspects of family-building processes, lalas' experiences of dealing with the tensions surrounding parent–child relationships and their mixed feelings of belonging to their families of origin and their newly formed same-sex families constitute key themes that run throughout my thesis. By bringing family sociology, gender and sexuality studies, and contemporary Chinese studies into dialogue with each other in the exploration of female-led, same-sex family formation in China, this study enables us to see the diverse ways in which women accommodate norms and/or carve out progressive new roles within the institution of the family.

Furthermore, my approach has been inspired by intersectionality scholarship (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2005), I examine lalas' experiences of building their own families in relation to the structural relations of inequality associated with their social locations, including their gender, sexuality, local or non-local residential status in Beijing,

and socio-economic status. The concept of intersectionality, which has increasingly been used in gender and sexuality studies since the 1990s, refers to the interaction of multiple relations of inequality associated with one's social locations, namely gender, class, and ethnicity, within and across different societal institutions (Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2005). From an intersectional perspective, every member of a family needs to navigate individual intersectionality in the sense that everyone's life choices are constantly shaped by power relations associated with multiple social locations (McCall, 2005). Thus, instead of treating the family as a static and monolithic entity, I focus on individuals as units of analysis and look into the ways in which lalas navigate structures of cross-cutting inequality and develop different pathways to same-sex family formation in the face of social and familial norms, the political authority of the state, and the ever-growing importance of cyberspace.

In short, by studying lalas' family formation through different angles in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I highlight their agency in negotiating change amid local and global flows of LGBT information and new technologies. Meanwhile, I demonstrate how lalas' social locations and material constraints intersect with various institutional systems, including the heteronormative institution of the family and the Chinese state, which keeps a firm grip on people's everyday lives (including the welfare system and the Internet), thus reproducing inequalities and leaving some marginalized lalas with limited family-building or reproductive options.

My methodological approach

I conducted my fieldwork in Beijing between July 2017 and June 2018. This fieldwork included individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 Chinese lala-identified women living in Beijing, and I also participated in lala-related community events. This study mainly draws on my interview data in order to capture and analyze the depth

and breadth of participants' experiences of family formation. While Chapter 3 provides a more detailed discussion of my methodology, this section highlights some of the key methodological underpinnings of my study.

Using qualitative methodology, I have aimed to examine lalas' lived experiences of making sense of family and forming their own families in Beijing, as well as the meanings they attach to family life. As the first of its kind, my study is exploratory in nature and sets great store by locally grounded knowledge gained through my fieldwork. Qualitative methodology allows researchers to achieve an in-depth understanding of "social life in terms of processes rather than in static terms" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 4). It is concerned with the "meanings, processes and contexts" of social phenomena, rather than questions about quantity or frequency (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 4). Thus, it is the most suitable methodology for me to examine what and how lalas think and feel, and how they act during the processes of building their same-sex families, as well as why they make sense of and do family in certain ways.

This methodological approach goes hand in hand with my theoretical approach to studying lalas' families, which is relation-focused and attentive to one's social locations and both family practices and imaginaries in the Chinese context. Conducting individual in-depth interviews with lalas enabled me to focus on individuals as the units of analysis and carefully capture individual perspectives on and experiences of family formation, including lalas' ways of sustaining relational ties with their families of origin and their family practices and imaginaries. My interview questions broadly covered different dimensions of participants' lived experiences, including their identity development as lalas, their everyday interactions with same-sex partners and families of origin, their ideas about or actual practices of marriage and childbearing, their use of cyberspace, and their social life and involvement in lala communities. These questions enabled me to understand

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participants' views and experiences both within and beyond the family sphere, thereby contextualizing their experiences of family formation within their larger webs of relationships and the wider socio-cultural, economic, and political environment.

As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, I am aware that this study presents only some of the many facets of lalas' lived experiences related to family formation and that it has been shaped by my own identities and the dynamics between my participants and me. Nevertheless, as remarked by many of my participants, my study represents the first significant step towards providing a channel for lalas to share their family-building experiences and make their family lives visible in public.

A note on terminology

As suggested by prior research (Bao, 2018; Chou, 2000; Engebretsen et al., 2015), great caution should be employed when researchers borrow and use Western terms pertaining to sexuality, such as "lesbian," "bisexual," and "queer," to describe sexual minority individuals in China. It is important to take account of locally specific vocabularies in order to reflect the experiences of research participants and not to allow the theoretical and political dominance of Western scholarship to mean that its terms are taken for granted. It is noteworthy that recent studies of sexual minority people in China have tended to use locally specific vocabularies, such as tongzhi (non-heterosexual men and women) (Bao, 2018; Kong, 2010) and lala (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). These terms are commonly recognized and adopted among sexual minority people in urban China.

Lala refers to a woman with same-sex desire (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). This term originates from a lesbian character called "lazi" in a Taiwanese novel about lesbians entitled *E yu shou ji* (Wang, 2015). The first word of the character's name "la" serves as a transliteration of "les" which is the abbreviation of the term "lesbian." The term "lala" was

then localized in Mainland China during the late 1990s alongside global flows of ideas about gender and sexual diversity through the Internet (Engebretsen, 2009, 2014). Since then, it has become the most widely known term used by women with same-sex desires for self-identification in urban China. It is noteworthy that lala nowadays serves as an umbrella category, which includes not only lesbians but also other types of non-heterosexual women, namely bisexual and pansexual women (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013).

On the other hand, as is common among other identity-based social categories, such as lesbian or the umbrella term LGBT referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (Pfeffer, 2010), the meanings of the term lala remain contested. While it is important to attend to the diverse social and political meanings inherent in the naming of Chinese sexual identities, which have been addressed in substantial detail in other studies (Bao, 2018; Wong, 2010, 2016), the complexity of sexual identities is beyond the scope of this study. It is also not the goal of the present research to draw a conclusion about a universally agreed-upon set of definition for the term lala. Rather, this research aims to capture the unheard voices of Chinese lala-identified women concerning their aspirations for and processes of forming their own families.

Informed by the above-mentioned literature, this dissertation uses the term lala to refer to a woman with same-sex desire for two major reasons. Firstly, all of my participants identified themselves as lalas. Secondly, by using this Chinese term, it is my intention to respect and represent the subject position of my research participants in order to more accurately describe and understand their experiences and perspectives. This is preferable to borrowing Western terms that cannot be seen as equivalent to the term lala, given its cultural specificity. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that there are no gender-specific Chinese terms for Chinese gay men, and "gay" is a widely known term referring to gay men in China (Bao, 2018; Kong, 2010). I also use the term "non-heterosexual" to broadly

refer to people who do not identify themselves as exclusively attracted to members of the opposite sex and to practices that do not follow heterosexual norms. When referring to specific samples of existing sexuality research and denoting an international context, I make use of Western identity-based social categories. For instance, "lesbian" and "gay" refer to women and men who identify themselves as attracted, usually exclusively, to members of the same sex. "LGBT" is used as an umbrella term to refer to issues or communities related to gender and sexual minority people in general.

Outline of the dissertation

This section provides a summary of each of the following chapters.

Chapter 2 situates my research within the historical, socio-cultural, economic, and political context of China and the global landscape of family change and diversity. It demonstrates how I develop a constructive dialogue with existing scholarship and highlights the significance of my research. It is organized into two major parts. The first section foregrounds the local specificities of China in order to set up the empirical and theoretical background of my study. I critically review the existing literature on changing gender and family relations and sexualities in China and discuss the significance of studying lalas' formation of female-led, same-sex families, which remain an understudied and largely invisible part of Chinese family relations. In the second section, I outline Western theories and empirical work on families in general and same-sex families in particular. I conclude the chapter by highlighting the significance of my research and the key insights drawn from the existing literature that helps us to study and understand lalas' experiences of family formation in China.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of my study in order to explain the processes through which I have generated my findings based on the interview data. It is organized

into four parts. It starts by providing the reasons for using qualitative methodology and demonstrating how my qualitative study has been guided by the social constructionist perspective. It then explains the procedures and rationale for using individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary research method. The third section delineates the process of data analysis by detailing my step-by-step approach to thematic analysis in six phases. The last section demonstrates my reflections on the research process and highlights how my position as researcher has shaped the production of knowledge in my study.

Chapter 4 presents the first set of findings of my research, with a focus on the strategies used by lalas to form same-sex families in urban China. It provides new empirical evidence for lalas' use of different strategies to form their own families and resist and/or accommodate heterosexual norms, which are often reinforced by their families of origin. I argue that lalas' family formation is shaped by, but at the same time reshapes, the institution of the family in different ways. This chapter marks the first attempt to provide empirical evidence for lalas' use of different strategies when forming their same-sex families. Building on the discussion of relational selfhood, it generates a new understanding of bilateral negotiations between lalas and their families of origin during the process of family formation, and thus adds contextual nuances to theorizing about family change.

Chapter 5 presents the second set of findings of my research, with a focus on lalas' experiences of contemplating and/or striving for motherhood. I argue that lalas' decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children raise significant questions about the meanings of being connected and the established norms associated with gender, sexuality, and the family in China. Drawing on my interview data, this chapter found that both traditional and new family beliefs, concerns about the stability of family life, and worries about later life came into play in lalas' decision-making processes regarding whether and how to have children. At the same time, given their socially marginalized

status as sexual minority women and their different social locations, particularly their socio-economic status and residential status (local/non-local) in Beijing, lalas demonstrated various responses to the perceived and actual difficulties of having children in China. This study provides new empirical evidence about the concerns and difficulties that lie along lalas' potential paths to motherhood. It also contributes to ongoing sociological debates about the extent and nature of the transformation in family life through an examination of family practices and imaginaries in lalas' reproductive decision-making processes. As I show in this chapter, these family practices and imaginaries are shaped by both intergenerational dynamics and socio-economic and structural conditions.

Chapter 6 presents the third set of findings of my research, with a focus on lalas' experiences of engaging with cyberspace, including their participation in online and offline activities initiated by lala-targeted online platforms and social networking mobile applications. It reveals how and under what circumstances lalas may benefit from their involvement in cyberspace to find alternative ways of navigating their intimate and family lives. I highlight both the opportunities and constraints brought by cyberspace to lalas' processes of same-sex family formation. I also discuss the implications of my findings for our understanding of the complex power dynamics that come into play when sexual minority individuals attempt to create alternative spaces to counter familial and social norms and pursue non-normative intimate and family lives within a digital, but still heteronormative, environment.

The conclusion chapter aims to provide a summary of my empirical findings and highlight the contributions of my research. It explains how my three empirical chapters connect with each other and produce new knowledge about gender, sexuality, and family. The chapter begins by summarizing the empirical findings in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 and highlighting why and how a sociological understanding of lalas' family-making processes

as relationally dependent and materially and structurally confined makes distinctive contributions. It then discusses the limitations of the study and provides suggestions for further research. It concludes by highlighting how my study, which centers on the perspectives and lived experiences of lalas and situates knowledge production within the local context of China, provides new empirical knowledge about lalas' families and contributes to a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of ongoing changes in family life both within and beyond China.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter discusses key empirical and theoretical debates in family sociology, gender and sexuality studies, and Chinese studies in order to explore important questions about gender, sexuality, and family both within and beyond China. It aims to highlight how my study engages with and contributes to the existing literature in two ways. Firstly, this study offers fresh insights into the current discussion on Chinese family life and homosexuality by engaging with new questions about how and under what circumstances lalas' processes of family formation may be enabled or constrained by political, socio-cultural, and economic conditions in China. My study about lalas' family-making is set within the context of ongoing debates about change and continuity in Chinese family relations, which will be discussed in considerable detail in the first section of the chapter. The complex interplay between structure and agency in lalas' family-building experiences, particularly the ways in which lalas' conception and formation of families fit within and challenge the social organization of gender, sexuality, and family, is a key issue that I will explore theoretically in this chapter and elaborate with empirical findings in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Secondly, while engaging with Western theories and studies that are useful to theorize family life and provide comparative knowledge about same-sex families, my study poses a challenge to the dominance of the Western production of knowledge, which fails to completely account for individual experiences of non-normative family formation in the Chinese context. As I show in the second section of this chapter, my approach to studying lalas' family-building experiences has been inspired by the feminist sociological approach to gender and sexuality, which focuses not only on social structure but also on the practices and meanings behind them (Connell, 1987; Jackson, 2018), and by family sociology, which has been paying increased attention to the ways in which relational ties are created and

sustained in family life – as captured in concepts such as "family practices" (Morgan, 1996, 2011) and "practices of intimacy" (Jamieson, 2011). Drawing on these perspectives, and attending to local specificities, my study aims to produce a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of lalas' formation of female-led, same-sex families in China. It draws attention to the local experiences of a socially marginalized group of women, whose continued struggles to build their own families have long been overlooked in both society and the literature, but which nevertheless can point us towards new ways of understanding family change and different forms of resistance against established norms of gender, sexuality, and family.

This chapter is organized into two major parts. The first section foregrounds the local specificities of China in order to establish the empirical and theoretical background of my study. I critically review the existing literature on changing gender and family relations and sexualities in China and discuss the significance of studying lalas' formation of female-led, same-sex families, which remain an understudied and largely invisible part of Chinese family relations. In the second section, I outline Western theories and empirical work on families in general and those on same-sex families in particular. The goal of the second section is not only to situate my study within the wider transnational landscape of family change and diversity, but also to demonstrate how I develop a constructive dialogue with existing scholarship and evaluate the relevance of Western theories to local experiences in contemporary China. I conclude this chapter by highlighting the significance of my research and the key insights drawn from the existing literature that enables us to study and understand lalas' family life in China.

The local context: Understanding gender, sexuality, and family life in China

The salience and strength of family relations in China serve as important starting points for the examination of lalas' family formation, particularly when we seek a better understanding of the interconnections and conflicts between non-heterosexual forms of families and established norms associated with the "family." In China, the family is considered the foundation of social and regime stability and of selfhood (Jackson, 2019; Kam, 2013; Santos & Harrell, 2017), which refers to the ways in which an individual defines and sees himself/herself in relation to others (Jackson, 2019). At the macro level, the Chinese government continues to control people's personal lives through state-led propaganda and the hukou[3] household registration. It defines the heterosexual family, in which a child grows up with the presumed love and care of a married couple of man and woman as parents and is expected to take care of those parents in their old age, as the backbone of a harmonious society (Jackson, 2019; Santos & Harrell, 2017; Sigley, 2006). At the micro level, women are still socially expected to fulfil their prescribed roles as wives and mothers, to give birth to children, and take up care work to maintain harmony in the family sphere and thus indirectly contribute to social stability, which is at the top of the agenda of the authoritarian state (Engebretsen, 2014; Rofel, 2007; Jackson, 2019). Furthermore, through tightening censorship of the media and Internet, as described in the recent literature (Liao, 2019; Tan, 2016) and by lalas I met during my fieldwork, the government has been silencing the experiences of people whose families do not fit with the conventional notion of the family, including those of lalas and gay men. It is within this context that lalas' family formation is considered the very antithesis of the traditional

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[3] Hukou refers to the household registration system in China. Under this system, each Chinese citizen is designated as having either an urban or rural hukou (registration status) based on his/her parent's (either father or mother) place of origin. The urban or rural hukou entitles a citizen to access different state-provided welfare, including education, housing, health care, and social services (Chan, 2009; Lui, 2017).

institution of the "family," which is backed by strong political forces, linked with state-approved privileges associated with opposite-sex marriage and reproduction, and socially recognized in public.

This section offers an in-depth exploration of how lalas fit into or run up against the socio-political organization of gender, sexuality, and family in Chinese society. It is structured around four parts. It first provides a brief discussion on gender, sexuality, and family life from a historical perspective, tracing same-sex desires and relationships back to China's dynastic history and illustrating the traditional role of women as prescribed by Confucianism. I then discuss the mixed roles played by the government, social and familial norms, and market-driven cyberspace in generating opportunities and constraints for non-heterosexual people, particularly lalas, since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

Gender, sexuality, and family life in China's historical past before 1949

It is noteworthy that same-sex desires and behaviors among men have been recorded in China's 3000-year history (Hinsch, 1990). Research looking into China's dynastic history has shown that it was not uncommon for a number of Emperors to have same-sex relationships with their male inferiors (Y. Li, 1998; Shi, 2004; Wu et al., 2004). Homoerotic practices between men were also depicted in Chinese classic literary texts, such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hong Lou Meng* in Chinese, a classic novel published in 1791 about the family life and different love relationships in a noble family) and "*Fen Tao Zhi Hao*" (a historical story recorded in 280–233 BCE about the expression of love between two men through the sharing of a peach) (H. Liu, 2017; Ruan & Tsai, 1987). Historical documents show that men were persecuted for same-sex behaviors for the first time in 1679, during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and that there was increased

regulation of male same-sex behaviors after that and later during the Republican era (1912–1949), in which the control of sexual behaviors was considered one of the approaches to developing the modern nation state (Sommer, 2000).

On the other hand, same-sex desires and behaviors among women were given much less attention or even ignored, largely due to the fact that most Chinese literature and historical documents were written by men for men, without attending to women's experiences (Ruan & Bullough, 1992). There are a few exceptions that depict female same-sex desires in Chinese literature and art, most notably *Loving the Fragrant Companion* (*Lian Xiang Ban* in Chinese, a play written in 1651 about a love story between a married woman and a younger, unmarried woman). In general, though, female same-sex desires and behaviors were much less visible in Chinese literature and history than male ones (Ruan & Bullough, 1992).

Moreover, the invisibility of same-sex desires and relationships among women in history has to be understood within the patriarchal Chinese culture supported by Confucian doctrines. It was almost impossible for women in traditional Chinese society to freely explore their sexuality, given that Confucian beliefs strictly regulated women's roles and duties and confined women to the male-dominated family sphere (Y. Li, 1998; H. Liu, 2017). Confucianism can be seen as one of the most important doctrines of morality in traditional Chinese society (Y. K. Wang, 2010). Despite different patterns of historical and cultural constructions of gender and family norms, many other East Asian societies, including Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, have also been strongly influenced by Confucianism, adopting a strong familial ethos with a rigid gender division between men and women (Ko et al., 2003). Historically, Chinese women had a lower status than men and were obliged to fulfill their familial roles by being good daughters, wives, and mothers. For the purposes of maintaining the stability of the male-dominated family and regulating women's

behaviors, the Confucian notion of "the Three Obediences and Four Virtues" prescribes that a woman should obey her father in youth, her husband after marriage, and her son in her old age, as well as possessing the virtues of performing appropriate behaviors in accordance with moral standards, tidiness, propriety in speech, and commitment to domestic duties (Steele, 1966).

In addition, the traditional role of women can be seen as not only that of subordinates regulated by gendered and generational hierarchies (Santos & Harrell, 2017) but also as a kind of property moved between families (Cheung, 2005). Rather than being an individual choice, marriage in traditional Chinese society was a decision made by the parents, mainly the father, on behalf of a son in order to acquire a woman to continue the male family line (Davis & Friedman, 2014). Following the traditional Confucian teaching of "filial piety," which emphasizes the importance of adult children's complete submission to parental authority, it was common for both men and women to enter marriage in accordance with the will of their parents (Davis & Friedman, 2014). Worse still, given the importance attached to patrilineal biological ties (Murphy et al., 2011), a married woman was expected to serve her husband's interests by bearing at least one son for him and caring for his elderly parents instead of her own birth parents (Barbalet, 2016). The Chinese saying "investing in a daughter is like pouring water onto another's field" best captures the inferior status of women in patriarchal Chinese society, especially before the 1950s.

In short, rather than pursuing their own individual interests and sexual pleasure, women in traditional Chinese society were obliged to completely conform to male authority and devote themselves to serving the men in the family (Davis & Friedman, 2014; Santos & Harrell, 2017). Discussing traditional Chinese gender and family ideologies and their legacy in contemporary China is important to our understanding of the persistent power hierarchies within and beyond Chinese families, which continue even nowadays to oppress

women and people who fail to follow the heterosexual family norms. It helps to explain why lalas' formation of their own female-headed families and their paths to motherhood are regarded as the very antithesis of the Chinese family, if not an unimaginable entity, which refutes the taken-for-granted insignificance of maternal lineage, male dominance within the family, and state control over the configuration of families.

Political control over individual and family lives in contemporary China

a. Changes and ambiguities in the government's approach to regulating homosexuality

Since the beginning of the reform period[4] (from 1978 to the present), the Chinese government has played a pivotal role in governing gender, sexual, and family norms, including its suppression of same-sex desires and relationships (Kong, 2019). It is noteworthy, however, that the government has displayed mixed attitudes towards homosexuality. Nowadays, it is generally believed that the government upholds the "Three-Nos" policy – no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion – with regard to homosexuality (United Nations Development Programme, 2016; Zhang, 2014). This ambiguous attitude on the part of the government has left some room for lalas and gay men to explore their identities, desires, and relationships but, at the same time, it has placed them in a precarious position within the predominantly heteronormative environment.

The Chinese government's attitudes towards homosexuality can be traced back to the Mao era (1949–1976). The government's suppression of homosexuality during this

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[4] In response to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a period of political and social chaos in China, the government led by Deng Xiaoping attempted to make a breakthrough in communist rule during the late 1970s. Under the banner of the Four Modernizations, the government launched reforms in the fields of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology (Ebrey & Chow, 2003). These reforms stressed the importance of attracting foreign investment, loosening the government's control over policies, privatizing state-owned industries, and encouraging private entrepreneurs to run businesses (Wilson, 2007). Through opening up the market to global capital investment, these reforms mark China's enormous transformation from socialism during the Mao era (1949–1976) to the development of state-led capitalism.

period was attributable to its political agenda, which prioritized social stability and national harmony (Hershatter, 1996, 2007). The government promoted heterosexual marriage and heterosexual reproductive sex as part of the political drive to consolidate communist society (Hershatter, 1996). Anyone who did not follow this heterosexual family model was criticized for his/her immorality and nationalist deficiency (Chou, 2000; Hershatter, 2007). In particular, during the Cultural Revolution, expressions of romantic love and sexuality were seen as shameful behaviors that revealed "bourgeois individualism" and hampered collective welfare (Evans, 1995, p. 358). As a result, any sexualities other than heterosexuality bounded by monogamous marriage and reproductive goals and shaped by "'revolutionary love'—self-sacrifice for Communism" were strictly taboo during this political period (F. Liu, 2018, p. 951).

Furthermore, the influences of Western sexology on medical and legal discourses in China should not be overlooked when understanding the government's suppression of homosexuality (Jackson, 2019; Kong, 2016). Research has shown that the concept of homosexuality, translated into Chinese as *tongxinglian* with the literal meaning of "same-sex love," was first introduced to China from the West as a particular sexual proclivity, which was viewed as social deviance due to the influence of Western medical discourses and later legal regulations in China (Bao, 2018; Jackson, 2019; Kong, 2016; Wong, 2016). During the 1920s, the dichotomy between sexual normality and deviation, as depicted in the English sexologist Havelock Ellis's medical theory of homosexuality, gained popularity and gradually became the orthodox understanding of homosexuality in modern China (Kong, 2016). In the post-Mao era, the official state endorsement of Western medical science as a form of modern knowledge continues to shape people's understanding of heterosexuality as "natural" and that of homosexuality as a sexual perversion or a disease to be cured (Bao, 2018; Kong, 2016). Although homosexuality per se has never been

criminalized in China, it was defined as a sexual disorder in the first version of the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders, which was followed from 1978 to 2001 (Wu, 2003). Also, until 1997, homosexuality was associated with the crime of "hooliganism" (*liumang zui*), which was introduced in Article 160 of the Criminal Law in 1979 (Ge, 1995). Consequently, many gay men and a few women were arrested, imprisoned, or subjected to political re-education as punishment (Kong, 2016; H. Liu, 2017).

China's opening up to the global market in 1978 is generally seen as a watershed in Chinese history and among scholars studying Chinese homosexual identities, practices, and relationships (Bao, 2018; Ho, 2010). Since the start of the reform period (from 1978 to the present), there have been significant shifts in the Chinese government's ways of policing gender, sexuality, and family relationships. Apart from the removal of "hooliganism" from the law in 1997 and homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses in 2001 (Kong, 2016), one of the most notable examples is the government's tacit support of gay male communities through AIDS-prevention campaigns. After the discovery of the first AIDS case in China in 1989 (Zhang & Chu, 2005), the government has been increasing its efforts to promote AIDS-related health education, especially for gay men, and collaborating with local NGOs and businesses targeted at gay men to carry out AIDS-prevention campaigns. Nevertheless, lalas remain sidelined in official government discourses. During the reform period, among the very few official reports on homosexuality, same-sex desires and behaviors between women were often dismissed as compensation for the absence of or abuse by men (Hershatter, 2007; Ruan & Bullough, 1992). Rather than meeting the needs and wants of non-heterosexual people, the government is concerned with resolving practical health issues, particularly the AIDS crisis. It is within this context that, compared with lalas, the gay male community has received far more public resources and media attention.

Formal recognition of same-sex relationships is, however, almost absent in contemporary China. The government provides neither legal protection against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation nor legal rights for same-sex couples to get married, adopt a child, or use assisted reproductive technology (ART) (Yu et al., 2018). Worse still, any references to homosexuality have been forbidden on television and in films since 2004 (Engebretsen, 2014). Since 2017, a similar ban on homosexuality-related content in online shows and programs has come into force. While research has shown that censorship has been tightened by the government in recent years (Liao, 2019; Tan, 2016), there are a few exceptions that indicate some positive changes in the government's attitudes towards homosexuality. One recent example is the official acknowledgement of public suggestions for the legalization of same-sex marriage by a spokesperson of the body of the National People's Congress in December 2019 (Baculinao, 2020). This spokesperson acknowledged in an official press conference that the country's highest law-making institution has received more than 230,000 online suggestions and letters from the public about legalizing same-sex marriage. This announcement was perceived by Chinese LGBT activists as an important milestone on the road towards the rights of same-sex couples because it has broken the government's silence on the issue of same-sex marriage (Y. Q. Wang, 2019). It has also aroused a heated online debate about whether same-sex marriage should be legalized in China (Baculinao, 2020). What was more surprising was that online polls were carried out by state-run newspapers and media to gather public opinion about same-sex marriage, attracting active participation from over seven million netizens (Y. Q. Wang, 2019). While more research is needed to track the political implications of this incident for LGBT activism, which is beyond the scope of discussion in this study, the nationwide online discussion on the topic of same-sex marriage suggests new social spaces

for increasing the visibility of same-sex relationships, despite the unpredictability of the government's approach to governing sexualities and relevant online discussions.

Another notable example is the publication of an official textbook which addresses and recognizes both heterosexual and same-sex relationships for the purpose of sex education in primary schools in China (Ye, 2017). This book is published by the Beijing Normal University Publishing Group and was approved by the Chinese government in 2017. Meanwhile, it has met fierce opposition from some sectors of society, especially from parents who oppose the teaching of issues related to same-sex desires. While there is still no evidence that the government will officially promote the book in schools, this incident serves as the first sign of the government's official recognition of same-sex relationships, and at the same time, an illustration of its fluctuating attitudes towards this topic.

Such ambiguity in the government's ways of addressing homosexuality renders Chinese lala and gay movements uncertain and often dangerous. Studies suggest that the identity politics surrounding LGBT movements in the West, which stresses the importance of coming out and claiming rights, is not echoed by many lalas and gay men in China (Engebretsen et al., 2015). One of the major reasons for this is that the risks involved in participation in any social movements are particularly high in China given the official censorship and suppression of sensitive public events (Rofel, 2007), especially in Beijing, the capital. Many of the street demonstrations and public gatherings organized by lala and gay communities have been spied on or suppressed by the government (Chen & Chen, 2007; Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017). Thus, Western literature on LGBT identity politics, which is centered on rights and discourses of pride, offer limited guidance for us to fully understand lala and gay lives in Chinese society. It is crucial to acknowledge the political constraints imposed on lalas and gay men when it comes to issues pertaining to their public visibility, social recognition, and family life.

In short, the Chinese government's mixed attitudes towards homosexuality have discouraged many lalas and gay men from disclosing their sexual identities but, at the same time, they have left them some grey areas in which to maneuver. Compared with the attention paid to gay men due to the AIDS-prevention campaigns, lalas are marginalized in official discourses and in the wider society (Hershatter, 2007; Ruan & Bullough, 1992). While a growing number of studies have examined the impact of shifting political conditions in China on individual identity formation and social movements among lala individuals and communities (Engebretsen, 2014; Engebretsen et al., 2015; Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017; Kam, 2013), little is known about lalas' ways of conceptualizing and forming their own families within the oppressive political environment in China. As suggested by Jackson and Scott (2010), non-heterosexual families pose a direct challenge to heteronormativity by not only demonstrating non-normative sexual practices but also questioning what has been commonly seen as the "normal" way of life. So it is important to ask: In the Chinese context, in what ways do lalas' attempts to form their own female-led, same-sex families challenge the "normal" way of life? This question needs to be addressed against the backdrop of continued heteronormativity reinforced by the Chinese government.

b. Continued heteronormativity under authoritarian rule

Despite the above-mentioned changes in the government's approach to regulating homosexuality, heteronormative ideologies, which privilege heterosexuality and endow it with "invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness" (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548), still persist in China. As suggested by McMillan (2006), the "underlying structures of meaning ascribed to sexuality remain intact" despite the reforms in China (p. 130). On the one hand, evidence has shown that sex has become an acceptable topic of discussion in the public

sphere, such as in the mass media and online platforms (Jefferys & Yu, 2015; Kong, 2016) and that there is increasing understanding and acceptance of different sexual orientations in society (F. Liu, 2018), largely due to the rapid development of the state-supported Internet industry and global flows of LGBT-related information via the Internet (Ho, 2010). The government has also made changes to the Marriage Law in China, endorsing mutual love as the foundation of marriage since the 1980s (F. Liu, 2018), in addition to the previous change made to the Law in 1950, which granted women equal rights with their husbands to possess and inherit family property and initiate a divorce (Barbalet, 2016). To a certain extent, these changes have contributed to the privatization of the institution of marriage, with a stronger emphasis on individual choice (Davis, 2014; Pan, 2006).

On the other hand, the heterosexual family model continues to be deemed the normative framework in both law and the welfare system, excluding individuals with same-sex desires as "others." According to the current Marriage Law, "family relations" refer to the relations between opposite-sex married couples, between parents and their biological children or social children (through legal adoption or in the form of a step-family), between grandparents and grandchildren, and between siblings. Same-sex couples are denied legal access to marriage and adoption and consequently are given no place in the Marriage Law. In addition, the hukou system, as a family-based registration system in China, regulates individuals within each household and their access to state-provided welfare, including education, housing, health care, and social services (Chan, 2009; Lui, 2017). It not only reinforces unequal resource distribution between rural and urban households by preventing individuals with rural hukou from accessing the same level of state benefits as their counterparts with urban hukou (Lui, 2017), but it also perpetuates heterosexuality by legally associating people's entitlements to state-provided welfare with the heterosexual family model. As shown in my study (see Chapter 5 in particular), lalas who want to or

have become mothers have no choice but to find ways to handle difficulties in registering a hukou for their (prospective) children, given the illegitimate status of families led by same-sex parents in China.

When it comes to motherhood in China, it is also noteworthy that state policy and state-led propaganda play a key role in reinforcing the traditional role of women in the family and reproducing heteronormativity. Women's fertility planning and family practices are mapped onto the government's blueprint for population control and influenced by its political discourses, family-planning policies, and taxation. In addition to the introduction of the two-child policy in 2015 to relieve the pressure of the ageing population and boost economic growth (Zeng & Hesketh, 2016), a new law on tax reduction has come into force since the beginning of 2019, allowing married couples to claim tax deductions for expenses relating to their children's education (W. Liu, 2018). This has aroused strong reactions against this perceived "tax on being single" and triggered heated debate over the government's bias against people without children on several Chinese social media platforms (W. Liu, 2018). Due to the minimal functioning of the state in supporting people's welfare or care work in China (Xu & Xia, 2014), Chinese parents are inclined to arrange matchmaking dates for their adult children and push them to marry someone of the opposite sex and have children, who can then provide some sort of support for older family members (Zheng & Ho, 2017). Worse still, women who remain single in their late twenties are often stigmatized as "leftover women" by state-led propaganda, the media, and society in general (Fincher, 2014; To, 2013). As a result, opposite-sex marriage and motherhood within marriage are of central importance to women's familial and social status as good daughters and respectable women in China (Kam, 2013; Xie, 2018).

To summarize, since the reform era, the Chinese government has opened up new social spaces for individuals, including women and non-heterosexual people, to explore

their sexual lives but, at the same time, it has also imposed limits on their individual freedom, including their freedom to engage in family life in ways that they prefer. In discussing the role of the government in individual and family lives, it is evident that lalas' family-building experiences, including their pursuit of motherhood within the context of same-sex relationships, represent a radical departure from the normative heterosexual family model prescribed by the government. It is reasonable to believe that such a departure will place many lalas in a precarious position, hindering their access to public welfare and social recognition. On the other hand, claiming one's same-sex partner to be part of one's "family" and attempting to lead a same-sex family life (with or without children) entails great and innovative efforts to resist established norms and re-create new meanings for what it means to be a family, especially given the political and socio-cultural significance attached to the traditional notion of the family in China. By focusing on lalas' accounts of their own family-building experiences, this study reveals the ways in which lalas make sense of their family lives and the complex negotiations and tensions involved in their struggles to overcome political, socio-cultural, and economic constraints.

Understanding Chinese relational ties in the context of social and familial norms

a. The difficulties confronting non-heterosexual Chinese people: Continued struggles to manage filial obligations and come out to families of origin

Apart from the political authority of the government, social and familial norms continue to define the socially respectable way of life in Chinese society. Due to the influence of the Confucian heritage of filial piety, there is still intense pressure on both men and women to fulfil parental expectations by marrying the opposite sex and having children in China. For women who are over the most suitable age for marriage (between the ages of 25 and 29) in particular, being single is not only seen as a personal failure but also as family

shame and a social problem because of their failure to fulfil their gendered social responsibilities towards family and society (Kam, 2013). That is why single women who are not yet married by their late 20s in the major cities of China are negatively labelled as "leftover" women (Fincher, 2014; Ji, 2015). Given the socio-cultural importance attached to opposite-sex marriage, lalas are doubly marginalized due to their non-heterosexual identity and unmarried status.

Furthermore, many Chinese people equate homosexuality with the rejection of filial piety due to its violation of heterosexual family norms (Choi & Luo, 2016; Hu & Wang, 2013). Echoed by some of my participants, the Confucian doctrine that "the most unfilial act is to have no offspring" continues to reinforce the importance of reproduction. Given the common belief that biological reproduction "naturally" gives rise to the most "respectable" form of family, composed of an opposite-sex married couple with at least one child (Kam, 2013; Wong, 2013), lalas and gay men tend to be considered unable to have their own offspring and/or irresponsible for not fulfilling their filial obligations through reproduction.

It is within this family-centered and heteronormative context that the processes and issues of coming out and ways of dealing with the imperative of opposite-sex marriage have occupied center stage in the existing literature on same-sex relationships in China (Ho et al., 2018; Kong, 2016). These two key issues are interrelated in the sense that they both reflect non-heterosexual Chinese individuals' responses to the filial obligation to marry and determine how these responses shape their relationships with their families of origin (Ho et al., 2018). Rather than the liberal, "out and proud" queer subject who has been celebrated in some Western contexts (Decena, 2008; Horton, 2018), it is well documented that Chinese non-heterosexual people continue to face great difficulties in disclosing their sexual identities and relationships to others, especially to their families of origin (Huang &

Brouwer, 2018; Yu et al., 2018) and that they are expected to keep a low profile in society (Ho et al., 2018).

The Chinese models of coming out, which have been widely discussed in previous studies, reveal the "norms, aspirations, and prescriptions for how to live as a queer subject in mainland China" (Huang & Brouwer, 2018, p. 98). In many Western developed countries, the act of coming out is generally considered an expression of authenticity and pride, although recent Western literature has indicated that lesbians and gay men continue to struggle to come out to their parents and gain acceptance from them (Alonzo & Buttitta, 2019; Ghosh, 2019). Previous studies have shown that one of the significant differences between East Asian and Western contexts in terms of the practices of coming out is that verbally disclosing one's sexual orientation is deemed too confrontational by many non-heterosexual people from East Asian countries (Chou, 2000; Ho et al., 2018; Kong, 2016). In fact, it is important to highlight that not all lesbians and gay men, regardless of their cultural or ethnic backgrounds, prefer or have the capacity to freely come out and challenge established family norms (Freeman, 2007). In China in particular, Kong (2019) argues that Chinese sexual politics is not primarily associated with a direct challenge to the authorities or the fight for human rights, but is more concerned with pragmatic ways of maintaining good relationships with families of origin. As illustrated in my present study, focusing on the Chinese context, which remains unfavorable for coming out or confrontational identity politics (Kong, 2016, 2019), allows us to see the importance of attending to the specific circumstances and relational ties of individuals in order to understand different paths to coming out and family-building among non-heterosexual people.

Against the backdrop of the socio-political emphasis on "harmony" within the family and in society at large, scholars have drawn our attention to unique models of coming out in China. For instance, Chou (2000) argues for the model of "coming home,"

in which Chinese gay men and lalas bring their same-sex partners to their parental homes with the intention of tacitly integrating their partners into their families of origin without verbally disclosing the couple relationship. However, this model has been criticized for its perpetuation of the violence inherent in remaining silent about one's sexuality within the family (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). Recently, Huang and Brouwer (2018) have suggested the model of "coming with" to show how non-heterosexual Chinese people can create and lead their non-normative lives without necessarily "coming out" or remaining silent by "coming home." By using the example of *xinghun*, a strategy of "contract marriage" between a gay man and a lala with the goal of appearing to be heterosexual (Engebretsen, 2014), Huang and Brouwer (2018) demonstrate that gay men and lalas may conform to parental and societal expectations while, at the same time, creating space for exploring non-normative sexualities and questioning heteronormativity. Their conceptualization of *xinghun* echoes other scholars' views on the strategy (Choi & Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; S. Wang, 2019). For instance, by interviewing gay men and lesbians[5] who were engaging in *xinghun*, Choi and Luo (2016) have developed the concept of "performative family" to illustrate how Chinese parents and their adult gay or lesbian children implicitly or explicitly collaborate to perform nominal marriage with the goal of "formally meet[ing] society's expectations about family and marriage" (p. 276). Huang's and Brouwer's (2018) model of "coming with" is useful to highlight that the goal of many gay men and lalas is to maintain close relations with their families of origin while preserving their own sexualities.

In addition to the complexities involved in the communication of sexualities with families of origin, most studies on Chinese same-sex relationships have addressed

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[5] I use the term "lesbians" here to reflect the authors' description of their sample (Choi & Luo, 2016). However, amidst existing publications that tend to use the term "lala" to describe women with same-sex desires given the local significance of the term in the Chinese context, it is problematic that the authors did not offer any explanation for using the term "lesbians."

individuals' experiences of continued pressure to marry the opposite sex, especially stemming from their families of origin (Choi & Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013; S. Wang, 2019). Kam (2013) and Engebretsen (2014) are the two scholars who have produced books in the past decade to draw people's attention to lalas' lived experiences in contemporary China. Their work has provided insights into the ways in which lalas deal with social and familial norms and negotiate the struggles between heteronormative expectations from their families of origin and their own same-sex desires. However, they fail to move beyond the heterosexual framework to conduct an in-depth examination of lalas' ways of forming their own families and pursuing motherhood. As a result, their discussions surrounding heterosexual family norms have resulted in the continued exclusion and invisibility of same-sex families created by lalas in China.

Kam's *Shanghai Lalas* (2013) is the first ethnographic study of lalas' lived experiences, communities, and politics in China. By conducting face-to-face interviews and participant observation, Kam (2013) has provided extensive ethnographic data about 25 lalas in Shanghai. She reveals the compulsory nature of heterosexual marriage in China and explores what she calls "the politics of public correctness" (Kam, 2013, p. 89). She argues that such politics has created internal conflicts between lalas' sexual lives in private and their social obligation to lead a heterosexual married life in order to look "normal" and "respectable" in public. Her view is criticized by Wang and Ho (2014) for reproducing the rigid divide between the private and public spheres without understanding the fact that "marriage and family are both public and private" (p. 113). In line with their critique, I further argue that Kam's (2013) discussion of lalas' struggles with the public and private dilemma is problematic because it is confined to their struggles with the long-established institution of opposite-sex marriage and family norms. It ignores the possibilities of lalas building their own same-sex families and challenging the traditional institution of the

family by creating alternative family practices and reshaping family relations, which are the focus of my present study.

Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 15 lalas in Beijing, Engebretsen's (2014) ethnographic study examines lalas' individual lives and the development of the lala community and activism in China from an anthropological perspective. Similarly to Kam's argument (2013), Engebretsen (2014) highlights that the desire to be normal, and especially to fit in with the ideal "respectable family bonds" through heterosexual marriage and parenthood (p. 18), continues to occupy center stage in lalas' sense of self. Her major argument is that lalas pursue "different normativities," such as hiding their sexual orientation or resorting to "contract marriage," alongside their desire for "recognition, equality, freedom" in Beijing. Nevertheless, Engebretsen's conceptual lens of "different normativities" has confined her analysis to lalas' responses to social and familial norms. For instance, Engebretsen (2014) has provided a discussion of lala marriage in Beijing, but she has primarily focused on two wedding ceremonies as "symbolic performances" given by lala couples who "[engaged] and sometimes [subverted] normative marriage practices" (p. 80). The discussion fails to give insight into the nuanced dynamics and concrete practices of doing family among lalas.

