Loving strangers, avoiding risks: Online dating practices and scams among Chinese lesbian (*lala*) women

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Abstract
The proliferating online social networking sites have created opportunities for Chinese queer women to meet new friends and lovers; yet, research on lesbian online dating in mainland China is scarce compared to heterosexual and gay online dating. This article investigates lesbian/*lala* women's online dating experiences in the context of economic reforms and the trust crisis in urban China. It is based on 16 in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in Guangdong from June 2018 to July 2019. It focuses on two digital platforms: Douban Group and WeChat. This article explores how online anonymity and stranger sociality shaped queer women's moral practices regarding turning virtual strangers into real-life partners. Queer women in this research expressed concerns about being cheated by low quality(*suzhi*) lovers, swindlers, and married women. This article suggests that the emerging online stranger sociality has both enabled and constrained lesbian/*lala* women's practice of seeking loving relationships, while they must internalize the potential risks by themselves.

Keywords
China, intimacy, lesbian, moral panic, online anonymity, online dating, romance fraud, stranger sociality

Introduction

> Things are different today. There are so many more platforms for us lesbians to find a same-sex lover compared to old times, but these are all unreliable (*bu kaopu*). You must be very lucky to find true love from these dating sites. (Sally, civil servant, age 33)

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During my ethnographic fieldwork in Guangzhou, China, I repeatedly heard this claim from my friend-respondents in lesbian/*lala* (a loose term referring to lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women who are attracted by women) meetups. Many queer women expressed their concerns about the extended same-sex social sites in today's LGBT world. The emergence of queer social spaces and communities in urban China as a result of the wide access to the Internet and rapid economic reform in recent decades has been recognized in various research (Bao, 2018; Engebretsen, 2014; Ho, 2009; Kam, 2013; Rofel, 2007). The appearance of terms such as "tongxinglian" (homosexual), "tongzhi" (comrades, roughly referring to LGBT people), "lala," "gay," and "lesbian" in public media and on the Internet has helped non-heterosexual people to recognize and express their sexualities. Nowadays, a queer person could locate another lesbian/*lala* woman online through either mainstream Chinese social media such as *Sina Weibo* (a Chinese microblogging site), *Douban Group* Forum (an interest-based social networking platform), or same-sex exclusive dating apps such as *Lesdo* and *Rela*. How did these emerging social sites, especially the digital communities, transform queer women's experiences of same-sex intimacies?

This paper looks particularly at Chinese queer women's online dating experiences in the context of rapid economic reforms and the changing moral landscape. It aims to trace how new modes of intimacy is made, transformed, and constrained in lesbian/*lala* life-worlds. Online dating, or cyber love, has increasingly become a popular mode of creating romantic relationships around the world (Bray, 2008; Dasgupta, 2017; Heino et al., 2010; Sveningsson, 2002). Yet, individuals from different age, gender, and sexual groups can have diverse experiences and concerns regarding online dating. For instance, Chan (2018) examines how dating apps can be both empowering and restraining for their (heterosexual) female users. At the same time, female same-sex desires and romantic relationships are often ignored or not acknowledged in public discourse; queer women are doubly marginalized for their gender and non-normative sexualities (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). Compared to heterosexual and gay online dating, research on lesbian online dating in mainland China is especially sparse. Furthermore, the risks regarding online dating among Chinese lesbian/*lala* women are rarely acknowledged, despite the fact that it is far from risk-free. Through the lens of social media, this article provides detailed cases of queer women realizing cyber intimacy as uncertain, unreliable, and even dangerous.

Before the analysis of lesbian/*lala* online dating practices, a few words must be said of the context of personal interactions and social trust in Chinese society. Traditionally, Chinese society was organized through different types of social circles where the individual's moral duties were specifically identified in accordance with their positionality in each social relation (Fei, 1992 [1947]). In such a world of acquaintances, people relied on personal trust cultivated from long term interactions within their social circles. In this sense, one's reputation and moral worth were relationally defined mainly through kin ties and local work networks. The rapid modernization and increased geographical mobility in China resulted in increasing interactions among strangers who shared no past (Lee, 2014; Yan, 2011), thus created prevalent trust concerns within society. Such rapid changes in Chinese social life are closely associated with the shifting ethical discourse and moral panic about stranger sociality.