The above-mentioned studies provide important evidence that lalas continue to face the unresolved tension between social and familial expectations towards opposite-sex marriage and individual sexual autonomy. Meanwhile, many lalas have cultivated different strategies in order to maintain social respectability on the surface and pursue their non-heterosexual lives. Although it is important to study lalas' strategies for dealing with heteronormative pressure, their personal accounts of their experiences of building their own female-led families are missing from current academic and social discussions. The present study aims to address this gap. It acknowledges but goes beyond the heteronormative

framework surrounding the traditional Chinese "family" in order to extend the ways in which we conceptualize and discuss families.

b. Locating lalas within the generational and gendered hierarchies of Chinese families

As demonstrated by their experiences related to coming out, lalas and gay men in China tend to embrace their "relational self," which shapes their "multiple self-formations" in everyday life (Kong, 2016, p. 506). As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Qi (2016) argues that the individualization thesis "fails to appreciate a third possibility, namely the Chinese relational self" (p. 40), who embraces more choices in order to pursue self-interest nowadays but, at the same time, continues to be responsible for working together with his/her family members in order to maximize the interests of the family. Although Qi's (2016) study of family bonds focuses on heterosexual people, her discussion of "the Chinese relational self" alerts us to the fact that it is impossible to fully understand lalas' family-building processes without examining their relational ties within the generational and gendered hierarchies in Chinese families.

Lalas, like other Chinese women, are offered new opportunities and yet simultaneously confronted with challenges as they cope with the social and economic changes in China (Ho et al., 2018). The reform era has opened up more space for women to develop their potential, gain access to advanced education and career advancement, and thus enjoy higher social status and mobility (Zhang et al., 2019). Under the previous one-child policy, parents of only daughters offer them concentrated investment (Yan, 2013). Also, supported by their parents, more and more women are able to leave their hometowns to pursue better life chances and career prospects through migration, either within China or overseas (Jackson & Liu, 2017). It is generally believed that filial piety has changed in form from children's complete submission to parental authority to reciprocal support

between the two generations (J. Liu, 2017). In particular, downward transfers of resources from older parents have now become a crucial source of support for young adult sons and daughters to meet their practical needs, such as the rising costs of living and housing in urban China (Zhang et al., 2019). Recent survey data has shown that a growing number of single women in major Chinese cities, especially those who are well-educated and have a stable job, have bought their own flats or houses with financial support from their parents in order to attain financial security (X. Li, 2019).

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that women, especially lalas, remain disadvantaged when it comes to intergenerational transfers of resources. Given the deep-rooted patrilineal norms (Zhang et al., 2019), several studies have shown that Chinese adult daughters still receive fewer resources from their families of origin than adult sons (Hu, 2017). Based on the general assumption that a woman will (co-)own a home after marrying a man, the parents of adult daughters are less inclined to provide financial support for their children's home ownership than those of adult sons (Fincher, 2014). In other words, the downward transfers of resources from older parents to adult children are still largely premised upon the heterosexual family model, in which heterosexual older parents are willing to offer more help to their married sons than to daughters with the goal of facilitating their normative family life (Hu, 2017; Zhang et al., 2019). It is thus reasonable to believe that lalas will experience difficulties in building their female-headed families with limited or even no parental support.

My study seeks to make a further contribution to the ongoing exploration of how individuals juggle family and personal commitments (Yan, 2010). Specifically, my study signifies a new step in probing into the formation of same-sex families by examining lalas' accounts of their experiences of negotiating with their families of origin and building their own female-led families. Diverse ways of negotiating sexualities with their families of

origin may differentially enable or restrict lalas' experiences of building their own families, but no study has looked specifically into Chinese same-sex family formation to date. The present study extends the discussions surrounding the issues of coming out and parent-child relationships into the realm of same-sex family formation.

<u>Market-driven cyberspace as an alternative space for rethinking individual and family lives</u>
a. The emergence and development of market-driven cyberspace in the reform era

One of the most significant changes in urban China over the past decade has been the growing visibility of topics surrounding same-sex desires and relationships on the Internet (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2010). Economic reform has largely facilitated the growth of the market, which has led to the emergence of gay- and lala-oriented cyberspace since the 1990s. Chinese gay- and lala-oriented cyberspace, as suggested by Ho (2010), serves as a new and unique site for the interplay between online and offline experiences among gay men and lalas.

Before further discussing the peculiarities of Chinese cyberspace, it is important to define the term "cyberspace." This term was originally coined by science fiction writer William Gibson (as cited in Cavallaro, 2000), who describes cyberspace as "[a] consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation" (p. viv). Drawing on this notion of cyberspace, Cavallaro (2000) argues that individuals' imagination and fantasy are constituted by and constitutive of cyberspace and are continually redefined based on shifting trends across nations. Ho (2010) further develops the term "cyberspace" to examine gay-oriented websites in China. She conceptualizes cyberspace as "both an imagined and real space" which "has implications for offline social experiences" (Ho, 2010, p. 101). Building on Ho's (2010) conceptualization of cyberspace, my study attempts to explore whether and how lalas' imagination and fantasy, generated

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from their online experiences, which transcend geographical boundaries, have shaped their conceptions of family and transformed their offline experiences of building their same-sex families.

In China, the introduction of a market economy has enabled the rapid and growing development of a commercialized Internet industry since the 1990s (Liang, 2005; McCormick & Liu, 2003). The Internet serves as one of the social sites with the least state intervention and a relatively high degree of freedom compared with other public spheres. This is mainly because the government regards it as beneficial to China's economic prosperity (Ho, 2010). It is against this backdrop that market forces have served as a driving force for the rapid development of gay- and lala-oriented online space, such as websites and online forums, since the 1990s (McCormick & Liu, 2003), and mobile applications in more recent years (T. Liu, 2017).

Expanding Internet access has provided fertile ground for the rapid establishment of lala and gay communities and activist networks since the 2000s (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2010). It has enabled lalas and gay men to connect with each other through rapid, low-cost, and often anonymous online communication instead of face-to-face interaction, which puts them at risk of involuntarily revealing their sexual identities and exposing themselves to stigmatization and discrimination. In addition, Engebretsen (2014) argues that widespread discussions about homosexuality on the Internet are "subtly but surely changing the official Chinese policy toward homosexuality" (p. 16), leading to its adoption of the "Three-Nos" policy. Although this claim remains speculative, it points to the fact that the Internet has created both online and offline opportunities for lalas and gay men in ways that can increase their public visibility and alleviate political control from the government.

In recent years, the advent of the Internet has also given rise to a flourishing pink economy, which targets Chinese non-heterosexual individuals as potential consumers,

particularly via online space (Bao, 2018; T. Liu, 2017). For instance, Lesdo, one of the most prominent lala-oriented online forums and social networking mobile applications in China, has more than five million users and has attracted an investment of over 11.6 million Chinese Yuan (approximately 1.3 million British Pounds) since its establishment in 2014 (Yang, 2017; Yen, 2018). As observed through my fieldwork, the lala-oriented online platforms also play a key role in enabling lalas to gain access to information about alternative paths to family life, such as information about same-sex marriage and the usage of ART overseas. For instance, during my visit to the office of Lesdo, the staff shared with me that they had been in touch with local private companies that provided clients (mainly heterosexual customers but also lalas and gay men) with tailor-made services to gain access to ART abroad. Therefore, Lesdo sometimes posted advertisements for these companies on their online platforms, sharing information about ART with lala users. To date, no studies have looked into the experiences of ART among lalas in China. Also, attention has rarely been given to the ways in which cyberspace has shaped lalas' conception and formation of families. My fieldwork and the findings presented in this dissertation reveal the significance of attending to a widening range of family formations among different groups of people with the assistance of advanced technologies in the digital age.

Despite the emergence of new opportunities brought by market-driven cyberspace, my analysis of lalas' experiences of developing different visions of their families via cyberspace needs to be set within the context of ongoing debates about whether and to what extent China's entry into the global market has brought freedom to individuals, particularly non-heterosexual people (Bao, 2018; Kong, 2017; Rofel, 2007). It is important to understand that the Chinese government has actively endorsed global capitalism since 1978 by encouraging a more flexible market in the country, including the Internet industry but, at the same time, it has shown no signs of faltering in its authoritarian rule (Harvey, 2005).

This mode of neoliberal governance with "Chinese characteristics" (Harvey, 2005, p. 20), led by the communist party, has had a significant impact on people's selfhood (Rofel, 2007; Zhang & Ong, 2008). Rofel (2007) argues for the emergence of the "desiring subject" since the beginning of the millennium, in which Chinese people, including non-heterosexual people, pursue their material and emotional self-interest with cosmopolitan aspirations through active participation in the labor and consumer markets, sexual practices and relationships, and travelling, and yet without losing their Chineseness, which is still regulated by social mores and social expectations towards respectability. In particular, she pinpoints that the emergence of Chinese gay identities, which center around aspirations to be respectable citizens and lead middle-class cosmopolitan lives, normalizes same-sex desires and yet creates hierarchical divisions within Chinese gay communities along the lines of class, the rural–urban divide, and other social divisions. Attending to this culture of self-discipline in a similar vein, Zhang and Ong (2008) argue that the economic reform has given rise to "new ethics of self-management and self-orientation" (p. 8), which urge people to pursue self-interest amid the competitive market without challenging the limits set by the government.

Informed by these insights into the coupling of authoritarian rule with the economic impulse for self-interest in China and its impact on selfhood, I approach market-driven cyberspace as an indispensable social site which is linked with not only the construction of lalas' selfhood but also the development of their family life. In particular, lala-oriented cyberspace serves as a dynamic space infused with state control, resistance, and tensions, which are elaborated with empirical findings in Chapter 6. My major theoretical interest lies in the processes of family making, and in particular the ways in which lalas' imaginations about family and their pathways to family formation, including the pursuit of motherhood among some lalas, are articulated, shaped, and transformed around cyberspace.

I ask: To what extent have lalas' experiences of cyberspace helped them to define and develop their intimate and family lives in the face of persistent heterosexual family norms in China? What are the constraints imposed upon their search for new visions of family life via cyberspace?

b. The potentiality and limitations of Chinese cyberspace: Local agency in navigating state censorship and connecting with local and global networks

Based on both Western and Chinese studies, there is strong evidence that cyberspace plays an indispensable role in the everyday lives of non-heterosexual people (DeHaan et al., 2013; Hung, 2011). Western research has shown that many LGBT people, especially those who lack offline resources and cannot disclose their sexual identities offline, have moved away from physical locations and into cyberspace, relying on it to create their own social networks and counter their experiences of social exclusion (Bartone, 2018; DeHaan et al., 2013). However, scholars have alerted us to the overstatement of the potential of cyberspace for transforming people's thoughts and lives on a "universal" scale through globally circulating information and ideas (Berry & Martin, 2003; Ho, 2010). Over the past decades, as gay- and lala-oriented cyberspace has been extending its territory in China, a growing amount of research has paid attention to Chinese gay men's and lalas' experiences of using cyberspace for the purposes of identity formation and community development (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2010; Liang, 2005; F. Martin, 2008). In particular, the impact of the Chinese government's continued censorship of the Internet on its citizens and the interplay between local and global forces spreading through cyberspace are two major issues discussed in previous studies (e.g. Ho, 2010; Liao, 2019; Shaw & Zhang, 2018), which are key to understanding the role of cyberspace in lalas' family-building processes in my study.

Firstly, it is important to attend to the complex power dynamics within Chinese cyberspace, where "state control, a degree of freedom of expression and self-censorship" coexist (Ho, 2010, p. 99). Informed by recent studies (Liao, 2019; Tan, 2016) as well as by the many lalas I met during my fieldwork, I learned that media and Internet censorship has been tightened by the government in recent years. There have, however, been a number of instances of heated online debates about homosexuality during the same time period. Notable examples include the #IAmGay# online protest[6] in April 2018 in response to Chinese social media website Weibo's[7] proposed ban on homosexuality-related content, and an advertisement featuring a gay male couple produced by Alibaba's e-commerce platform[8] in January 2020. These examples not only highlight persistent ambiguities in the execution of Internet and media censorship, but they also demonstrate different ways of responding to political control over freedom of speech and expression among business leaders and individuals. It is generally believed that there have been constant changes and ambiguities in the state regulations, which have led to self-censorship on the part of both media/Internet practitioners and Internet users (Shaw & Zhang, 2018). As a result, differently from many of their Western counterparts who have the freedom to explore their sexualities via cyberspace (Bartone, 2018; DeHaan et al., 2013), Chinese lalas (and gay men) have to tread carefully in exploring and expressing same-sex desires online while being sensitive to different forms of state intervention.

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[6] To protest against the platform's proposed ban on homosexuality-related content announced on April 13, 2018, many online users of Weibo used the hashtag #IAmGay# to share their experiences of coming out, advocate for LGBT rights, and condemn social media censorship (Liao, 2019). As a result, Sina reversed the ban on April 16, 2018 and announced that no more homosexuality-related content would be removed from the platform.

[7] Similar to the functions of Twitter, Weibo serves as the largest microblogging platform in China. Launched in 2009 by the Chinese Internet company Sina, Weibo enables its users to develop social networks by sharing and interacting with texts, photos, and videos (Liao, 2019).

[8] Similar to the functions of Amazon and eBay, Alibaba serves as China's largest e-commerce platform. In January 2020, Tmall, one of the largest online marketplaces owned by Alibaba, produced and released an advertisement in which a young Chinese man brings his male partner home to celebrate Chinese New Year with his family of origin. The gay subtext of the advertisement triggered a heated debate on the Internet and it has been considered a bold move by the company to increase gay visibility in public (He & Jiang, 2020).

Secondly, scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which the lives of lalas and gay men in China have been transformed by global flows of LGBT identities, practices, and movements while, at the same time, being shaped and constrained by locally specific processes and circumstances (Berry & Martin, 2003; Ho, 2010). There is a growing, but as yet limited, body of literature exploring how digital technologies have produced and shaped different kinds of same-sex subjects and communities in their indigenous terms, including "lala," "gay," "*tongzhi*," (non-heterosexual men and women) and "*ku'er*" (queer)[9] (T. Liu, 2019; Tan, 2016; Zhao, 2017). For instance, by conducting "cyber anthropology" involving online participant observation of gay-oriented websites, textual analysis of the narratives of the websites, and interviews with gay men and webmasters, Ho (2010) observes that gay-oriented websites have set up their own chat rooms and a bulletin-board system, where global identities and ideas are localized and continually redefined by Chinese gay men. In addition, she argues that the growing commercialization of Chinese gay-oriented cyberspace has led webmasters to resort to self-censorship under state control while simultaneously targeting gay men as potential consumers of goods such as sex toys and sexual health products. Her work contributes to a better understanding of the gay-dominated nature of cyberspace, in which female same-sex desires and relationships remain sidelined, as well as highlighting the emergence of the Chinese gay identity in the digital era, which is bound up with a consumption-oriented culture.

Furthermore, scholars working on film, media, and cultural studies have looked into how Chinese LBGT-themed online videos and documentaries and other digital media platforms provide alternative spaces for people to develop same-sex desires and

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[9] As in Western countries, there are many different types of identity categories used by non-heterosexual people in China (Bao, 2018). There have been ongoing discussions about the social and political meanings inherent in these identities and their implications for selfhood and activism (Bao, 2018; Wong, 2010, 2016). As mentioned in the introductory chapter, while I acknowledge the diversity of sexual identities, an in-depth exploration of these identity categories, "each with its own specific histories and contexts" (Bao, 2018, p. 29), is beyond the scope of my current study.

communities while, at the same time, continuing to reinforce structures of power, including state control, gender norms, and heteronormativity (E. Li, 2015; Tan, 2016; Zhao, 2017). For instance, by examining Chinese fans' online discussions about the Danish fashion model Freja Beha Erichsen, who is seen as a female Western queer icon, Zhao (2017) reveals how Chinese fans develop "'normalized' queer fantasies" by reimagining Erichsen's personal same-sex relationships based on Chinese normative ideals associated with women's roles within marriage and the family. Building on sexuality scholars' critiques of Altman's "global gay" theory (Bao, 2018; F. Martin, 2011; Stella, 2015), which assumes that non-Western countries emulate the sexual identities and politics of Western countries (Altman, 1997), Zhao's study challenges such ethnocentric assumptions and calls for more attention to be paid to the hybrid of Western queer culture and local conditions.

To conclude, the growing body of scholarship on Chinese lala- and gay-oriented cyberspace has sensitized us to individuals' agency in reflecting upon sexual identities and developing possible forms of resistance to heteronormativity through online communities. While people have more freedom to exercise collective agency to organize LGBT movements in public spaces in democratic societies (Ho et al., 2018; Jackson, 2019), Chinese lalas and gay men continue to struggle with the extent to which they are able to exercise individual and collective agency to challenge established norms and bring changes to their personal and family lives in the digital age, due to the various constraints, including tightened political censorship, persistent heterosexual norms, and societal pressure for self-discipline and economic success (Ho, 2010; Tan, 2016; Zhao, 2017). Inspired by and moving beyond the overarching concern with the complex power dynamics within Chinese cyberspace as constitutive of selfhood and lala and gay communities in the existing literature, I attend to lalas' experiences of cyberspace by focusing on their attempts to find alternative ways of navigating their intimate and family lives, both online and offline.

A critical engagement with Western theories on family life and issues of gender and sexuality

In addition to an in-depth empirical and theoretical discussion of the local specificities of China, it is important to critically engage with existing Western literature on family life and related issues of gender, sexuality, and intimacy. Since the first decade of the 21st century, social science research on LGBT couple relationships and families in Western contexts has been rapidly expanding (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Gates, 2013, 2015, 2017; Lambert, 2005; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Patterson, 2000). Although sexuality plays a key role in different aspects of family processes, in the past the majority of research often took heterosexuality for granted and focused on heterosexual populations when studying families. However, researchers nowadays have been paying more attention to families formed by lesbian and gay couples amidst ongoing legal and societal changes in the recognition of same-sex marriage and civil partnerships in developed countries (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Farr, 2019; Lambert, 2005). In addition, the growing popularity of the use of ART and a significant increase in lesbian and gay parenthood have heightened the importance of research on the connections between sexualities, families, and technologies (Gates, 2013, 2015; Golombok, 2018; Nordqvist, 2017; Smart, 2007). This section discusses the significant Western theories and empirical studies that provide insights into conceptualizing family life in my study, as well as highlighting the contributions of my study to existing scholarship.

The shifting forms and meanings of "family" – What is "family" and who counts as "family"?

The family is one of the key social units, with a greater or lesser degree of symbolic and practical significance to individuals in different parts of the world. In family studies, "family" is a fiercely contested term constituted by and constitutive of complex and shifting meanings of gender, sexuality, culture, and power relations (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Morgan, 2011). Feminist scholars have long critiqued the monolithic conceptualization of "the family," which obscures gender inequalities within families and historical and cultural variations in family forms as well as the diverse family lives that people experience nowadays (Jackson, 1997, 2015). In order to destabilize the hegemonic nuclear family model, which is composed of a heterosexual husband and wife and their biological child(ren), family scholars have pluralized the notion of "the family" and called attention to the variety of families and family injustices in contemporary societies (Scott et al., 2004; Stacey, 1996; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). Nowadays, the term "family" is increasingly used by many people, including non-heterosexual people, to refute the heterosexual exclusiveness of the conventional notion of family and to denote relationships that extend beyond those based on blood ties and marriage (Weeks et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that the conceptual move to pluralize "the family" does not necessarily mean the demise of "the 'still alive-ness' of the category" (Budgeon & Roseneil, 2004, p. 127). Despite a significant increase in family diversity, including a growing number of single-person households, cohabiting couples, divorces, step-parents, single parents, and same-sex parents, particularly in Western developed countries (Goldberg et al., 2014), the nuclear family model continues to be regarded by the general public as the standard form against which all other family forms are contrasted (Cenegy et al., 2018; Krull, 2011). As reflected in the family structure literature, family forms other than those following the nuclear family model are often referred to as "non-traditional" or "complex" because they deviate from the traditional configuration of the family (Cenegy

et al., 2018). Moreover, biological and heteronormative family ideologies continue to impact upon family practices and interactions among family members nowadays (Herbrand, 2018; Nelson, 2006). For instance, research has widely documented unequal power relations between men and women in heterosexual families, as evidenced by the continued burden of unpaid domestic work borne by women (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016; England, 2010; Kan et al., 2011).

Over the last 20 years, lesbian and gay families have gained growing visibility across society and have attracted greater scholarly attention (Giddens, 1992; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). The emergence of these families has raised important questions about the heterosexual assumptions inherent in the traditional notion of the family and highlighted the need to reconceptualize family relationships. As a gendered institution (Jackson, 2018; Rahman & Jackson, 1997), heterosexuality is structurally linked with marriage and family formation, through which gender divisions between men and women are reproduced and male dominance is preserved. As suggested by Jackson and Scott (2010), heterosexuality is "an organising principle of many aspects of social structure and social life, and an important one" (p. 81). Lesbian and gay families not only pose a challenge to the dominant gender and sexual order, but they also question what has been taken for granted as the normal way of life embedded in the heteronormative social structure (Jackson & Scott, 2010). From this perspective, lesbians' and gay men's use of the term "family" can be seen as "one important way in which the sexually marginal are struggling to assert the validity of their own way of life" (Weeks et al., 2001, p. 17). Their attempts to create and form their own families and their fight for legal recognition of these family forms represent a significant move to open up new ways of redefining and broadening what "family" means.

In exploring non-heterosexual people's appropriation of the term "family" and their ways of forming their families, there have been ongoing discussions about the extent and

nature of changes to family life (Almack, 2008; Dunne, 2000; Gabb, 2008; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014; Weeks et al., 2001). Sociological studies of family life have been largely influenced by the individualization thesis, which argues for the demise of traditional conventions and institutions and the resultant liberation of individuals to enjoy better opportunities to pursue their own choices (Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Giddens, 1992). For instance, Giddens (1992) argues that people in same-sex relationships are "prime everyday experimenters" as they push the boundaries of how families are understood and formed beyond the traditional heterosexual model (p. 35). This argument is linked to his theorization of changes to intimate life under late modernity, in which tradition "loses its rationale" (Giddens, 1991, p. 206). Positioning tradition and modernity as polar opposites, the individualization thesis has attracted considerable critiques, not only of its universalistic claim about late-modern social change but also of its failure to acknowledge the continued significance of close personal relationships in Western societies (Gabb, 2008; Jackson, 2011, 2015; Jamieson, 1998, 1999; Smart, 2007). For instance, Gross (2005) argues that "meaning constitutive" traditions, such as traditional ideas about love and commitment, still play a key role in shaping people's participation in marital and family relationships in the Western world, specifically in the United States. Evidence from studies of families in the United Kingdom also shows that a sense of obligation is still commonly found among family members (Finch, 1989; Finch & Mason, 1993; Morgan, 2011). In the contemporary era of choice about family life, many people still choose to engage in the traditional institution of marriage and choose to remarry after a divorce in Western societies (Cherlin, 2009; Wilding, 2018). These debates surrounding family change and continuity have led to associated questions about how and to what extent non-traditional Western families have transformed and/or assimilated hegemonic family

norms as they consciously make choices about the family life they prefer (Herbrand, 2018; Mamo, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001).

The belief that "choice" has become one of the defining features of lesbian and gay notions of family is, in fact, debatable (Dempsey, 2010; Gabrielson, 2011). In discussing the emergence of distinctive lesbian and gay families, the conceptualization of "families of choice" or "chosen families" has sparked widespread academic discussions (Weston, 1991; Weeks et al, 2001). As termed by Kath Weston (1991), whose ethnographic study on same-sex kinship and families conducted in the San Francisco Bay area has been influential in LGBT studies, "chosen families" are comprised not only of couples, offspring, or people with biological ties, but also of friends, former partners, neighbors, and any other individuals who are important to lesbians and gay men. In other words, the notion of "chosen families" refutes the necessity of biological or legal ties embedded in traditional heterosexual families and allows a diversity of family constellations, which are characterized by open membership and blurred boundaries. It challenges the long-established ideology of kinship, which prioritizes biological ties and values biological parenthood rather than other forms of parenthood (Goldberg et al., 2009; Letherby, 1999).

Weeks et al. (2001) similarly define "chosen families" as informal, fluid, and strong support networks of intimate partners and friends, which may or may not include biological families. Based on their study in Britain, they found that many non-heterosexual people regarded their core relations as "family," irrespective of the existence of biological or legal ties (Weeks et al., 2001). Other studies have shown that lesbians, particularly older lesbians, tend to develop social support networks of friends and see them as part of their families (Comerford et al., 2004; Gabrielson, 2011; Masini & Barret, 2008). In short, these conceptions of "chosen families" highlight the extension of the concept of family beyond biological kinship or legal connections.

The extent to which the notion of "chosen families" may apply to different socio-cultural contexts is, however, open to dispute. While earlier writings have explored "families of choice" in Western contexts with an emphasis on elective ties and the importance of telling new stories about these ties, through which non-heterosexual people "give meaning to their lives, affirm their identities, and present their relationship as viable and valid" (Weeks et al., 2001, p. 11), recent studies call for more attention to who gets written into these narratives and who gets left out (Gabb, 2018; Herbrand, 2018). Studying contexts other than European and North American ones can sensitize us to important reflections on the limitations of the liberal discourse of choice amidst changing family life in the following two ways.

Firstly, it is important to flag up the different ways in which individuals narrate their sexual identities and display family life under different socio-cultural, economic, and political circumstances. Scholars generally suggest that the practice of telling stories about oneself and about families of choice is crucial and powerful for non-heterosexual people in Western contexts (Plummer, 1995; Weeks et al., 2001). Such storytelling practices enable non-heterosexual people to individually and collectively establish their identities, pride, and belonging to a community (Cavalcante, 2019; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015) as well as to publicly demonstrate alternative ways of living and make claims for recognition and equal citizenship (Plummer, 1995; Weeks et al., 2001). Given the increasing societal acceptance of and legal protection for LGBT people in many developed countries (Flores et al., 2018), it has been widely documented that more and more lesbians and gay men come out at an earlier life stage and consider pursuing parenthood as one of their possible life choices (Gato et al., 2017). In Western contexts, coming out is generally perceived as a personal act of being "authentic" to oneself (Hutson, 2010; Lovelock, 2019) and an active process of making selfhood through discourse (Sedgwick, 1990). However, not all lesbians

and gay men want or have the capacity to freely come out and challenge established family norms in different contexts (Freeman, 2007). Recent Western literature has also indicated that LGBT people, including same-sex parents, continue to struggle to come out, especially to their families of origin (Almack, 2008; Alonzo & Buttitta, 2019; Nordqvist, 2015).

Related to these discussions on the diverse practices of coming out and family storytelling, scholars, especially those in the field of Asian sexuality/queer studies, have called for an alternative conception of selfhood that can enable us to move beyond the liberal and "out and proud" model of understanding sexual identities and sexual disclosure (Bao, 2018; Kong, 2016; Pai, 2017; Tang, 2011). Rather than an abstract conception of a self that is isolated from his/her relational ties, the idea of relational selfhood brings to light not only the ways in which individuals engage with others but also the agency of individuals in reflecting upon themselves in relation to others in their social environments (Adams, 2003; Jackson, 2011, 2015). For instance, in analyzing gender and heterosexuality in East Asia and critically discussing the relevance of Western concepts to Asian societies, Jackson (2019) highlights that "[t]he self is always relational but forms of relationality differ in varied social contexts, along with the reference points by which we define ourselves and others define us" (pp. 50–51). From this perspective, the individualization thesis has come under critique because it overemphasizes individualized choices in Western societies and neglects the continued significance of the relational ties and structural constraints that shape people's ways of leading their lives (Heaphy, 2007; Jackson, 2015, 2019; Smart, 2007). In other words, it is important to attend to relational selfhood and understand the self as social and relational (Adams, 2003; Jackson, 2011, 2015). Such an understanding of selfhood serves as a key starting point for our in-depth understanding of the practices of coming out and family-building among non-heterosexual people in non-Western contexts.

Empirical work in Asian contexts, such as that in Mainland China (Engebretsen, 2009, 2014; Kam, 2013), Taiwan (Brainer, 2019; Pai, 2017), India (Horton, 2018), and Korea (Cho, 2009), has shown that the Western liberal discourse of coming out excludes queer subjects who do not have the economic, political, racial, and/or gendered privileges to exercise individual choices and come out and, equally importantly, that it overlooks the queer possibilities inherent in different life trajectories other than the act of verbally coming out. Other studies on Asian family lives among heterosexual populations have also demonstrated that people in Asia nowadays tend to adopt "a middle path" by absorbing Western values associated with individualism while, at the same time, sticking with traditional values, including loyalty to and respect for their family of origin (Zheng & Ho, 2016, p. 448). Continuing in this vein, my current study explores the diverse pathways to same-sex family formation among lalas in China. I ask: In what ways do lalas pursue their desired family life against the backdrop of local heteronormative family-oriented culture that is nevertheless affected by global flows of LGBT-related ideas and practices, LGBT movements, and advanced technologies? As illustrated in this dissertation, studying the Chinese context, which remains unfavorable to coming out and confrontational identity politics (Kong, 2016), allows us to see the importance of attending to specific circumstances and individuals' relational ties in order to understand different paths to family formation among sexual minority people.

Secondly, in addition to a relational conception of selfhood, a context-specific conception of families is needed in order to avoid ethnocentric bias and open up a more comprehensive and transnational understanding of the realities of same-sex families (Kong, 2016; Pichardo, 2011). For instance, Yip (2008) questioned the applicability of the notion of "families of choice" among lesbian and gay Muslims in the UK. The importance of the traditional biological family to their religion and culture discouraged them from developing

a broader notion of "family" that might include friends and others whom they personally preferred. Pichardo (2011) also found that most of his non-heterosexual informants in Spain used the term "family" to refer to their biological family but not to their lovers or friends. The latter were considered "like family" or "as if they were family" but not "family," despite the strong emotional ties. In a study on lesbians in Taiwan, which is so far the one exception that has produced an in-depth examination of lesbians' family-making in the Asian context, Pai (2017) argues that "[t]here is no concept of friends as family in the culture" by showing that her participants only included their partners, their natal families, and their partners' natal families as part of "family" (p. 268). By interviewing 15 Taiwanese lesbian couples and studying their sexual identities and roles, their negotiations with their families of origin, and their domestic arrangements and practices of commitment, Pai (2017) argues for the importance of understanding lesbian relationships in their situational contexts and in relation to their negotiations of sexuality in their families of origin. She draws our attention to the persistence of Confucian patriarchy in Taiwan, which makes it difficult for female same-sex relationships to be acknowledged in the family of origin. She also points out that the middle-class background and relatively young age of the participants in her sample play a role in providing better opportunities for them to realize their family plans, compared with lesbians who have fewer cultural and economic resources and older lesbians, whose difficulties in gaining parental support and access to housing have been documented in previous research (Chao, 2002).

The above-mentioned studies serve as illustrations of the fact that the notion of "chosen families" does not apply to all non-heterosexual people from different backgrounds. It is important to treat existing Western frameworks regarding families and sexualities with caution and to take account of local peculiarities, including not only cultural traditions but also socio-economic and political circumstances (Jackson, 2015,

2019). Informed by critiques of the individualization thesis, which is grounded in its local parochial context (Gabb, 2008; Jackson, 2011, 2015; Jamieson, 1998, 1999; Smart, 2007), and empirical work that has developed a more nuanced picture of same-sex family configurations in different contexts (Pai, 2017; Pichardo, 2011; Yip, 2008), my present study takes the first important step forward in attending to the peculiarities of lalas' formation of same-sex families in China, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of diverse family forms and meanings in non-Western contexts.

Family practices among same-sex couples – In what ways have lesbian families reinforced or challenged existing social and familial norms?

Since the 1990s, Western family sociology has been paying increasing attention to the ways in which people "do" family and create relational ties within and beyond the family sphere, rather than taking the existence of intimate and family life for granted. Concepts such as "family practices" (Morgan, 1996, 2011) and "practices of intimacy" (Jamieson, 2011) have been widely used to examine the everyday interactions and activities in which people engage to sustain relational ties and keep families functioning. In particular, the notion of intimacy has been developed to denote the "quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality" (Jamieson, 2011, p. 1). This concept is capable of capturing the subtle qualities of a wide range of close personal relationships, which range from romantic, sexual, and familial to extra-familial (Gabb, 2008; Jamieson, 1998). While it remains difficult to translate this Western concept into other contexts (Jackson, 2015), the practice-oriented approach to studying families as captured by "practices of intimacy" (Jamieson, 2011) sensitizes us to the importance of examining what is actually going on in close personal relationships and facilitates cross-cultural comparison (Jamieson, 1998; J. Liu, 2017).

Shifting the subjects of research from heterosexual populations to non-heterosexual ones, and the focus of analysis from family structure to everyday practices, a growing body of empirical work has developed a more nuanced understanding of family practices among non-traditional families (Almack, 2008; Herbrand, 2018; Nordqvist, 2012, 2015, 2017). Naples (2001, p. 33) argues that doing family involves everyday construction and accomplishment, which are particularly apparent when people are doing family in unconventional ways:

> Family must be achieved and constructed on a daily basis. Bisexuals, gays, lesbians, and all of us who do not fit into the normative heterosexual-family model understand this well. But all of us, regardless of the family form we inherit or create, must work to sustain these relationships.

Existing studies about the family life of same-sex couples in Western societies have highlighted that doing family involves drawing a boundary between who counts as "family" and who does not, as well as assigning rights, privileges, and obligations to those whom we see as "family" (Carrington, 1999; Naples, 2001; Sullivan, 2004; Weeks et al., 1999). Doing family is not "merely a natural constellation of individuals connected by biology" (Naples, 2001, p. 33), but it is also shaped by what we regard as appropriate social roles and behaviors for men and women, as well as by a set of material constraints. Furthermore, compared with Chinese LGBT politics, which sets great store by relationships with families of origin, as discussed in the previous section (Kong, 2019), Western LGBT politics is largely associated with the human rights discourse and the ideal of egalitarianism (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Heaphy et al., 2013; Richardson, 2017, 2018). While the issues of rights and egalitarianism within same-sex relationships are not the focus of my current study, the following discussion on diverse family practices adopted by lesbians provides important insights into the complex navigation undertaken by individuals in order to cope

with wider inequalities structured by the intersection of heterosexuality, gender, culture, and individuals' social locations.

With a focus on family practices among lesbians, one key theme in the existing literature is the ways and extent to which lesbian families have transformed and/or assimilated hegemonic family norms (Herbrand, 2018; Mamo, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001). This has been explored through empirical studies of a range of family practices, most notably housework, parenting, and childcare. Much of the earlier literature focused on lesbian couples' division of labor and suggested a common egalitarian ideal among them (Sullivan, 1996; Dunne, 2000). Research has shown that lesbian couples, both with and without children, tend to have an equal allocation of domestic labor and pursue "financial co-independence" (Dunne, 2000, p. 142). The non-heteronormative practices observed among lesbian couples have been attributed to the absence of traditional gender scripts, which guide family practices among opposite-sex couples, and the resultant opportunities for lesbian couples to defy heteronormativity and negotiate their own arrangements for paid and unpaid care work (Dunne, 2000; Rawsthorne & Costello, 2010).

Recent research has paid increasing attention to intersectionality and attended to how individuals' social locations, such as ethnicity and class, shape their lived experiences, thereby adding further nuances to lesbian family life (Farr, 2019; Mendez et al., 2016; Moore, 2008, 2011). For instance, Moore (2008) argues that egalitarianism is primarily shared among White, middle-class lesbian parents, who tend to pursue an egalitarian relationship through shared paid work, shared housework, and shared childcare. In Moore's study (2008), Black lesbian stepfamilies did not embrace the same egalitarian beliefs, but they did set great store by financial independence and labor-market participation and were less concerned about the equal sharing of housework and childcare. Similarly, Lev (2008) suggests that the inclination to perceive lesbian families as egalitarian could hinder us from

understanding variations across lesbian families and the other complex family dynamics that they might entail.

Moving beyond the focus on the egalitarian "community narrative" shared among some lesbians (Gabb, 2004, p. 174), more recent work examines parenting in lesbian families with children and reveals family practices that reproduce and/or question social and familial norms and structural inequalities (Mamo, 2007; Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015; Nordqvist, 2012, 2015, 2017). On the one hand, lesbians and gay men can now experiment with different family practices by raising children outside the heterosexual family model, given a widening range of options to pursue parenthood, including transnational and transracial adoption, in vitro fertilization (IVF), surrogacy, and implanting frozen embryos (Hayman & Wilkes, 2017; Krull, 2011; Lo & Chan, 2017). Family formation, including the prospect of having children, has become a "cultural expectation" for many lesbians and gay men, particularly for those who possess significant economic and cultural resources and are able to obtain legal protection for their same-sex relationships in certain jurisdictions (Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015, p. 533). Destabilizing the dominance of the heterosexual model, lesbian and gay parents are considered "postmodern family pioneers" (Stacey, 2006, p. 28). On the other hand, same-sex marriage and parenthood have been criticized by scholars in queer studies for reproducing what Duggan (2002) calls homonormativity because they signify people's conformance to the conventional family model based on a monogamous marital relationship and reproduction (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015).

In response to the debate on the assimilationist/radical politics associated with same-sex parenthood, recent studies have challenged such a binary understanding of family practices and developed a more nuanced interpretation of the diverse practices and aspirations embraced by lesbian and gay parents, who exercise innovative family

arrangements while simultaneously holding on to specific imaginaries associated with traditional family ideals (Herbrand, 2018; Nordqvist, 2012, 2015, 2017; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014). One notable example is Petra Nordqvist's (2015, 2017) research on lesbian mothers with donor-conceived children in the United Kingdom. Through her studies on these lesbian mothers and their relationships with their own mothers in the context of childbirth, Nordqvist (2017) argues that the cultural importance attached to genetic connections or, more specifically, what she terms "genetic thinking" – "the process through which genetic relationships are rendered meaningful in everyday family living" (p. 865) – plays a key role in lesbian family life. "Genetic thinking" could be found, for instance, in non-genetic parents' perceived need to do extra work to "prove" themselves as competent parents (p. 872). In her study of lesbian mothers and their older parents, she found that genetic relations with grandchildren were perceived as strong by some grandmothers, who therefore maintained good relationships with their daughters and grandchildren, whereas non-genetic relations with grandchildren tended to be considered weak and thus led to more fragile relationships (Nordqvist, 2015). In short, Nordqvist (2015, 2017) highlights that traditional family ideals associated with genetic ties still hold their normative power to shape interactions and expectations among family members, despite lesbian families' efforts to push back the boundaries of the family. Her study confirms the continued pressure felt by lesbian families to attain social recognition and legitimacy for their family forms (Mamo, 2007) and echoes other scholars' view that modernity continues both to be shaped by and to reshape traditions (Jackson, 2015; Jackson et al., 2013; Qi, 2015).

Based on rich empirical findings drawn from the examination of family practices and "genetic thinking," Nordqvist (2017) calls for future studies to put more focus on "the relationship between family as a set of activities and the feelings, imaginations, dreams or claims with which they are entwined" (p. 865). In response to this call, my study attends to

what lalas do ("family practices" (Morgan, 1996, 2011)) and how they think ("family imaginaries" (Nordqvist, 2017)) in their family life, including lalas' processes of contemplating and/or pursuing motherhood. Despite an increase in same-sex parenthood, mostly in Western developed countries (Gates, 2017; Patterson et al., 2014), and the growing popularity of ART in the global market (Golombok, 2018), societal discussion about family formation among same-sex couples in Chinese society remains very limited, let alone that about same-sex parenthood. My study thus marks the first step towards examining the family practices and imaginaries in the unexplored territory of family formation and paths to motherhood among lalas in China. It pays attention to the ways in which traditions have been renegotiated through everyday practices (Jackson, 2015; Jackson et al., 2013; Qi, 2015) as well as engaging with ongoing debates about the potential of non-traditional family formations to challenge conventional social and familial norms (Herbrand, 2018; Mamo, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001).

Diverse paths to motherhood – What does it mean to pursue motherhood in the context of a same-sex relationship?

By delving into the experiences of family formation, and particularly those of reproductive decision-making, among lalas in the Chinese context, this study draws attention to the struggles and inequalities that confront sexual minority women in the intersection of heterosexuality, gender, culture, and individuals' social locations. A more in-depth discussion about the diverse experiences of pursuing same-sex motherhood is needed here. While not all lesbians include motherhood as part of their family-building plans, the ways in which lesbians perceive and pursue different paths to motherhood provide a critical lens through which to explore established norms associated with gender,

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sexuality, and family and the meanings of being connected (Nordqvist, 2012, 2015, 2017; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014).