The emerging online mode of sociality among both heterosexual and non-heterosexual people in China not only signified the blurred boundary between online and offline life, but also signified the increasing interactions between strangers in contemporary Chinese society. Anthropological studies have demonstrated that the online world should not be seen as a self-contained sphere separate from everyday offline activities (Miller and Slater, 2003; Miller et al., 2016). The rising online dating fraud cases, as reported by People's *Daily* (2019; see http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0402/c209043-31009867.html), Legal Person Magazine (2021; see https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1689497800635510733밁=spider&for=pc), and many other official news websites, suggest that online anonymity and stranger sociality has inevitably created trust concerns in the domain of virtual romance. That is to say, individuals are worried about counterfeit goods as well as "counterfeit people." Major Chinese online dating/matchmaking service providers like *Baihe.com* claim to verify their users' personal information and provide background check services for VIP members to reduce romance fraud. Liu (2016) illustrates how researching social media through the lens of sexuality could reveal the complex interconnections between political, cultural, economic, and the "private" realms of intimacy. I would further stress that we must not exclude non-heterosexual people's experiences when disclosing such interconnections in online dating culture. Against this backdrop, this research hopes to contribute to studies of queer online dating practices and further our understanding of Chinese economic and moral transformations.

Methodology

The data cited in this article comes from 16 in-depth interviews and fieldwork in Guangdong Province, China, from June 2018 to July 2019. This study is complemented by virtual participant observation mainly on WeChat and Douban Group. Douban.com is an interest-based social networking platform and is generally considered more niche-focused than other Chinese social media platforms. Douban Group is the online forum in Douban.com. Douban users can create a specific theme for their groups. This article focuses on the largest lesbian-themed Douban Group named "les sky," which had more than 360,000 members by June 2021. WeChat is a messaging, social media, and mobile payment application widely used in China. WeChat users may chat and transfer money to another individual on the WeChat app, and they can join different group chats via shared QR codes. All respondents use Wechat and Douban, and many of them used dating apps such as *Lesdo* or *Rela* at some point to meet new people. This research doesn't recognize online relationships as essentially inauthentic or displacing offline relationships. Employing Miller et al. (2016)'s "polymedia" approach, this research looks at how the use of one digital platform is related to the others.

Research respondents were recruited through my recruitment article on WeChat public page and "les sky" group. I have been a member of "les sky" group since 2014 and regularly follow and reply to group discussions. More than 30 queer women reached me after reading my recruitment article and showed their interests in participating in my research. In October 2018, I joined a lesbian-themed Wechat group which had more than 120 members residing in Guangzhou. I participated in group conversations in a daily basis and attended three offline group get-togethers. The group administer was aware of

my research, and she later became one of my friend-respondents. To practice friendship as a method means that we research with ethics of friendship and invite respondents further into our lives (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). The interview was "a part of participant observation and not apart from participant observation" (Skinner, 2012: 35). During each interview, I exchanged a great amount of my life history with respondents, which allowed us to foster friendships in a profoundly short period. All respondents remained in touch with me after the interview, as we continued to have casual meetups and small talks online. There were numerous moments when we found we shared similar struggles and exchanged useful information on various topics. By this means, they gradually became my long-term friend-respondent rather than interviewees.

Research respondents were aged 22–36 and living in Shenzhen or Guangzhou. It should not be discounted that queer women in this study are heterogeneous in terms of their age, educational background, and social status, and therefore their attitudes and practices need to be apprehended within their social context. My research is guided by the 2012 Ethics Statement of the American Anthropological Association. I have explained the purpose of my research in detail to every respondent and obtained their consent before moving to the next stage. All personal information is securely protected and made anonymous in all documents.

From lesbian bars to cyberspace: The new cultural space?