Despite a considerable variation in women's desire to become mothers and an increasing number of voluntarily childfree women nowadays (Harrington, 2019; Simon et al., 2018), it is generally believed that motherhood still plays a key role in women's sense of self in both Western and Asian cultures (Bell, 2019; Davis & Friedman, 2014). For instance, in the USA, motherhood continues to be seen as not only a normative life-course transition but also a crucial element of womanhood (Bell, 2019; McQuillan et al., 2012), although it can now take many different forms beyond the traditional nuclear family model, such as single, same-sex, and step-motherhood (Klett-Davies, 2016; Nelson & Hertz, 2017; Sanner & Coleman, 2017). As discussed in the previous section, motherhood in China is central to women's selfhood and is still largely bound up with the institution of opposite-sex marriage under heteronormative policies. In general, sociological work on motherhood has highlighted the gendered structure of parenthood by pointing to the persistent cultural expectation imposed on women to bear and rear children and the importance of motherhood to women's sense of self and social identity (Bell, 2019; Fox, 2009). Furthermore, studies have indicated that access to reproductive options tends to be segregated along lines of sexuality, class, and ethnicity (Hovav, 2019; Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015). For instance, compared with middle-class White women, working-class women and women of color are likely to experience greater stigmatization if they identify as infertile and/or seek fertility treatment (Bell, 2014). Lesbians who wish to become mothers, apart from facing unequal access to reproductive options based on hierarchies of ethnicity (Moore, 2011), class, and education (Taylor, 2009), also continue to be marginalized by the common heteronormative belief around the "natural" nuclear family and thus to face unequal treatment in seeking fertility services (Hayman et al., 2015).

Over the last few decades, a significant increase in lesbian and gay parenthood, predominantly in Western developed countries – a phenomenon termed the "lesbian baby boom" or "gayby boom" (Clarke, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2008) – has been accompanied by a recognition of the need to account for the experiences of same-sex parents and their children in social science scholarship (Gabb, 2018; Nordqvist, 2012, 2015; Perales et al., 2020). A growing body of quantitative studies has examined the attitudes of childless lesbians and gay men towards parenthood with those of their heterosexual counterparts (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind & Tornello, 2017). Compared with their heterosexual counterparts, lesbians and gay men tend to report lower levels of parenting desire and intention due to structural constraints and cultural climates (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Riskand & Patterson, 2010; Riskind & Tornello, 2017), notably legal barriers to same-sex couples' adoption and parenting rights (Bauermeister, 2014) and heteronormativity in different settings, including healthcare and schools (Hayman et al., 2015). Meanwhile, compared with gay men, lesbians are more likely to desire and intend to have children (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Riskand & Patterson, 2010). Research attributes this gender difference to various factors, including but not limited to most women's innate ability to carry a baby and traditional gender norms which may render women more committed to family life and pressurize them to become mothers (Gato et al., 2017; Riskind et al., 2013). As a result, it is not surprising that there have been more discussions on lesbians than on gay men in Western literature on same-sex parenthood (Perales et al., 2020). Nevertheless, more research on the paths to same-sex motherhood is still needed in order to explore important questions about what it means to pursue motherhood in different cultural contexts and how same-sex motherhood impacts upon relational ties in the wider family. I undertake this research direction in the current study in order to advance knowledge about the family life of sexual minority women in a non-Western context.

With their in-depth exploration of the experiences of pursuing lesbian motherhood, qualitative studies have demonstrated that the decision to have children in the context of a female same-sex relationship remains a difficult one even in cultural and legal contexts with relatively favorable attitudes and laws regarding LGBT rights, namely the USA, the UK, and Australia (Hayman et al., 2015; Leal et al., 2019; Perales et al., 2020). While in the past lesbians wishing to achieve pregnancy had no choice but to resort to heterosexual intercourse or self-insemination through sperm donation from friends at home or in illegal settings, the increasing accessibility of ART, such as that of IVF and intrauterine insemination, has provided lesbians with more options to become mothers than ever before (McNair et al., 2002; Hayman et al., 2015; Yager et al., 2010). Nevertheless, compared with heterosexual women, lesbian intended parents need to go through unique decision-making processes that are "deliberate and conscious" (Hayman et al., 2015, p. 405) and "multilayered and complex" (Chabot & Ames, 2004, p. 348). For instance, they have to make additional decisions about how to conceive a baby, which partner will become the biological parent (Hayman et al., 2015), whether to choose a known or unknown donor, how to deal with the relationship with the donor (Lingiardi et al., 2016; Somers et al., 2017), and how to navigate parenthood within a predominantly heteronormative society after childbirth (Goldberg et al., 2018; Hayman et al, 2015). The decision to become parents has become a political experience for many same-sex couples because it entails relentless efforts to navigate structural and societal challenges in their interactions with health practitioners, teachers, and other, heterosexual, families as well as yet more efforts to legitimize their family forms through everyday practices (Jennings, 2016; Perales et al., 2020).

While previous studies have highlighted some of the common struggles experienced by lesbian mothers, it is also important to understand that lesbians' journeys

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to conception and on to motherhood are differentially structured by individuals' social locations and local socio-cultural, economic, and political forces (Mamo, 2018; Stacey, 2018). Building on the existing literature, which has been largely grounded in Western experiences, my study marks the first attempt to situate pathways to same-sex motherhood within the Chinese context, sensitizing us to important reflections on different meanings of same-sex motherhood and different family-building mechanisms that are constrained by material and structural conditions in a restrictive context. Two important issues are worth discussing here to highlight the political and cultural boundaries of motherhood, which distinguishes the experiences of lalas from those of their counterparts in Euro-American contexts.

Firstly, despite the fact that lesbian motherhood has been facilitated by significant legal changes and technological advances, predominantly in Western developed countries (Gato et al., 2017; Goldberg et al., 2014), China does not share the same socio-political environment as Euro-American contexts, in which liberal discourses about the rights of same-sex couples and parents are embedded. In China, lalas' rights to adoption and ART are denied. As demonstrated by my findings in Chapter 5, lalas' choices and opportunities to become mothers are restricted by the legal context and other socio-cultural, political, and material circumstances. As suggested by Nordqvist (2012), the ways in which lesbians perceive and pursue routes to parenthood provide an important window into family life because "the reproductive process requires couples to make explicit their choices about the family they seek to become" (p. 646). The chosen routes foreground the cultural discourses and values that individuals embrace when developing their family life (Herbrand, 2018; Nordqvist, 2012, 2015, 2017). In Western societies, the increased visibility and presence of lesbian-parented families should thus be understood in relation to the available social discourses and legal rights which recognize the status of lesbian mothers as parents

(Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2019; Gabb, 2018). In the UK, for instance, interviews with young non-heterosexual people indicate that same-sex parenthood is now considered an exercise of one's legal right and "a rite of passage into commitment" (Gabb, 2018). As Gabb (2018) points out, the availability of legal recognition for same-sex partnerships and parenthood, coupled with the technological advancement of ART, has reinforced, rather than challenged, the values of biogenetic relatedness and future-oriented forms of relationship commitment and family-making. In a restrictive context where legal rights for same-sex parents are not available, the meanings inherent in lalas' pursuit of motherhood are worth exploring. I ask: What concerns do lalas have in their decision-making processes regarding having children or not? How do lalas perceive and respond to potential difficulties relating to having children as sexual minority women in China?

Secondly, my study calls for more attention to be paid to a relational understanding of sexual minority women's aspirations towards motherhood in the context of their relationships with their families of origin. I argue that the study of same-sex parenthood should move beyond its current emphasis on individual aspirations or couple dynamics, sexual citizenship, and reproductive rights to examine the wider range of issues and relational ties that come into play in reproductive decision-making processes in different socio-cultural contexts. Western studies on lesbian families have predominantly focused on lesbians' relationships with their partners, children, and LGBT communities, particularly familial roles and ideologies associated with egalitarianism among lesbian couples (Dunne, 2000; Rawsthorne & Costello 2010), methods of upbringing and gender socialization and their outcomes for children (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2020; Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2019), and social support from friends and wider LGBT communities (Gabrielson, 2011; Masini & Barret, 2008; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). With only

a few exceptions (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist, 2015), the existing literature has largely overlooked the role of the wider family in shaping family formation among lesbian couples.

Paying attention to the relationships and negotiations between non-heterosexual people and their families of origin reveals the workings of heteronormativity within the family sphere and brings to the fore the question of what it means to be related amidst family change (Nordqvist, 2015). For instance, Almack (2008) revealed that coming out as lesbian parents to families of origin after becoming mothers remained a difficult task in England. She illustrated how these parents used different "display work," as it is termed by Finch (2007), such as the use of narratives and personal objects, to gain recognition of "their parental and familial status within (and also beyond) their wider kinship networks" (Almack, 2008, p. 1188). With a focus on the meanings of pregnancy among lesbian parents, Nordqvist (2015) explored the relationship between these lesbians and their older parents and highlighted the role of pregnancy in "normalizing lesbian life" and connecting lesbian daughters and their mothers via traditional "kinship properties" of genes and blood and the shared experience of childbirth (p. 496). These studies demonstrate a growing focus on the role of wider family networks in people's family lives (Nordqvist, 2015; Smart, 2007), but they are limited in the sense that they only capture the negotiations between lesbian parents and their older parents after their journey to conception.

While existing Western research generally presents a progressive picture of lesbians' (and gay men's) parental aspirations, with younger generations coming out at an earlier stage and considering parenthood to be part of their life trajectories (Gato et al., 2017; Riskind et al., 2013), what is often overlooked is the wide diversity of pathways to conception and on to motherhood, which can be inextricably interwoven with the continuing struggles to come out and handle relationships with families of origin depending on individuals' social locations and wider socio-political contexts. From this perspective,

given China's family-centered culture, and specifically the fundamental role of the traditional notion of the family in selfhood and personal life (Jackson, 2019; Kam, 2013; Santos & Harrell, 2017), China serves as a productive site in which to study the dynamics between new families formed by female same-sex couples and their families of origin and to explore alternative journeys to same-sex motherhood. In particular, my current study pays attention to how and under what circumstances different types of relational ties, including parent–adult child and wider intergenerational ties, may shape lalas' decision-making processes when they contemplate whether and how to have children.

Summary of the chapter

As shown in this chapter, persistent gender inequalities and the continuing suppression of same-sex desires and relationships in urban China can be attributed to the influence of the country's Confucian heritage on established gender and family norms as well as that of the current political, socio-cultural, and economic forces manifested in the authoritarian regime, social and familial norms, and market-driven cyberspace. A thorough examination of the Chinese family-centered context enables us to see how and why lalas' family-building experiences represent a radical departure from established norms. At the same time, it brings to the fore the inequalities confronting people whose family aspirations and practices do not fit the heterosexual family model. In addition, by engaging with ongoing discussions about the changing forms, practices, and meanings of families brought by same-sex couples' appropriation of the term "family" and their efforts to form their own families, this chapter offers a critical dialogue with existing Western literature and evaluates the relevance of Western theories to local experiences in China. In this final section of the chapter, I highlight how my study has been informed by previous studies and,

more importantly, how it can make distinct contributions to the existing literature on gender, sexuality, and family in two major ways.

Firstly, my research serves as the first study to provide empirical evidence about conceptions of family and the formation of same-sex families among lalas in China. It examines lalas' lived experiences in relation to the family through a different lens from that of previous research on lalas. Whereas the primary focus of previous research has been on lalas' identity formation, their negotiations with parents, their experiences of continued pressure to marry the opposite sex, and their engagement in communities and activism (Engebretsen, 2014; Engebretsen et al., 2015; Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017; Kam, 2013), my present study aims to investigate lalas' accounts of their own family-building experiences, including the meanings they attach to the families they form, their family imaginaries, and their practices of building their own families, which remain invisible in academic and social discussions. This study does not ignore the central problem of heterosexual social and familial norms, which have been a major obstacle to lalas' lives in China. Rather, it situates the unexplored sphere of lala families within the socio-cultural, economic, and political context of Beijing and links the personal and the familial to wider social processes, including the expansion of ART and cyberspace. Furthermore, as I show in my findings, lalas' family-making has the potential to develop new ideas about what it means to be connected within the family. Thus, my study contributes to a growing body of social science research on gender, sexuality, and family change in China and, equally importantly, to the limited body of literature that specifically concerns lalas and their family life in China.

Secondly, not only does my research increase the volume of empirical knowledge about same-sex families, but it also pushes forward a rich research agenda that extends beyond the dominant Western paradigm and broadens the scope of discussions about families across global contexts. The existing literature on same-sex families has primarily

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focused on middle-class White people in Europe and North America (Moore, 2012), although more and more scholars have paid attention to intersectionality and attended to how lesbian family life has been shaped by individuals' social locations, such as ethnicity and class (Farr, 2019; Mendez et al., 2016; Moore, 2008, 2011). In particular, this chapter engages with the contested debates regarding ideas of individualized selfhood and the radical potential of lesbian families, flagging up the dangers of the assumed universality of Western theories and sensitizing us to important reflections on the interconnections between family life and social change in different contexts. By focusing on the unexplored territory of Chinese same-sex family formation, my study aims to capture different meanings of families and the practices of navigating and creating family ties, including those with their families of origin, in lalas' processes of family formation. Attending to intergenerational relationships allows us to move beyond the narrow discussion about couple dynamics or their "chosen" networks, which have dominated Western literature (Gabrielson, 2011; Masini & Barret, 2008; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). By doing so, my study sheds light on a diverse set of mechanisms of resistance against established social and familial norms and reveals the interlocking systems of inequalities confronting sexual minority women in the Chinese context.

To conclude, overlooking Chinese same-sex families prohibits a complete understanding of all possible family forms. The absence of institutional and legal support for same-sex marriage and parenthood in the Chinese context does not mean that Chinese families led by same-sex couples do not exist. Rather, the local conditions in China further complicate the challenges confronting same-sex couples and their processes of forming non-normative families and pursuing parenthood. With a focus on lalas in urban China, I attend to the diversity of practices, meanings, and power dynamics involved in their different pathways to family formation. I argue that the case of lalas' family-making in

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China provides an important window into different mechanisms of family formation, including those of reproductive decision-making, against the backdrop of local heteronormative family-oriented culture that is nevertheless affected by global flows of LGBT-related ideas and practices, LGBT movements, and advanced technologies.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the methodology of my study. It aims to delineate my procedures and rationale for data collection and data analysis as well as to demonstrate my reflections on the whole research process. As stated in the introductory chapter, the research design and methods underpinning my study are intended to enable an in-depth exploration of what and how lalas think, feel, and act during the processes of building their families and why they make sense of and do family in certain ways. As the first of its kind, my study is exploratory in nature, setting great store by locally grounded knowledge gained through my fieldwork, which was conducted in Beijing between July 2017 and June 2018.

This chapter is organized into four parts. It starts by providing the reasons for using qualitative methodology and demonstrating how my qualitative study has been guided by the social constructionist perspective. It then explains the procedures and rationale for using individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary research method. The third section delineates the process of data analysis by detailing my step-by-step approach to thematic analysis in six phases. The last section demonstrates my reflections on the research process and highlights how my position as researcher has shaped the production of knowledge in my study.

The use of qualitative methodology

Qualitative methodology allows researchers to achieve an in-depth understanding of "social life in terms of processes rather than in static terms" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 4). It is concerned with the "meanings, processes and contexts" of social phenomena rather than questions about quantity and frequency (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 4). Using qualitative methodology, I aim to examine lalas' lived experiences of making sense of and

forming their own families in Beijing. In particular, given my research interest in the meanings that lalas attach to their family lives and their practices of forming families, I employ a qualitative methodology, rather than a quantitative one, in order to gain access to participants' personal accounts of their family-building processes in detail.

The qualitative methodology used in this study is theoretically informed by the social constructionist perspective. As one of the major schools of thought informing qualitative research, social constructionism emphasizes that understanding the meanings and interactions in the social world of research participants is key to knowledge production (Blaikie, 2007; Ritchie et al., 2014). In other words, it is important to explore and understand people's lived experiences from their own points of view and to study them within a particular historical and social context, in which the meanings of their lived experiences are socially constructed (Blaikie, 2007; Crotty, 2003).

Social constructionism has served as one of the major theoretical sociological frameworks for understanding sexuality since the 1980s[10] (Kong, 2019; Stein & Plummer, 1994). Through the lens of social constructionism, researchers neither pathologize homosexuality as a kind of social deviance or mental illness nor simplify the experiences of people with same-sex desires as a "culturally uniform condition" (Kong, 2019, p. 3). Rather, they study sexuality as socially produced, emphasizing that sexual identities, practices, and other relevant experiences are created and organized by society and subject to change across space and over time (Plummer, 1998).

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[10] While social constructionism remains influential in sexuality studies (Kong, 2019), queer theory, which emerged during the 1990s, posed a challenge to it (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). Queer theorists argue for the importance of destabilizing the binaries of gender and heterosexuality/homosexuality and seeing identities as constantly fluid and hybrid (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). Thus, the view that identity categories (male/female or heterosexual/homosexual) are socially constructed is seen by queer theorists as resting on essentialist categories and thus problematic. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that a lack of attention to everyday social interactions and the effects of material and structural arrangements on people's lived experiences is widely recognized as a limitation of queer theory, which is rooted in literary theory and text-based studies (Jackson, 2018; Kong, 2019; Stella, 2015). Echoing this critique, I did not adopt queer theory as the primary theoretical perspective for my study.

The use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews as my primary research method reflects my social constructionist theoretical perspective. It has allowed me to study lalas' individual perspectives on and experiences of developing their own versions of family life. It is also noteworthy that the social constructionist perspective not only emphasizes how realities are constructed in society, but also "explicitly incorporate[s] context, conditions, and resources into analysis" (Holstein, 2018, p. 405). Informed by this perspective, this study attends to both participants' accounts of their family-building experiences and the interplay between their experiences and the wider socio-cultural, political, and economic circumstances that have conditioned their actions and shaped their experiences. By using lalas' own accounts of family life to explore their family practices and imaginaries, their actual and perceived difficulties, and the tensions and conflicts they experienced when building their families, my study teases out the interplay between structure and agency in lalas' family-building experiences in rich detail.

Whereas quantitative methodology can enable us to understand broad patterns, identify potential relationships between variables, and generalize findings drawn from random sampling to larger populations (Kelly, 2020), qualitative research is best suited to my current study due to its aim of understanding the complexities of family-building processes among lalas and the meanings they attach to the notion of "family." As suggested by scholars studying non-heterosexual identities and relationships (Heaphy et al., 1998; Pai, 2017; Weston, 1991), quantitative methods, such as questionnaire surveys, have their methodological limitations due to both the difficulty of obtaining a representative sampling frame for a hidden population of lesbians and gay men and also their failure to capture the shifting and subtle nuances of identities and relationships, which are "'contingent,' 'emergent,' and 'processual'" (Heaphy et al., 1998, p. 455). As in many other parts of the world, census data identifying non-heterosexual populations remains unavailable in China.

Given the socially marginalized and hidden status of lalas in China (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho et al., 2018; Kam, 2013) and my research focus on the diverse ways in which lalas redefine the boundaries of the family and build their own families, I employ qualitative methodology in order to unravel lalas' lived experiences of family formation, which have been silenced and remain largely invisible in both the existing literature and wider society.

Data collection

Rationale for conducting individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews

The themes that I explore in this dissertation are primarily based on lalas' thoughts, feelings, and actions articulated during the interviews. In sexuality and family studies, among other fields, interviews serve as one of the most common and effective ways of achieving an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives on specific topics that are sensitive and related to hidden populations, including non-heterosexual populations (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2012). My rationale for carrying out individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews is threefold.

Firstly, participants' accounts of their lived experiences collected through in-depth interviews play an important role in reflecting the meanings that lalas attach to their family lives and the practices they adopt to relate to others and sustain their family ties. As explained in the previous two chapters, building on ongoing debates about how intimate relationships are molded by local socio-cultural, economic, and political circumstances (Ho et al., 2018) and previous efforts to theorize the relational understanding of selfhood (Kong, 2016; Qi, 2016), one of the key focuses of my study is to examine the ways in which lalas juggle traditional family obligations and non-normative aspirations for building their families. As suggested by Heaphy and Einarsdottir (2013) in their methodological reflections on interviewing same-sex couples together and apart, individual interviews are

particularly conducive to a detailed exploration of the "socially and biographically embedded 'relational selves'" (p. 55). In other words, rather than testimonies of objective truth, the material that participants share in in-depth interviews is analyzed as narratives reflecting the ways in which individuals give meaning to their experiences and link it to their social world (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014). In-depth interviews thus fit my research goal of generating a rich description and interpretation of lalas' family formation at the individual, relational, and contextual levels.

Secondly, individual interviews, rather than joint interviews (with both members of a couple) or focus groups, provide a safe and open platform for participants to share their personal experiences in a one-to-one setting with the researcher (Beitin, 2008; Bryman, 2016). As opposed to joint interviews, individual interviews enabled me to explore in-depth issues that some lalas might be reluctant to talk about in the presence of their partners, such as conflicting ideas about the ideal family life and tensions arising from different degrees of intimacy with one's natal family within a couple. It is true that couple interviews can offer potential for understanding the ways in which a couple co-create their narratives for their relationship in an interactional interview setting, and consequently can provide insights into couple interactions and power dynamics within the couple (Allan, 1980; Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013). It is not, however, the primary objective of my study to look into these couple dynamics. Also, interviewing couples together may hinder individuals from freely sharing their perceptions of family life and personal experiences, or even risk producing a one-sided story of the relationship in cases where one partner holds dominance over the other (Allan, 1980; Beitin, 2008). Similarly, given my focus on personal accounts of family life and the sensitive nature of same-sex relationships in China, this study does not adopt the method of focus groups. This group-based method serves to gather data through the group interaction between participants, but it lacks the depth of data that is

better captured through individual interviews (Bryman, 2016) and may discourage participants from openly sharing their feelings, experiences, and opinions (Gill et al., 2008).

Thirdly, the semi-structured format of the interviews gave each participant ample space to tell her story about family life from her own perspective. While loosely structured around an interview guide (see Appendix II), all my interviews share the goal of capturing individual versions of what family means and how family life has been developed. Rather than imposing definitions of "family" on my participants, my study is concerned with lalas' individual perspectives on the notion of "family" and family life. Therefore, drawing on my participants' accounts in response to my open-ended questions during the interviews, "family" or "families" as discussed in my findings refer to participants' relations to other individuals whom they saw as part of their "family." The semi-structured format of the individual interviews allowed flexibility in the exploration of family-related issues that truly concerned each participant and consequently offers deep insights into the boundaries of who and what are included in the "family" as participants actively defined it.

Procedures for data collection

Sampling approach

This study used purposive sampling to recruit participants. Purposive sampling refers to the selection of participants based on particular characteristics which can enable a focused and detailed exploration of the central research questions (Bryman, 2016). In my study, I designed my sample frame to achieve two fundamental goals of purposive sampling (Ritchie et al., 2014). My first goal was to ensure that the characteristics or experiences of the participants were relevant to the central focus of my research, which was concerned with the experiences of family formation among lalas in Beijing. The second goal was to ensure a high degree of diversity among participants so that rich data could be obtained.

With reference to these two goals, I chose three selection criteria: relationship/family status, age, and local or non-local status in Beijing. According to Ritchie et al. (2014), setting the priority of different criteria is important because it shapes the sample composition, with the primary criterion assigned a certain quota of the sample and the secondary (and tertiary) criteria assigned with a less precise quota, or no quota at all. As shown below, I prioritized my selection criteria based on their different degrees of relevance to my research focus and accordingly designed my sample frame.

Firstly, my study included lala-identified women with different relationship/family status. This criterion for purposive sampling was considered "primary" due to its central importance to my study (Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 134). Before starting my fieldwork, I intended to recruit some participants who were single, some who were in a relationship with a same-sex partner, and others who were engaged in a contract marriage with a gay man. This purposive inclusion of three types of relationship status, which were informed by my research objectives and the existing literature, allowed me to recruit lalas who were likely to be at different stages of family formation and consequently different from each other in their ideals and/or actual practices of family formation. As a result, I would be able to identify and contrast different perceptions of and approaches to family formation which cut across the sample. This would achieve a more detailed picture of how individual and structural opportunities and constraints might shape lalas' diverse meaning-making and decision-making processes of family formation.

However, it is noteworthy that, as my fieldwork progressed, I realized the importance of adding lalas who had already become mothers to my sampling frame. In qualitative research, it is not uncommon to amend the sampling frame during the research process with the aim of enhancing the quality and diversity of the data (Ritchie et al., 2014). Such flexibility not only allowed me to derive sound evidence from my fieldwork, but it also

enabled me to reflect upon my assumptions as a researcher. Before the start of my fieldwork I had not expected to be able to reach any lalas who had children in the context of a same-sex relationship. This assumption was derived from my review of the existing literature, in which no discussions on reproductive decision-making or motherhood experienced by lalas in urban China exist, as well as from my observations (before fieldwork) of continued stigmatization against sexual minority people and legal restrictions in China, which largely prevented lalas (and gay men) from having their own children. Nevertheless, my fieldwork proved this assumption to be wrong. It exposed more complex processes of family formation, which included lalas' decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children, and shed light on underground forms of resistance against norms and regulations. As I further explain in the next sub-section, my recruitment strategy optimized my chances of identifying a wide range of participants with different characteristics, and consequently of gaining a more comprehensive picture of diverse forms of family formation among lalas in China. While it is currently impossible to identify the actual size of the population of lalas, let alone lala-identified mothers, who remain a hidden and hard-to-reach group, recruiting a group of lalas who had children was particularly useful to my study because it drew significant attention to a wider scope of family aspirations embraced by lalas and illuminated lalas' agency and difficulties in defining who could be related to whom in their families.

Other criteria for purposive sampling included age and local or non-local status in Beijing. As these criteria were potentially important aspects of lalas' family-building experiences but might not be as directly related to family composition as the criterion concerning relationship/family status, they were assigned as "secondary" criteria in my sampling approach (Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 134). By recruiting lala-identified women in their late 20s (aged between 25 and 29) and those in their 30s and older, I focused on a

subset of lalas who had experienced or were experiencing severe familial and societal pressure for entering opposite-sex marriage and giving birth to children. Such pressure could pose a huge challenge to their desired ways of building their own same-sex families. In China, social stigma is generally attached to single women in their late 20s (Fincher, 2014; Ji, 2015). There is a general belief that the most desirable age for marriage is between 25 and 29 (Kam, 2007). Thus, I decided to recruit both younger lalas in their late 20s and older lalas aged 30 and above. The former group could reveal the ways in which lalas experience pressure to conform to the heterosexual family model and how they attempt to handle this pressure in pursuing their desired intimate and family life. The older age group was expected to have experienced similar familial pressure and potentially taken action to develop their own intimate and family life in more concrete forms. As shown in my final sample, the majority of my participants (28 out of 35) were over 30 years old, while seven were in their late 20s. This sample composition allowed me to explore a variety of actual family practices, including those of getting divorced and pursuing motherhood, which provided deep insights into the complex and diverse processes of family formation among lalas.

In terms of residential status, I recruited both lala-identified women who were locals and others who were non-locals in Beijing. As explained in the introductory chapter, I chose Beijing as the site of investigation because of its unique position as the political and cultural hub of China and the co-existence of freedom and control, which has allowed lalas to explore the city's vibrant community culture and develop their intimate and family lives, albeit within limits. Many people tend to migrate to major cities, such as Beijing, in order to seek better jobs and more resources (Chan, 2009). Among lalas in particular, it is not uncommon to migrate to Beijing in order to seek the way of life they prefer and to escape from the intense pressure to marry the opposite sex imposed by their families of origin in

their hometowns (Wang, 2015). Nevertheless, people from different provinces of China tend to have different regional backgrounds and customs (Wang, 2015), which may shape their family beliefs in different ways. In addition, due to the relatively higher living costs in Beijing, particularly the rising costs of housing, compared with other smaller cities (Lian, 2019; Mu & Yeung, 2019), research has shown that non-local residents in Beijing tend to find it more difficult to afford housing and settle down in the capital city than their local counterparts, who generally have the options of remaining in their parental home and/or receiving parental support to buy a home (Lian, 2019). Taking into account the different constraints and opportunities encountered by local and non-local lalas residing in Beijing, it was crucial to interview both groups to ensure that the study could cover a wide range of possibilities and experiences of family formation. By doing so, I would be able to identify various factors, such as material and structural factors, that enable or constrain the processes of family formation experienced by lalas with different backgrounds in China.

In short, taking these three criteria into consideration[11], purposive sampling was used in order to establish substantive knowledge about a particular subset of lalas who had the most relevant experiences of planning and/or building their same-sex families in Beijing at the time of the interview. Following the guidelines on purposive sampling (Ritchie et al., 2014), I set specific quotas to recruit participants with different relationship/family status

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[11] Other selection criteria, such as class and gender-role identity, were considered, but they were not selected for the following reasons. While class is known to be associated with the amount of resources lesbians can mobilize to develop their ways of life (Chao, 2002; Pai, 2017; Taylor, 2009), people tend to have different understandings about the categorization of class. Nevertheless, although I did not include class as a selection criterion in the recruitment stage, I did collect data on occupation and highest educational qualification during the interviews and actively took these indicators of class into account during the data analysis. Similar to class, the definition of gender-role identity, which refers to T (masculine)/P (feminine) in Chinese contexts, is highly contested and varies among individuals (Ho, 2008). Similar to the butch (masculine)/femme (feminine) divide in Western contexts (Blair & Hoskin, 2016), this T/P categorization is seen as reflecting the conventional dichotomous roles of heterosexual men and women (Ho, 2008; Pai, 2017). Therefore, not all lesbians/lalas adopt these binary roles in their self-identification. In my sample, more than two-thirds of my participants did not identify themselves with the T/P dichotomy. Overall, the loosely defined criteria concerning class and gender-role identity would have made the recruitment of participants difficult because this information has to be collected even before a person participates in the interview.

(primary criterion) while not using minimum quotas to specify the number of participants of different ages (secondary criterion) or residential status (secondary criterion). In the design stage of my research, I aimed to recruit approximately eight participants for each type of relationship/family status (single, in a same-sex relationship, in a contract marriage with a gay man, and being a mother), so the expected number of participants to be recruited for the study was 32 in total. The purpose of specifying the quotas (8) was to ensure at least some representation of participants of different ages (aged 25–29; 30 or above) and with different residential status (local; non-local) within each of the relationship/family status subgroups. Nevertheless, rather than being fixed, this initial design was subject to adjustment alongside the process of my fieldwork. The final sample was composed of 35 participants and it largely met my initial design criteria by ensuring the inclusion of key features that were expected to be associated with lalas' processes of family formation.

Recruitment channels

In order to put my purposive sampling approach into practice, I recruited my participants through multiple channels, both online and offline. As demonstrated in previous studies of intimate and family life among non-heterosexual people, who remain a hidden and hard-to-reach population (Nordqvist, 2014; Weeks et al., 2001), it is common to recruit participants through various gateways in order to increase the diversity of the sample. I recruited the participants for my study through LGBT-related (six participants) and gender-related (two participants) organizations, lala online platforms (nine participants), my personal networks (five participants), and participants' referral to their networks (13 participants).

It was particularly difficult for me to recruit informants at the beginning of my fieldwork. My interview invitations and indirect requests for referrals to potential

informants were ignored or rejected numerous times. These difficulties also highlighted the hidden status of lalas and the taboo subject of homosexuality in China (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013), which led some lalas to refrain from participating in the research. Therefore, it is noteworthy that my recruitment process was inextricably interlinked with my participation in different lala gatherings and community events in Beijing. Without attending these events, it would have been almost impossible for me to gain access to the local lala community, gain trust from gatekeepers for local organizations, and, more importantly, to achieve an in-depth and all-round understanding of the living conditions of lalas within the socio-cultural, economic, and political context of China.

Prior to conducting the first interview, it took me around three months to familiarize myself with the lala community and develop my network in Beijing. I spent considerable time mingling with people involved in the local lala community, including those involved in lala-related businesses (e.g. online dating mobile applications targeted at lalas) and activism and lalas in general. I regularly joined informal lala gatherings in bars, cafes, and private spaces, as well as attending community events, such as the spring festival concert held by Beijing Queer Chorus, the 13th anniversary event held by the Beijing Les Center, and a sharing session about a woman's journey to seek ART overseas promoted via the lala-oriented online platform Lesdo. My participation in these events allowed me to engage with the local lala community and witness the diversity of underground strategies adopted by individuals, businesses, and activists in order to circumvent government regulations that were unfavorable to their development. In addition, by talking to lalas, including those who were activists during my fieldwork, I was able to develop a locally sensitive understanding of the political climate in Beijing, which was described by some as "under stricter government control than before." As a result, as a researcher coming from Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous Chinese city (more discussion in the final section), I developed deep

insights into the lived experiences of lalas in Beijing and, equally importantly, heightened my awareness of the importance of assuring all potential participants of their privacy and confidentiality and assuaging any of their concerns throughout the recruitment and interview process.

Although I did not intend to actively recruit lalas who involved themselves in lala-related businesses and activism, due to the focus of my study being on family formation rather than community/activism development, my contact with this group of lalas allowed me to expand my social network with lalas in Beijing and gain the trust of key gatekeepers. They were then willing to post advertisements about the study on the online platforms of their organizations and to spread the word among their personal networks. In all the verbal and written messages for recruiting interviewees, I made it clear what my research was about (how lalas made sense of what "family" meant to them and how they had developed their own family life) in plain Mandarin Chinese, which was the native language of all the participants. In particular, the online advertisements endorsed by local gatekeepers and organizations played a key role in my recruitment process because they helped me to gain significant credibility as a researcher whom participants could trust. In addition, these gatekeepers could also reach potential participants who were not active members of the lala community offline, and yet chose to covertly follow lala-related information online, thereby diversifying my sample. [12] Several participants reported that they saw the advertisements for the study through the official Weibo[13] of Beijing LGBT Centre and Beijing Les Center, although they had never participated in any of these organizations'

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[12] Only two participants in my sample were actively involved in gender-related NGO work and an ART-related business respectively. The vast majority of participants said that they were not active members of the local lala community.

[13] Similar to the functions of Twitter, Weibo serves as the largest microblogging platform in China. Launched in 2009 by the Chinese Internet company Sina, Weibo enables its users to develop social networks by sharing and interacting with texts, photos, and videos (Liao, 2019).

activities. Taking advantage of increased public access to the Internet,[14] my study was able to recruit a variety of participants from all walks of life, rather than a sample that was confined to those who actively participated in community events or activism.

Furthermore, having got in touch with local businesses and communities that helped lalas to gain access to ART overseas exposed the limitations of my initial sample frame (designed before my fieldwork), which had overlooked lalas who had become or planned to become mothers. Similar to other participants, they were recruited from diverse channels, including participants' referral to their own networks, lala online platforms, and my personal networks.

It is noteworthy that I personally knew none of my participants before the study. Although five of the 35 participants were recruited through my personal networks, they were either friends or acquaintances of my heterosexual and non-heterosexual friends and only indirectly connected with me through my friends' social networks. I avoided recruiting anyone with whom I was familiar so as to minimize potential bias in my study. In short, my recruitment process was informed by my participation in numerous lala-related events during my fieldwork and facilitated by different recruitment channels with the aim of rendering the sample as diverse as possible.

Contacting interviewees

In advance of the interviews, I had a conversation with each of the potential participants about the interview procedures and major objectives of my study via Wechat, the most commonly used instant communication tool in China with similar functions to WhatsApp (Kharpal, 2019). These conversations were useful in enabling me to check

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[14] According to the latest official statistics, there has been a growing increase in the number of Internet users in China, accounting for over half (61.2%) of the entire population by June 2019 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2019). Nevertheless, advertising my study through online platforms had its limitations. It reduced the possibility of including lalas without Internet access in my sample.

whether the potential participants met my selection criteria and allowing them to ask any questions they had about my study and me as the researcher. I also ensured that all potential participants understood that they would have complete freedom to express their thoughts in ways with which they felt comfortable, to withdraw from the study at any time, and that all interviews would be treated with confidentiality.

Common questions that were raised by the potential participants included questions about who was going to interview them, whether and how the interviews would be recorded, why I was interested in carrying out the study, and what the intended outcomes of the study were. While it was common and encouraging to see participants express their interest in the topic of my study, a few indicated their concern that they might not be able to "contribute" much to the study, either because they felt that there was "nothing special" about their family life or because they were single. I then reassured them that I did not have any preset definitions of what "family" was and that the gist of the study was to give participants room to define the meanings of "family" in their own ways and to demonstrate their ways of perceiving and developing family life. This initial communication with potential participants served to help them make a more informed choice about whether or not to join the study.

During the initial communication via Wechat, one common suggestion raised by participants who were in a same-sex relationship was that they wanted to attend the interview together with their partners. Most of them explained that their partners had a similar interest in joining the study, while some believed that their partners would bring a different angle to the study due to their "more complex" or "different" family backgrounds or experiences. The former group tended to volunteer to have a joint interview together with their partners, whereas the latter group expressed no preference. Heaphy and Einarsdottir (2013) attribute the suggestion for joint interviews to the fact that opting for

separate interviews may be seen by one's partner as implying the existence of secrets within the couple. As I explained earlier, it is not the primary goal of my study to examine negotiations and power dynamics between partners, which can be best captured by joint interviews. Given my substantive focus on individual perspectives on and experiences of family life, the best-quality data was likely to be obtained from individual interviews. I therefore explained my motives for conducting individual interviews to my participants, who then agreed with my arrangements. There were ten couples in my final sample, in which both members of each couple were separately interviewed in succession by me.

Although it was possible that couples might have discussed issues related to the topic of family life before the interview, my data showed that participants made sense of and narrated their family lives in different ways given their different personal perspectives and backgrounds. In describing the essence of qualitative research, Eisikovits and Koren (2010) argue that "reality is a picture created by the perceptions of individuals experiencing a similar phenomenon or something they have in common" (p. 1652). Echoing this view, I included participants who were in a same-sex relationship in my study, but I interviewed partners separately in order to focus on the ways in which each individual perceived and talked about her "reality" of family life. In short, my recruitment approach was designed in line with my goal of conducting interviews that would serve to foreground the individual voices of lalas in their meaning-making and family-building experiences.

To facilitate the aim of gaining rich data from the interviews, I also invited interviewees to find one or two photos that best represented their ideas, imaginings, or experiences related to family life and to share the meanings behind these photos during the interviews. The instruction read as follows: "Please show me one or two photos that best reflect your imagination, opinion, or experience of you forming a family." This invitation was premised upon the belief that social science research is a collaborative process between

the researcher and participants (Ritchie et al., 2014), and that the latter should be involved in setting the research agenda and encouraged to express what most concerns them. The photos chosen by participants served as a stimulus for me to deeply explore the meanings and experiences of family formation through discussions about the images with participants. They also served as effective visual aids for participants to clearly express their visions of family life, which are very rarely articulated given the taboo nature of same-sex relationships in China. They also encouraged participants to embrace their agency to project their voices about their own families beyond the interview guide that had been preset by me.

Characteristics of participants

I conducted face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 Chinese women who identified themselves as lalas. The table in Appendix I shows the characteristics of my participants. Their ages ranged from 25 to 45, with the majority in their thirties. The median age was 33. At the time of the interview, all participants were living in Beijing and had been in the city for two years or more. In terms of local or non-local status, 16 participants were local Beijing residents (with Beijing urban hukou[15]) while 19 (with non-Beijing urban hukou) came from other provinces of China but lived in Beijing for work. The majority were white-collar employees with an average monthly salary of around 10,000 Chinese Yuan (approximately 1,125 British Pounds). Twenty-six were employed and working in a variety of sectors, including the media, non-governmental organizations, design, finance, logistics, and administration. Four worked freelance, four

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[15] Hukou refers to the household registration system in China. Under this system, each Chinese citizen is designated as having either an urban or rural hukou (registration status) based on his/her parent's (either father or mother) place of origin. The urban or rural hukou entitles a citizen to access different state-provided welfare, including education, housing, health care, and social services (Chan, 2009; Lui, 2017). For a more detailed discussion of the hukou system, please see Chapter 2 (Literature Review).

were self-employed (running their own businesses), and one was unemployed. Most participants had a bachelor's degree, nine had a master's and three had not received a university education (of these, one had completed high-school education and two had received vocational training). According to recent research (P. Li, 2019), because the post-80 cohort in China has generally benefited from government support for basic education and the expansion of university enrolment policies, this generation tends to enjoy greater access to university education than previous generations. As the vast majority of my participants were born in the 1980s, they had enjoyed better opportunities to enter university and were generally well-educated.

In terms of relationship/family status, 23 participants were in a same-sex relationship, while 12 did not have a same-sex partner at the time of the interview. The length of participants' relationships varied from about six months to over ten years. Among the 23 participants who were in a same-sex relationship, four of them were married (same-sex marriage overseas) and 20 were cohabiting with their same-sex partners. Among all the participants, eight were currently in a contract marriage with gay men and one had already divorced her gay husband. These nine participants were cohabiting with their same-sex partners. Fewer than one-third of participants owned their own flats in Beijing. Eight of those who did were local residents with financial support from their parents for the purchase of a flat in what was their hometown, whereas only three participants who owned their flats were non-local residents in Beijing, using their own incomes from their professional jobs to buy them. As mentioned earlier, research has shown that local residents in Beijing tend to enjoy a greater chance of receiving parental support for home ownership than non-local residents (Lian, 2019). It is also noteworthy that most of the local lalas who received parental help in their home purchases in my sample had not yet come out to their families of origin. On the other hand, most participants (20) were renting flats in Beijing and four

local participants were living in the parental home. As shown in the findings, participants' socio-economic status, coupled with their relationships with parents and perceived and actual support from their parents, came into play in their family-building processes.

None of my participants had siblings, except for one who was in her forties. This sample composition was largely born during the period of the one-child policy, which came into effect in 1979 and continued until October 2015. As suggested in previous research (Hildebrandt, 2019), lalas and gay men who are only children in their natal families are likely to shoulder primary responsibility for the care of their parents and to suffer from persistent pressure to marry the opposite sex and have children. My sample, largely composed of lalas born under the one-child policy, enabled me to examine this particular subset of lalas who tended to share the burden of parents' heteronormative expectations and, at the same time, to find ways to accommodate and/or resist these expectations and explore their desired ways of building their own families.

Eight of the participants were mothers and they had become mothers through different means. Two of them became biological mothers through the use of ART, two became non-biological mothers through their partners' use of ART, one had become a non-biological mother through her partner's use of ART and also planned to become a biological mother herself through the use of ART in the coming year, and one participant was the non-biological mother of her gay husband's child conceived through surrogacy. Two participants had become mothers through sexual intercourse with heterosexual men, with whom they had got married, but one woman had already got divorced and the other intended to do so. All of them were raising or planning to raise their children in China. Although some may argue that those who are able to seek ART overseas tend to be in a more privileged position in terms of economic and cultural resources, it is very important to include them because unusual or special cases can be potentially enlightening and

conducive to a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon that is being studied (Bryman, 2016; Patton, 2002). As shown in the findings (Chapter 5), participants had considered ART services in different countries with varying prices, ranging from less than or around 100,000 Chinese Yuan (approximately 11,350 British Pounds) in less developed countries such as Cambodia and Thailand to over 250,000 Chinese Yuan (approximately 28,140 British Pounds) in developed countries such as the USA. In addition, not all the lala mothers in my sample had conceived their children through the use of ART overseas. A more detailed discussion of participants' experiences in contemplating and/or striving for motherhood is provided in Chapter 5.

Several limitations in my sample are worth mentioning. It was confined to lala-identified women living in Beijing. Thus, it excluded those living in other urban or rural parts of China and women who did not choose to identify as lalas but (had) engaged in same-sex relationships. Also, the majority of my participants could be seen as members of the middle class with white-collar jobs, with just a few who were economically disadvantaged with unstable and low-paid jobs, and only one was unemployed. As discussed in Chapter 2, previous studies have called attention to the role of class differences, among other factors, in shaping lesbians' life choices, including those related to access to housing (Chao, 2002; Pai, 2017) and reproductive services (Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015; Taylor, 2009). Although my study mainly reflected the experiences of a subset of lalas, most of whom benefited from middle-class backgrounds, it is noteworthy that the amount of economic and cultural resources varied between participants and that they all still encountered different types of material and structural obstacles and used diverse strategies to build their families, with or without children. In particular, the experiences of some of the participants who had the resources or had taken out a loan to seek ART revealed the additional challenges and structural inequalities that confront lalas who want to become

mothers. Without including them in the sample, the layers of complexity in lalas' reproductive decision-making processes and their potential paths to motherhood would have been missed. In other words, while my sample had its limitations, it nevertheless opened up new possibilities for redefining Chinese family life beyond the traditional heterosexual family model.

In short, while it is impossible to include the whole range of lalas with diverse backgrounds in a single study, my current study made use of different recruitment channels to develop a sample that was as diverse as possible. It included lalas of different ages and with different relationship/family status, local/non-local resident status in Beijing, and various occupations. By doing so, my study revealed various family practices and imaginaries among a heterogenous group of lalas, whose experiences were enabled and constrained by their social locations and the wider socio-cultural, economic, and political context in different ways.

Interviewing

Interviews were mostly conducted during weekends, with some during weekday evenings to fit the work schedules of the participants. No more than two interviews were conducted on any given day so that I had enough mental energy to engage in conversations with each of the participants and to digest what they said. Given the semi-structured format of the interviews, their length varied, largely depending on the flow of the conversations and the extent to which the participants actively shared their experiences and ideas. The shortest interview lasted around one hour ten minutes while the longest one was nearly four hours. On average, each interview took about two hours.

The extent to which safe space and private conversations were allowed in an interview venue was of the utmost concern when I discussed with participants where they

preferred to be interviewed. While the interview venues were largely decided by my participants, I decided before my fieldwork that the interviews would not be held at participants' homes due to safety concerns for both myself and participants and the potential risk of intrusion into their privacy. Only one participant, who was pregnant at the time of the interview, suggested that it should be conducted at her home, in order to minimize physical movements during pregnancy, whereas all the other participants felt at ease with the interview taking place in public space. In the former case, I explained to her about the ethical concerns involved in visits to participants' homes and offered flexibility in rescheduling at a later stage when she felt more comfortable about going out to a place that was as close to her home as possible. Given her cooperation and others', all the interviews were conducted in public spaces (cafes and restaurants) which were chosen by participants as being uncrowded, and able to provide at least some distance between tables for private conversations. In addition, I always arrived at the venue at least one hour before each interview so as to find the best possible spot where we could keep our distance from other customers and have a free and comfortable conversation without worrying that we might be overheard.

I began each individual interview by providing participants with an information sheet with all the necessary information about the study written in Chinese. I then explained the format and goals of the interview to ensure that each participant was fully informed and able to give written consent to participate in the study. I clearly explained that there would be no right or wrong answers to any given topics and that the goal of the interview was to hear participants' ideas and experiences in their own words. Similar to the pre-interview conversations via Wechat, I encouraged participants to ask any further questions about my study or myself as the researcher in order to facilitate reciprocal interaction and a

relationship of trust. This serves to create an open environment for knowledge exchange between participant and researcher (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

With the assistance of an interview guide (Appendix II), I discussed a wide array of predetermined topics with participants but, at the same time, I responded flexibly to the flow of the conversations and allowed enough space for participants to share what they considered important. The interview guide was based on the focus of the present study, which is lalas' experiences of family formation. It was modified after four pilot interviews with lala-identified women and alongside the research process. In general, I guided each interview through four broad topics that were included in the interview guide:

a) Personal background and identity development as lalas (Section A in the interview guide)

A discussion on this topic aimed to collect data about participants' personal information, including their age, educational background, occupation, hometown, and their stories of identifying as lalas, such as how they came to terms with their identities and what previous relationship experiences they had had. I used open-ended questions such as "could you tell me a bit about yourself" and "could you talk me through when you first realized your lala identity?" and then asked follow-up questions to probe for more detail. These background questions paved the way for a contextualized understanding of their intimate and family relationships and their visions of family formation.

b) Everyday family life and interactions with same-sex partners and family members (Sections B and C in the interview guide)

A discussion on this topic formed a substantive part of all the interviews, through which I aimed for both breadth and depth of coverage of the family-related issues and experiences which concerned my participants. I collected data about participants' concrete

experiences of family life by asking questions such as "can you describe your relationships with your family members?" and "have you ever had any conflicts over any living or financial arrangements with your same-sex partner?" In addition, in the middle of the interviews, I invited participants to share the photos they had chosen as the visual representation of their family life. This approach acted as a stimulus for participants to give a vivid account of what they perceived as the ideal family life or the most important aspects of their family experiences. I also asked them to reflect on similarities and/or differences between their own and their partners' approaches to family life.

Overall, the interviews covered diverse dimensions of family life with varying degrees of detail, including the processes of coming out, the division of domestic labor, financial arrangements, conflicts and challenges, and ideas or actual practices of (contract) marriage and childbearing. In order to encourage participants to elaborate on the key dimensions of family life that most concerned them, I probed further to explore their thoughts, feelings, and the meanings they attached to family life by asking questions such as "what does this particular experience mean to you?" or "could you explain what you mean by…" The following conversation serves as an example of how I achieved depth of exploration and explanation from the interviews.

Me: You said that your family includes your lover and also your parents and children. Can you tell me a bit more about the roles of your parents in your family?

Ying: If my family of origin could understand our relationship, of course I hope they could see the happiness of my life, then they would feel happy and relieved. But so far there's no way to talk about it. I have to just hide it. They can be the parents of my side only.

Me: What do you mean by "the parents of [your] side only"?

Ying: That is, they're only my father and my mother, but there's no way to introduce my girlfriend to them…She's my lover. She's my family, but I can't let my parents know about all this.

This interaction between Ying and me illustrates a number of important aspects of her experiences of family formation, including her way of seeing what family meant to her and her relationship with her parents and her partner. It also led to a discussion about other highly relevant issues, such as her way of handling contract marriage with a gay man and later divorce, which I explored in more detail during the rest of the interview. In short, in order to capture the diverse meanings and experiences of lalas' family lives, I used open-ended and probing questions to get beneath the surface and examine the values, feelings, and past experiences that underpinned their responses.

c) The use of lala-oriented cyberspace (Section D in the interview guide)

A discussion on this topic aimed to collect data about participants' concrete experiences of using lala-oriented cyberspace, including whether and why they used lala-oriented online platforms and their experiences of joining activities initiated by these platforms. While I had prepared a number of questions about this topic, it was common for participants to touch upon some aspects of cyberspace when narrating their past experiences of realizing their lala identities and finding same-sex partners. Below is an example of a participant narrating her process of self-recognition as a lala while spontaneously raising the subject of cyberspace.

Yao: In this process of searching [for a partner], I started to really recognize my own identity…I've surfed forums trying to find a partner. Of course, she [current partner]

is my colleague. I didn't end up finding anyone reliable through the forums. Because I searched for a short period of time, a very short period of time. I've tried to use these platforms to search for opportunities.

Me: Just to make sure I've understood. So why do you think you didn't find anyone reliable online?

Yao: I wish people were reliable, but at that time the ones I got in touch with were all pretty unreliable. This is because, when you search online, most people actually haven't yet come out…she may have only come out to people close to her, such as friends. Most people come out to friends but not to colleagues and parents. These people are unwilling to be open online. So, when you search online, you can never find out about all sides of the person. There's always a barrier between you.

In this case, by further probing and inviting the participant to go deeper into her experiences of cyberspace, I elicited important information about socio-cultural factors that might come into play to cause difficulties in searching for same-sex partners online, moving beyond the factor of "time" mentioned by Yao in her initial account. In short, by probing into the ways in which cyberspace related to participants' lived experiences, the interviews provided great insights into both the opportunities and constraints that shaped participants' ways of making sense of their identities and intimate and family relationships.

d) Social life and experiences and perceptions of the wider social environment (Sections E, F, and G in the interview guide)

A discussion on this topic aimed to contextualize lalas' experiences of family formation within their daily lives. Questions included: "what do you think of gender expectations towards women in China?" "what do you think of the Chinese government's

attitudes towards same-sex relationships in general and lalas in particular?" and "what does the lala community mean to you?" While these questions did not seem to relate directly to family formation, they did help to illuminate the wider socio-cultural, economic, and political environment in which my participants' values and experiences were embedded. By asking these questions, I was able to understand how participants related to social norms, traditional family values, the government, and lala communities, and why they used certain strategies to build their same-sex families. This discussion added depth and richness to participants' accounts of their family-building experiences and revealed how these experiences occurred within the family sphere and were shaped by the wider context.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford before the fieldwork commenced. During my fieldwork in Beijing, all lalas with whom I communicated were informed about my identity as a researcher and my purpose for being in the field. Also, before the start of the semi-structured interviews, I assured all participants that whatever they shared in the interviews would be kept strictly confidential. In particular, for participants who brought their partners to join the interviews, I clearly explained that the separate interviews were not intended to catch them out with difficult questions that would expose inconsistencies in the two accounts of the couple. Rather, individual voices and stories captured by the separate interviews were what I was focusing on and were highly valued in my study. Before they gave written consent and permission to be recorded, all participants were fully informed about the purposes and processes of the study and that they had the right to withdraw at any point during the study. Pseudonyms were used during the analytical process and in all forms of publication. Also, any identifiable personal information, such as company names

and names of friends mentioned during the interviews, were modified or removed in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

Data analysis

I adopted an inductive approach to data analysis. That is, my analysis was primarily a bottom-up process (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2014), through which my findings were mainly derived from participants' responses during the interviews. As noted by Blaikie (2007), it is impossible for a researcher to adopt a purely inductive approach because the ways in which the researcher asks questions and interprets the data will have been influenced by previous theories and studies in the field. Being aware of the potential influence of assumptions, I carefully read and re-read the interview transcripts and fieldnotes from time to time in order to develop the most relevant empirical results based on the data. As discussed in the previous section, I also gave a lot of space for participants to express their own opinions through our conversations and their photos so that the interviews and subsequent analysis were not dominated by my preset interview guide.

All the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim for data analysis. I coded the interview transcripts with the assistance of NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package. It is noteworthy that I did not translate the data set from Chinese to English during my analytical process because it was important to read and reread participants' accounts in their own words (in Chinese) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Quotes were translated into English only if they were selected for inclusion in conference presentations, the dissertation, or other publications. For some specific Chinese terms which have no straightforward equivalence in English, I used rich descriptions and the romanization system for Mandarin Chinese (*hanyu pinyin*) to minimize any potential misunderstanding of the terms.

I conducted thematic analysis in six phases, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines to ensure that the analysis was conducted in a rigorous manner. Thematic analysis is a widely used method of qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Its aim is to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns of meaning (themes) in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). One of the advantages of thematic analysis is that its goal of searching for themes in the data can be applied to different theoretical perspectives, including the social constructionist theoretical perspective that I adopted. Also, I chose this method because it enabled me to focus on and identify shared meanings and experiences that were meaningful to participants.

During the first phase of thematic analysis, the major task was to become familiar with the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As I listened to the recordings and read and reread the full transcripts, I made notes on individual transcripts and fieldnotes to highlight interesting aspects of the data and to help me digest the surface and latent meanings of what my participants had said. I constantly asked myself questions to actively think about what the data meant, such as: "Why did the participant make sense of her experiences in certain ways?" "How is her account similar to or different from others?" "Which social identity category/categories is/are meaningful to the participant?" "What role(s) does a certain institution play in a certain context?" By asking these questions, I tried to make some initial links between the individual interviews and compared and contrasted participants' approaches to making sense of and developing family life. While I was focusing on individuals as the units of analysis for reasons I have explained in previous sections, I took into account the context of their larger webs of relationships, including relationships with previous and/or current partners, families of origin, and friends, in order to grasp the essence of their experiences. Through a close reading of the data during this phase, I

familiarized myself with the depth and breadth of my data set to thoroughly prepare for subsequent stages of coding.

The second phase marked the beginning of the systematic coding process. Its aim was to generate initial codes, which served to identify parts of the data that were potentially relevant to my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes can be understood as "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). During this phase, by reading the transcripts line-by-line, I generated 360 initial codes. These included descriptive codes, such as "attending matchmaking dates (arranged by parents)," "feeling lonely," and "making friends online," which directly reflected participants' experiences and feelings. As the analysis progressed, I also created interpretive codes to identify the latent meanings of the data. Examples included "responsibility for caring for parents," "self-recognition (as lalas)," and "financial independence." These codes remained as close as possible to the language used by my participants while, at the same time, capturing their experiences and perceptions at a more conceptual level. The coding process was time-consuming and yet rewarding because I coded every piece of the data that was potentially relevant to my research questions. My goal was to capture the diversity, patterns, and inconsistencies within the data set without missing out any important materials (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). By immersing myself in the data, I also started to identify some interesting and repeated patterns of meaning in my data set that could form the basis for the next phase of analysis.

The third phase involved transforming the initial codes into potential themes. A theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In my search for potential themes, I carefully reviewed, compared,

and contrasted the long list of initial codes in order to identify common patterns of meaning around certain clusters of codes. This process of categorization provided the initial mapping of my data in relation to my research questions concerning family formation. For instance, I noticed that a large number of codes clustered around the issue of "family values," which involved perceived expectations from families of origin, ways of managing these expectations, and the difficulties involved. I then categorized these codes, such as "attending matchmaking dates (arranged by parents)," "responsibility for caring for parents," "face (prestige)," and "raising children for the purpose of being taken care of in old age (*yang er fang lao* as a Chinese idiom)," into one theme, named "family values." Similarly, a lot of codes clustered around the theme of "independence," including "financial independence," "independence from parental interventions," and "avoid being influenced by others." I also identified codes that cut across different themes and codes that did not seem to fit into any potential themes. I thus drew and redrew mind-maps to visually organize potential themes and subthemes and clarify the connections between them. During this phase, I identified 12 potential themes that reflected meaningful patterns in the data and were each derived from a large number of codes and relevant coded data extracts. These potential themes were: "family values," "recognition," "independence," "coming out," "difficulty in having a child," "conception of family ties," "conflicts (with the self and others)," "intimate expressions and behaviors," "issues surrounding two families (family of origin and newly formed family)," "outside heterosexual marriage," "seeking resources/networks online," and "(not) connecting with the lala circle." As in the previous phase, I kept these potential themes close to the content of participants' accounts. Although they were subject to further refinement during the subsequent phases, they moved the analysis a step forward by generating a much clearer picture of the significant patterns of meaning within the data set.

The fourth phase was concerned with "quality checking" through a careful review and refinement of the potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 65). I checked each of the potential themes against the coded data extracts and the entire data set to ensure that they coherently and meaningfully captured the relevant data. As suggested by Elliott (2018, p. 2850), coding is a "decision-making process" in which qualitative researchers have to constantly make their own decisions concerning every step of coding in line with the peculiarities of the research project, including the epistemology, research design, and research questions. It was during this phase that I modified and discarded some of the less clearly defined and less relevant themes. I also decided to focus on themes that were both highly relevant to my research questions concerning family formation and supported by data in sufficient depth and detail. For instance, in order to sharpen the focus of my analysis and highlight an important pattern found across my data, I reorganized the two themes "conception of family ties" and "issues surrounding two families (family of origin and newly formed family)" and merged the relevant codes into a new theme named "navigating a dual sense of belonging to the family of origin and same-sex family." As I illustrate with more detail in Chapter 4, this theme, coupled with the other two themes concerning conflicts with family members and independence, captured the complex dynamics between lalas and their families of origin in their family-building processes.

During the fourth phase, as I refined the potential themes and re-read the entire data set, it also became evident that the central themes broadly emerged from three key aspects of lalas' lived experiences related to family formation; namely, their relationships with families of origin (Chapter 4), their reproductive decision-making (Chapter 5), and their experiences of cyberspace (Chapter 6). For the reproductive aspect of participants' accounts, I redrew the boundaries of several relatively broader themes, namely: "family values," "coming out," "difficulty in having a child," "conception of family ties," "intimate

expressions and behaviors," and "outside heterosexual marriage," and transformed them into a number of more specific themes. These modified themes were "managing parental expectations," "cementing couple relationships," "pursing a 'complete' life by having a child," and "seeking emotional support," which were subsequently renamed (a process taking place during the fifth phase) and presented in Chapter 5. Similarly, in order to produce a more focused analysis of participants' experiences of cyberspace, I carried out further refinement of some of the potential themes, including "family values," "recognition," "coming out," "conception of family ties," "conflicts (with self and others)," "outside heterosexual marriage," "seeking resources/networks online," and "(not) connecting with the lala circle." By merging, splitting, and reorganizing these themes, I came up with a more coherent set of themes: "seeking new versions of family life online," "seeking recognition for lala families online," and "managing tensions between online and offline life," which captured the most significant elements of the data pertaining to my research question about the roles of cyberspace in lalas' family-building experiences.

Building on my previous efforts to refine the potential themes, the fifth phase involved important analytical work on the interpretation and presentation of the themes, followed by the final phase, which was the writing-up of publishable work in the form of a dissertation, book, and/or journal article (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). During these final phases, I selected data extracts to be quoted in my chapters and wrote detailed analyses of these quotes and their meanings in relation to my research questions and the relevant existing literature. As shown in the empirical chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), I selected the most compelling quotes to illustrate each of the themes. I drew on the accounts of different participants to show the coverage and range of aspects of the themes. Sub-themes were added to describe different patterns under the same theme where necessary. In addition, without changing the essence of the themes chosen in the fourth phase, I renamed them to

render them more informative and concise and to develop a more coherent analytical narrative through which different themes were linked together (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). For some of the themes, I used direct quotes from the data to mirror participants' language and concepts. For instance, in Chapter 4, one of the themes, which was developed from the potential theme "independence," was renamed as "'My ability is my sense of security': Excelling oneself as a self-sufficient and independent lala." This used a direct quote from a participant and highlighted participants' emphasis on being financially independent and independent-minded as a common pattern identified across the data.

In short, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines on how to conduct thematic analysis in a rigorous manner in order to identify key patterns of meaning in my data set. The following three methods were used to ensure the quality of this qualitative study. Firstly, as demonstrated in this section, each phase of the analytical process was documented to allow scrutiny. I enhanced the rigor of my analysis by constantly checking the codes and themes back against the data, alerting myself to any data that might run counter to the themes, and providing rich and thick descriptions of the data. I also constantly revisited my fieldnotes, which remined me of the importance of contextualizing participants' experiences within their webs of relationships and the wider socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions in Beijing with the aim of producing a context-sensitive analysis.

Secondly, in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretations drawn from the data, I used multiple channels to share my research findings with a range of people, including regular meetings with my supervisor, presentations at Chinese and international conferences and seminars, submitting my work to academic journals for peer review, and informal chats with participants and other lala-identified friends and scholars. As these discussions involved multiple perspectives and often challenges and questions, they

encouraged me to constantly go back to the data set, reread it, and improve my understanding and conceptualization of the data.

Thirdly, I used a reflective journal throughout my study to record my decisions on sampling, recruitment, coding, and the use of concepts and theories. By documenting every step of my study, the journal helped me to assess my interpretations and assumptions. I am fully aware of the central role of reflexivity in qualitative studies. Reflexivity emphasizes self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-critique of a researcher's roles, beliefs, and behaviors (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2014). As I explain further in the next section, being alert to my insider and outsider positions, I gathered and analyzed the data with a critical and open mind and ensured transparency throughout the whole research process.

Reflections on the research process

One important element of qualitative research is reflexivity, which requires researchers to reflect upon their position in relation to research participants and be explicit about their own insider/outsider perspectives, values, and beliefs, which inevitably shape the research process (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2014). Reflexivity is indispensable in qualitative research because it enables researchers to explicitly discuss any potential assumptions and biases they may have brought to the study, thereby rendering the research process, particularly the impact of the researcher's position on analysis and knowledge production, transparent (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015).

Scholars conducting qualitative studies argue that there are blurred boundaries between the insider and outsider researcher positions and that it is important to reflect upon the multiple identities we hold as researchers along with their positive and negative impact

on the research process (Fish, 2008; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Echoing this view, I consider myself to be both an insider and an outsider in my current study and I have constantly reflected upon how my identities have shaped the research process. As part of the LGBT community, I have benefited from an insider position to gain better access to the lala community and to build a rapport with participants. The existing literature has shown that an insider/outsider researcher position plays a particularly key role in sexuality research because an insider who shares a marginalized sexual identity tends to have an advantage in gaining trust from participants, who generally assume that a researcher studying LGBT issues will be a member of the LGBT community (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). The commonality between the researcher and participants is also likely to encourage participants to fully engage with the study and share rich, in-depth accounts due to the implied credibility of the insider researcher (LaSala, 2003; Perry et al., 2004; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). During my fieldwork, I was open about my sexual identity and I honestly responded to any questions about my sexual identity and relationships raised by participants before or after the interviews. A few participants explicitly stated that they would not have participated in my study if I had been a heterosexual researcher doing the study "out of curiosity." Some participants also reported that they were willing to join the study because it was recommended by their networks of lala friends and/or local lala organizations, which assuaged their suspicions about the study. Similarly to suggestions in previous studies about lesbians and gay men (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; LaSala, 2003), my insider position has given me a distinct advantage in terms of accessing the hard-to-reach group of lalas and building rapport with this group, who are stigmatized in Chinese society and inclined to be alert to any potential intrusion into their private lives.

On the other hand, I am sensitive to the potential impact of my identities on my ways of interacting with my participants and interpreting the data. Research has suggested

that a researcher in an insider position may risk missing important follow-up questions during the interview due to an assumed shared understanding between the researcher and participants, or may overlook certain parts of the data due to taken-for-granted knowledge of the topic (LaSala, 2003; Tang, 2007). Aware of this potential bias, I allowed a lot of space for participants to express their opinions and experiences and, at the same time, constantly sought clarification of participants' narratives whenever there was confusion during the interviews. Also, during the process of data analysis, I constantly revisited the data set and fieldnotes and presented rich and thick descriptions of participants' characteristics and experiences as part of the findings in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 to ensure that my interpretations were evidence-based.

Furthermore, given that I grew up in Hong Kong, which has a different culture from that in Beijing, I see myself as an outsider to the lala community and subculture in Beijing, which has allowed me to be open and critical while conducting the study. I am also different from my participants along other axes of identity, including age and socio-economic status. As the majority of my participants were in their 30s (older than me) and had been established in their careers for more years than I had, many aspects of their lived experiences, such as their long-term relationships and experiences in planning for motherhood and/or raising children, significantly differed from mine and thus fell outside of my personal perspective and life experience. Therefore, throughout the research process, I bore in mind the potential pitfalls of both my insider and outsider positions and allowed participants to take the lead in voicing what they considered to be most important to them.

In this regard, my outsider position as a Hong Kong Chinese doctoral student studying at a university outside China has facilitated the analytical distance that is needed to ensure an in-depth exploration of the complexity of family formation among lalas. There were times when participants asked where I came from right at the beginning of the

interview after they heard my Mandarin Chinese, which is fluent but with an accent. Some of them also expressed interest in my motivations for doing the study in Beijing as a person born and raised in Hong Kong. The process of clarifying my differences from my participants, and discussing the motivations behind my study with them, was actually a reassuring one as almost all participants acknowledged the importance of the topic about lalas' family lives. Many of them also pointed out that it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get this project started if I were studying at a local university in Mainland China. Through this type of interaction, participants might, on the one hand, have positioned me as an outsider who was different from them; but, on the other hand, they discussed their experiences in more depth and were willing to explain local terms and slang expressions in detail because they did not assume that I had a shared understanding of local culture. As a result, I was able to gain rich and in-depth data from the interviews and minimize the potential risks of misunderstanding participants' views and experiences.

To summarize, being sensitive to the impact of my position as researcher on the research process, I have kept an open mind throughout my research in order to pay full attention to the personal perspectives and locally grounded experiences of my participants. On the one hand, it is noteworthy that my sample only represents a small subset of the lala population, being individuals who were willing to participate in the study and interested in discussing family-related issues with me in ways with which they felt comfortable. In other words, although this study offers an in-depth understanding of the range and diversity of lalas' experiences in terms of family formation, it still precludes us from drawing inferences about the needs, concerns, and challenges faced by the wider lala population with diverse backgrounds in China. On the other hand, the ideas and experiences shared by my participants are invaluable because they serve as concrete examples of the different meanings attached to the notion of "family" and of strategies for accommodating and/or

resisting heterosexual family norms and developing alternative family forms and practices. Attending to and analyzing lalas' accounts of their family-building experiences enables us to explore the understudied territory of same-sex family formation in the Chinese context as well as to expand the discussion on the plurality and complexity of family life both within and beyond China.

Chapter 4 Families in Negotiation: Lalas' Strategies for Forming Families and Navigating Relationships with Families of Origin in Urban China

Introduction

This chapter examines the ways in which non-heterosexual Chinese women, who identify themselves as lalas in China, negotiate their relationships with their families of origin during the processes of forming their own families in the Chinese context, where same-sex relationships remain stigmatized (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho et al., 2018; Kong, 2016). By focusing on the various strategies adopted by lalas to form their own families, this chapter reveals that lalas' family formation is shaped by, but at the same time reshapes, the institution of the family in different ways. I argue that lalas have the potential to reshape the institution of the family from within the family sphere as both lalas and their families of origin negotiate to create new family practices and redefine the acceptable boundaries of the family.

While there is a growing body of literature on same-sex family formation in North America and Europe (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Farr, 2019; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013), overlooking same-sex families in other contexts prevents a complete understanding of all possible forms and dynamics of families. More importantly, grand claims made from within the individualization thesis and the focus on "families of choice" have largely neglected the relationship between same-sex families and their families of origin, which, as I argue using the case of China, has significant implications for same-sex family formation.

The objectives of the chapter are twofold. Firstly, this chapter marks the first attempt to provide empirical evidence for lalas' use of different strategies when forming their same-sex families, which enables a thorough examination of both change and

continuity of heterosexual norms in the family sphere. Secondly, building on the discussion of relational selfhood, it generates a new understanding of bilateral negotiations between lalas and their families of origin during the process of family formation, and thus adds contextual nuances to theorizing about family change.

In this chapter, I begin by highlighting the notion of relational selfhood as a starting point for analyzing lalas' family formation. I also discuss the extent to which individuals can exercise their choices to create their desired forms of intimate and family life. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 35 lalas in Beijing, I then explore their strategies for forming their own families and resisting and/or accommodating heterosexual norms, which are often reinforced by their families of origin. I conclude with a discussion on the implications of bilateral negotiations between lalas and their families of origin for sociological theorizing on the changing nature of families.

Exploring the relational lives of lalas in their processes of family formation

This chapter is set within the context of ongoing discussions about the degree and form of transformation in Chinese family life. There is growing consensus in the literature that, rather than total submission of adult children to their elderly parents, reciprocity in terms of two-way exchanges of support, mainly in financial and material terms, has become common in the practices of filial obligation, which remain a crucial aspect of Chinese family life (F. Liu, 2018). According to Qi (2016, p. 40), the individualization thesis actually "fails to appreciate a third possibility, namely the Chinese relational self," who embraces more choices to pursue self-interest nowadays, but at the same time continues to be responsible for working together with his/her family members to maximize the interests of the family as a whole. This notion of relational selfhood serves as a key starting point for our understanding of lalas' family-building experiences. Drawing on the notion of the

"relational self" and interrogating it within the context of lala family building, which challenges heteronormativity in the institution of the family, I argue that lalas' strategies for forming their families are shaped by, but at the same time have the potential for reshaping, their parents' beliefs and practices around heteronormativity in different ways.

Some western scholars have suggested that processes of individualization have rendered intimate relationships increasingly fluid and contingent (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). For instance, there is a belief in late modernity that intimate relationships are based on "elective affinities" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 85). Giddens (1992) argues that the "pure relationship" is based on a democratic form of mutual self-interest and that it lasts "only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (p. 58). These claims have met with criticism for their ethnocentric and Eurocentric account of social change and their failure to acknowledge the continued significance of close personal relationships even in Western societies (Gabb, 2008; Jackson, 2011, 2015; Jamieson, 1998, 1999; Smart, 2007). Similarly, the belief that "choice" has become one of the defining features of lesbian and gay notions of family is open to doubt (Dempsey, 2010; Gabrielson, 2011; Weeks et al., 2001). A limited amount of sociological research has looked into everyday intergenerational relations in order to better understand lesbian and gay relationships and question the rigid divide between "families of choice" and families of origin (Almack, 2008). There is evidence that sexual minority individuals in different Western countries are also subjected to the obligation to be a good child and suffer a lack of recognition from families of origin to varying extents. This has an adverse impact on their intimate and family lives, including their access to sexual citizenship rights and their same-sex marriage (Bertone, 2013; Shipman & Smart, 2007). Challenging the individualization thesis, Le Feuvre and Roseneil (2014) also show that it is difficult for people who live outside the traditional heterosexual couple form or

family in Europe to flourish as intimate citizens, who are able to "experience a sense of agency and choice, to be able to exercise relational autonomy and self-determination in intimate life" (p. 550). In short, the extent to which individuals can exercise choice to create their desired forms of intimate and family life remains an open question. As shown in my findings, in order to unpack the complexities of family formation among sexual minority women in different contexts, we should neither overestimate the power of individualized choices nor downplay the influence of socio-cultural, economic, and political constraints on individuals.

As suggested by Yan (2013), people's ways of dealing with individualization are largely shaped by the wider social context. It is important to flag up the difference between individualization and individualism. Beck (2007) argues that "[w]hereas individualism is commonly understood as a personal attitude or preference, individualization refers to a macro-sociological phenomenon, which possibly – but then again perhaps not – results in changes in attitude in individuals" (p. 681). For example, in Chinese society, it is generally believed that family relations continue to play a central role in people's selfhood (Jackson, 2019). It remains debatable whether Chinese people embrace the ideas of individualized selfhood (Jackson, 2019), even though there are signs of individualization in Chinese society, as evidenced by weakening family bonds and a declining sense of filial obligation to take care of older parents (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Yan, 2009, 2010, 2013).

In China, lalas' formation of their own families can be seen as the very antithesis of the conventional idea of the family, particularly that endorsed by older generations. Focusing on this group of sexual minority women provides a particularly useful perspective from which to understand whether and how individuals are able to exercise their agency and negotiate with the institution of the family to develop their desired forms of family life. What strategies do lalas use to form their own families in China? To what extent and how

have lalas' ways of forming their families been shaped by and/or shaped their relationships with their families of origin? These are the key research questions that I seek to answer in this chapter.

Based on my analysis of the interview data, I identified three themes to illustrate my participants' experiences of negotiating their relationships with their families of origin during the process of family formation. These themes are: (1) The strategy of short-term contract marriage with a gay man: Navigating a dual sense of belonging to the family of origin and same-sex family; (2) The necessary "detour": Avoiding confrontations and (re-)framing intimacy; and (3) "My ability is my sense of security": Excelling oneself as a self-sufficient and independent lala.

These themes represent the key strategies used by participants during their processes of family formation and, equally importantly, they capture the bilateral negotiations between lalas and their families of origin. In total, quotes from 18 (out of 35) participants are presented in this chapter because they best illustrate key aspects of the themes. They serve as examples of the generalized patterns of meaning associated with the themes and represent the range and diversity of the data.

The strategy of short-term contract marriage with a gay man: Navigating a dual sense of belonging to the family of origin and same-sex family

Nine out of 35 participants had decided to engage in a contract marriage with a gay man, sharing the same belief that the major reason behind the use of this strategy was their concern for the well-being of their parents, especially their psychological well-being. At the time of the interview, these nine participants were all in their own same-sex relationships. None of them were living with their gay husband and one had already divorced him. They highlighted the "short-term" nature of the marriage as they shared a

common plan to get divorced (at a later stage), stalling for time until a moment of "good timing" arrived or their parents died. The strategy of short-term contract marriage foregrounds the ways in which lalas navigate their dual sense of belonging to varying extents to their families of origin and their families with their same-sex partners.

a. Impact of contract marriage on lalas' family lives

Consistent with the small body of literature on contract marriage in China (Choi & Luo, 2016; S. Wang, 2019), my participants who engaged in contract marriage saw this strategy as a way to maintain harmonious relationships with their parents and yet create space for themselves to develop their same-sex relationships. By probing into participants' family-building experiences, my study further shows that this strategy to avoid conflicts with parents through conformity to their expectations impacted upon the relationships of lala couples to varying extents.

Yang (aged 30) was a social worker and had disclosed her sexual identity and relationship to colleagues and friends. She had not come out to her parents, who were in their 50s with a working-class background, because she strongly believed that they would not understand her sexuality. She explained her reason for engaging in a contract marriage with a gay man:

> In China, in such an environment, my parents are very stressed in their neighborhood…That's why I've done it. Now I find it very troublesome, exhausting. In fact, it's really annoying, but this is the choice...Given that they can't accept it in their environment, I shouldn't make them suffer…Just let them live happily in their own world, but I won't change my life trajectory because of anyone, including my parents. I also have to choose my own way of life to live happily.

Yang's view about the intense pressure faced by her parents in their neighborhood was echoed by many participants, regardless of their relationship or family status. Lalas were worried that coming out would threaten their parents' "face" (prestige). What

concerned them most was that coming out would "push parents into another closet," forcing them to bear the burden of keeping their child's non-conventional identity and family life secret from relatives and neighbors.

Also, in Yang's opinion, the earlier she made the decision to marry a man, the sooner she could be free of parental control. As a local resident in Beijing, Yang believed that the strategy of contract marriage with a gay man was her only possible way of justifying the move away from her natal home and cohabiting with her current same-sex partner in secret. This need to escape from parental control was widespread among participants. It is common for Chinese parents to expect their single daughters to live with them before marrying the opposite sex (S. Wang, 2019). This traditional gendered expectation can also largely explain why all of my non-local participants reported moving to Beijing to distance themselves from their families of origin and enjoy greater freedom.

On the other hand, Yang reported that her same-sex partner was very sad to "see her get married," despite the fact that she supported the strategy. That was why Yang had decided to launch a wedding with her same-sex partner before the wedding with her gay husband. The wedding with her same-sex partner was held in Beijing and attended by more than 100 people, including their friends, teachers, and colleagues but not their families of origin. Yang considered the wedding to be an important ceremony because it enabled her partner and herself to officially announce their relationship to friends and gain recognition as a couple. She saw her family of origin and her family with her same-sex partner as "two separate parts" of her family, both of which she considered very important, but mutually exclusive in her everyday life.

Building on the notion of relational selfhood, these findings show that lalas' choices and decisions regarding family formation are laden with emotions and shaped by the relational ties that are embedded in Chinese family-oriented culture. Previous research has

suggested that the Chinese relational self urges Chinese gay men and lalas to "create multiple self-formations" (Kong, 2016, p. 506). Such "multiple self-formations" were evident in Yang's account of her experience of contract marriage. As she explained why she found contract marriage "very troublesome, exhausting," she highlighted the trouble of performing the socially expected familial roles as a wife and future mother. Not only did she need to conceal her sexual identity and pretend to be a heterosexual married woman in front of her family of origin, but she also had to handle parental pressure to have children and find excuses to justify her current childless status. In conformity with traditional family and gendered expectations, she also visited her parents-in-law, who were living in another city, and performed domestic labor as a good daughter-in-law at their home once a year during the Chinese New Year. The imperative of marriage in wider society (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013), coupled with her dual sense of belonging to her natal family and to the family she had formed with her same-sex partner, might explain why Yang was willing to go to such extraordinary lengths to manage her different selves and navigate her complex family life with her natal family, her gay husband's natal family, and her own family with her partner.

It is noteworthy that all the trouble experienced by Yang in her contract marriage could be understood as part of the traditional "marriage package" of East Asian societies, in which women are typically expected to give birth to children and serve as caregivers for their children, husbands, and parents-in-law after marriage (Bumpass et al., 2009; Ji, 2015a). Although research has shown that such a "marriage package" has become increasingly unattractive to educated women who are economically independent (Raymo et al., 2015), the pressure to marry remains exceptionally high in China (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). On the one hand, it is found that in some Asian regions, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, a growing number of women are now marrying later or

remaining unmarried as their educational and economic resources improve and the range of life opportunities available to them broadens (Chang & Song, 2010; Jackson, 2019). On the other hand, Mainland China stands out against this social change observed in East Asia. Most Chinese men and women are married before the age of 30 and the overwhelming majority are married by their mid-30s in Mainland China (Jackson, 2019; Nakano, 2015). This phenomenon is attributable to the huge societal pressure to get married and the state-endorsed stigmatization of women who remain single in their late 20s as "leftover women" (To, 2015). It was against this backdrop that some of my participants, including Yang, who had a master's degree and a stable job, succumbed to the imperative of marriage through an alternative way of collaborating with gay men. Instead of embracing the ideas of individualized selfhood and directly coming out to her parents, Yang's strategy of contract marriage highlights the significance of relational selfhood in her family life. Contract marriage was regarded as a means to an end, which, to use Yang's words, was to "choose [her] own way of life to live happily," taking both her personal interests and her emotional ties with her natal family into account.

Understanding lalas' family-building experiences within a larger web of family relations and the wider socio-economic milieu allows us to see the more complicated dynamics that are at play, involving both intimacy and distance, both material and emotional concerns. The experience of Hong (aged 31) helps to illustrate this point and shows how her engagement in contract marriage complicated her family life with her same-sex partner. After growing up in a small city, she moved to Beijing for the purposes of not only distancing herself from her parents but also pursuing her dream of becoming a scriptwriter in the vibrant cultural hub of China. She reported that her parents were civil servants who worked in a very "traditional" and "conservative" environment. They held traditional family beliefs and firmly expected her to marry the opposite sex. Therefore,

Hong engaged in contract marriage to avoid her parents "suffering the pain of accepting [her] sexual orientation." On the positive side, Hong reported that she was able to own an apartment and a car, which were financially supported by her parents, and to live at the apartment with her same-sex partner in secret.

Without a contract marriage, such financial support from parents was not a feasible option among other participants who had come out to their parents and thus suffered from the withdrawal of parental financial support. This finding is consistent with previous research on contract marriage, which indicates that the increasingly competitive market economy has intensified younger adults' dependence on emotional and material support from older parents and therefore encouraged some gay men and lesbians to resort to contract marriage in order to strike a balance between their desire for autonomy within their intimate lives and their need for parental support (Choi & Luo, 2016).

In addition to material considerations, one of the interesting findings of my research concerns the ways in which lalas manage their relational selves in different ways, which, in turn, impact upon their newly formed families with their partners. Similar to Yang, Hong expressed mixed feelings of intimacy with and distance from her parents:

> Our relationship [with her same-sex partner] is a much more important family relation to me than that with my parents. I know that my parents treat me very well and have done a lot for me. But I rely much more heavily on the intimacy with her… Because my parents can't understand me, and I can't reveal my true thoughts to them. This has fundamentally created a huge distance between us.