Among the four *lala* couples I interviewed and spent a great deal of time with, two of them met each other through WeChat groups (joined via QR codes shared on "les sky" group or *Lesdo*), and two of them met each other through "les sky" group. Qiwen wrote in her "friend-seeking" post (*zhengyou tie*):

> I'm a T (short for "tomboy") born in 1990. I'm from Chaoshan and currently living in Shenzhen. 162 cm, 50 kg, short hair, not too manly. I work as an engineer. I like reading and cooking; sometimes I play video games. [. . .] I hope you have long hair, not too fat, similar age, and you want to settle in Shenzhen as well. No bisexual and no married women please. I've come out to my parents already, so I will bring you home to meet them once we are in a committed relationship. I hope you've come out or at least plan to do so in the future. Message me through Douban Email for exchanging photos.[1]

Qiwen gave some details about herself, including age, height, body type, appearance style, hometown, personality, and job. She then shared some expectations of her future girlfriends and future loving relationships. In "les sky," it is common to see posts like this. Other "friend-seeking" posts might include personal details like educational background, dating histories, and photos. Qiwen chose to post in "les sky" because she preferred forum-based socializing. During the interview, she explained:

> When you use the dating apps, the first thing you see is photos. I don't like that. I am looking for a life partner, so I want to know more about each other's appearance or sexual role. I want my girlfriend to share similar values and mutual goals with me.

After posting on "les sky," Qiwen chatted with two women who identified as P (short for "Po/female/femme" or "pretty girl") and added one of them to her WeChat contacts. After a month of regular online chatting, Qiwen and the woman met offline and started a romantic relationship. The process of meeting online dates/girlfriends in real life is described as "benxian" (literally meaning "head for real life"), and it could take as short as a day or as long as years. Qiwen never desired a long-distance or purely online intimate relationship, as she tried to minimize the time she waited to *benxian* with her girlfriend. Qiwen then deleted her post and joked that she would not return to "les sky" unless they broke up.

For queer women, especially urban youths, meeting new friends and lovers within online sociality modes has allowed them to meet new friends, establish queer social ties, and develop romantic relationships (e.g. Tang, 2017). Online interactions became an important element in people's offline lives, as online dating usually leads to real-life meetups. Even if it remains entirely online, it could still have impact on one's offline relationships and could involve financial transactions.

Several implications arise with Qiwen's understanding of online dating. First, Qiwen attempted to explain the distinction between different same-sex dating/socializing sites, and so did every other respondent. They compared various online and offline queer social sites, from nightclubs and same-sex dating apps to online forums. Most respondents claimed that meeting someone randomly at a bar or nightclub was one of the least *kaopu* (reliable) ways to find true love. Many argued that bars and nightclubs were places exclusively for people looking for casual sex rather than serious conjugal relationships. This conception prevails among Chinese people, straight and queer alike. Wei (2020) suggests that gay and lesbian bars and nightclubs have become consumer spaces gated by erotic desires and economic capital, while cultural indicators of artistic taste, education, and the etiquette of middle-class status in these spaces were absent. Distinct from gay bars, queer film clubs and activist groups emerged as cultural spaces that genuinely exclude non-heterosexual people who lack cultural capital and are recognized as neither middle class nor good cultural citizens within the community (Bao, 2018; Rofel, 2007; Wei, 2020).

Wei's comparison of queer consumer spaces and cultural spaces is insightful for understanding queer people's motivation of turning to online dating. For most of my respondents who called themselves "ordinary people" (*putong ren*) and were not interested in joining queer films and LGBT organizations, cyberspace has become a seeming desirable cultural space for them to identify other potential same-sex lovers with similar artistic tastes, educational backgrounds, and social status. According to my friend-respondents and numerous Douban Group posts, the more specific image one creates for herself and the potential girlfriend, the more likely she may find the right soulmate online.

On the other hand, Qiwen and many other queer women presented ambivalent attitudes toward online dating. For Qiwen, location-based same-sex dating apps didn't seem to be the ideal space for seeking stable relationships, but rather for casual erotic relationships. In this sense, location-based lesbian socializing apps were not only situated between "radical" and "conservative" sexual attitudes/lifestyles, but also situated between casual and committed relationships. This suggests that same-sex socializing

apps serve ambiguous functions in queer women's eyes. Even many Douban Group users argued these, once "pure," online same-sex socializing platforms were "contaminated" by people who just wanted to hook up.