Hong's experience was typical of the complicated dynamics that came into play in participants' family-building processes as they needed to manage their dual sense of belonging to their family of origin and their same-sex family and navigate intimacy with and distance from their parents to varying degrees. Hong recalled several conflicts with her same-sex partner, who was engaging in contract marriage due to the conservative family beliefs in her hometown. She was particularly disappointed by the fact that her partner, who

had a low-paid job just as Hong did, still gave money to her natal family and treated them "more as her family." By contrast, as shown in her remark above, Hong had clearly distanced herself from her parents, who failed to understand her "true" sense of self. She positioned herself as a "good" daughter who had already fulfilled parental expectations by getting married. By doing so, she could shift her energy to contribute to her same-sex family by capitalizing on her contract marriage and seeking her parents' financial support.

When narrating her conflicts with her partner, Hong added that the closet nature of her same-sex family put her in a difficult position when dealing with her relationship with her parents. Such difficulty was seen by Hong and many other participants as one of the greatest challenges confronting lala families. It could explain her mixed feelings towards her parents and her disappointment with her partner, who was reluctant to distance herself from her natal family in the way that Hong did. While heterosexual couples may also experience disagreements in relation to filial obligations towards their natal and marital families (Choi & Peng, 2016), Hong's experience highlights lalas' additional difficulties in handling such disagreements. It is difficult for lalas to negotiate with their natal families due to their closet identities and family status, and at the same time manage different degrees of mixed feelings towards parents within the couple.

Among all the participants, the only one who had divorced her gay husband was Ying (aged 35). At the time of the interview, Ying had quit her previous white-collar job and started a small-scale business with her partner. Without informing her family of origin, she had filed for divorce after being married to her gay husband for two years. She had done so for two major reasons. Firstly, Ying's current same-sex partner, who was of a similar age as her and had been trying very hard over the last twenty years to persuade her parents to recognize her identity and relationship after coming out to them in her teens, saw her contract marriage as "unacceptable." Secondly, they had decided to register a same-sex

marriage overseas very soon, so it was necessary for Ying to get a divorce in China. Ying expressed great regret at her decision to enter a contract marriage:

> I feel that this step was a complete failure…Of course, I hope that they can see how happy I am, but now there's no way for me to introduce her as my girlfriend. After we get married, she's my lover, she's my family. But there's no way for my parents to know about all this.

Ying had an urge to share her current happy family life with her parents because she valued parental recognition of her relationship with her same-sex partner. She added, "If you have recognition from your parents, you will feel that your life is good and there's no problem. You can go on with it." Meanwhile, she foresaw great difficulties in explaining to her parents the reasons for telling all the lies and the fact that she loved women. She believed that exposing the truth would only put her parents under great pressure due to not only their own heterosexual family values but also the fact that they would need to deal with gossip from their several siblings and other relatives in her hometown, a small Chinese city. As a result, she ended up forgoing the hope of incorporating her "small family" with her partner into her "big family" with her family of origin.

Ying's experience highlights the continued power of heteronormativity, which can lead a lala to deprive herself of her desire and right to claim parental support and recognition for her own family. It also serves as an example of how lalas tend to locate themselves and their same-sex families in the wider family network, taking collective-oriented family values and family interests into account. This study expands upon the insights of previous research on "multiple self-formations" among gay men and lalas in the face of heterosexual norms (Kong, 2016, p. 506). The findings further demonstrate how these "multiple self-formations" may lead to different kinds of family formation, which, in turn, shape lalas' ways of seeing the family and complicate the ways in which their sexual identities and family lives are compartmentalized into private and public spheres. In

practical terms, lalas' dual belongings to their natal families and the families they form with their same-sex partners may place them in a particularly difficult position when striving for their desired forms of families and recognition.

b. Engaging the family of origin in contract marriage and divorce

Consistent with previous research on contract marriage (Choi & Luo, 2016), my findings show that engaging in contract marriage could be the result of collaboration between parents and lala adult children rather than a decision made by the lalas alone. My study also provides further insights into the ways in which lalas work strategically with one or both of their parents to rebuild familial emotional bonds and redefine the acceptable boundaries of the family as they pave the way for the dissolution of their short-term contract marriages.

Wen (aged 35) had been in a stable relationship with her same-sex partner for almost ten years. She believed that it was very important for her to be true to herself and her parents, and thus she had decided to come out to her mother. The act of coming out was immediately followed by, as Wen described it, a three-year "fierce storm" which involved numerous phone calls from her mother to her partner asking her to leave her daughter, her mother's threats to commit suicide, and her father's experience of a heart attack after learning from Wen's mother about her sexual orientation. Thus, Wen had taken the initiative to suggest staging a fake wedding to protect the family's "face." She said, "But I assured them [her parents] that I wouldn't marry a guy. They definitely had thought about it." This remark implies that her parents had been implicitly informed about the bogus nature of the wedding.

The turning point in her "bitter struggle" with her parents came after Wen gave her mother an 18-page written letter, in which she clearly explained her desire for women,

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which she had known about since she was small, her ability to lead a decent life as an administrator with a stable income at a state-owned enterprise, and her future plans. After reading the letter, her mother called Wen and asked her to stage a fake wedding in front of her father and other relatives in her hometown. Because Wen's father raised doubts about the "marriage" in front of her mother from time to time after the wedding, Wen reported that she had been working with her mother to reveal the truth bit by bit, with the goal of gradually changing her father's mindset from a focus on the family's "face" to focusing on the "happiness" of family members. Wen was the only one of the nine participants who had entered a contract marriage to do so in "collaboration" with a parent. However, her case clearly demonstrates the persistence of rigid and heteronormative family values upheld by parents, especially the father, and, at the same time, the possibility of reaching compromise solutions among lala adult children and their parent(s), who might gradually come to realize that any effort to persuade their daughters to change their sexual orientation will be in vain.

While planning for her divorce, another participant, Ting (aged 32) had also decided to come out to her mother. Although her act of coming out was followed by her mother's outburst of shock, tears, and anger, Ting took the initiative to share information and articles about homosexuality with her. Her mother eventually began to ask Ting more questions about her girlfriend and their relationship. Ting recalled one of the touching remarks made by her mother:

> She said to me, "The way you two are living, it's fine as long as you feel happy." But she added: "You definitely can't tell your Dad about it, and don't share it with other family members either." And she's come up with those lines about how I should talk about my divorce with my gay husband, how to proceed, how to get things done. She's got all those in mind. "You used to carry huge pressure on your own. Now that I'm aware of it, let's share it together." This is really touching.

Although Ting's mother still held the belief that homosexuality should remain a taboo subject within the wider family, Ting saw her mother's support as "a very good start"

to their changing parent–child relationship, in which she used to experience an intense contradiction between "keeping a huge distance" and "treating parents well" in her performance of contract marriage.

It is evident that lalas' use of the strategy of contract marriage might not only shape the dynamics within lala couples (as shown by Yang and Hong) and diminish their hope for a recognized family (as shown by Ying), but it might also pose a challenge for some parents to rethink their taken-for-granted conceptions of marriage, heterosexuality, and family relations. By exposing their parents to their non-normative intimate and family lives, lalas (such as Wen and Ting) worked strategically with their parents to renegotiate the acceptable boundaries of the family. Their extra efforts to enter and quit contract marriages highlight the entanglement of their relational selfhood with the familial and social environment on the one hand, and the agency of individuals to enable new meanings of family to emerge through day-to-day interactions on the other.

The necessary "detour": Avoiding confrontations and (re-)framing intimacy

There was a strong belief among most participants that one of the prerequisites for building a lala family is to make compromises that take into account heteronormative beliefs endorsed by their families of origin. One of the common ways of doing so was to take an indirect and non-confrontational route to same-sex family formation. Four participants referred to the same Chinese term "*qu xian jiu guo*" (*qu xian*: curve; *jiu guo*: save the country) to illustrate their strategies. Dating back to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945), this term depicts the ways in which Chinese politicians cooperated with their Japanese enemies as a political maneuver, with the ultimate aim of resisting the enemy, keeping the peace, and rescuing the country. The scenarios below illustrate the ways in which participants pursued different indirect routes in their processes of family formation.

a. Impact of the detour (*qu xian*) on lalas' family life

Shan (aged 29) made her detour to avoid confrontation with her parents by registering a same-sex marriage overseas and claiming her preference for singlehood. Shan had been in a stable relationship with her same-sex partner for more than nine years and married her in the USA. She saw their marriage as a formal commitment to a long-term family relationship. Nevertheless, she insisted that she "preferred a single life" in front of her parents because she was afraid of hurting them by coming out. She considered her claim of a preference for a single life to be an "indirect strategy" for reducing her parents' expectations of her marrying the opposite sex. Despite Shan's emphasis on the importance of making this detour, she adopted the strategy at considerable cost to her own family life with her spouse. As she was a local resident in Beijing and was seen as a "single" daughter by her parents, she had no choice but to follow gendered expectations and live with them. Even though she could afford to rent a flat with her spouse, given her current job in marketing and her spouse's as a professional, they could not cohabit.

This finding is similar to the results of previous studies conducted in other Asian contexts, where being single may allow lesbians to pass as heterosexual women but imposes constraints on the development of their same-sex relationships (Kamano & Khor, 2008; Pai, 2017). For instance, in Japan, Kamano and Khor (2008) found that lesbians could "'pass' and find a niche in society as single (heterosexual) women" in a context where delayed marriage had become more common and the marriage rate was in decline (p. 175). Nevertheless, they also argued that the act of passing as single women made lesbians invisible and created "a bigger problem" when they wanted to move out from their natal homes to live with their same-sex partners and needed to justify such a move to their parents (p. 171). Similarly, according to Pai (2017), lesbians in Taiwan might benefit from

appearing to be "single," which leaves them some room to maneuver outside the patriarchal heterosexual family, but they still face different difficulties in gaining recognition of their identities and same-sex relationships and making commitments to those relationships without legal recognition.

Echoing these previous studies, my research shows that the effort to claim one's preference for singlehood and/or pass as a single woman further limits lalas' conception of the family and family role(s). For instance, Shan had given up the option of having children and becoming a mother due to heteronormative expectations towards reproduction:

> It's impossible to tell my mum that I'm having a child because I haven't got a boyfriend yet and I'm still single. If I really decide to have a baby, I'll probably need to consider whether to enter a contract marriage and find a guy. I don't necessarily have to use his [sperm]. I may use IVF to have a baby. But seriously this is another huge problem. You have to deal with another family and another group of people.

This remark highlights the relational ties intertwined with every stage of lalas' family-making processes. It demonstrates relational selfhood – Shan made sense of the possibility of becoming a lesbian mother and raising her child in a same-sex family by locating herself in relation to her mother and wider family kin. Furthermore, it shows that her fertility and family plans were closely tied to the way in which she handled her relationship with her mother, with a gay man, and with the gay man's family. It is also noteworthy that her concern about her relationship with her natal family was inseparable from her own material considerations. Shan reported that coming out would have posed a threat to her job in the government, which had been secured due to the networking of her family of origin. Previous research suggests that market reforms in China serve as one of the major societal forces for fostering emotional ties and material "mutual interdependence between the generations" (Whyte, 1997, p. 25). Recent studies also show that downward transfers of resources from older parents have now become an increasingly important

source of support for young adults to deal with their practical needs, such as the rising costs of living and housing in major Chinese cities (Zhang et al., 2019). In other words, Shan's decision to take a detour by claiming her preference for singlehood in front of parents and yet registering a same-sex marriage overseas in secret was laden with both emotional and material concerns and shaped by the family-oriented heteronormative culture. The decision was based neither on sheer individual-oriented material calculation nor completely based on emotional closeness with significant others or collective-oriented family values.

My findings echo other scholars' insights into the Chinese relational self (Barbalet, 2014; Qi, 2016) and show that lalas may enjoy a broadening range of life options nowadays and yet still be keen to find a recognized place for themselves in the family to the satisfaction of both self-interest and family concerns. This search for the optimal way of juggling personal goals and family obligations, however, makes it difficult for lalas to build their own families. For instance, Jia (aged 31), who was single at the time of the interview, had been lying to her parents by stating that she had been dating men despite several break-ups. By using this strategy, she hoped to show her parents her "good attitude" towards the search of a reliable male partner despite numerous failures and thus to pave the way for eventually coming out when she was in need of care by another person in her old age. Jia had moved to Beijing to pursue a career in finance because she believed that the environment in her hometown, which was a small Chinese city, was not as "open" or "inclusive" as that in big cities like Beijing. Given her current single status and her distance away from her parents in her hometown, she found it unnecessary to confront her parents with her non-normative sexuality. For Jia, the biggest difficulty in building a same-sex family was to find a like-minded person who would be willing to "take such a detour and not to choose an easy mode," referring to the mode of entering opposite-sex marriage and having children.

Similar to Shan and Jia, Qin (aged 35), who was single, had been hiding her sexual identity in front of her parents. But she eventually felt that she could no longer suppress her identity and came out when her mother asked why she always broke up with the "boyfriends," whom she had introduced. As a local resident in Beijing, Qin was living with her parents. She said that she had always had a close relationship with her mother, who was a university teacher. Later she also came out to her father, whom she perceived as "open-minded" due to his job in the film industry. She expressed her deep gratitude to her mother, who fully supported her and did not deny her identity:

> I'm extremely fortunate in having such a good mother...She said that if I'd come out to her several years earlier, she would not have let me make so many detours. She might have helped me design and plan a route to intimate relationships as a lala in advance.

Qin's experience reveals that the fear of not being accepted by one's family of origin tends to cost lalas a lot of time and energy as they attempt to perform the normative role of a heterosexual woman. Whether and how to make the detour to avoid confrontation with parents depends on various considerations, ranging from the physical and emotional distance from parents (as demonstrated by Qin and Jia), finances and career prospects (as demonstrated by Shan), to perceived levels of parental acceptance based on parents' living environment (as demonstrated by Qin and Jia). Nevertheless, these examples drawn from the experiences of Qin, Shan, and Jia reveal that the reluctance to begin the dialogue about one's sexuality with one's family of origin is costly because it will delay or hinder lalas' own prospects of building their families.

b. Guiding the family of origin through the detour

Continued efforts to avoid confronting their parents with their sexuality were commonly seen among participants. In fact, several participants said that they wondered

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whether their parents actually knew about their sexual orientations and relationships but chose to remain silent. "They're quite evasive. Since it's been a long time and I've never brought any guys home, I don't believe they never wonder. It's just something we never mention" (Ling, aged 35). "They're educated, so I don't think they have no idea about it. But they're definitely not willing to accept that I am [a lala]…If I don't need to be honest and I can have a harmonious relationship with them, we all act dumb" (Na, aged 33). As noted by Qi (2016, p. 40), "[t]he dominant family pattern in China today is neither individualistic nor collectivistic but tends to be relational; the self and his/her family work together in such a way that the interests of family members might be harmonized and optimized." It is evident that participants and their parents tended to engage in a conspiracy of silence about non-normative intimate and family lives in order to maintain the "harmony" of the family as a whole.

Nevertheless, some lalas take a more proactive role in "educating" their parents about alternative forms of family life, creating new conditions in which lalas may be able to redraw the boundaries of the family. As a divorced lala, Meng (aged 33) explained that she had married a man at the age of 30 due to traditional family beliefs endorsed by her parents in her hometown of Shandong: "At that time I felt the need to get married because of my parents and live a life as a normal person." Right after giving birth to her daughter, who was conceived through ART, Meng had, however, decided to divorce her husband, who provided the sperm, and end the marriage, or as Meng called it, the "game." Since then, Meng and her same-sex partner, whom she had met long before her pregnancy, had been raising the child in Beijing and they sometimes visited her parents (back in her hometown) together. Whereas her partner had a stable job in a state-owned enterprise, Meng was earning an unstable income as a freelance writer and was mainly responsible for

childcare at home. Meng said that she was very curious about how her parents viewed her relationship with her partner, but she had never asked anything and neither had her parents.

On the one hand, Meng's decisions, firstly to join and then to quit the "game" of marriage, but not to verbally announce her lala identity and relationship in front of her parents, demonstrate the persistent confines of heteronormative family life. On the other hand, Meng expressed her strong desire and attempts to "lead a freer life and be able to do what [she] wants." Therefore, she continued to push back the boundaries of the family by educating her parents on the torture of normativity without mentioning the taboo subject of homosexuality:

> This is what I've told them. "Do you want me to live a good life or not? Living a life you see as normal? Living a life as a normal person is sheer torture to me. Do you want me to have a tortured life?" Starting from this year, I think my parents are gradually becoming more concerned about themselves and they no longer bother that much with others. This is how we've been guiding them…

Similarly, Min (aged 37) had been reframing her relationship with her same-sex partner in a way that might possibly be more easily accepted by her "traditional" father. With a strong determination to "be herself" and not to "play the role of a submissive child," Min had already come out to her mother, who had then decided to tell her husband (Min's father) about Min's sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Min's father insisted that what her mother had said was "impossible." While Min shared gay-related movies with her mother to increase her understanding of same-sex relationships, she used a different approach to deal with her father's denial:

> I don't directly tell him that I'm a homosexual, or that I like girls. I just let him recognize my current living conditions. That is, I'm living together with my partner, living a life together ever after…Now my Dad has already accepted that I'm single and living a life together with my partner…Sometimes when she doesn't come (to family gatherings), my dad asks me to bring her next time.

Like many other participants, Min expressed a longing for parental recognition of her same-sex family. As a local lala living in the same city as her parents, Min and her partner had family meals together with her parents every weekend, without explicitly acknowledging their relationship. Compared with other participants, especially non-local ones, this living arrangement put Min in a better position to include her family of origin in her new family life. Yet, it is also noteworthy that Min expressed a strong sense of responsibility to communicate with her parents and had taken the initiative to encourage them to "grow." Although her relationship with her same-sex partner had not yet been completely accepted by her father, Min was willing to make an effort to walk her father through a display of non-heteronormative intimacy and lifestyle, albeit in an indirect way.

As addressed in Chapter Two, the widely discussed models of "coming out" and "coming home" in the existing literature on sexualities in China are inadequate for capturing the wide range of lived experiences among gay men and lalas (Huang & Brouwer, 2018). Instead, Huang and Brouwer (2018) suggest the model of "coming with" to show how Chinese non-heterosexual people can create and lead their non-normative lives without necessarily "coming out" or remaining silent by "coming home." The example of Min echoes Huang's and Brouwer's (2018) notion of "coming with" in the sense that she was keen to challenge heteronormative family structures, and at the same time to incorporate her family of origin into her familial relationship with her partner in a way that was deemed acceptable to her parents, especially her father. Both her acts of directly coming out to her mother and indirectly displaying her same-sex relationship at home in front of her father were performed with the goal of "living with rather than turning away from the family institution" (Huang & Brouwer, 2018, p. 107). These acts also demonstrate the role of relational selfhood in her process of family formation. In order to pursue her ideal family life, Min actively reflected on her sense of self in relation to her family of

origin and maneuvered herself to the optimal midway point, where her parents, her partner, and herself could meet each other in a harmonious manner and, more importantly, her non-normative family aspirations could coexist with familial harmony among the wider family.

In short, participants' strategies for taking a detour were intended to accommodate and resist heteronormative expectations and rules. Drawing on the idea of "*qu xian jiu guo*," Jia explained: "In the past, it was all about the country. Now it's about myself. That is, you save your own love life through a *qu xian* [an indirect route]." Lalas' pursuit of indirect routes to same-sex family formation not only highlights the intense struggle between a lala's desire to "be herself" and the persistent power of heteronormativity in the family sphere, but it also reveals the attempts and potential of lalas to influence their families of origin in a positive way.

<u>"My ability is my sense of security": Excelling oneself as a self-sufficient and independent lala</u>

In the absence of parental support or official recognition of same-sex families from the government, participants revealed that they needed to devote themselves to securing financial independence and becoming independent-minded in order to form and maintain their same-sex intimate and family relationships and gain recognition from their families of origin.

a. Impact of financial independence on lalas' family life in practical and psychological terms

Many participants said that they would not have put as much effort into paid work if they had been "normal heterosexual" women. The ability to accumulate financial resources and become self-sufficient was seen as a determining factor in their ability to

exercise their own choices and lead their desired ways of life: "Only if I work hard to earn as much money as I can, can I have many choices. I can seek ART, although it's illegal in China. But it's absolutely legal in the USA" (Shi, aged 30). "I want to use my own ability to turn it [marriage] into reality and this is why I plan to migrate to a foreign country" (Tao, aged 36). It was common for participants to believe that they could rely on their "economic power," gained through hard work, to overcome practical constraints in China, such as the unavailability of legalized same-sex marriage and the denial of access to ART.

On top of practical and material constraints on the path to same-sex family formation, what concerned most participants was parental and societal disapproval of homosexuality. Similarly to previous studies, which show that Chinese sexual minority people tend to see financial success as a precondition for coming out as respectable persons (Ho & Tsang, 2012; Kam, 2013), several participants stressed the role of financial independence in asserting oneself and dealing with oppositional forces. "My ability is my sense of security. I must be able to earn money…I feel that making myself better is the best weapon to shut people up" (Meng, aged 33). "I definitely have to have a very impressive career…because you have to be financially independent, right? Then you're able to not listen to your parents, you're qualified to not listen to them" (Na, aged 33).

Ya (aged 34) further illustrated the importance of both financial independence and mental strength in the process of same-sex family formation. She had married her same-sex partner in the USA two years previously. They had a one-year-old child conceived by Ya's spouse through ART overseas. Despite her working-class family background, Ya had been working very hard to secure a position at the mid-senior management level in a private firm in Beijing. She added that her spouse shared a similar background, having climbed to the management level in her profession while her parents were blue-collar workers. Ya

highlighted the importance of financial independence, about which her heterosexual counterparts did not have to worry. She explained:

> If you're a boy, your parents have probably been trying their best to save money for you since you were a child so that you can buy a house and marry a woman. But if you're a girl, your parents don't do the same to save for a house for you. These are the difficulties. So you must have enough money. Your relationship has to be more than good enough.

Ya's remarks highlight the persistence of heterosexual norms embedded in parent-child relationships and the lack of intergenerational support for women who would like to head their own same-sex families. This is why Ya stated that it is very important to have a good and stable relationship that can provide a solid foundation for continued resistance against material obstacles and against the temptation to enter opposite-sex marriage, which would generally guarantee support from both parents and one's husband.

Having come out to her parents, Ya reported that they had already accepted that her happiness was the most important thing and that they were no longer trying to persuade her to change her sexual orientation. Nevertheless, she was deeply concerned about her parents' "face," taking account of their difficulties in openly talking about her non-normative same-sex family in front of their friends and relatives.

> You have to believe from the bottom of your heart that you don't feel sorry for your family members. This hurdle is very challenging because you know that your family members will be hurt by others because of you, because you fail to showcase a normal wedding and a normal family in front of the friends of your parents and relatives…After turning yourself into a stronger person, you definitely have to show your parents that you're living a decent life. You really have to!

The feeling of guilt and the pressure to "succeed" in their (future) same-sex family were commonly found among participants who had verbally come out to their parents. To conquer this sense of guilt, it was thus important for Ya to be self-sufficient and capable of displaying a blissful same-sex family life. Echoing Ya's view, Jia (aged 31) believed that not having the ability to display a blissful life with a stable same-sex partner would only

reinforce her parents' traditional belief that one "should marry a guy rather than going down the path to a same-sex family which is doomed from the start."

As my participants narrated the meaning and significant value of being a financially independent lesbian woman, it became evident that they were practicing a high degree of agency and reflexivity in navigating possible ways of leading a desirable and respectable same-sex family life. As selfhood and agency are always embedded in the social (Jackson, 2018), lalas' pursuit of financial independence needs to be understood as both an active process of meaning-making and an adaptation to the constraints imposed by the socio-cultural, political, and economic context. In particular, it is important to contextualize the meaning attached to independence and the pressure to "succeed" in their (future) same-sex family within the coupling of authoritarian rule and neoliberal governance in China. The mode of neoliberal governance with "Chinese characteristics" (Harvey, 2005, p. 20), led by the Communist Party, has a significant impact on people's selfhood (Rofel, 2007; Zhang & Ong, 2008). As suggested by Rofel (2007), the "desiring subject" has emerged among Chinese people, including non-heterosexual people, who pursue their material and emotional self-interest with cosmopolitan aspirations to be respectable citizens and lead middle-class cosmopolitan lives. Meanwhile, the Chinese government ensures that people do not challenge its authoritarian rule and that they conform to the culture of self-discipline (Kong, 2017; Zhang & Ong, 2008). One of the ways in which the Chinese government has achieved this goal is to reinforce the role of the family in regulating people's behaviors, sustaining social norms, and maintaining social and regime stability (Engebretsen, 2014; Rofel, 2007). As a result, women who fall outside the heterosexual family model, including lalas and single or divorced women, are not only socially stigmatized but also economically disadvantaged (Zhu, 2018). Zhu (2018) points out that this group of women are particularly vulnerable to material constraints in neoliberal China, including the gender gap and glass

ceiling (Chi & Li, 2008; He & Wu, 2017), the lack of welfare support for single mothers (Palmer, 2007), the rising costs of living and housing (Zhang et al., 2019), and the state welfare policy that places eldercare responsibilities on the family's shoulders (Xu & Xia, 2014).

While lalas may experience these constraints to varying extents depending on their individual circumstances, it is within this neoliberal and authoritarian context of China that my participants may have felt the pressure to "succeed" as both a respectable person and part of a family, and have set great store by self-empowerment in economic terms. It was also why the majority of participants reported working extra hard to climb the social ladder and earn enough money to prepare for their later life. By doing so, they hoped to overcome both the social stigma attached to homosexuality and material constraints, as well as gaining recognition of their identities and same-sex families from their wider family and social networks.

b. Pursuing independence from the influence of their family of origin and the heterosexual model

The need to develop the ability to cope with uncertainty and rely on themselves rather than others was emphasized by participants, especially those who had chosen to come out to their families of origin and those who had married a heterosexual man. Although these two sub-groups were in the minority in my sample, their experiences brought to the fore the complexity of family ties and lalas' potential ways of resisting and reshaping heterosexual norms.

Qu (aged 27) had come out to her parents when she was 18 years old, when she used to believe that "family was probably a place for you to rely on." Nevertheless, her act of coming out had met with unexpectedly fierce opposition from her parents, who worked

in the government and the medical profession, respectively. Worse still, her father forced her to leave their home and terminated financial support for her. Since then, she had learnt to rely on herself and had been working very hard to develop her career as a designer. When describing her current relationship with her same-sex partner, she firmly indicated that she would never take on the traditional role of a housewife:

> I'm the type of person who believes very strongly in independence. There's a precondition for being a housewife. That is, you have to financially rely on another person. This absolutely runs counter to my values. No matter how little money I've earned, that is what I've earned. With what I've earned, I don't need to rely on anybody.

Qu admitted that her strong belief in independence was related to her bitter experience of being rejected by her parents and had been her way of surviving the days when she had to "worry about money every single day." On the one hand, her emphasis on the pursuit of independence could be considered an expression of agency and a form of resistance against the traditional institution of the family in patriarchal Chinese society, where a woman is generally expected to meet parental expectations and to marry a man who can provide financial support (Santos & Harrell, 2017). By showing her parents that she could live a decent life on her own and with her same-sex partner, she believed that she had been able to assert herself and wrest control of her own life away from parental influences.

On the other hand, Qu also expressed sadness about the fact that she had "never felt included in the [natal] family." It was clear that, despite distancing herself from her parents and their conventional views of the family, she continued to struggle with emotional ties to them. This reflects the ways in which relational selfhood leaves lalas still entangled with their family ties even though they may embrace individualistic values and beliefs. It echoes Zhu's (2018) view on the importance of "[doing] justice to the intricate entanglements of queer Chinese with their specific social-familial environment" (p. 1075). In other words, it

is important to challenge the abstract conception of a self that is isolated from his/her relational ties (Adams, 2003; Jackson, 2011, 2015) and to move beyond the liberal model of understanding sexual identities and sexual disclosure in Western contexts (Zhu, 2018). Qu's family-building experience shows that she exercised considerable agency in developing her own family life with her same-sex partner and escaping from parental control, but she also desired to redraw the boundaries of the family in a way that could be recognized by her parents. At the time of the interview, she reported that she had gained "complete acceptance" from her mother and had incorporated her into her family with her same-sex partner. Her mother came to the apartment Qu shared with her partner to help cook meals and feed their dog every day, whereas her father deliberately avoided the subject of relationships and no longer interfered in her intimate and family life. After all, Qu's way of forming her own same-sex family posed a direct challenge to the heterosexual male-breadwinner model, which remains deep-seated in patriarchal Chinese society. By excelling as a self-sufficient and independent lala, however, Qu tried hard to realize her desired way of life, and at the same time to reshape her relationship with her parents, particularly her mother.

Qu's strong emphasis on the importance of independence, while yet experiencing complicated family ties, were echoed by other participants. For instance, Ping (aged 40) had been in a marriage with a heterosexual man for over five years and they had been raising their son together. Like the other three participants who had married heterosexual men, Ping reported that she had felt a strong need to follow the norms, which had pushed her into marriage without serious consideration. In addition, she feared that she "would not be able to live a life on her own" in either financial or psychological terms if she did not marry a man. She had been earning an unstable income as a freelance art instructor and relying on financial support from her husband, who was a counsellor. Thus, Ping

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experienced intense struggles as to how and when to get divorced and how to continue her current intimate relationship with another woman, who was also in a marriage with a heterosexual man:

> Perhaps the model you see in your relationship with your partner is the kind of model you've been familiar with since childhood, such as the model you have with your parents. It really tears you apart to leave something you're familiar with. It's like… leaving home during adolescence…You really have to become an adult. You can no longer rely on your family. It's truly a journey of independence on your own. You don't have to think of it as a choice of an intimate relationship. In fact, it's a journey of independence…I have to be independent in my emotional, spiritual, and economic life.

Although Ping had been aware of her sexual attraction towards women since she was young, the fact that she had been financially and mentally relying on her family of origin and on men (including her ex-boyfriends and current husband) for the past 40 years made it very difficult for her to question the norms and leave her comfort zone. Nevertheless, after meeting her current same-sex partner, Ping had become determined to resist heterosexual norms and become independent-minded as an adult in order to fully engage in their relationship.

Lan (aged 45), a participant who had divorced her husband, also emphasized the importance of being independent-minded. She reported that she had been taking on various administrative jobs with low salaries throughout the past two decades, given her vocational high school background without a university education. Since her divorce, however, she had been actively engaging in LGBT-related voluntary work in addition to her paid work. She had also exposed her daughter to the lala community because she believed that it was important to enhance her daughter's understanding of her change in identity and relationships. She encouraged everyone, including her daughter, to engage in independent and critical thinking:

> When someone is not independent enough, and lacks independence as an individual, she wavers whenever her parents have a word with her. Thus, parents will think that

you're indecisive, that you don't have the mind of an adult. How dare you say that I can't interfere in your life then?

The remarks and experiences of Qu, Ping, and Lan show that it is particularly important for a lala to develop not only financial independence but also an independent mind so as to overcome parental influence and decide her own family life. However, echoing other scholars' insights into the Chinese relational self (Barbalet, 2014; Qi, 2016), my findings also show that lalas' conception and pursuit of independence during their family-building processes do not necessarily mean a separation from their families of origin. Rather, they highlight new possibilities of renegotiating and reshaping relationships with them.

Conclusion

This chapter has not only provided new empirical evidence of a range of strategies used by lalas to accommodate and/or resist heterosexual norms and form their own families, but it has also highlighted the ways in which lalas' processes of family formation are shaped by, but at the same time shape, their relationships with their families of origin. The findings from this study demonstrate that participants were active in finding different ways of forming their own families; namely, contracting a short-term marriage with a gay man, taking a detour by reframing their intimate and family life, and excelling themselves as independent-minded and financially independent adults. By examining the unexplored sphere of lalas' family-building strategies, I argue that lalas have the potential to re-shape the institution of the family from within the family sphere as both lalas and their families of origin negotiate to create new family practices and redefine the acceptable boundaries of the family. This chapter contributes to sociological understandings of family change in three significant ways.

Firstly, understanding lalas' use of strategies for building their own families in relation to their complex relationships with their families of origin contributes to a better understanding of the changing nature of family life in the Chinese context. Existing literature on the changing nature and practices of Chinese families has predominantly focused on heterosexual populations (F. Liu, 2018; Yan, 2010). This study reveals how individuals negotiate their relationships with their families of origin and respond to the oppression of heteronormativity, which continues to deny the existence of lalas or of their intimate and family lives. It is important to understand the institution of the family as not static, but a social construction that is shaped by changing social relations between individuals, and thus characterized by both continuity and change (Barbalet, 2016). The findings demonstrate the ways in which some lalas worked with their families of origin to challenge the established boundaries of the family. In particular, participants demonstrated the possibility of subverting the heteronormative rules of the game and influencing parents' ways of seeing the family, such as coming out and engaging parents in the performance of contract marriage (as shown by Wen and Ting), finding possible ways of educating their parents on alternatives to the heterosexual family model (as shown by Meng and Min), and developing an independent mind in order to overcome parental influence and authority (as suggested by Qu, Ping, and Lan). These findings shed new light on the ways in which individuals exercise their agency to embrace non-normative aspirations for building their own families.

Secondly, by revealing bilateral negotiations between lalas and their families of origin, in which both the younger and older generations may initiate changes or maintain the continuity of the traditional institution of the family, the present study questions the rigid divide between "families of choice" and families of origin. Similarly to Pai's (2017) study, which demonstrated that Taiwanese lesbians do not see friends as part of their

"families," my findings have shown that lalas tend not to entertain the notion of "families of choice," as suggested by Weston (1991). That is, none of my participants regarded their friends as "family members" or attempted to incorporate flexible networks into the "family." Worries over parents' loss of "face" (as shown by Yang and Ya), parental control over adult daughters (as shown by Yang and Shan), and difficulties in gaining acceptance of one's sexual orientation from parents, especially fathers (as shown by Wen, Min, and Qu) continue to shape the ways in which lalas' choices are perceived, constrained, and achieved during their processes of family formation. The complicated maneuvers performed by lalas, exemplified by the strategies of short-term contract marriage and taking a detour, challenge the overgeneralization of Weston's model (1991), which posits that the act of coming out can create a "common cultural ground" for "lesbian- and gay-identified people of all colors and classes" to challenge the long-established solidarity associated with blood ties and develop family ties of their choice (p. 60). Rather than ignoring traditional family obligations and turning their backs on their families of origin, my participants saw their blood ties as an inseparable part of their family-building experiences and went to extraordinary lengths not to disappoint their parents. In short, the findings reveal that the choices available to lalas in their processes of family formation are by no means free from the regulation of social and familial norms, which are often governed and reinforced by their families of origin.

Last, but not least, the findings of this study foreground the gendered, familial, material, and socio-political constraints imposed on female-led, same-sex families in the Chinese context. Consistent with previous research on shifting Chinese intergenerational support, which is still biased towards sons and opposite-sex marriage (Fincher, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019), the findings show that it is particularly difficult for lalas to benefit from downward transfers of resources from older parents, given their female identity and

unmarried status. Participants thus had no choice but to rely on themselves and use various strategies to seek recognition and resources. In general, because the formation of female-headed, same-sex families can be seen as a challenge to not only parental authority but also the heterosexual male-breadwinner model, participants were put at a distinct disadvantage in their family-building processes, without parental, state, or societal recognition of their family status. Meanwhile, the findings also highlight the internal heterogeneity among participants given their different social locations. For instance, whether and how participants accommodated or challenged established norms largely depended on their material needs and concerns, such as their personal finances (as shown by Ya, Qu, and Ping) and career prospects (as demonstrated by Shan). Scholars have alerted us to the fact that personal choice and tactics may simply mirror or even reinforce existing social structures (Fu et al., 2018; Jackson, 2015, 2019; Otis, 2008). Therefore, caution should be taken to avoid romanticizing any of the individual strategies used by lalas.

To conclude, by analyzing lalas' use of different strategies in their processes of family formation, this study provides fresh insights into the ways in which lalas' families are continuously shaped by, but at the same time shaping, the institution of the family, which is subject to change in social interactions between family members. Expanding upon the discussion of relational selfhood in the Chinese context and attending to the role of relational selfhood in lalas' family-building processes, it also contributes to the wider sociological debate about the nature and extent of family change. It highlights the need to attend to bilateral negotiations between same-sex families and families of origin in order to fully investigate intergenerational relations as a site of power struggles and tackle the inequalities arising from the heteronormative institution of the family from within the institution itself.

Chapter 5 Lalas' Decisions about Whether and How to Have Children: Exploring Family Ties in Urban China

Introduction

This chapter examines the processes by which lalas in urban China make decisions about whether and how to have their own children. It focuses on lalas' concerns about how they are changing family ties and creating new ones, and their ways of dealing with the perceived and actual difficulties of having children. The study aims to contribute to family sociology in two ways. Firstly, set within the global context of a growing multiplicity of family forms and practices (Gates, 2015; Smart, 2007), including an increase in same-sex parenthood in some Western countries (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Gato et al., 2017), this study provides new empirical evidence of the concerns and difficulties that come into play in lalas' decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children in China. Secondly, it contributes to ongoing sociological debates about the extent and nature of current transformations in family life through an examination of family practices and imaginaries in lalas' reproductive decision-making processes, which, as I show in this chapter, are largely shaped by intergenerational dynamics and socio-economic and structural conditions. The family-oriented nature of Chinese culture, with its strong emphasis on blood ties, coupled with the wider socio-political environment which is hostile to homosexuality (Engebretsen, 2014; Kong, 2016), renders the empirical case of lalas' family-making in China particularly conducive to a theoretical exploration of different dimensions of connectedness and new possibilities for resisting established norms and reshaping family ties in a context of global changes in families.

This chapter begins by providing a brief discussion of how my study engages with the notions of "family practices" (Morgan, 1996, 2011) and "family imaginaries"

(Nordqvist, 2017) and contextualizes lalas' pursuit of motherhood in Chinese society. I then present my interview data and demonstrate lalas' different concerns when contemplating or actualizing their paths to motherhood and their ways of responding to the perceived and actual difficulties. The last section discusses the implications of these findings for sociological debates about changing family life and how they contribute to a better understanding of both family practices and imaginaries.

Family practices and imaginaries: Lalas' ways of creating and navigating family ties

My approach to lalas' family-making is influenced by family sociology, which has placed increasing emphasis on processes of relationality in family life since the 1990s. Drawing on the concept of "family practices" (Morgan, 1996, 2011), it is important to approach family life as "a set of activities" (Morgan, 2011, p. 6), as something that people do to create connectedness within their families. Recent research on lesbian parenthood has engaged with and further extended this concept (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist, 2017). As argued by Nordqvist (2017), the concept of family practices is useful in capturing everyday activities that are carried out by family members, but it does not fully address more "discursive and ideological dimensions of family life," especially "ideas and concepts of what makes a family" (p. 866). For instance, Nordqvist's (2017) study on heterosexual and lesbian families with donor-conceived children in the UK reveals the processes by which genetic relationships were made meaningful within families. As termed by Nordqvist (2017, p. 865), "genetic thinking" could be found in, for instance, non-genetic parents' perceived need to do extra work to "prove" themselves as competent parents. Her study highlights the need to pay attention to not only "family practices" but also "family imaginaries" (Nordqvist, 2017), which have the conceptual capacity to illustrate the role of norms in shaping people's ways of doing family (Nordqvist, 2017; Smart, 2007).

Building on the above-mentioned literature, my study explores family practices and individuals' feelings and imaginings that are intertwined with these practices. It taps into the "doing" dimension of family life by exploring how lalas make their decisions about whether and how to have children and how they negotiate their family ties. Furthermore, it reveals that these practices are closely linked with individuals' family imaginaries by situating lalas' reproductive decision-making within the established norms of gender, sexuality, and family, as well as within intergenerational family ties in Chinese society.

The case of lalas' family-making in China provides an ideal window into different mechanisms of reproductive decision-making against the backdrop of a heteronormative family-oriented culture that nevertheless encompasses transnational flows of LGBT-related information and ART. While it has become more common for some lesbians (and gay men), particularly those of the younger generation in Western developed countries, to come out at an earlier life stage and include parenthood as part of their life trajectories (Gabb, 2018; Gato et al., 2017), becoming a parent within a same-sex relationship remains a difficult or unrealizable life option among many lalas in China, where coming out remains challenging and obstacles to their paths to motherhood abound. Firstly, lalas (and gay men) are not granted the rights to same-sex marriage, civil partnership, or adoption in China (Yu et al., 2018). Also, the government has been placing great emphasis on the continuity of family lines within opposite-sex marriage through a range of measures, including but not limited to the two-child policy and the new law on tax reduction applied to married couples with children (W. Liu, 2018), as mentioned in Chapter 2. In general, raising children within opposite-sex marriage is considered less of a personal choice than a familial and social obligation, especially for women (Kam, 2013). It is against this socio-political backdrop that lalas' formation of their own female-headed families and their pursuit of motherhood can be regarded as the very antithesis of the Chinese family, if not an unimaginable entity.

This chapter seeks to explore the following two questions: (1) What concerns do lalas have in their decision-making processes regarding whether or not to have children? (2) How do lalas perceive and respond to the potential difficulties of having children as sexual minority women in China? The chapter brings to the fore the ways in which different individuals think and feel about relational ties and how different types of families create and sustain connectedness in a traditional family-oriented culture.

Based on my analysis of the interview data, I identified four themes to illustrate the complex experiences of my participants in their decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children. These themes are: (1) Having children as a way of negotiating parental acceptance of same-sex identity and family; (2) Having children as a "common goal" and a way of cementing the relationship; (3) Having children as part of a "complete" life; and (4) Children as good company and a potential source of emotional support in one's old age.

Rather than structuring the presentation of findings around evidence from different sub-groups of participants based on their (preferred) means of achieving motherhood, or their status as a biological/non-biological mother or not a mother, I analyzed and integrated the evidence from and across different sub-groups and presented it through the four themes. Each of these themes speaks of the layered complexity of participants' experiences in a coherent way, despite the differences in their fertility plans and parental status. Such an overall thematic framework facilitates the presentation and discussion of the range and diversity within each theme (Ritchie et al., 2013). In total, quotes from 18 (out of 33[16]) participants were selected because they best illustrate key aspects of the themes. They serve

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[16] Two participants became mothers through sexual intercourse with heterosexual men. These two women were excluded from the analysis in this chapter because they had made their decisions to give birth to and raise children within their opposite-sex marriage. As the focus of this chapter is lalas' reproductive decision-making processes within the context of their same-sex relationship, these two cases exceed the scope of discussion in this chapter.

as examples of the generalized patterns of meaning associated with the themes and represent the range and diversity of the data.

Participants expressed different concerns when contemplating or actualizing their paths to motherhood. They were at different stages of the reproductive decision-making process, ranging from achieved motherhood (six participants), actively planning the pursuit of motherhood through various means (nine participants), hesitation and delay in taking action to pursue motherhood (eleven participants), and a lack of interest in or hope of becoming a mother (seven participants). The accounts presented below illustrate how various concerns at the individual, couple, familial, and societal levels overlapped each other and were shared by participants who were going through different stages of the reproductive decision-making process. All participants mentioned potential obstacles in the paths to same-sex parenthood, but they had responded to them in different ways and thus demonstrated different decisions to pursue motherhood or remain childless.

<u>Having children as a way of negotiating parental acceptance of same-sex identity and family</u>

While all participants expressed a greater or lesser degree of difficulty in coming out to their families of origin, one of the surprising findings was that six participants considered the pursuit of motherhood to be a practical way of negotiating their relationships with their families of origin, who had fixed ideas about what counted as a "proper" family and strongly rejected homosexuality.

For instance, in order to protect the "face" of her parents, who worked in the government, Ru (aged 36) had entered a contract marriage with a gay man. As a local resident in Beijing, Ru reported that her parents had always imposed "strict discipline" on her and that, since the age of 28, she had been pressurized by her parents and relatives to

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attend matchmaking dates with men. Meanwhile, Ru had married her same-sex partner, Li (aged 36), in the USA and kept the marriage secret from her family of origin. Ru had a senior position in a large consulting firm, whereas her partner earned a lower income as a designer. At the time of the interview, Ru was pregnant, having conceived her baby through In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) with the use of her own egg and sperm from a sperm bank in the USA. Ru's parents, however, had been kept in the dark about the real identity of her baby and assumed the pregnancy to be genetically connected with Ru and her gay husband. Ru explained her plan to come out to her parents only after giving birth to her child:

> We're ready to come out after our baby is born. I'm going to lay out my cards in front of Mum because once our baby is born, what do you want? I'm almost 40 and I still can't decide my own life? That's ridiculous. And I think that my parents and their grandchildren, this kind of intergenerational blood tie is very close. They will accept their grandchildren even if they don't accept you. If you don't let them see the kids, it's like killing them.

The example of Ru foregrounds the impact of both the traditional importance attached to blood ties and the sense of intergenerational connectedness on lalas' ways of doing family. Ru treated her parents as "number one" because they were "[her] family without any choice." To Ru, having a genetically related child would not only fulfill her parents' dream of having a grandchild, but it would also increase her bargaining power when persuading her parents to accept her lala identity and recognize the status of the family she had formed with Li.

Ru and Li had also reached a consensus on their fertility plan. They had already reserved sperm from the same donor and Li was preparing to conceive another baby using her own egg and the donor's sperm during the coming year. The cost of their fertility plan was, in fact, extremely high. Despite both earning stable incomes, the couple had had to take out a loan in order to afford nearly one million Chinese Yuan (approximately 112,000 British Pounds) for both of them to conceive a baby. Li, who was also a local Beijing

resident in a contract marriage with a gay man for the purpose of escaping from parental control, expressed her view about having children:

> In fact it's okay for me not to have a child because I do feel that our first baby is our baby…Because from the very beginning we've come all the way to have our baby…so I'm giving 100% love to our baby... but she [Ru] always says that if I don't have my own child, it will be very difficult for me to come out to my family in the future...because parents believe that no matter who you're with, it's for the sake of having your own child in the future, who will be able to take care of you. That's the destination, period.

Li's remark describing parental worries about the prospect of their adult children having nobody to care for them in their old age was echoed by many participants. The paths to motherhood designed by Ru and Li highlight that their reproductive decision-making was shaped by the cultural ideology of blood ties and the perceived need to maintain good intergenerational relations. Although Li did not care about the lack of a genetic tie with her child, she believed that having her own biological child would not only relieve her parents of their worries over her future, but the "sibling" relationship between the two children, who would share the same sperm donor, would also appear more acceptable to her parents. The couple thus demonstrated a collective effort to strategically create a new form of family that would probably be intelligible and acceptable to their older parents so that they could take advantage of it when they confronted their parents with their non-normative identity and family and attempted to gain recognition for themselves and their newly formed family. Their strategy could also be considered an outcome of their relational selfhood, which took their own personal and family aspirations into account but, at the same time, did not abandon their felt obligation to meet parental expectations (Qi, 2016).

Jia (aged 31), who was single at the time of the interview, also expressed a desire to have her own child(ren) if she had a stable partner in the future. She had migrated from a small Chinese city to Beijing to pursue her career in finance. She had been searching for online information about available technology and agencies providing access to ART

overseas so that she would be ready to share a clear fertility plan with her future partner. She also believed that her job in the finance industry would allow her to earn enough money to realize the plan. She recalled several success stories about coming out among her lala friends who had given birth to children:

> They [parents] hug the baby and then cry for two days. On the third day they will be very happily hugging the baby... As the Chinese saying goes, "The most unfilial act is to have no offspring." These friends of mine are having a happy life now. Their parents are raising the children. That is, you "have the offspring" and then they think you have someone to take care of you.

On the other hand, only a minority of participants (13 out of 33) had decided to pursue, or were considering pursuing, motherhood through the use of ART abroad. Practical and financial constraints around the use of ART were one of the obstacles to participants' paths to motherhood. In addition, more than half the participants shared their worries about potential discrimination against the children of same-sex parents in a context where homosexuality remains stigmatized. Bo (aged 33) was one of these, and she had thus decided not to have her own child. Her alternative path to motherhood, however, illustrates how non-genetic family ties might also be accepted in traditional Chinese families and how individuals can make sense of and sustain such ties given the huge concern over the "face" of the family in a heteronormative environment.

Bo had been in a contract marriage with a gay man for more than five years, and at the same time had been cohabiting with her same-sex partner for more than two years. Similar to other participants who engaged in contract marriage, Bo, a local resident in Beijing and an entrepreneur, strongly believed that this strategy was the only way for her to justify moving away from her natal home, which enabled her to "maintain a good distance" from her parents, and live the way of life she desired. After the contract marriage, however, Bo explained that her parents, who worked in the military and education sector respectively, faced huge pressure from their circle of conservative friends and relatives due

to her childless status at that time. She thus lied to her parents that she and her gay husband had adopted a child. The child had been provided with care by Bo's parents ever since he had been introduced to the family. In fact, the boy had been conceived through surrogacy overseas and had a genetic connection with Bo's gay husband, who wanted to have a child with his same-sex partner. Bo explained the major reason behind all the lies she had told in front of her parents.

> They [parents] probably have no clue how to deal with their old age as the parents of a homosexual who has come out and has no children. I believe that their living conditions and quality of life would be extremely poor. And I'm sure that, to be honest, my girlfriend and I are very unlikely to have any plans for children. We don't have any such plans. Therefore, even if I came out, this [parents' prospects of having a grandchild] would definitely be a missing piece…They would have to face relatives and face the fact that they don't have any chance of raising a grandchild.

Bo's decision to introduce this "son" to her parents and relatives was attributable to her concern about her parents' emotional well-being and the perceived difficulties in having children with her same-sex partner. The intense pressure that participants believed their parents would face due to their adult children's non-normative sexual relationships and the lack of any grandchildren was a commonly expressed worry in the interviews. Meanwhile, Bo said that she did not want to have her own child because of her huge concern about potential discrimination and violence which confronts not only sexual minority people but also the children of same-sex families in China. Therefore, when her gay husband encountered difficulties in balancing paid work with childcare and sought help from Bo, she agreed to collaborate with him and co-create the story of adoption in front of her parents because she foresaw that this decision would bring mutual benefits to both parties.

It is important, however, to understand Bo's family-building experience as not only rationally planned but also continually shaped by relational ties embedded in Chinese family-oriented culture. When asked about her feelings towards her "son," she

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acknowledged that she did not have any genetic tie with him, but she did express a kind of "maternal love" that she had been forcing herself to endorse:

> Whenever I see him, I tell myself, "Yes, this is my son." But I must be very honest…I'm more like …Oh, this is my son, so I love him. I buy him a lot of clothes, things, books and I play with him. But…the so-called maternal sense of connection is more like something imposed by myself. It's not real…

On the one hand, this remark shows that the feeling of connectedness between Bo and her "son" was defined and created within the established framework of parent–child relationships and the traditional script of motherhood which prescribes love, care, and material support for a child. In Chinese society, motherhood within opposite-sex marriage is still of central value to women's familial and social status as good daughters and respectable women (Kam, 2013; Xie, 2018). In addition, Bo's parents presented their "grandson" as part of their biological family in front of their relatives and neighbors and enjoyed taking on the role of "grandparents." In other words, Bo's strategy to perform the role of a wife and mother did help her to establish a recognized place in her natal family and connect with her older parents by following the heteronormative family script that they endorsed. On the other hand, Bo clearly kept a distance from her non-biological "son" and her gay husband and did not consider them to be part of her "family." By this act of self-distancing, she asserted her "real" sense of self as a lala and her own conception of what counted as a family, which only included her close ties with her same-sex partner and her parents. It is evident that she embraced relational selfhood in the sense that she was constantly constructing and reconstructing her sense of self in relation to significant others in order to maximize the interests of her own family (Qi, 2016).

The fact that Bo regarded her gay husband as a "comrade" conquering heteronormative challenges together but not as part of her "family" is worth further attention. This, to a certain extent, echoes the findings of Y. Wang's (2019) study of

contract marriage, or what she calls "cooperative marriage," in China, whereby lalas and gay men may develop camaraderie and solidarity and collaborate with each other because they share similar lived experiences due to the social stigma attached to homosexuality and come up with solutions together. Nevertheless, this ideal of camaraderie is "contingent on negotiation between multiple parties in such relationships" (Y. Wang, 2019, p. 16). To Bo, there remained considerable uncertainty as to whether, when, and how to disclose the truth to her parents about her "son" and end the contract marriage with her "husband/comrade." She accepted the current familial arrangement only because it created "relatively good conditions," where "an acceptable boundary" had been co-drawn by Bo and her parents, who could now enjoy their normative status and roles as "mother" and "grandparents" respectively and engage in normative intergenerational practices of care. In other words, her emotional ties with her family members took precedence over the camaraderie formed with the gay man, which was dependent upon whether or not it could function well to address her self-interest, family interest, and relational struggles.

The example of Bo demonstrates how lalas' ways of doing family are tightly intertwined with their family imaginaries, which are largely shaped by intergenerational dynamics and wider social and structural constraints, including the perceived need to protect the "face" of parents and practice the traditional script of motherhood, as well as the perceived threat of violence against same-sex families. Similar to other participants, Bo did not endorse the Western idea of a "chosen family" structured by the individual selection of friends, people whom one can trust, and people with or without biological ties (Weston, 1991). Meanwhile, Bo's experience demonstrates new possibilities of co-creating family ties between lalas and the older generation, which might expand the acceptable boundaries of the "family" beyond genetic connections, albeit within the confines of the heterosexual family model.

Having children as a "common goal" and a way of cementing the relationship

Another major concern that came into play in participants' decision-making processes regarding whether and how to have children was the degree of stability in their couple and family relationships. Eight participants expressed a wish to have children because it represented a "common goal" or a "common future" for a lala couple to work towards: "Raising a child together is a better way of building, maintaining, and stabilizing our relationship, no matter whether it's through the use of my egg or my girlfriend's and how we find a guy and his sperm" (Di, aged 37). "There's no legal protection for our marriage. If one says [they want] to break up, that's it, end of story. But if there's a child, you'll probably be more rational…that is, you then have a common future" (Jia, aged 31). Although both Di and Jia were single at the time of the interview, they believed that having a child would endow a couple with a "shared" vision of family life and thus help to overcome the lack of recognition of same-sex families in China.

In addition, among these eight participants, three of them, Jia (aged 31), Shi (aged 30), and Kun (aged 37), placed strong emphasis on the importance of a genetic tie between their prospective child(ren) and themselves. Take Kun as an example. She was a non-local resident in Beijing working in a state-owned enterprise with a middle income, whereas her partner was unemployed and reliant on Kun for financial support. At the time of the interview, Kun was planning to go to Cambodia with her partner to make their second attempt to conceive a child through IVF. They wanted to have a child who was "connected to both of [them]." Given their financial concerns, the couple had opted for IVF in Cambodia, where the cost of assisted reproduction is much lower than in developed countries and estimated to be up to 100,000 Chinese Yuan (approximately 11,350 British Pounds). Due to her age and her previous failed attempt at using IVF, Kun had decided to

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provide the eggs, whereas her partner, who was more than ten years younger than her, planned to receive the embryo and give birth to their child. By doing so, they could participate in the creation of their child together. Kun explained why it was important for both of them to be involved in the process of pursuing biological motherhood:

> I think that our relationship is pretty good, but having a child would make our family more stable and more motivated going forward. The child is the motivator. Yes, having something to strive for, a common goal that we work hard for and achieve together.

Kun stressed the importance of genetic ties, without which she was worried that she would feel annoyed by the child's naughtiness and reluctant to take on the role of parent and provide care in the future. She said: "If the kid's my own…I'll keep telling myself, 'This is my biological kid, this is my biological kid, somehow genetic, biological…Just bite the bullet!'" Echoing Nordqvist's (2017) notion of genetic thinking, Kun demonstrated that the genetic tie with her child would shape the way in which she perceived her legitimate status and responsibility as a mother. Rehearsing such thinking made her believe that she would not relinquish the tie with her child and would shoulder the care responsibility. According to Mason (2008), genetic ties are commonly perceived as "fixed," although they are actively defined and worked upon by family members in their everyday lives. Kun's belief in the importance of genetic ties lent color to her family imaginary, in which she had developed fixed ideas about the unbreakable bond between parents and biological child(ren) and the associated familial role and care responsibility. She strongly believed that having a biological child would serve as the cement in her family relationship with her same-sex partner, and therefore she took action to pursue her path to motherhood.

It is also noteworthy that most participants who were in favor of having their own children, especially those who valued the genetic tie, preferred not to involve a known sperm donor and therefore excluded the option of having a child through contract marriage

or self-arranged insemination outside of clinics. Previous studies have shown that lesbians in some Western countries may have children through self-arranged donor conception (conceiving in private arrangements with friends or personal networks outside clinics), especially in the past when there was no legal access to clinical treatment (Agigian, 2004; Nordqvist, 2008). Echoing the worries of many lesbians over such private arrangements outside clinics, as documented in Western literature, including the lack of health screenings of the sperm and the absence of legal regulations determining the boundary between the sperm donor and the lesbian family (Baetens & Brewaeys, 2001; Hayman et al., 2015), participants in my study were reluctant to engage in self-arranged donor conception. They explained that seeking ART overseas was worth the money and effort because it afforded them the peace of mind that every step of the conception was following formal and legal protocol. They also said that, given their socially marginalized position as either a single biological mother or a non-birth mother without any legal status in China, they would be in a very vulnerable position if a known sperm donor tried to claim his parental status. Such concerns need to be understood within the context of Chinese culture, in which men tend to face huge pressure to continue the family line due to the cultural emphasis on the primacy of patrilineal ties (Santos & Harrell, 2017). Participants thus believed that there was no guarantee that the sperm donor would not intervene in the lala family, even if the two parties had made an agreement not to do so beforehand.

My participants' perception of motherhood as a way of cementing their couple relationship reveals what Nordqvist terms (2012, p. 301) "contractual intimacy" in the sense that parent–child affective practices can be understood as instrumental rather than purely altruistic. By interviewing lesbian couples with experiences of pursuing donor conception in England and Wales, Nordqvist (2012, p. 301) argues that having and raising a child is instrumental in meeting a couple's desires and emotional needs and that, in order

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to fulfill the instrumental value, couples strategically negotiate who can have "ownership" of their children and explore how they may prove their position as parents. In my study, my participants' plans to seek ART overseas and eliminate any potential risks from a known sperm donor signaled their felt need to legitimize their parental position within a heteronormative environment. While they were aware that some lalas involve a gay friend or gay husband (in a contract marriage) in the process of conception, most participants stressed the importance of centering the dyadic couple as the foundation of the family and avoiding the involvement of any third party. In discussing the idealized form of camaraderie and solidarity between lalas and gay men, Y. Wang (2019) draws our attention to this possibility while alerting us to the fact that it remains highly contested due to lalas' and gay men's constant need to negotiate gendered, class, and relational struggles. My findings provide concrete evidence that some lalas may focus on contracting family relations in a way that can protect their sense of selves as legitimate parents and the solidarity of their family, rather than forming camaraderie with gay men. As shown in other parts of this dissertation, compared with gay men, lalas need to navigate additional gendered, material, familial, and structural obstacles when forming their female-led families within a patriarchal and heteronormative environment. Therefore, the romanticized picture of camaraderie and solidarity between lalas and gay men should be treated with caution. It is more prudent to understand lalas' pursuit of motherhood as both cutting-edge and conventional – they were imagining futures of relatedness and expanding family ties beyond the heterosexual family model and state control, and yet, at the same time, conforming to traditional family ideologies that emphasize the nuclear form and biological ties, with the goal of rendering their family form legible within systems of social norms (Gabb, 2018; Mamo, 2018).

On the other hand, not every lala shared the belief that having one's own child(ren) is instrumental in making intimate and family life more stable. When asked about their thoughts about childbearing, many revealed a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future. For instance, Guo (aged 30) reported that she had hesitated to take any action to have a child, although she supported her partner's wish to have one: "My life is still so unstable as a migrant to Beijing. It's not that suitable to have a kid. No one can tell what the future looks like." Similarly, Cong (aged 31), who was single and a non-local resident in Beijing, firmly stated that she did not want a child, irrespective of her sexual identity: "It's so hard to live a decent life on my own. Why bother to have a child?"

While these participants highlighted the impact of material constraints on lalas' reproductive decision-making, it is noteworthy that the lack of legal recognition of and social support for same-sex relationships in China also created a real hurdle. As a non-local designer working in the Internet industry in Beijing, Ting (aged 32) described her feeling of "midlife crisis" and attributed it to the many uncertainties in her life, including unstable income, no guarantee of sufficient resources to support her in old age, the likelihood of changing jobs in the ever-changing Internet industry, and uncertainty about where to settle down in the future. More importantly, in addition to her view that it would be "unfair" to children of same-sex families to grow up in a hostile environment in China, Ting described how her identity as a lala put her into a "turbulent state," which could explain why she had never thought of becoming a mother:

> Because we've always been in turmoil, in a turbulent and hidden state of life…because you can't rely on your partner to give you a promise for the future. Since you're not granted any legal protection, your rights are not legally guaranteed or protected…On top of that, there are more of us who don't want children. We definitely don't have that much longing for children. So, if you don't have children, you probably have less emotional support in the future, and you lack the same thing normal families have…Deep down you'll still…I have to learn to deal with everything and that's why I feel extremely stressed. I'm always prepared for the worst. What if this person can no longer stay with you, what would you do?

On the one hand, the heightened sense of insecurity described by Ting might explain why some participants shared the "common goal" of having children, which has been the norm within Chinese heterosexual families. As suggested by Nordqvist (2017, p. 876), genetic ties are often considered a kind of "social 'glue' that keeps family relationships intact." On the other hand, rather than embracing the hope that having a child would stabilize the family, Ting highlighted how the lack of legal protection, coupled with traditional beliefs about what it means to be "family," might cause lalas to lower their expectations of achieving a stable and long-term same-sex relationship and to give up the prospect of achieving motherhood. Whereas the majority of participants, regardless of their desires and intentions in relation to having children, reported that they perceived their same-sex partners, or would perceive their future partners, as part of their "family," Ting was one of the very few participants who was reluctant to count her current relationship with her same-sex partner as a form of "family." She explained:

> When it comes to family, I think of my parents, our relationship, and what's happened between us since I was small. I feel very much…very stressed. So I don't…I don't really feel like thinking of this life of ours [Ting and her partner] as a family…Perhaps my family belief is still quite traditional. That is, a family is a father, a mother, and a child…Family is probably just too heavy for me. Responsibility, promises, and staying together and never splitting apart…So…I just feel that she [partner], my cat and dog, and I live together and trust and care for each other. That's good enough.

Ting not only expressed strong feelings of distance from her parents due to their expectations that she would marry the opposite sex, but she also felt very uneasy with the term "family" due to its deep cultural heritage and its associations with heteronormative responsibilities and lifelong promises. She thus rejected the traditional framework of family practices and ideologies in her current relationship. Ting's view of her "family" life might be exceptionally pessimistic, but it highlights how conventional family beliefs and heterosexual norms in China have shaped lalas' family imaginaries and might discourage

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some lalas from picturing their own families with their same-sex partners and pursuing parenthood. Building upon relationship stability and financial sufficiency, lalas needed to make extra efforts to work out ways of creating family ties that worked for them, including how to become mothers, who should be involved in the process of conception, and who would carry the baby. All of these issues were closely intertwined with their ways of making sense of what it means to be connected in a heteronormative environment in China, where same-sex families and parenthood are denied legal protection or recognition.

Having children as part of a "complete" life

The belief that having one's own child will make one's life "complete" was shared by 12 participants. When elaborating on their different ways of understanding and achieving such "completeness," participants tended to draw a line between their own ideas about how to build connectedness and their parents' ideas. For instance, Shi (aged 30), who was single at the time of the interview, had been working for nearly a year in a private company in Beijing that helped people gain access to ART overseas. She was responsible for providing information about fertility treatment options for Chinese gay men and lalas in particular. Through her job, she had become well informed about various methods to have her own child, including IVF, surrogacy, and egg freezing, which she had had no idea about in the past. She said that she had always wanted to give birth to a child: "You'll get to experience what it means to give, what is big love, what is responsibility…This means entering another stage of life…I see my life as complete only if I have a child."

On the one hand, Shi admitted that she was affected by "Chinese logic" in the sense that she would prefer to have a genetically related child rather than an adopted one, and that it was of utmost importance to earn enough money to pursue motherhood through ART and provide sufficient resources for her child. On the other hand, she used the term "small love" to refer to the way in which Chinese parents treat their children and differentiated it

from her pursuit of "big love." She said, "Like my Mum, she knows that the money she's earned all her life is to give to her daughter. Spending every penny on her daughter is good, but spending even one penny on others is uncomfortable." Shi emphasized the importance of making a significant contribution to society rather than only to her own family, such as by helping more families achieve their goal of having children and providing them with accurate information.

Similar to Shi, other participants, such as Ling (aged 35) and Jun (aged 26), put some distance between their ways of approaching family life and the old ways endorsed by their parents. Meanwhile, they continued to demonstrate traditional ideas about family connectedness, which are prescribed in the heteronormative script. Ling had quit her job in a state-owned enterprise in her hometown which had been obtained for her by her parents, and moved to Beijing to work in a logistics company in order to escape from parental control. At the time of the interview, she had broken up with her ex-girlfriend, who did not want to have a child. She explained her decision: "What I understand as 'family' is the same as heterosexual people's…You have a child and it's like a breath of fresh air in your family. You're not sure what he or she will bring you. That's completeness." While Ling expressed the hope of one day having a family that would be exactly the same as her parents' in the form of a nuclear family, she drew a clear distinction between her desired way of parenting and that of her parents, who had been pressurizing her to marry the opposite sex:

> I'm responsible for giving my child wings. You then go and fly…That is, everyone thinks that he/she has done whatever it takes to raise the kid. But everyone ends up not getting the kind of reward they want…It's like my parents and me. They always think that you'll be happy doing this and that. But the problem is that no one has ever thought: what if that's not what I want?

Moreover, in contrast to their older parents, some participants believed that the blood tie was not the most important thing because the experience of raising a child per se

was meaningful to life. Jun (aged 26), who was Kun's partner and would be responsible for carrying their baby if their attempt to use IVF succeeded, said:

> I don't seem to value the blood tie that much. As long as emotionally you devote yourself to raising the child since he/she is born and fulfill the obligations of a parent…I think a child will bring more of a family atmosphere at home. After all, in the world generally, having a child makes a complete family.

The couple's different ideas about genetic ties had allowed them to reach a consensus about their pursuit of shared motherhood. While the above-mentioned examples demonstrate that heteronormative family imaginaries continue to have a tangible impact on lalas' ways of developing their intimate and family lives, they also reveal lalas' new ways of understanding family connectedness, with a stronger focus on personal feelings and aspirations and challenging the taken-for-granted family norms associated with parental prioritization of family interests, parental control over (adult) children, and genetic ties.

On the other hand, participants who actively sought ways of achieving "completeness" in life were not in the majority. Similar to Jun's view on the importance of the experience of parenting rather than that of genetic ties, Dong (aged 33) said: "I think having a child would probably make a family more complete. I don't necessarily have to give birth to a child. I might adopt one." Min (aged 37) also said "You'll probably live a fuller life if you have a child…that is, the experience of accompanying another life to grow." It is noteworthy, however, that Dong had given up hope of becoming a mother and Min had not made any fertility plans or started any in-depth discussion with her partner over the past nine years because of the huge "trouble" confronting lala mothers. Min's remark highlights the "trouble" that deterred over half of the participants (18 out of 33 participants) from actively pursuing motherhood:

> If lalas want a child, they need a great deal of strategic planning and preparation work. Heterosexuals probably need to make preparations only after childbirth. For us, we need to do a lot of preparation before childbirth to give him/her a status, to

think about how to get the baby. These require huge input, including energy and money.

Rather than embracing a strong desire to have a child, Min reported that she preferred to put her energies into her work as an editor, especially given that her job remained unstable. When asked about the greatest difficulty in pursuing motherhood to, as she claimed, "live a fuller life," Min pointed to the way in which single women are denied access to "the basic right to reproduction." Min explained that it is impossible for single women to secure a legal hukou (household registration) status for their children through the "normal channel," that is, the government authorities, given that these women do not have a legal marriage certificate. Without a legal hukou status in China, it is very difficult for children to access education and other welfare benefits in the future. Lalas are generally perceived as single and unable or unwilling to bear children, unless they engage in opposite-sex marriage. Given these structural constraints, Min felt that it was almost impossible to realize her desire for "a fuller life."

The worry over the status of their potential child was echoed by many other participants who were not actively pursuing motherhood. In fact, participants who were having their own children or planning to have children outside opposite-sex marriage managed to use different strategies to overcome this legal constraint. For instance, Ru had used her own eggs to conceive her baby rather than pursuing shared biological motherhood because, through a DNA test, which is required by the local authorities in Beijing, she could then acquire a Beijing hukou for her baby, who was genetically connected with her. Other, non-local, lalas who had children, such as Ya (aged 34) and Meng (aged 33), believed that population control outside Beijing was much more lenient and they were thus able to steer clear of official regulations governing hukou registration. In other words, while the traditional ideology of reproduction, which is perceived as a life stage to fulfill or a life

task to accomplish, was common among participants, there was apparently a lack of knowledge or guidance about how to become parents and how to fight for legal status for their children among many lalas, unless they actively explored alternatives online and/or through the market. The prospect of a "complete" life with one's own child(ren) tended to be overshadowed by the lack of social and structural support for people who wish to bring non-conventional families into existence outside the heterosexual family model.

Children as good company and a potential source of emotional support in one's old age

The cultural expectations of care work and/or emotional support provided by one's offspring, especially in later life, were commonly shared by participants, and according to them, their parents. Six participants expressed worries about their later life, when they might be left alone after their partners passed away or left them for different reasons. The prospect of having children could soothe this sense of insecurity or loneliness because they considered children to be good company and to represent connectedness with themselves and their partners as a family unit. That was why some of them, including Kun (aged 37) and Ru (aged 36), were willing to make all the effort, including money and energy, to seek ART overseas. For instance, Kun, whose partner was more than ten years younger than her, said:

> I'm afraid that I won't live so long and she might be quite lonely [after I die]. She would have nothing on her mind, no one to care about. If we have a child, he/she would take care of her. She also has someone to care about. She would have company. Even if the kid isn't around, he or she can keep her company mentally.

Meng (aged 33) shared a similar belief in the importance of having one's own child for company, but she had taken a completely different approach to becoming a mother. She had married a heterosexual man but divorced him immediately after giving birth to their child conceived through IVF using his sperm. She attributed her decision to get married at

the age of 30 to the need to "live life as a normal person" in front of her parents. Meng had begun her relationship with her current same-sex partner before her pregnancy and both of them had been raising the child together. Whereas her partner had a stable job in a state-owned enterprise, Meng was earning unstable income as a freelance writer and was mainly responsible for childcare at home. She was satisfied with this family arrangement because she saw the company of her child as indispensable in her life:

> I'd always had the feeling that I was adrift all my life and that I had no roots or home without a child…In fact, I'm that type of person who feels insecure all the time. Neither your partner nor your parents can stay with you all your life, but a child can, because he/she is your flesh and blood and can't leave you behind.

To Meng, nobody except her own "flesh and blood" would keep her company for the rest of her life or could endow her with "a sense of security," which was unattainable through other means, including registering a same-sex marriage overseas given its lack of legal status in China. Meng defined her current relationships with her partner and her daughter as "a family" which was "very stable and very normal." Although her parents had been very angry at her decision to get divorced, they were helping with the care work for the child without asking anything about her relationship with her same-sex partner, who was only considered her "friend" by her parents. Meng believed that her status as a mother had caused her parents to acquiesce to her family form and that her divorced and currently "single" status also saved her from the pressure associated with the traditional roles and duties of a wife and daughter-in-law to the husband's family. Thus, Meng had achieved motherhood and attained a "sense of security" and "freedom" from heteronormative family obligations, while at the same time challenging the conventional roles and norms associated with motherhood. While Meng's way of achieving motherhood was unique in the sample, it highlights that some lalas will go to extraordinary lengths to create their own family ties, which are considered significant psychological protection for them in the long run.

On the other hand, what concerned most of the participants and deterred them from pursuing motherhood was still the place of the prospective child within wider kin. For instance, although Xia (aged 38), an accountant in a local firm, expressed grievances against her parents, who were of "little education" and unwilling to accept her identity after her coming out, she described how parental concern had shaped her desire to have a child:

> My parents worry a lot. What are you going to do when you're old? My mother is still with me. I can still take care of her when she's sick or whatever…But you have to face your old age on your own. That's very scary.

In fact, she had hesitated to pursue motherhood because she foresaw huge difficulties, including her age, the unstable relationship with her partner, and her worry about the absence of a father figure in her prospective same-sex family. As mentioned earlier, the majority of participants were aware that their parents were pressurizing them to have children out of good intentions because Chinese parents generally want to make sure that their adult children, who are often only children, will not be left alone in their own old age. Such parental concern needs to be understood within the Chinese context in which the family, rather than the state, remains the main provider of care support in contemporary China (Shang & Wu, 2011). Nevertheless, given the absence of a father figure, more than half of the participants were worried about how to explain the status of their child to parents, relatives, and/or neighbors who were close to their parents if they became mothers. Thus, even though some participants, such as Xia and Wen (aged 35), echoed their parents' concern and shared the belief that having a child would keep them company in their old age, they hesitated to become mothers.

Wen had already come out to her mother, and after three years of conflicts and negotiations arising from her mother's rejection of homosexuality, her mother had eventually struck a deal with Wen by asking her marry a gay "husband" in order to save the family's "face", and in return promising not to disrupt her relationship with her same-

sex partner any more. While her mother wanted her to have a child through the help of her gay "husband" so that they could "keep up appearances" as a heterosexual family with a child in front of other family members in their hometown during festival visits, Wen resisted her request in the following way:

> I repeatedly told my Mum that I don't want children...because this matter is very complicated. There will be education problems after the child is born. How to deal with my parents and his, and how do they deal with people they know? Like why? The question of why is the father always absent? Also, the child may tell when he/she grows up…he/she may blurt out the truth that there's no father…But I haven't made up my mind about how to get a baby or even whether to get one.

While the prospect of raising offspring to care for them in old age seemed promising to both lalas and their parents, Wen illustrated the complex concerns that had to be taken into account. At the time of the interview, she was earning a stable income at a state-owned enterprise, whereas her partner's job as an editor was relatively unstable. Wen reported that she wanted to spend more time on personal and career development rather than "being tied down by anything," especially given her unpleasant experience of parental pressure to enter a traditional marriage. Therefore, although she foresaw that a child would be good company in her old age, she had not pursued motherhood so as to save herself the trouble of having to explain where her child came from and handling wider family relationships.

In Chinese society, individuals are still expected to carefully manage and balance their own relational desires with their obligations to the satisfaction of family members (Barbalet, 2014; Qi, 2016). On the one hand, participants' desire to have children as a source of care and emotional support was shaped by parental concern and the lack of care-related social welfare provided by the state. On the other hand, such a family imaginary could be curtailed by lalas' social connectedness with wider family networks, whose conception of what counts as a "family" tended to remain heteronormative. This had direct

consequences for lalas' decisions about whether or not to have children, discouraging many participants from putting their fertility plans into practice.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Chinese lalas' concerns about having children and their ways of responding to the perceived and/or actual difficulties in doing so. Traditional and new beliefs about family ties, coupled with concerns about the stability of family life and worries about their later life, came into play in participants' decision-making processes regarding whether and how to have children. Participants were aware of different kinds of constraints in the route to motherhood as sexual minority women in China, ranging from the high cost of seeking ART overseas and/or raising a child, potential discrimination against same-sex parents and their children, and difficulties in explaining the child's identity to wider kin, to the lack of familial, legal, or social support for same-sex parenthood. As a result, a number of participants hesitated to take any action, and a few had given up the option of becoming mothers because they foresaw too many obstacles. My research contributes to empirical and theoretical understandings of the wider sociological debates about changing family life in the following three ways.

Firstly, this study provides new empirical evidence of lalas' desires and intentions to have children and their parallel concerns about the difficult route to motherhood in China. Lalas' family-making, which deviates from heterosexual family norms in China, foregrounds the marginalized position of lalas who seek to create family ties as they wish. As demonstrated by the experiences of these participants, structural constraints on hukou registration and the lack of legal or social recognition of the familial and parental status of same-sex couples discouraged many lalas from embracing the prospect of becoming a mother. In addition, apart from their socially marginalized status as sexual minority women,

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the different socio-economic and residential status (local/non-local) of lalas also led to their different responses to the difficulties around having children in China. The findings show that the use of ART overseas was a viable option only for those who possessed sufficient financial and cultural resources to acquire information about ART and to go abroad. Compared with local participants who were born in Beijing, non-local participants were more likely to express worries about life uncertainties due to the difficulties in settling down and handling the high living costs in the capital city, which discouraged some of them from pursuing motherhood. Meanwhile, given the inconsistent implementation of birth-control measures in different cities in China (Nie, 2010), local participants were subjected to tighter controls, including a DNA test of the parent–child relationship, when attempting to secure a Beijing hukou status for their children compared with their non-local counterparts, who could manage to take advantage of relatively lenient regulations in other cities to secure a non-Beijing hukou status for their children.

On the one hand, the findings show that the traditional heterosexual family model continues to play a key role in the Chinese government's blueprint for social and regime stability (Engebretsen, 2014; Rofel, 2007). On the other hand, despite the continued power of conventional family norms and structural constraints, some lalas did explore potential ways to transgress heteronormative biogenetic family bonds, taking material, familial, socio-cultural, and structural factors into account. Scholars have suggested that examining the role of the state in regulating and shaping sexual desires and practices in China is key to understanding Chinese sexual culture and homosexuality (Ho et al., 2018; Kong, 2016). Building on this view, this study highlights that it is important to situate lalas' reproductive decision-making processes within the larger socio-cultural, economic, and political context of China, which shapes lalas' unique family practices and imaginaries.

Secondly, this study calls for more attention to be given to the diverse ways of navigating family ties between generations. It highlights the tension between lalas' feelings towards family connectedness, which are, to a large extent, bound by familial and social norms and roles, and individuals' pursuit of agency and autonomy in redefining who can be related to whom. Based on the interview data, a great deal of rumination and planning about how family connectedness between the three generations of lalas, their own birth parents, and their (prospective) children could be created and maintained came into play in lalas' decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children. The mixed feelings of connectedness with and distance from their parents and the perceived need to maintain good intergenerational relations and care were commonly experienced by participants when they contemplated whether and how to have children. Previous studies of same-sex parenthood have largely overlooked the role and effect of intergenerational dynamics. Only a few exceptions have examined lesbians' relationships with their parents after the birth of their children conceived through ART (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist, 2015). It is worth paying more attention to the intergenerational dimension of same-sex family life because the meanings of family connectedness are subject to continued reinterpretation and negotiation between old and new sexual and family scripts, and between older and younger generations.

Thirdly, this study demonstrates that lalas' decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children entail a complex interplay of family practices and family imaginaries. It is of great significance to look into family imaginaries because they represent personal thoughts, desires, and cultural ideals about what it means to be connected, in the family and in society (Nordqvist, 2017; Smart, 2007). The findings show that a range of material, familial, socio-cultural, and structural factors had shaped lalas' imaginaries of who and what makes a family. More importantly, family imaginaries had

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tangible consequences for lalas' decisions as to whether and how to become mothers. Participants engaged in different family-making practices, such as the pursuit of ART and shared biological motherhood, divorce from a heterosexual husband after giving birth to their child, and performance of the mother's role for their gay husband's child, in order to fulfill their desired familial roles and seek recognition from their families and/or themselves. Meanwhile, as participants explored different ways of creating their own families and negotiating parental, legal, and socio-cultural barriers to same-sex motherhood, their non-normative family-making practices demonstrated the potential to reshape family norms and ties and push their older parents to reimagine what they might see as 'family.' In short, this study provides empirical evidence for the co-construction of family practices and imaginaries. It shows that a more relation-focused approach to family as a negotiated site of both family practices and imaginaries is conducive to exploring, both theoretically and empirically, how and under what circumstances individuals' reproductive decisions may reinforce or subvert established norms of gender, sexuality, and family.

To conclude, this study represents the first key step towards understanding lalas' ways of making sense of and reshaping family ties in their decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children. It demonstrates how paying attention to both what people do and how they feel and think about intergenerational connectedness and family life in general will allow us to reveal the complexities of family relations and, equally importantly, to identify individuals' needs, wants, and difficulties, especially those whose family aspirations and practices do not fit the norms.

Chapter 6 The Exploration of Cyberspace in Urban China: Lalas Navigating Intimate and Family Life through Online and Offline Spaces

Introduction

This chapter examines lalas' experiences of using cyberspace, including their participation in both online and offline activities initiated by lala-targeted online platforms and social networking mobile applications, and the effects of these experiences on their family-building processes. It is set within the context of ongoing discussions about the ways in which the Internet has created new spaces for LGBT individuals to meet, communicate, and build their communities (Bartone, 2018; Cavalcante, 2019). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 35 lalas, this part of my study focuses on the extent to which cyberspace has created new spaces for lalas to counter established heterosexual and family norms and envision and actualize alternative forms of families in the Chinese context, where the heterosexual family model remains the norm (Jackson, 2019; Kam, 2013; Santos & Harrell, 2017) and state control over the Internet has recently been tightened (Liao, 2019; Tan, 2016).

The objectives of this chapter are twofold. Firstly, it aims to contribute to current discussions on cyberspace and sexuality and family studies by investigating the roles of cyberspace in lalas' intimate and family lives. Expanding on prior research examining the impact of online engagement on identities, sexual exploration, and community and activism among Chinese lalas and gay men (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2010; F. Martin, 2008), my study investigates lalas' experiences of cyberspace as part of their family-building processes in China. More importantly, building on the discussion of the Chinese relational self in both the existing literature (Barbalet, 2014; Qi, 2016) and previous chapters of this dissertation, this chapter highlights the deep tensions between the transformative potential

of cyberspace for lalas' family life and the pressure lalas feel to accommodate social and familial norms. I argue that these tensions reveal the persistence of heterosexual norms and the regulatory power of both the family and the state, which continue to restrict the potentially liberating effects of lalas' experiences of cyberspace on their offline lives.

Secondly, by exploring cyberspace in a restrictive context under state control and self-censorship, this chapter raises important questions about the extent to which individuals use personal and/or collective agency to respond to established norms through online and offline spaces in different contexts. Differently from their Western counterparts, who generally enjoy greater freedom to make use of cyberspace to mobilize individual and collective agency for rights-based advocacy and movements (Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen, 2017), it remains risky, if not impossible, for lalas and gay men in China to launch online (or offline) campaigns to fight for their rights or challenge the status quo (Ho et al., 2018; Liao, 2019). This chapter maps lalas' different approaches to state-censored cyberspace, including their ways of reflecting upon themselves and navigating parental expectations, distancing themselves from others and their own past, and navigating tensions. Understanding lalas' accounts of family life in relation to and in tension with cyberspace offers a more nuanced and context-sensitive analysis of the complex interplay between online and offline lives and between structure and agency.

In this chapter, I begin by situating the rapid development of lala-targeted cyberspace within the socio-cultural, economic, and political context of China and discussing the dynamics between freedom and control in Chinese cyberspace. I then present my findings and discuss how and under what circumstances lalas may benefit from their involvement in cyberspace as they seek to find alternative ways of navigating their intimate and family lives. In the conclusion, I highlight both the opportunities and constraints brought by cyberspace to lalas' processes of same-sex family formation. I also discuss the

implications of my findings for our understanding of the complex power dynamics that come into play when sexual minority individuals attempt to resist established norms and pursue non-normative intimate and family lives within a digital but still heteronormative environment.

The co-existence of freedom and control: Understanding relational selfhood and family formation in online and offline lives

One of the most significant changes in urban China in recent decades is the growing visibility of topics related to LGBT issues on the Internet (Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2010). Before the advent of Internet technology, the state had the authority and means to monopolize the dissemination of information through state-owned media outlets and thus it was able to silence information and discussions about LGBT-related issues in public (Yang, 2019). Nowadays, despite continuing state control over the Internet and crackdowns on protests, the rise of Internet technology has at least given individuals more opportunities to explore different ideas and organize online collective actions in China (Gao, 2016; Yang, 2019). In particular, online platforms have enabled lalas and gay men to explore their sexualities and connect with each other through rapid, low-cost, and often anonymous online communication instead of face-to-face interaction, which used to put them at risk of involuntarily revealing their sexual identities and exposing themselves to stigmatization and discrimination (Ho, 2010; F. Martin, 2008). As shown in this chapter, cyberspace also plays a key role in enabling lalas (and gay men) to obtain information about potential paths to family life, such as same-sex marriage and the usage of ART overseas, neither of which have yet been legally permitted in China.

On the other hand, the extent to which cyberspace helps give rise to new possibilities for imagining and realizing non-heterosexual intimate and family relationships

needs to be understood in relation to a person's relational selfhood and the online and offline environment. Firstly, as demonstrated by my participants' experiences of coming out and forming their families in the previous chapters, it is evident that Chinese sexual minority people tend to embrace their "relational self," which is inclined to pursue self-interest and yet strive to meet family expectations and interests at the same time (Qi, 2016). While there is a common belief that the Internet is productive in generating online and offline communities for LGBT people in general (Cavalcante, 2019; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015; Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2010), this study investigates the more complicated dynamics at play in cyberspace using the case of China, and particularly the experiences of lalas who are attempting to find alternative ways of navigating their intimate and family lives, but are, at the same time, subject to pressure to accommodate social and familial norms.

Furthermore, it is generally believed that China's move towards neoliberal governance has given rise to a "new ethics of self-management and self-orientation" (Zhang & Ong, 2008, p. 8), which urges people to pursue self-interest amid the thriving labor and consumer market without challenging the limits set by the government (Kong, 2017; Rofel, 2007). It remains unknown how or under what circumstances lalas are inclined to make use of cyberspace to challenge established norms in the processes of developing their intimate and family lives. Moreover, research has shown that media and Internet censorship has been tightened by the state in recent years (Liao, 2019; Tan, 2016). Since 2017, homosexuality-related content in online shows and programs has been banned by the state. There have been constant changes and ambiguities in state regulations, which lead to self-censorship carried out by media/Internet practitioners and Internet users (Shaw & Zhang, 2018). As a result, differently from many of their Western counterparts, who have relatively more freedom to explore their sexualities via cyberspace (Bartone, 2018; DeHaan

et al., 2013), lalas and gay men have to tread carefully in exploring online spaces while being sensitive to potential state intervention (Shaw & Zhang, 2018).

Rather than analyzing online content, I draw on participants' personal narratives of their experiences of cyberspace in order to illustrate their subjective experiences and meaning-making processes in relation to their broader social networks, including their relationships with parents and the lala community. In this chapter, the research question I seek to answer is: To what extent have lalas' experiences of cyberspace helped them define and develop their intimate and family lives in the face of persistent heterosexual family norms in China? I identified three major themes: (1) The exploratory space: Rethinking traditional sexual and family norms and navigating parental expectations; (2) "Is there another way out?" Seeking recognition for lala families through community support and/or personal agency; and (3) Space for resistance and accommodation: Navigating local and global discourses about rights and same-sex marriage. In total, quotes from 18 (out of 35) participants were selected because they best illustrate key aspects of these themes. They serve as examples of the generalized patterns of meaning associated with the themes and represent the range and diversity of the data.

The exploratory space: Rethinking traditional sexual and family norms and navigating parental expectations

My findings show that cyberspace has brought various opportunities for lalas' processes of same-sex family formation. Almost all the participants mentioned how the Internet had "opened the door" to new ways of understanding their own identities and thus encouraged them to develop their intimate lives. More importantly, their participation in cyberspace had enabled them to navigate and rethink parental expectations that they would

engage in opposite-sex marriage and to search for possible ways of forming a family beyond the traditional heterosexual model.

a. "Opening the door" to alternative conceptions of intimate and family life and avenues to achieving it

All the participants said that the Internet had played a significant role in their access to knowledge about their sexual identities as lalas and, more importantly, in their processes of self-recognition of these identities. Both the literature and my findings show that it is common for lalas to face and/or fear facing rejection of their sexuality in their daily lives, especially from their families of origin (Engebretsen, 2014; Yu et al., 2018). When asked about their first experiences of identifying themselves as lalas, participants commonly used negative terms including "fear," "shame," and "feelings of being alone and helpless" to describe their emotions after realizing their same-sex desires. Access to information about non-heterosexuality and a "community" of lalas via the Internet made them feel that they were not "weird," "abnormal," or even "psychopathic," as perceived by the general public.

For instance, Na (aged 33), who was raising a child together with her same-sex partner without her parents knowing anything about her current family status, reported that she had discovered her same-sex desire in her teens and had thought of committing suicide due to perceived parental disapproval at that time. She said that the Internet had rescued her from the depths of despair because it enabled her to become connected with a community through which she could meet people similar to herself in terms of sexual identity.

> It gave me a strong sense of community. I used to question if it was only me in the world. And I felt so isolated and helpless. I was so afraid that others would know about this... but then through the Internet I've come to realize that the world is huge... now that I have my own space for survival, it's best if my parents could accept it. That's all I want.

Na's ideal family form would be if the family she was building with her same-sex partner could gain parental recognition and they could live close to their parents so as to take care of them. Unfortunately, her current family form was far from this ideal. Na reported that her parents, who had not received a university education as she had, should have heard the term "*tongxinglian*" ("homosexuality" in Chinese), but she never expected them to truly understand same-sex relationships or accept her family with her same-sex partner. Na said, "Our family is a family that no one recognizes…this idea of family only exists in the minds of the two of us." But she said that finding lala-related information and meeting other lalas online had at least made her feel that she was able to enjoy her own space and conceive and actualize her own idea of what a family could be.

In addition, Na's discovery of such space for "survival" through cyberspace also had practical implications for her offline social life. Seeing many other lalas living a good life in and beyond China via the online platform had given her the courage to come out to all her friends and colleagues and live a more open life. She believed that it was important for her to include her same-sex partner not only in the domestic sphere but also in other, public, life spheres and that living a double life would be too "tiring." In describing her experience of engaging in cyberspace, Na demonstrated a high degree of reflexivity, making sense of the changes in her way of seeing herself and her family and social life. As suggested in the classic work by Mead (1934), the self is by no means a fixed inner essence of the individual. Rather, it is malleable through reflexive renegotiation and reconstruction in different contexts. Despite being constrained by the available social and material resources, people can reflexively make and remake their sense of self and locate themselves in relation to others and their social worlds (Jackson, 2018). Similarly, Na's own account of her transformation through redefining herself in her online and offline lives demonstrates relational selfhood, a self that is "reflexive and relational" but also changeable through

everyday interactions and over time. Na's experience highlights that the Internet not only creates virtual space for lalas to explore their identities and develop a sense of community, but it also generates a transcendent effect on their relational selfhood and family life as it broadens their perspectives on whether and how to live their gay lives as individuals and families, despite the lack of parental and societal recognition.

Many participants said that they would hardly have been able to resist heterosexual norms or to pursue their desired way of life as lalas if they had never had the chance to gain access to the Internet. "I would have kept my affections deeply hidden. Perhaps forced to get married? Probably. But my married life would definitely have been unhappy, tragic" (Wen, aged 35); "It turns out that I can live the way I like. It's not a problem" (Cong, aged 31). These remarks highlight that lalas' experiences of cyberspace had enabled many of them to refute established family norms and imagine new family forms. For instance, Ling (aged 35), who was single at the time of the interview, said that she loved watching American television series and Chinese lala movies online because they opened her eyes to diverse family forms, which were different from the conventional version of the heterosexual family constantly preached by her parents. She had never come out to her parents and believed that she would never be able to persuade them to accept her non-normative intimate life due to the pervasive pressure to follow the mainstream in her hometown. Like almost all of the non-local participants in my study, Ling had decided to leave her hometown and move to Beijing in order to live a freer life. Her remark highlights how and why the Internet serves as an important platform in Chinese society.

> If there was no Internet, I would probably have formed a heterosexual family. Because under the huge pressure in my hometown, there's no way for me to find my peers in my social circle. First, I wouldn't have been able to accept myself. It was also impossible to tell others. I would definitely have succumbed to the arrangement made by my parents… Indeed, it's definitely the Internet that has accelerated my growth, or given me the chance to be able to be honest with myself.

"Self-education," "self-growth," and "self-transformation" were also mentioned by several participants when they spoke about the impact of their use of the Internet on the development of their desired forms of intimate and family life. Ling touched upon many of the ways in which other participants reported using the Internet to overcome offline barriers. Parental pressure to marry the opposite sex, coupled with a lack of available channels to meet potential lala friends or partners, tended to make lalas prone to succumb to the traditional heterosexual path to family formation and thus to suppress their same-sex desires. As a single child, Ling expressed a huge sense of familial obligation to be "a filial daughter" and reward her parents' love by fulfilling their expectations. But, at the same time, she complained about what she perceived as a "mismatch" between her parents' heteronormative love script and her own understanding of love and family. Ling was able to identify different "expressions of love" through the Internet and thus she had awakened to the realization that she must "be honest" with herself and escape from parental control of her own family life.

While the existing literature has documented LGBT people's experiences of belonging and affiliation and/or the mobilization of political actions via online platforms in Western democratic societies (Breese, 2011; Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen, 2017), it was rare for my participants to use cyberspace as a collective space to carry out rights-based activism, given the political conditions in China. Rather, cyberspace served as an essential stepping-stone to a more positive view of the self and to self-realization of new possibilities for forming non-heterosexual families in Chinese society. Building on the wider discussion of selfhood as social and relational (Adams, 2003; Jackson, 2011, 2015), my findings show that my participants were able to reflect on themselves and their ways of navigating close ties with their families of origin as well as to combat traditional conceptions of family, especially those preached by older parents. Related to this point, the next sub-theme

illustrates the ways in which lalas' online engagement fits into a wider web of relational ties and impacts upon alternative forms of family formation beyond the heterosexual family model.

b. Bridging the gap between parents' heteronormative and lalas' non-heterosexual conception of intimate and family life

The experiences of some participants showed that the Internet could be not only a catalyst for self-recognition but also a way of building bridges between parents and children. For instance, Qin (aged 35) explained why and how the Internet had been important for her self-realization of her lala identity at an early stage: "At that time I needed a medium to locate my sexual orientation, to give it a place in society. So I went online and searched for a great deal of information." Similar to other participants, she also shared how she got to know about offline events (e.g. gatherings at lala bars, events organized by lala organizations) via the Internet and subsequently had found "a strong sense of belonging" by actively engaging in these community events. Thus, she considered the Internet a useful channel for "bringing them [lalas] from the virtual world into real life." In marked contrast to the majority of participants, however, Qin had taken the initiative to make use of the Internet to expose her mother to lala-related online information and offline events after years of concealing her sexual orientation. She elaborated on her motive for doing so:

> After all, the accumulation of knowledge and information is all that matters. You have to let your parents know about and receive information about this [sexual orientation]... When they know about it and get familiar with it, they won't find it horrifying, or weird, or terrible.

Qin was one of the very few participants who had gained parental support after coming out. While she attributed the support from her open-minded parents to the fact that her family was always receptive to new ideas and different sources of information, given

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her father's job in the film industry, she also highlighted her continued efforts to advance her parents' understanding of her sexuality "step by step" and the key role of cyberspace in facilitating this gradual change. She reported that her act of coming out to her parents had enabled her to pursue her intimate relationships more freely and actively, and to discuss her intimate life with her mother, to whom she had always felt particularly close.

Qin's belief that cyberspace can enable not only lalas but also older parents to "experience a wider world" was echoed by two other participants. Having come out to her university-educated parents and incorporated her family with her partner into her "big family," including her parents and relatives, Yao (aged 29) said:

> My mother and family members never encountered or paid attention to same-sex relationships [in the past]…[but] they've known about all these through the Internet, which has indirectly helped my family to accept me.

Another participant, Shi (aged 30), who was single at the time of the interview, came from Shanghai and was working in an LGBT-friendly private company in Beijing, which helped people gain access to ART overseas. She expressed a positive expectation of her mother's response if she came out later: "If I encourage her to go online, learn more about this community, and bring her to offline activities and whatnot, she will slowly integrate into the community and accept it."

Yao's experience and Shi's expectation of parental acceptance of their homosexuality demonstrate that the existence of cyberspace not only benefits lalas in terms of increased information exchanges and social connections, but it also opens up practical solutions to, or at least hopes for, some lalas to reconcile their non-normative intimate and family lives with parental concerns. Meanwhile, familial and socio-cultural factors, such as their relationship with parents, parents' education and occupation, and/or their work environment might come into play in lalas' decisions to use or not to use cyberspace to directly challenge their parents' heteronormative beliefs. In the Chinese context, where

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family and wider relations continue to play a pivotal role in shaping one's selfhood (Jackson & Liu, 2017), cyberspace offers a platform for lalas to actively reflect upon themselves and their social worlds and, more importantly, to find ways to juggle their personal interests and parental expectations. Through interacting with their parents and educating them with the assistance of cyberspace, lalas have the potential to challenge the status quo and reshape the boundaries of the family over time.

In short, while participants' relationships with their parents and their perceptions of parental support varied, it is evident that cyberspace could provide new spaces for them to recognize their socially marginalized identities as lalas, navigate parental expectations of opposite-sex marriage, and explore new and different avenues to family formation beyond the traditional heterosexual model. As demonstrated by the narratives of Qin, Yao, and Shi in particular, lalas were able to actively make use of cyberspace to counter the heteronormative expectations endorsed by their parents and bridge the gulf between their parents and themselves in their family-building processes.

"Is there another way out?" Seeking recognition for lala families through community support and/or personal agency

When asked about the difficulties in forming a same-sex family, most participants said that one of the greatest challenges was the lack of recognition from their family of origin, colleagues and peers, and/or the state and society at large. My findings provide additional insights into the within-individual and within-sample divergence of lalas' experiences in (not) searching for external support for themselves and their same-sex families via cyberspace. As shown below, participants' experiences of cyberspace depended on their individual and familial circumstances and the wider context. Some

participants actively sought support through cyberspace, whereas others withdrew from cyberspace and relied on themselves to develop their intimate and family lives.

a. Searching for practical and emotional support through online/offline communities of lalas

Among all the participants, with their different relationship/family status, it is interesting to find that participants who were considering having children or had already become mothers tended to attach the greatest importance to the lala community they found via online platforms. For this group of lalas, cyberspace was commonly regarded as an indispensable site for developing feasible ways of forming alternative families within heteronormative society. It not only provided them with practical tips and resources for accessing ART overseas, but it also provided a safe space for them and their (prospective) children to socialize and build support networks.

For instance, Li (aged 36) and Ru (aged 35), who were a couple, clearly revealed the indispensable role of cyberspace in their family-building process. At the time of the interview, Ru was pregnant through the use of ART overseas and Li was planning to conceive their second baby during the coming year. Both Ru and Li expressed deep gratitude for the practical and emotional support they had been receiving from an online/offline support group, which targeted lalas who wanted to become or had become mothers. Li said:

> In the past I didn't dare to believe that I would be able to have my own children. I thought I should just be very thankful to find a partner in my life. But when I met them [the group] online, I came to realize that there is a new path for us, and I really want to pursue it… It's no exaggeration to say that they're the lighthouse, giving us a clear direction as we were like a lost boat drifting in the sea.

Furthermore, Ru and Li took the initiative to share their tips for registering same-sex marriage and seeking ART overseas on the online platform. Li explained their shared

motive: "Because we think this would be especially helpful to everyone in our group... Sharing and being shared complement each other." Ru also added that her gay "husband" had tried to persuade her into giving birth to a baby for him (by using his sperm), but both Ru and Li strongly opposed this idea because it would be "cruel" to raise a child in a "family without love." The online community for lala mothers had pointed her towards an alternative path to childbearing through the use of ART overseas. In turn, Ru wanted to contribute to the lala community by sharing her experience and inspiring others who wanted to pursue motherhood but might otherwise do so in a contract marriage with a gay man. In other words, the couple's acts of sharing their personal experiences could be considered "counterhegemonic practices" (Leung & Lee, 2014, p. 343), which helped the group of (prospective) lala mothers to counter the traditional heterosexual family model and pursue the family life they wanted.

For Ru and Li, the online community of lala mothers could also help to create an offline community for their prospective children to socialize with other children raised in lala families. In their views, such "community awareness" would help their children to understand that they were just living in "a normal family" like their peers in the community. This view was echoed by other participants who were contemplating having children or had already become mothers through the use of ART. They had joined the same online/offline support group because it was the most well-known and established group within the lala community in Beijing. "There are gatherings from time to time. The child would develop a sense of belonging and understand that he/she is not alone" (Kun, aged 37). "I don't want the kid to feel that he's that different from others. That's why I've joined the group online to find similar families for him to socialize with other kids" (Ya, aged 34).

Nevertheless, when asked about her experience of attending offline activities organized by the online platform for lala mothers, Ya said, "My feeling is that I've met

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some friends who are similar to us and yet different… In fact, I don't think people need to be grouped this way... I met all my friends in real life." Ya clearly distinguished between lala mothers whom she met online for practical purposes, especially for getting handy tips about accessing ART overseas and providing peer support for her child, and her friends who shared similar interests in her "real" daily life. This sense of difference was largely echoed by other participants, especially those who were single, as demonstrated in the next sub-theme.

b. Distancing from online/offline communities of lalas and reorienting the focus on oneself

Although cyberspace was found to serve not only emotional but also practical purposes for (prospective) lala mothers, it is noteworthy that some participants expressed a sense of alienation from the online community of lalas and some even revealed a sense of skepticism towards the online community. Many participants talked about attempting to meet potential friends or intimate partners online when they were still trying to explore and affirm their sexual identities in the past, but some of them had gradually become more and more detached from the online/offline lala community because they no longer needed it to assert themselves or meet intimate partners via the Internet. For instance, Tao (aged 36), who was running her own business and actively planning to migrate to an LGBT-friendly country with her partner, reported her change in the use of cyberspace:

> I used to feel courageous and comfortable only when I found peers who were similar to myself. But now I no longer have this problem. Now in the circle of straight people, I just tell them that I'm different. I'm not afraid of losing them anymore… So I feel very relaxed being with her [partner]. Wherever I go, I'm with her.

Tao recognized the importance of cyberspace in her process of "rebirth," during which she came out to her parents and peers and resolved the tension between her online lala identity and offline closet identity. She reported that she no longer relied on cyberspace

to improve her offline life and that she could now focus on developing her current family with her partner by accumulating enough financial resources for migration. By distancing her current self from her past self, Tao was able to create a narrative of her own transformation and come to terms with difference in her relationships with her heterosexual parents and peers. Her case illustrates the mutable nature of relational selfhood and relational ties. Scholars have pointed out that the self is constantly being modified through interactions with others and over time, and that the making of selfhood varies according to one's social location and the social and cultural milieu one inhabits (Adams, 2003; Jackson, 2011, 2015, 2018). Through self-distancing from her past self, Tao demonstrated the agency to see herself in a new and more positive light as well as to redefine her relational ties. Her state of being "not afraid of losing" heterosexual friends and acquaintances demonstrates her capacity to find her own place in her social world and resist the power of heteronormativity. This transformation in her relational selfhood, in turn, reshaped her family life with her partner and rendered it more publicly visible. The example of Tao also demonstrates that lalas might choose not to seek solidarity within lala-oriented cyberspace and might seek recognition for their family status by individual means. However, this largely depends on one's material and social resources and the resultant bargaining power to counter society's heteronormative rules.

Furthermore, the suspicion that lalas they met online were "unreliable" was commonly expressed by my participants. Among those who were single at the time of the interview, in particular, such suspicions placed them in a predicament. On the one hand, most were eager to find a partner and develop a long-term relationship. On the other hand, there was a daunting prospect that they would never be able to find a reliable partner and would "die alone." Take Di (aged 37), who was single at the time of the interview, as an example. Working as a manager in the energy industry, Di emphasized the importance of

being independent-minded and financially independent and had been earning a decent living. However, she reported that she often questioned herself as to whether she had "done anything wrong" and therefore could not "find a person who could build a family with [her]." She acknowledged the role of the Internet in creating "a delightful prospect" of meeting potential intimate partners, but she had become increasingly disappointed by her experience of cyberspace:

> It seems that they [lalas met online] have always been like that, not trying to improve themselves, just making friends, meeting for coffee or whatnot… just like I've been asked by two people, "Have you ever had a one-night stand?" I said, "No, sorry." And that was the end of the conversation... because this is the only way of finding a friend or a lover or developing a relationship. Is there another way out?

Di's remark highlights the dilemma faced by the majority of participants. Most reported that it was very difficult for them to find potential partners, not only because they tended to hide their sexual orientation in their physical lives but also because their parents and supervisors and/or colleagues in the workplace were eager to arrange matchmaking dates for them. Although Di saw herself as in the minority of lalas who are able to come out, in her case to her mother, and be generally open about her sexual identity, she described the wider problem in Chinese society where LGBT events cannot be "open" or "publicized" and contrasted it with the situation in other countries where large-scale LGBT events are allowed. She added: "This is a problem that particularly leaves me at a loss. What you can do is to sneak around, or search [for partners] through apps and online." Di's sense of loss and helplessness illustrates the lack of channels, apart from the Internet, for lalas to develop their desired intimate and family relationships. Nevertheless, as mentioned by Di and other participants, the Internet was seen as overflowing with "unreliable" lalas, who were mostly deep in the closet and reluctant to expose a "full" or "authentic" account of themselves.

Di's claim that some lalas using online dating platforms were just muddling along and/or seeking casual relationships while she craved a stable relationship was echoed by

many other participants. On the one hand, it is noteworthy that such a commitment to future-oriented forms of relationship and family-building and dislike for casual relationships formed online was rarely found in previous studies about the use of cyberspace among Chinese gay men. While individuals, regardless of their gender and sexuality, may have different thoughts about why and how they engage in cyberspace, recent studies on the use of social apps among Chinese gay men show that seeking casual sexual partners and meeting sexual needs are their major motivations for using these apps (Miao & Chan, 2020; S. Wang, 2020). In general, research has found gender differences in relationship preferences among gay and lesbian online daters in Western contexts (Potârcă et al., 2015). Compared with lesbians, gay men engaging in online dating tend to attach less importance to monogamy and hold more open attitudes towards uncommitted sex (Potârcă et al., 2015). Such gender difference, coupled with the emphasis on familial stability in Chinese culture (Zhu, 2018), might explain why the majority of participants, like Di, expressed a strong desire for a monogamous and stable family relationship with their partner.

While it is reasonable to assume that single lalas might be actively searching for potential intimate partners via cyberspace, my findings show quite the opposite. Rather than seeking external support from the online/offline community of lalas, Xuan (aged 27), who was single at the time of the interview, shared the common belief held by other participants that it was important to rely on herself. In the past, Xuan had frequently used online dating apps to find potential partners because she found it hard to identify other lalas in real life. Nevertheless, as she aged, she realized that she did not need a "circle" that was bound by the lala identity. She explained why she had decided to distance herself from the online community of lalas:

> I used to be in touch with some circles of lalas. Although we are all lalas, I don't feel as if I belong there…I feel like everyone is just there for fun…Perhaps some

people feel it's good to just idle the days away. To some people, it's totally fine to have recognition from a partner only, or recognition from family. But there are people who need recognition not only from their partners but also from society. I probably need recognition in many respects.

What mattered most to Xuan was not only a stable same-sex family but, more importantly, parental and societal recognition for herself and her family. At the time of the interview, she reported that she had not come out to her parents, who arranged matchmaking dates for her from time to time. To cope with the pressure on her to marry the opposite sex, she worked long hours every day with the goal of striving for career success, making herself "stronger" in society, and eventually gaining recognition from others. In her opinion, her craving for recognition and career success marked a clear distinction between other lalas, who indulged in cyberspace, and herself.

This distinction was also echoed by other participants, such as Cong (aged 31). Although Cong reported that her experience of cyberspace enabled her to see possible ways of forming a same-sex family, she now spent much less time in cyberspace. She also, like Xuan, distanced herself from other lalas who "idled the days away" in cyberspace: "You can't deny that there are a group of people who just idle the days away. It's like 'Anyway I'm like this. I have no idea how to change my life, whatever.'"

The examples of Di, Xuan, and Cong demonstrate that some lalas were not complacent about the increase in freedom brought by exploring their sexual lives online and that they were active in improving their own offline lives by developing their careers and earning a decent living. On the one hand, their decisions to distance themselves from online/offline communities of lalas and rely on themselves could be considered an instance of their personal agency. As suggested by Jackson (2019, p. 52), agency "arises from the human capacity for self-reflexivity, the ability to reflect on ourselves and our social situation, and from relationality, our interactions with others." My participants were able

to actively reflect upon their relational selfhood in the sense that they tried hard to climb up the social ladder and navigate a better position in relation to others so as to overcome the stigma attached to their sexual identities.

On the other hand, such agency needs to be understood within the specific context of the neoliberal market economy in China, where people are expected to both obey authoritarian rule and become self-enterprising subjects in pursuit of wealth and personal advancement (Kong, 2017; Zhang & Ong, 2008). This context might explain why some of my participants set great store by personal agency and development instead of community-building together with other lalas. As further elaborated in the final theme below, the findings of this study draw attention to the mixed feelings of connection and distance experienced by participants. They add new insights to the existing Western literature on cyberspace, which generally sees it as a liberating space for individual expression, political agency, and rights-based activism in democratic societies.

In short, my findings shed light on the diversity of ways in which participants described and interpreted the extent to which they related or "belonged" to the online/offline communities of lalas. They reveal that cyberspace has a temporal dimension in the sense that it may serve different functions at different stages of lalas' intimate and family lives. Participants' development of their relational selves was shaped by and shaped their engagement with cyberspace, which helped them to find their place in their social worlds. It is evident that all participants acknowledged the role of cyberspace as being a catalyst for self-recognition of one's own identity and intimate life. In addition, lalas who were pursuing or thinking about pursuing motherhood (as shown by Ru, Li, Kun, and Ya) tended to form an online mothering community to support each other in emotional and practical ways. They created an alternative space to counter the lack of social support in the offline environment. Meanwhile, the majority of participants (as shown by Tao, Di,

Xuan, and Cong), particularly those who were single, cautioned against or even withdrew from getting involved in cyberspace when it came to their search for long-term relationships. The fact that participants turned their backs on cyberspace and emphasized personal agency highlights their continuing struggles with heterosexual norms, which put many lalas into a difficult position when it comes to managing their public and private selves. These struggles may, in turn, urge them to give undivided attention to their work with the aim of accumulating resources and earning social respectability.

<u>Space for resistance and accommodation: Navigating local and global discourses about rights and same-sex marriage</u>

In addition to the opportunities brought by cyberspace for participants' family-building processes, and the sense of alienation from the online community of lalas experienced by some participants, another important finding concerns the ways in which lalas made sense of the local and global discourses about rights and same-sex marriage that they witnessed online in relation to the restrictive reality in China, where such discussions remain sensitive (Ho et al., 2018; Liao, 2019). I argue that understanding lalas' accounts of intimate and family life in relation to and in tension with cyberspace provides a particularly useful viewpoint from which to explore the tensions and negotiations between individuals' intimate and family lives and the wider heteronormative and authoritarian context of China.

a. Avoid being "too radical": Maneuvering for position in online and offline spaces within acceptable limits

The majority of participants acknowledged that cyberspace has served as one of the major driving forces behind increasing societal acceptance of homosexuality. LGBT icons, namely Li Yinhe, a Chinese sociologist who is famous for studying LGBT issues in China,

and Kevin Tsai, a Taiwanese TV host who is openly gay, were commonly mentioned by several participants, who believed that these icons have played a significant role in educating the public that being gay is nothing "weird" or "abnormal." Some lalas who were hoping to have their own children, such as Kun and Li, also believed that their prospective children would be living in a more open environment due to continued technological advances and the expansion of cyberspace.

Moreover, when asked about their views on effective ways of advancing the living conditions of lalas, most participants shared the common belief that cyberspace, due to its capacity for spreading messages at high speed and with wide coverage, serves as the most ideal platform to advance the rights of lalas, particularly the right to same-sex marriage and the right to be free from discrimination. "There are more and more lala movies and TV series featuring Internet celebrities from this circle [lalas]…We need advocacy through this kind of channel, expressing and conveying the rights you want. Politics or others is neither efficient nor effective enough" (Yi, aged 33); "Relatively speaking, the Internet is a free platform. Although they [the government] can delete your message, your autonomy is relatively stronger. No matter what you say, there could be certain power and effects" (Xian, aged 40). These remarks highlight that cyberspace, on which the state tends to keep a relatively looser grip than on physical spaces (Liao, 2019), was perceived to be a relatively freer platform for the concerns and needs of lalas to be heard and advocacy of their rights to be publicized, at least among Internet users.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that none of my participants had thought about challenging the political authority of the government or claiming any rights for lalas through official channels. They were alert to the fact that they could only express their opinions about LGBT issues online within acceptable limits. While the limits on self-expression on the Internet set by the government are always ambiguous and shifting (Shaw

& Zhang, 2018), many participants reported witnessing tightened control of the Internet in recent years. The ban on homosexuality-related content on the online platform Weibo is an example of Internet censorship that was commonly raised by participants. Despite participants' different responses to the ban, there was a common belief that it is unwise to be "too radical" and important to "mind your own business" rather than challenging the government. For instance, Lu (aged 38) was one of the very few participants who revealed her attitude towards the ban via the Internet. She reported that she rarely discussed issues related to lala family life with anyone because she had very few friends and her parent, who was a primary school teacher, was extremely conservative and perceived her as "rubbish" because of her single status (without knowing about her lala identity). Nevertheless, the Internet gave her the opportunity to keep up with global LGBT movements, such as Pride Parades, the legalization of same-sex marriage, and speeches about human rights. In response to the ban on Weibo, she shared a photo in which two men were secretly holding hands in the dark environment of a cinema with the intention of highlighting the invisibility of same-sex couples in public, and yet the existence of true love between them. She explained how and why she had responded to the ban:

> I didn't express my opinion, but I just shared a post [the photo]… I'm relatively prudent, but I do express my thoughts within my scope... To be honest, it's hard to say whether it's useful or not… As a matter of fact, you can just mind your own business. For me, I just want to be with a person of the same sex. So I keep searching for her… I believe that the actions and expressions of every individual continue to accumulate… Water turns into the sea, affecting something far more profound.

Lu's statement reveals how lalas' experiences of cyberspace tend to be shaped by the state and self-censorship and how these experiences, in turn, shape their life prospects. Despite Lu's optimistic hope for a gradual improvement in the living conditions and rights of sexual minority people, it is evident that she exercised self-censorship on the Internet by carefully framing her resistance to the ban. The need for constant vigilance in cyberspace

is reflected in not only her conformance to state censorship but also her perception of the taboo nature of homosexuality in Chinese society. Working in the human resources sector, Lu argued that any talk of homosexuality was "strictly taboo," "completely impossible," and "the most sensitive" subject in the workplace. Therefore, rather than coming out in public and/or standing up for the rights of sexual minority people, she indicated that all she could do was to "mind [her] own business" by seeking a same-sex partner who could form a family with her and give her the feelings of "stability," "warmth," and "reliability" that she craved. She added: "Deep down, I feel it's a bit unfair, but I won't ask for too much… I'll just do my part well." Being single at the time of the interview, Lu made it clear that finding a same-sex partner and forming a stable family was her top priority, taking the restrictive environment in China into consideration.

b. "That's something too distant from me": Self-conflicts between alternative imaginations of family life and foreseeable offline constraints

Compared with Lu, the majority of participants expressed a pessimistic view about the chances of seeing the government adopt a more inclusive approach to homosexuality, given its tightened censorship on the Internet. In fact, Lu touched upon many of the ways in which other participants reported experiencing limited agency in cyberspace due to various offline constraints. Her belief that lalas could not "ask for too much" was echoed by other participants, highlighting an inner conflict between the realization of new life possibilities via cyberspace and the burden of conforming to established social norms and the authoritarian regime.

For instance, Xia (aged 38) admitted that she was thrilled to witness the growing visibility of LGBT lives through the Internet, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage in other countries. Also, she used to watch a lot of lala movies online, which gave her a

positive perspective on same-sex intimacy and family life. She believed that these online resources rendered lalas less "alien" to the public and thus increased the social acceptability of homosexuality in general. Nevertheless, as she aged, she had developed a stronger belief that entering same-sex marriage would never become a feasible option in her real life. This view had much to do with the lack of state and familial support in China in general and her own experience with her parents in particular, who had "little education" and were unwilling to accept her identity after she came out. This differed from the view of her partner, who was more than ten years younger than her, had received support from her mother after coming out, and was excited about the possibility of registering same-sex marriage overseas. Xia explained her reasons for becoming less involved in lala-oriented cyberspace and losing interest in keeping up with the latest trends in global LGBT movements:

> Knowing about Pride Parades, public speeches, or the legalization of same-sex marriage in other countries, I was particularly excited, and I felt that our world is getting bigger and bigger… However, now I can't stand others [lalas] getting married… that's something too distant from me, although I really want to do it… But to me, without the presence of the parents of both of us, there's something missing. They receive blessing and recognition only from a small community. But it's totally not the case in the wider context, like in the couple's families of origin and larger society.

Although Xia was currently living with her same-sex partner, she saw the current family they had formed together as far from her ideal form of family, which was to maintain a good and intimate relationship with the "big family," including parents and relatives and to have regular "big family" gatherings. Xia represents a typical example of how most of the participants were caught in a predicament as they experienced a collision between the excitement and hope triggered by witnessing global LGBT movements and the lingering gloom of not gaining recognition in the local Chinese context. On the one hand, Xia said that cyberspace had generated a far-reaching effect on her intimate and family life. She

explained: "Seeing so many people working hard to fight for their rights, that was a real shot in the arm for me." Her experience of cyberspace, where global discourses about LGBT rights abound, had enabled her to recognize her own identity and affirm her previous and current same-sex relationships. On the other hand, as Xia aged, she had come to believe that it is totally unrealistic to fight for rights for lalas in China given its authoritarian regime. Similar to many other participants, Xia stressed the importance of paying more attention to her personal finances and practical concerns. She said:

> My real self, what my partner looks like, and my sexual orientation, these are part of my private life. That is, I can interchange my role of being a lala and my role of being a citizen in society, in this country very well. I find nothing wrong with it… I don't see any misfit. None. But that's probably because many things have been wiped out after all these years. It seems to me that I no longer have much longing for romantic relationships at my age. It's more about practical stuff.

Despite the fact that Xia used to want more information about global LGBT movements via the Internet and to embrace the prospect of entering same-sex marriage, she said that her current priority was to maintain a good family relationship with her partner and their families of origin. Also, as an accountant in a local firm without large savings, she had to work hard to earn a good living in order to support her family life and prepare for her later life. To Xia, these "practical" concerns outweighed the hope for positive changes for the LGBT community in China that had once been raised by the Internet. Thus, she was willing to take up different roles, including the role of a lala in the private sphere and that of a good citizen who would never challenge the heteronormative rules of the state in public. Such a perception and actualization of social roles could be seen as counter evidence of the Western "liberal" understanding of selfhood, which emphasizes the discourse of individual human rights and democratic values. They highlight the continued significance of relational selfhood and family obligations that are so essential in Chinese culture (Bie & Tang, 2016), which largely restricted Xia's "choice" of family life and the

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extent to which cyberspace could liberate her from established norms. Xia's focus on "practical" concerns also reflects the fact that people might have no choice but to cultivate what Kong (2017, p. 679) calls "a new sense of self-enterprising citizenry" in order to navigate their own ways of surviving the competitive market. Not only do lalas need to manage their own lives, including their work, finances, and relationships with partners, but they also have to manage parental and social expectations and find ways of providing elder care for older parents and themselves in the long term, given that the responsibility for elder care largely falls on the family's shoulders, rather than the state's, in urban China (Xu & Xia, 2014).

In summary, while some participants (as shown by Yi, Xian, and Lu) believed that they could exercise limited personal agency on the Internet and push for positive changes in terms of the advancement of lalas' living conditions bit by bit, none of my participants was willing to take any risks in order to challenge the authority of the government or fight for their rights as lalas in public. The examples of Lu and Xia highlight the familial, socio-political, and material conditions which confined them to spending their energy on their personal lives and building their same-sex families through their own means without asking for any rights or support from the state. The power of the state and self-censorship in cyberspace, coupled with persistent heteronormativity, continue to restrict the potential liberating effects of lalas' experiences of cyberspace on their offline lives. The offline constraints might also, in turn, hold them back from freely engaging in cyberspace and exploring new possibilities for countering heteronormativity and fighting for freedom and rights for their intimate and family lives.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that lalas' interactions in cyberspace enable the creation of real or imaginary versions of alternative families but, at the same time, expose them to tensions between the new possibilities revealed by cyberspace and established social and familial norms. The findings show that the constant need to navigate such tensions may push some lalas to withdraw from cyberspace into themselves and to prioritize personal interests instead of community building. They suggest that lalas continue to struggle with the extent to which they can exercise individual and collective agency in order to challenge established norms and bring changes to their intimate and family lives in the digital age due to various constraints. These include the prevailing heteronormative expectations endorsed by parents and society at large, tightening state control, and their own material concerns. My study contributes to current discussions on the ever-changing nature of cyberspace and to sexuality and family studies in three important ways.

Firstly, by developing the linkage between studies about cyberspace and research on sexuality and family life in China, my study links the personal and the familial to wider social processes, including the expansion of cyberspace and online LGBT and mothering communities, thereby shedding new light on different opportunities for online and offline resistance against heterosexual family norms. On the one hand, cyberspace enabled participants to imagine alternative routes to intimacy and imagine family life beyond the traditional heterosexual model. Also, participants who wanted to or had become mothers could form an online community and seek emotional and practical support. Under the huge pressure to engage in opposite-sex marriage imposed by their parents and society in general, participants explained that pursuing their desired forms of family life would not have been possible without cyberspace. In this sense, cyberspace served as a vital platform for lalas

to question traditional sexual and family norms and seek recognition for themselves and their non-heterosexual family lives.

On the other hand, the simultaneous sense of connectedness and distance experienced by participants in cyberspace reveals the complex nature of cyberspace and the interplay between online and offline explorations of selves and intimate and family relationships. Consistent with previous research on Chinese culture's emphasis on family harmony (Bie & Tang, 2016; Huang & Brouwer, 2018), my findings show that the emphasis on maintaining good relationships with parents played a central role in participants' family-building decision-making and strategies. Even though participants felt inspired by local and global discourses about LGBT lives and rights in cyberspace and had discovered new possibilities for forming their own families, their relational selfhood could explain why many of them found themselves entangled in a series of self-conflicts while having to navigate heteronormative norms and parental expectations. From this vantage point, this study makes another contribution by generating a deeper understanding of the full terrain of people's experiences of cyberspace in different contexts. As mentioned in the Introduction, current discussions on LGBT people's experiences of cyberspace have been largely grounded in Euro-American contexts, with a primary focus on the discourses of civil society and human rights (Breese, 2011; Cavalcante, 2019; Jenzen, 2017). By focusing on lalas' accounts of their intimate and family lives in relation to and in tension with cyberspace, my study extends beyond this focus on political and civic engagement in cyberspace and draws attention to a wide range of personal, familial, and socio-political motivations for (not) engaging in cyberspace and the mixed feelings of connection and alienation experienced by participants. Cyberspace as experienced by my participants served as a contingent space in which lalas adjusted and readjusted their counterhegemonic practices and attempted to resolve the tensions between the self and established norms by

taking their specific circumstances into account. These struggles bring to the fore the oppressive socio-cultural, economic, and political forces confronting lalas in the offline environment. These forces also came into play in cyberspace and even compelled some participants to refrain from actively engaging in it, some from fighting for their own rights, and some from acting on the family aspirations inspired by their engagement with cyberspace. In short, this chapter demonstrates the limits of cyberspace due to its potentially liberating effects tending to be constrained by deep-rooted social and family norms and a lack of parental and societal support in the Chinese context.

Last but not least, the tensions between the transformative potential of cyberspace and the felt pressure to accommodate social norms tie into larger questions about the right to family formation and the right to access public spaces to which individuals should be entitled regardless of their sexual identities. The findings of this chapter show that cyberspace, which opened participants' eyes to local and global discourses about rights and same-sex marriage, turns out to be vulnerable to continued influences from the still-heteronormative offline environment and state censorship. Some participants opted out of cyberspace because they believed that they must rely on themselves to earn money and gain social respectability, rather than seeking external systems of support or community networks. This finding echoes the existing literature, which suggests that China's rising market economy has generated a "neoliberal hetero-/homo-normative culture" that endorses self-reliance and self-responsibility" (Kong, 2020, p. 1007). As discussed in the findings, such an emphasis on self-interest prevents people from challenging the status quo or the authoritarian rule of the Chinese government (Kong, 2017; Rofel, 2007). Participants' reluctance to engage in political actions either online or offline calls into question the ways in which lalas' rights to form and enjoy their family lives have been privatized, if not silenced, by both the state and lalas themselves. Further research, such as online

ethnography and surveys, is needed to explore to what extent and how cyberspace can provide better opportunities for lalas and other sexual minority people to exercise individual and collective agency in deciding the way of life they prefer.

To conclude, by looking into the role of cyberspace in offering real or imaginary avenues to non-normative family formation for lalas in China, I have highlighted both the transformative potential of cyberspace and its limitations. My findings shed light on the ways in which dominant social and familial norms may be negotiated, reconfigured, and/or accommodated through cyberspace. Building on the discussion of relational selfhood in family-centered Chinese society, my study also reveals the complexity of the tensions between non-normative family aspirations constructed through cyberspace and deep-seated social and family conventions. While exploring online space, lalas continue to counter oppositional forces in different ways and maneuver for position in offline space, which has long silenced their needs and wants when it comes to same-sex relationships and family formation.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This final chapter provides a summary of the key contributions of my research. It highlights how my empirical findings contribute to new knowledge about same-sex families in particular and about gender, sexuality, and the family in general. With a focus on three different and yet interrelated aspects of lalas' family-building experiences, namely their ways of navigating their relationships with their families of origin (Chapter 4), their decision-making processes concerning the pursuit of motherhood (Chapter 5), and their experiences of cyberspace (Chapter 6), my study has shown the complex interplay between individual agency and social norms in lalas' lived experiences of forming their own female-led families. It has also revealed how lalas' social locations (namely their gender, sexuality, local or non-local resident status in Beijing, and socio-economic status) and material needs intersect with various systems of oppression (including social and familial norms, the heteronormative welfare system, and state control and censorship) in shaping lalas' ways of making sense of and building their families.

My research brings to the fore the marginalized and often overlooked experiences of lalas, particularly their experiences of building their own families in China, where homosexuality remains stigmatized (Ho et al., 2018; Kong, 2016). As the very existence of Chinese same-sex families has been largely silenced, both in society and in the existing literature, this research fills an important knowledge gap and, equally importantly, demonstrates how lalas' family formation in China offers a particularly useful lens through which to problematize the dominant Western-centric theorizing of same-sex families, which is inadequate to fully capture or explain the complex dynamics of same-sex family formation in non-Western contexts. As stated in the introductory chapter, the overarching research questions that I seek to answer throughout my study are: (1) How do lalas make sense of and form their own families in China? (2) To what extent and how have socio-

cultural, economic, and political constraints and opportunities shaped lalas' conception of family and practices of doing family? To answer these two questions, my research design and qualitative methodology are intended to examine lalas' lived experiences in their processes of family formation and the meanings they attach to their family lives.

This chapter highlights how my findings, which have emerged from the Chinese context, enable us to see the importance of attending to individuals' social locations, material needs, and relational ties and situating them within the local context. We can then gain a more comprehensive picture of different paths to family-building and alternative forms of resistance against heteronormativity. Inspired by the growing body of work on Asian sexualities, which questions the dominance of Western-centric scholarship and calls attention to local specificities (Cho, 2009; Horton, 2018; Jackson & Ho, 2018; Kong, 2016; Pai, 2017), my study situates lalas' meaning-making and decision-making processes regarding family formation within the combined set of socio-cultural, economic, and political forces in China. Rather than assuming lalas to be either free individuals exercising personal choice in building their families or passive conformists succumbing to traditional family norms, my research draws attention to the diverse ways in which lalas sustain, reshape, and create family ties within their family-building processes. It reveals a variety of possible resistance strategies and family constellations, which, to a large extent, depart from the liberal, "out and proud" model of coming out and family-building in many Western contexts.

In the following sections, I synthesize my empirical findings and highlight why and how a sociological understanding of lalas' family-making processes as relationally dependent and materially and structurally confined makes distinctive contributions to a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of ongoing changes in family life, both

within and beyond China. I then discuss the limitations of the present study and provide suggestions for further research.

Significant contributions of the research

<u>A relational conception of families: Lalas juggling traditional family obligations and non-normative aspirations for family formation</u>

One of the most significant contributions of my research is that it signifies the first key step in probing into the formation of Chinese same-sex families by examining lalas' accounts of their experiences of negotiating with their families of origin and building their own female-led families. This step forward has both empirical and theoretical implications. Firstly, it has provided new empirical evidence for lalas' use of different strategies for dealing with the difficult relationships with their families of origin during their family-building processes. As shown in Chapter 4, rather than passively conforming to parental and societal expectations for them to marry the opposite sex and forgoing their desired intimate and family life, participants were, to a greater or lesser degree, keen to search for various means of navigating their relationships with their families of origin and explore alternative paths to family formation. With a focus on lalas' experiences of contemplating and/or striving for motherhood, Chapter 5 demonstrates how and under what circumstances different types of relational ties, especially intergenerational ties, shaped participants' decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children. Chapter 6 also reveals how participants actively explored cyberspace to find ways of countering the heteronormative expectations constantly preached by their families of origin and navigate new and different avenues to family formation beyond the traditional heterosexual model.

These findings make a further contribution to the ongoing exploration of how individuals juggle family and personal commitments (Yan, 2010, 2013). Although recent studies on Chinese homosexuality have looked into contract marriage as a response by gay men and lalas to the tensions between their personal and other motivations and parental expectations for opposite-sex marriage (Choi & Luo, 2016; Wang, 2019), no research has specifically explored same-sex couples' perspectives on and actual experiences of forming their own families. Shifting the focus to female-led, same-sex families, my study has shed new light on the ways in which individuals juggle traditional family obligations and non-normative aspirations while building their own families. By presenting the voices and perspectives of lalas, it has revealed their needs and desires, as well as the challenges they face when it comes to family formation, which have long been invisible in Chinese society.

Moreover, drawing on the notion of the "relational self" (Qi, 2016) and interrogating it within the context of lalas' family formation (Chapter 4), I argue that it is empirically and theoretically important to adopt a relation-focused approach to same-sex families. This approach engages with and builds upon a limited and yet growing body of Asian sexuality studies about how same-sex intimate relationships are molded by individuals' relationships with their families of origin (Brainer, 2019; Ho et al., 2018; Pai, 2017) and previous efforts to theorize the relational understanding of selfhood in China (Kong, 2016; Qi, 2016). My study makes a distinctive contribution by further explicating the ways in which different aspects of lalas' family formation have been shaped by and shape relational ties, particularly those with their families of origin. In this dissertation, I have shown how the boundaries of the family are constantly being disputed by family members and subjected to change, depending on the everyday practices of and dynamics between lalas and their family members (Chapter 4). By studying the family as a negotiated site of both family practices and imaginaries (Chapter 5), I have also demonstrated that

lalas' prospects of becoming mothers are inextricably linked with their traditional and new beliefs about family ties, their concerns about the stability of their couple and family relationships, and their worries about the lack of intergenerational care in later life. With its focus on lalas' experiences of cyberspace, Chapter 6 illustrates the deep tensions between the transformative potential of cyberspace for lalas' family life and their perceived need to accommodate social and familial norms and seek recognition from their families of origin. For most of the participants, the conception of "family" was still largely bound up with, to use participants' words, "the big family" (the family of origin including parents and other relatives), as shown by their efforts to handle their relationships with their families of origin and their hopes of integrating their natal families with the families they had built with their same-sex partners. All these findings highlight that it is almost impossible to study Chinese same-sex families without understanding individuals' larger webs of family relations within the wider socio-cultural, economic, and political context.

It is noteworthy that a relation-focused approach to families is relevant to studies of same-sex families in both Western and Asian contexts. As mentioned in previous chapters (Chapters 2 and 4), a small but growing body of Western research has moved beyond an exclusive focus on the dynamics within same-sex couples to examine the role of wider kin in same-sex families (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist, 2015). By studying lalas' family-building in the Chinese context, where individuals are still expected to carefully manage and balance relational desires and obligations to meet family members' expectations (Barbalet, 2016; Qi, 2016), the analytical usefulness of the relational conception of families has been brought into sharp relief. The relation-focused approach to families allows us to move beyond the liberal and rights-based conception of the "free" individual and couple. This allows us to perceive the various micro-strategies that sexual minority individuals may use to negotiate their sexualities with members of their natal families in order to maintain

family ties and seek recognition. In particular, given the increasing prevalence of same-sex parenthood and more open access to different sources of LGBT-related information through the Internet globally, it is reasonable to foresee continued, if not more intense, collisions between old and new family beliefs among and between the younger and older generations in societies where heterosexuality is still the norm. Furthermore, caution should be taken to avoid romanticizing any of the individual or collective strategies used by lalas. Scholars have alerted us to the fact that any tactics may simply mirror or even reinforce existing social structures (Fu et al., 2018; Otis, 2008). As shown in the findings, most of the participants, despite their use of strategies for building their own families and resisting parental and societal opposition, reported a strong emotional attachment to their families of origin, a sense of obligation to please their parents, and hopes of having their same-sex families recognized by their natal families. These findings highlight the need to explore the meaning of family connectedness and pay more attention to intergenerational dynamics when studying same-sex families.

Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the importance of inter-Asian comparison and referencing in knowledge production (Iwabuchi, 2014; Roy & Ong, 2011; Tang, 2020). Iwabuchi (2014) calls for researchers working within and beyond Asia to advance cross-border dialogue and contribute to innovative knowledge production by "making concepts and theories derived from Asian experiences translocally relevant and shared" (p. 44). For instance, in discussing intergenerational relationships in China, Zheng and Ho (2017) draw our attention to the "middle path" shared by the younger generation in Asia (p. 448), who increasingly endorse Western ideas of individualism but, at the same time, continue to embrace collective values, such as respect for older family members and reciprocal care and support provided by family members of different generations. Attending to these similarities enables us to situate sexual minority people's experiences within the connected

histories and cultural heritage of Asia (Tang, 2020). Meanwhile, my study also attends to the peculiarities of the Chinese context that place lalas in a difficult position. While China and other East Asian regions, such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, share similar Confucian values, which attach great importance to family life and family harmony (Jackson, 2019; Ko et al., 2003), the pressure on adult men and women, especially that on women, to marry the opposite sex and have children is extraordinarily pronounced in China due to both social norms and state policies that favor the heterosexual family model (Zhu, 2018). Moreover, due to the previous one-child policy, Chinese older parents tend to consider offspring as the main source of care and support for older family members and thus urge younger adults to continue the family line (Hildebrandt, 2019). These socio-political forces, among other factors discussed in previous chapters, serve as key stumbling blocks to lalas' family-building experiences. Also, the coupling of authoritarian rule with the economic impulse for self-interest in neoliberal China complicates the ways in which lalas must juggle family obligations and personal aspirations in order to live the life they desire (Yan, 2010, 2013). By attending to lalas' relentless efforts to navigate their complex relational ties and negotiate established norms in their family-building processes, my findings can help us to rethink how relational selfhood and the meanings of family connectedness are renegotiated in everyday interactions and how established norms of gender, sexuality, and family can be reshaped (Jackson et al. 2013; Jackson & Liu, 2017). Such thinking can, in turn, be applied and further developed when studying different forms of same-sex families in Asian societies and other contexts.

Multiple inequalities faced by lalas and female-led, same-sex families

Another important contribution of my research is that it offers fresh insights into the gendered, familial, material, and socio-political constraints confronting female-led,

same-sex families in the Chinese context. My study has mapped lalas' family-building practices onto their various social locations, including their gender, sexuality, local or non-local resident status in Beijing, and socio-economic status, which influence individual life chances and entitlements to benefits and welfare, thereby revealing the internal heterogeneity among lalas. Even though participants demonstrated a high degree of agency in reflecting upon traditional family norms and the kind of family life they wanted to pursue, not all of them had sufficient financial or social resources to actualize their aspirations for family formation, which ranged from making a decent living for the purpose of supporting the practical needs of their family and earning recognition from others to using ART in the overseas market. While many participants stressed the importance of financial independence in their family-building experiences, their opportunities to enjoy their desired family life and receive recognition of it from others were shaped not only by personal finances but also by gender and family norms and other socio-political constraints, as highlighted below.

This study has made a distinctive contribution to the fields of gender, sexuality, and family studies by extending the scope of discussions on female-led, same-sex family life into the Chinese context and attending to the materiality of family life that is bound by sexual minority women's disadvantaged positions within China's generational, gendered, and sexual hierarchies. As illustrated in Chapter 4, consistent with previous research on Chinese intergenerational support, which found it to be still biased towards sons and opposite-sex marriage (Fincher, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019), my findings show that it is particularly difficult for lalas to benefit from downward transfers of resources from older parents, given their female identity and unmarried status. Participants thus had no choice but to rely on themselves and use various strategies to seek both recognition and resources. Because the formation of female-headed, same-sex families can be seen as a challenge to

not only parental authority but also the patriarchal and heterosexual male-breadwinner model, participants were placed in a disadvantaged position in their family-building processes without parental, state, or societal recognition of their family status. My research has highlighted that the choices that lalas have in their family-building processes are by no means free from the regulation of gender and family norms, which are often tightly governed by their families of origin, especially fathers.

In addition, the findings that I describe in Chapters 5 and 6 have further demonstrated the ways in which lalas' predicament in their processes of family formation is inextricably linked with their social locations and their (in)ability to cope with various socio-political constraints, particularly the heteronormative welfare system, the hukou (household registration) system, and state censorship of the Internet. Chapter 5 shows that lalas' reproductive aspirations and decisions are hindered by not only individual and familial circumstances but also institutional barriers, including state control over the configuration of families through the hukou system, the denial of access to ART, and the lack of legal recognition or welfare support for same-sex couples and their children. While only lalas with sufficient financial and social resources are able to gain access to ART overseas in order to have their own children, this privileged group of lalas still need to face and try to circumvent other institutional constraints, such as the difficulty of gaining a hukou for a baby born outside opposite-sex marriage and the absence of welfare support for same-sex families. It is thus not surprising that lalas who are economically disadvantaged and who lack parental financial support may hesitate over the possibility of becoming a mother or have given up altogether in the face of insurmountable material and institutional hurdles. Additionally, the majority of non-local participants, who had gravitated to Beijing in search of better job opportunities and greater freedom in wresting control of their own lives from parental intervention, reported that they had found it

difficult to settle down in the big city, especially given the high cost of housing. Their non-local resident status in Beijing tended to generate a sense of insecurity and uncertainty and exacerbate their worries about personal finances and the future, thereby discouraging these lalas from making extra efforts to pursue motherhood through non-traditional means.

Furthermore, while cyberspace has the potential to expand lalas' imaginations about their future family life and to connect lalas and (prospective) lala mothers, the extent to which they make use of cyberspace to challenge established sexual and family norms varies among individuals. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, familial and socio-cultural factors, such as the relationship with parents, parents' education and occupation, and/or their work environment came into play in participants' decisions about whether or not to use cyberspace to directly challenge their parents' heteronormative beliefs. Also, some participants chose not to seek solidarity within lala-oriented cyberspace, but sought recognition for their non-heterosexual families by individual means offline, particularly by earning money and gaining social respectability. This individual strategy largely depended, however, on their material and social resources and the resultant bargaining power to counter society's heteronormative rules. The fact that many participants cautioned against getting involved in lala-oriented cyberspace, or even withdrew from it, and that none of them were willing to directly challenge the authority of the government in either online or offline space has revealed two major challenges. Firstly, the power of state and self-censorship in cyberspace, coupled with persistent heteronormativity, has discouraged some lalas from freely engaging in cyberspace to explore new possibilities for countering heteronormativity and fighting for freedom and the right to their intimate and family life. Secondly, although some lalas may strive for material comforts and pursue their desired family life without asking for any rights or support from the state, it is still problematic that

lalas' rights to form and enjoy their own families have been privatized, if not silenced, by both the state and lalas themselves.

To summarize, it is evident that lalas' experiences of inequalities in their family-building experiences can be attributed to not only individual and familial circumstances (such as personal finances and their relationships with parents) but also wider structural constraints. Gender and family norms that favor heterosexuality, the lack of legal and welfare support for families led by same-sex couples, with or without children, state control over what constitutes a "proper" family, and censorship of what can be done both online and offline continue to place this group of sexual minority women in a difficult position to define and develop their family life outside of opposite-sex marriage.

Moreover, this study has revealed the internal heterogeneity among lalas, challenging the presumption that lalas or sexual minority people can be seen as one singular entity. When it comes to family formation, the material and structural conditions create and reinforce not only inequalities between heterosexual couples and lala couples but also inequalities between lalas occupying different social locations. It is empirically and theoretically important to understand the underlying causes of lalas' difficulties in building their own families in order to provide possible solutions to their experiences of social exclusion in their development of intimate and family life. Such an understanding also has significant implications for future research addressing deep-rooted social inequalities faced by other minority groups, including but not limited to single women and other gender and sexual minority people.

Rethinking individual choice and family connectedness within the local context: Lalas' ways of making sense of "family" and resisting heteronormativity

Last but not least, my findings open up new ways to rethink the changing meanings of family connectedness and different forms of resistance to heteronormativity in the context of global changes in family life. Related to the significance of the relational conception of families, this sub-section further discusses how my study enables us to tease out the complex interplay between structural constraints and individual agency in lalas' family-building experiences. In order to fully understand lalas' conception of family in the Chinese context, this study highlights the importance of examining not only lalas' practices of doing family but also their personal emotions or, more specifically, their dual sense of belonging to their natal and newly-formed families (see Chapter 4), their family imaginaries (see Chapter 5), and the internal struggles between new and old family beliefs (see Chapter 6). The data gathered from this study engages with and contributes to family studies and gender and sexuality studies in two interrelated ways.

Firstly, by bringing to the fore both the change and continuity in heterosexual norms and inequalities in the family sphere, this research highlights different definitions and forms of the "family" and the complex family dynamics experienced by lalas in the Chinese context. As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 4, my research seeks to problematize the heteronormative assumptions embedded in Chinese family relationships, thereby extending the "obligatory framework" that is generally adopted in the field of Chinese family studies, which primarily focuses on family responsibilities and the roles of heterosexual family members (J. Liu, 2017, p. 1035). Drawing upon the perspectives of non-heterosexual women on forming same-sex families, my data has added further insights to the current literature by engaging in this rarely discussed aspect of Chinese family relations in the context of female-headed, same-sex family formation. My findings have complicated the picture of family change by revealing how lalas handle their dual sense of belonging to their families of origin and same-sex families, as well as pursuing same-sex family life and

motherhood in different ways (Chapters 4 and 5). By attending to lalas' experiences of cyberspace, I have also highlighted how they experience internal struggles between non-traditional family aspirations and the cultural ideal of heteronormativity (Chapter 6).

The original findings drawn from my study have shown that my standpoint outside the frame of the normative heterosexual family is theoretically advantageous. Given that female same-sex couples are vulnerable to additional challenges in the heteronormative Chinese context, which does not grant their family forms legitimacy or social recognition, their experiences of building their own families are premised upon their willingness and ability to put additional efforts into conquering social norms and exploring alternative forms of intimate and family life. Studying these additional efforts enables us to see the tension between lalas' feelings towards family connectedness, which are, to a large extent, bound by familial and social norms and roles, and individuals' pursuit of agency and autonomy in redefining who can be related to whom. That is, rather than perceiving their family-making processes as rationally planned and carried out, it is significant to understand that their choices and decisions are laden with emotions and shaped by relational ties embedded in Chinese family-oriented culture. Echoing previous calls for more attention to be paid to the nuances of relational ties (J. Liu, 2017), my study has demonstrated the theoretical significance of attending to both what people do and how they think and feel about intergenerational connectedness and family life. By examining both the family practices and imaginaries of lalas (see Chapter 5), the ways in which women experience and respond to the inequalities arising from patriarchy and heteronormativity are thrown into sharp relief. In other words, although this study did not include heterosexual women, the struggles, tensions, and resistance demonstrated by lalas have urged us to rethink the inequalities embedded in the "family," which continues to serve as a restrictive institution for perpetuating heteronormativity (Jackson & Scott, 2010). More importantly,

they encourage us to search for possibilities for alliances and collaborative efforts that might lead to a more inclusive society for many different people, regardless of their sexual orientations, with diverse family aspirations. Knowledge production in gender, sexuality, and family studies could be further enhanced by more research on the similarities and differences between the struggles with heterosexual norms experienced by same-sex and opposite-sex families.

Secondly, studying the Chinese context enables us to discover different conceptions of family and diverse paths to same-sex family formation, thereby debunking Western-centric biases in the existing literature on same-sex families. Engaging with Western studies on families of choice (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991) and the wider debates on individualization and its implications for intimate relationships in both Western and Asian contexts (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Chang & Song, 2010; Heaphy, 2007; Jamieson, 2011; Yan, 2009, 2010), the present study offers new empirical evidence about lalas' understanding of family ties and the extent to which they accommodate and/or resist the traditional institution of the Chinese family and develop their own same-sex families. Similar to Pai's (2017) study, which shows that Taiwanese lesbians do not see friends as part of their "families," my findings reveal that lalas tend not to entertain the notion of "families of choice," as proposed by Weston (1991). That is, none of my participants regarded their friends as "family members" or attempted to incorporate flexible networks into the "family." As shown in the previous chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), while all participants attached great importance to their families of origin and regarded their parents as an indispensable part of what they considered to be their "families," they shared the belief that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to gain full support and recognition from their parents for their non-heterosexual family forms. Given their concerns about the "face" and well-being of their families of origin and the perceived need

to maintain good parent–child ties, participants had no choice but to resort to different strategies, including contracting a short-term marriage with a gay man, taking a detour by reframing their intimate and family lives, and excelling themselves as independent-minded and financially independent adults, in order to redraw acceptable boundaries with their families of origin (see Chapter 4). Taking their relationships with their parents and their perceptions of parental support into consideration, some participants attempted to make use of cyberspace to bridge the gulf between their parents and themselves and expose their parents to new knowledge about non-heterosexuality. However, the majority of participants avoided direct confrontations with parents and focused on developing their own intimate and family life in private through individual means and economic power (see Chapter 6).

These findings bring light to diverse forms of resistance against heteronormativity, which have been downplayed by the Western liberal discourse in celebration of "out and proud" LGBT communities and identity politics (Decena, 2008; Horton, 2018). Scholars, especially those studying intimate relationships in non-Western contexts, have alerted us to the need to problematize the dominance of Western knowledge and discourses about sexualities (Jackson & Scott, 2010; Stella, 2015). As shown in previous chapters, the complicated maneuver performed by lalas in the Chinese context challenges the overgeneralization of Weston's model (1991), which assumes the act of coming out to be a "common cultural ground" for "lesbian- and gay-identified people of all colors and classes" to challenge the long-established solidarity associated with blood ties and to develop family ties of their choice (p. 60). Moreover, my findings challenge the notion of a "crisis of filial piety" proposed by theories of Chinese individualization (Yan, 2010). Rather than questioning the enduring solidarity of blood ties with one's family of origin and attempting to break away from such ties, my participants saw their blood ties as an inseparable part of their lives and went to extraordinary lengths not to disappoint their

parents. Thus, unlike most of their counterparts in Western countries, lalas are unlikely to follow the path from directly coming out to forming their own families in a linear fashion. Rather, they have to handle gendered, familial, material, and socio-political constraints while they carefully decide whether, when, and how to come out throughout their family-building processes.

In short, it is not my intention to suggest that lalas' families in China represent a unique or exotic form of family. Rather, the family-oriented norms emphasized in the Chinese context, as elsewhere, can draw our attention to the ongoing significance of family connectedness, which continues to shape individual choices and family practices when people, regardless of their sexual orientations, explore their pathways to family formation. The additional difficulties faced by lalas have drawn our attention to the effects of socio-cultural, economic, and political forces and the relentless struggles that minority groups have to experience in order to live out the family life that they prefer. In joining the line of critique of the ethnocentric assumptions of Western-based theories within sexuality/queer studies (Decena, 2008; Horton, 2018; Jackson & Scott, 2010; Stella, 2015), my study has also posed a challenge to the presumed universality of Western knowledge about same-sex families. It has highlighted the importance of empirical knowledge firmly grounded in individuals' lived experiences within a specific local context.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the above-mentioned contributions of this study, several limitations deserve attention. Addressing these limitations reveals important directions for future research with the goal of further advancing scholarship on gender, sexuality, and family issues.

<u>Attending to the voices of the families of origin of sexual minority individuals</u>

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It is noteworthy that this study did not directly examine the perspectives of lalas'

parents or other relatives on lalas' family-building experiences. Rather, it focused on lalas'

own perspectives and their experiences of actively building same-sex families, including

their experiences of negotiating with their families of origin. As stated in the Introduction

and Methodology chapters, this research design was intended to enable an in-depth

examination of lalas' personal accounts of their everyday practices and lived experiences

in their own terms. In addition, it was almost impossible to recruit their parents or other

members of their natal families, given that the majority of participants were hiding their

sexual identities from their families of origin.

The missing voices of the families of origin of sexual minority individuals remain

a common limitation, which is found in previous studies about Chinese sexualities because

homosexuality is still a taboo subject in China (Choi & Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2014;

Xuan et al., 2019). Nevertheless, as shown in Brainer's (2019) exceptional study on LGBT

families of origin in Taiwan, studying the perspectives of both LGBT individuals and their

families of origin greatly facilitates our understanding of the ways in which LGBT

individuals negotiate their gender and sexuality within a family-oriented culture, and the

ways in which members of their natal families take part in these negotiations. Following

this line of enquiry, interviewing parents and other family members would have provided

additional insights into lalas' processes of family formation and thus complemented my

present study. For instance, by studying the narratives of lalas' parents, future research

could probably better capture the roles of parents in lalas' family-building processes and

other family interactions, such as parents' subjective views on their adult children's

relationships with same-sex partners/spouses and their responses to the LGBT-related

information shared by their adult children. However, caution must be exercised because

this approach would only be able to reach a relatively small and more open-minded subset

of participants who are willing to openly discuss same-sex desires and relationships with each other in the family.

<u>Searching for same-sex families beyond China's big cities</u>

Another limitation of the present study is its focus on lalas resident in Beijing. Given the hidden nature of the lala population and my use of purposive sampling within Beijing, it is not my intention to generalize my findings to the whole lala population in different parts of China. Despite my effort to diversify my sample (see Chapter 3), which included lalas of different ages and with different relationship/family status, local/non-local resident status in Beijing, and various occupations, the majority of my participants had a middle-class background. Only three participants did not have a bachelor's degree, and only one of these was unemployed. To a certain extent, my participants' interest in my research, and their willingness and ability to share their opinions about family formation and their experiences of developing intimate and family life, reflect their socio-economic status and access to different resources. Also, the fact that my non-local participants had decided to leave their hometowns to search for better opportunities in Beijing differentiates them from other non-Beijing lalas who stay in their hometowns in the sense that the former had taken steps to move to a big city to explore alternatives. It is thus reasonable to believe that lalas living in other parts of China, especially those with fewer resources in second-tier or third-tier cities and rural areas, are likely to encounter additional challenges when attempting to develop their intimate and family lives, which are not addressed in the current study.

As explained in the Methodology chapter, it was very difficult for me to recruit research participants, especially during the early stages of my fieldwork. My interview invitations were constantly ignored or rejected. Taking the socially stigmatized status of

lalas in China into account, this research, despite its relatively small sample size, represents a significant step forward in identifying the needs, wants, and challenges of lalas and their families and understanding the mechanisms through which lalas navigate heterosexual norms and pursue the family life that they prefer.

More research needs to be conducted to provide a better understanding of the variety of family lives formed and experienced by lalas of different socio-economic status living in other Chinese cities. The majority of Chinese LGBT studies have been carried out in big Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, where sexual minority individuals tend to have access to relatively more social resources and wider community networks (Bao, 2018; Engebretsen, 2009, 2014; Kam, 2013). Using the lens of inter-Asian referencing (Iwabuchi, 2014; Roy & Ong, 2011; Tang, 2020), it would also be beneficial to examine similarities and differences in the ways in which sexual minority people develop and experience their family lives within and across other East Asian countries. Ensuring that the family-building stories of underprivileged groups of lalas and other sexual minority people can be heard continues to be one of the urgent tasks for researchers in this field, including myself, to complete in the near future.

Keeping track of the changing patterns and widening diversity in "family" and "parenthood"

Lastly, this study was not able to convey the full breadth of diversity that exists in the kinds of family arrangements and practices due to the constraints of time and budget in a doctoral study. For instance, among participants who were mothers, or were planning to become mothers, in what ways would they raise their kids in the heteronormative environment of China? Among the few participants who had thought about migrating to other countries for a better family life, would they put their plans into practice, and if so, how? These questions remain to be answered in future studies.

One of the common challenges of collecting in-depth interview data is that this research approach may restrict the researcher's ability to fully capture the ways in which research participants' attitudes, life choices, and family situations change over time (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Although I spent one year doing my fieldwork in Beijing in order to immerse myself in the local lala community and to answer my research questions, it was impossible for me to keep track of how the family life of each participant turned out. More importantly, the focus of the present research is to explore how socio-cultural, economic, and political constraints and opportunities have shaped lalas' conceptions of family and their practices of doing family. Thus, this study allows us to understand the range and diversity of participants' experiences in building their families and how their experiences have been shaped by the wider context. However, it still precludes us from drawing inferences about the needs, concerns, and challenges faced by lalas across different life stages. It is also important to emphasize that not all lalas are interested in thinking about or putting effort into relationships with their families of origin, paths to motherhood, or the exploration of online spaces.

To better capture the changing patterns and widening diversity in "family" and "parenthood," longitudinal studies of same-sex families in China would be useful in order to examine the changing practices of sexual minority individuals in building their families and maintaining relational ties, including those with their older parents and/or their own children, over time. Although census data is unlikely to be officially available in the near future given the government's current Three-Nos policy (see Chapters 1 and 2), quantitative studies with non-random sampling could complement qualitative studies by, for example, mapping sexual minority people's changing attitudes towards family issues, including migration intentions and parenting attitudes. Comparative studies between gay men and lalas in terms of their family-building aspirations and practices would also

contribute to a better understanding of gendered differences, among other factors, in the formation of same-sex families.

Concluding remarks

This study has offered new insights into the different meanings that lalas attach to the notion of "family" and their diverse strategies for accommodating and/or resisting heterosexual social and family norms in the processes of developing their own family lives. In particular, I have dug deeply into the aspects of family-building experiences with which participants were most concerned, including lalas' ways of navigating their relationships with their families of origin (Chapter 4), their decision-making processes concerning whether and how to have children (Chapter 5), and their experiences of exploring alternative paths to family formation via cyberspace (Chapter 6). This study has not only drawn attention to the oft-neglected needs and aspirations of lalas and the multiple inequalities they face in their processes of family formation, but it has also revealed a wide diversity of resistance strategies and family constellations which have been little discussed in the existing literature on same-sex families, which is largely modeled on Western experiences.

Paying attention to lalas' family-building experiences matters in and of itself to the understanding and visibility of lalas and their families. For international scholars working to understand gender, LGBT issues, and family change, examining diversity in family formation also provides a window into the ways in which individuals' social locations intersect with established norms of gender, sexuality, and family and other institutional systems in shaping their conception and formation of families. This study thus contributes

to a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of ongoing changes in family life both within and beyond China.

It is important to highlight that the present study would not have been possible without the invaluable ideas and lived experiences shared by my participants. This study centers on the perspectives and lived experiences of lalas and situates its knowledge production within the local context of China. I am deeply indebted to all my participants for their kindness and bravery in sharing their lived experiences with me and their hope of inspiring others through their participation in this research. Their voices have enabled me, and hopefully my readers, to reach a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of family relations beyond the dominance of the heterosexual family model. Their continuing struggles reveal an urgent need to address the inequalities experienced by marginalized individuals and families whose family aspirations and practices are considered to deviate from the norm and are consequently devalued or silenced.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Characteristics of participants

Name (Pseudonym in alphabetical order)	Age	Residential status in Beijing	Highest education level attained	Occupation	Relationship / Family status	Approximate length of current same-sex relationship
Bo	33	Local	Undergraduate	Self-employed	In a relationship and in a contract marriage with a gay man	2 years
Cong	31	Non-local	Undergraduate	Self-employed	Single	N/A
Di	37	Non-local	Undergraduate	Manager	Single	N/A
Dong	33	Local	Undergraduate	NGO employee	Married (her same-sex partner)	5 years
Guo	30	Non-local	Master's	Freelance scriptwriter	In a relationship and in a contract marriage with a gay man	Over 10 years
Hong	31	Non-local	Undergraduate	Freelance scriptwriter	In a relationship and in a contract marriage with a gay man	Over 10 years
Jia	30	Non-local	Master's	Finance	Single	N/A
Jing	28	Non-local	Master's	Business analyst	In a relationship	2.5 years
Jun	26	Non-local	College diploma for vocational training	Unemployed	In a relationship	1.5 years
Kun	37	Non-local	Undergraduate	Administrator	In a relationship	1.5 years
Lan	45	Non-local	Vocational high school	Administrator	Divorced (a heterosexual husband), single, have a 18-year-old child	N/A
Li	36	Local	Undergraduate	Designer	Married (her same-sex partner) and in a contract	6 years

Name (Pseudonym in alphabetical order)	Age	Residential status in Beijing	Highest education level attained	Occupation	Relationship / Family status	Approximate length of current same-sex relationship
					marriage with a gay man	
Ling	35	Non-local	Undergraduate	Administrator	Single	N/A
Name (Pseudonym in alphabetical order)	**Age**	**Residential status in Beijing**	**Highest education level attained**	**Occupation**	**Relationship / Family status**	**Approximate length of current same-sex relationship**
Lu	38	Local	Undergraduate	Human Resources	Single	N/A
Meng	33	Non-local	Undergraduate	Freelance writer	Divorced (a heterosexual husband), in a relationship, have a 4-year-old child	2.5 years
Min	37	Local	Undergraduate	Editor	In a relationship	Nearly 10 years
Na	33	Non-local	Undergraduate	Editor	In a relationship, have a 4-year-old child	2.5 years
Ping	40	Local	Undergraduate	Freelance art instructor	Married (a heterosexual husband), in a relationship, have a 4-year-old child	0.5 year
Qin	35	Local	Master's	Administrator	Single	N/A
Qu	27	Local	Master's	Designer	In a relationship	1 year
Ru	35	Local	Undergraduate	Consultant	Married (her same-sex partner), pregnant, and in a contract marriage with a gay man	6 years
Shan	29	Local	Undergraduate	Marketing	In a relationship	Nearly 9 years
Shi	30	Non-local	Undergraduate	Marketing	Single	N/A
Tao	36	Local	High school	Self-employed	In a relationship	2 years
Ting	32	Non-local	Undergraduate	Designer	In a relationship and in a contract marriage with a gay man	2 years
Wen	35	Non-local	Master's	Administrator	In a relationship and in a contract	Nearly 10 years

Name (Pseudonym in alphabetical order)	Age	Residential status in Beijing	Highest education level attained	Occupation	Relationship / Family status	Approximate length of current same-sex relationship
					marriage with a gay man	
Xia	38	Local	Undergraduate	Accountant	In a relationship	1 year
Xian	40	Local	Undergraduate	Media-related	Single	N/A
Xuan	27	Local	Master's	Manager	Single	N/A
Ya	34	Non-local	Undergraduate	Consultant	Married (her same-sex partner), have a 7-month-old child	Over 10 years
Yan	25	Non-local	Undergraduate	NGO employee	Single	N/A
Yang	30	Local	Master's	Social worker	In a relationship and in a contract marriage with a gay man	Nearly 9 years
Yao	29	Local	Master's	Business analyst	In a relationship	2.5 years
Yi	33	Non-local	Undergraduate	Lawyer	Married (a heterosexual husband)	N/A
Ying	35	Non-local	Undergraduate	Self-employed	Divorced (a gay husband), in a relationship	2 years

Appendix II: Interview guide

A) Personal background and identity development as lalas

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself? (e.g. age, educational background, occupation, hometown)

2. Could you talk me through when you first realized your lala identity? How and when did you realize your lala identity?

3. How do you make sense of your lala identity?

4. To whom and to what extent have you disclosed your lala identity?

B) Family life, norms, and values

5. Can you describe your relationships with your family members?

6. What counts as "family" from your own point of view?

7. To what extent do you think that your view on family matches or differs from the dominant view of what "family" is?

8. What do you think of family values in China?

9. To what extent do you have similar or different view of family values compared with that of your family of origin?

10. How does your family of origin think of same-sex relationships?

11. What do you think of marriage? How important is it to you and to your family of origin?

12. What do you think of childbearing? How important is it to you and to your family of origin?

C) Same-sex relationship and family

13. Can you describe your relationship with your current same-sex partner? (e.g. how long is the relationship? How did you two meet each other? Cohabiting or not?)

14. Have you ever had any discussions about "family" with your same-sex partner? If

yes, what did you discuss? If no, why is that?

15. (For lala who cohabits with her same-sex partner) Can you describe your division of domestic labor between your partner and you? How have you come up with the arrangement?

16. Can you describe the financial arrangement between your partner and you? (e.g. Does she know about your financial situation? Do you share your finances with her? Who is earning more?) How have you come up with the arrangement?

17. Have you ever had any conflicts over any living or financial arrangements with your same-sex partner? If yes, how do you deal with the conflict(s)? If no, why do you think there were no conflicts between you two?

18. How do others (your family of origin, friends, or colleagues) see your relationship with your current same-sex partner? How do you feel about their attitudes or opinions?

19. Can you describe your ideal "family life"? (e.g. Who are the people involved and why? Where to live and why?)

20. Can you name one of the greatest challenges in your pursuit of your ideal family life?

21. Have you ever thought about getting married with your same-sex partner? Why or why not? If yes, how do you plan to do it?

22. Have you ever thought about having children? Why or why not? If yes, how do you plan to do it?

23. Have you ever thought about engaging in contract marriage (xinghun: marrying a gay man to appear to be heterosexual)? Why or why not?

24. (For lala who is engaging in contract marriage with a gay man) What impact has your contract marriage had on your relationship with your same-sex partner?

25. (For lala who is engaging in contract marriage with a gay man) What are the

advantages and challenges of your contract marriage?

26. If you were given a chance to change any one aspect of your current relationship, what would you change?

D) The use of lala-oriented cyberspace

27. How often do you visit lala-oriented online platforms? Can you name one or two online platforms that you often visit?

28. What do you usually do on these lala-oriented online platforms?

29. What does the lala-oriented online space mean to you?

30. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using these online platforms?

31. Have you changed your pattern of using lala-oriented online platforms in these years?

32. Has your use of lala-oriented online platforms influenced any aspect(s) of your everyday life?

33. Have you participated in any offline activities that has been initiated by lala-oriented online platforms? If yes, how was your experience? If no, why not?

34. How would you describe the similarities and/or differences between your behaviors as a lala in the offline environment and those in the lala-oriented online space?

35. Imagine that the lala-oriented online space never existed, what would be the most significant difference in your life now?

E) Social norms

36. What do you think of gender expectations towards women in China?

37. To what extent do you think that you have fulfilled these gender expectations?

38. What do you think of public opinions towards same-sex relationships in general, and lalas in particular, in China?

39. What are the challenges of being a lala in China?

F) The Chinese government

40. What do you think of the Chinese government's attitudes towards same-sex relationships in general and lalas in particular?

41. Are there any changes in the Chinese government's attitudes towards same-sex relationships? If yes, how and why are there such changes?

42. Do you foresee any potential changes in the Chinese government's attitudes towards same-sex relationships? If yes, how and why? If no, why is that?

43. To what extent do you think that the Chinese government's attitudes towards same-sex relationships has affected or will affect your identity and experience as a lala?

G) The lala community

44. To what extent have you participated in the lala community? (e.g. What events? How often? Where?)

45. What does the lala community mean to you?

46. What are the general ideas about forming a same-sex family in the lala community in China as far as you know?

47. Have any people or events in the lala community had any impact on your plan(s) to build your own same-sex family?

48. To what extent have you participated in the lala movement? Why?

49. What rights should lalas possess in China? Since when and how have you come up with these thoughts?

50. What are the difficulties in enhancing the rights of lalas in China? How have you dealt / will you deal with them?