In mainstream culture, real-time locational-based heterosexual dating apps such as *Momo* are often characterized as hook-up sites which merely serve the purpose of *yuepao* (getting laid with strangers). The reputation of being a *yuepao* app is linked with the low possibility of finding a "high quality (suzhi)" partner that one may develop a serious relationship with (Liu, 2016). *Suzhi* can be glossed as human quality. The hegemonic discourse of *suzhi* is embodied in the figure of urban middle-class citizen (Anagnost, 2004). At the same time, the language of "low quality" is often used to mock and devalue people who are rural migrants, short, poorly educated, and ill-mannered (Kipnis, 2007). The moral dimension of *suzhi* has become particularly vital in same-sex communities. Among queer men in Beijing, the language of "low quality" is always targeted at *money boys* who are from rural China and are believed to have no morals (Ho, 2008). For my lesbian/*lala* respondents, *suzhi* encompasses one's cultural, physical, and moral "qualities," which one must carefully evaluate before entering serious relationships.

In this context, female same-sex dating apps like *Lesdo* and *Rela* have added "community" features similar to Douban Group forums in recent years, as they strived to look less like a hook-up site and more like a virtual cultural space. In other words, Chinese same-sex dating apps tried to provide their users more opportunities to express and investigate each other's social status and cultural capitals.

Qiwen's online dating experience might be a successful one, while a lot more queer women I know claimed they could never find a reliable, "high quality (suzhi)" partner through digital platforms. To further problematize this matter, many of my friends-respondents referred to online dating as a less preferred, less effective method but the only option for them to extend their dating pools. Several of my respondents insisted that "one must be very lucky to find true love from these dating sites." Moreover, the anonymity and practices of faking cultural capital have called online social networking sites' role as queer cultural spaces into question, which I shall unpack in the next subsections.

Walking the blurred line between fictive and real

I met Sally in April 2019, only shortly after she ended her 3-month relationship with her ex and came back to use digital platforms to seek a potential girlfriend. At a lesbian meetup, Sally complained to me about her recent ex-girlfriend, whom she met via a *lala* WeChat group chat. Lots of regionally-themed lesbian/*lala* chat groups organize offline get-togethers on a regular basis for members to meet each other in person. From my field observations, the primary and unspoken purpose of these offline meetups was to find a girlfriend. Most willing participants were single. The get-together usually took the form of a casual dinner and might progress to a bar or a KTV night. According to Sally, she was purposefully "picked up" by her ex-girlfriend in that group chat because of her decent job position and house ownership in the city center. When they met in-person in the first time, they started a dating relationship that Sally thought to be honest and serious. However, it didn't take too long for Sally to discover that her pretty girlfriend flirted with several other lesbians in different group chats. Sally associated her promiscuous

behaviors with low quality (*suzhi*). Moreover, Sally believed she was taken advantage of by her ex financially, as her ex asked for gifts several times.

After telling this story, Sally also talked about her puppy love in high school. Sally and her first girlfriend were classmates, and they fell in love when Sally didn't even know the meaning of lesbian. For Sally, they simply loved each other regardless of their gender and background. Their romantic relationship lasted for 6 years until they graduated from university and moved to different cities to work. Sally's second girlfriend was her colleague, and their cohabitating relationship lasted for 2 years. Both Sally's first and second girlfriends were married to heterosexual men in recent years, and thus Sally referred to them as straight women (*zhinv*). Although Sally referred to her earlier relationships with her first and second girlfriends as pure love with a nostalgic undertone, she admitted that she didn't want to date *zhinv* anymore, and her only option was to use same-sex online platforms to find a lesbian-identified lover. Sally remained critical of same-sex dating Apps and Douban Group:

> I know my first girlfriend so well, but my ex is still like a stranger to me now. I shouldn't trust her so quickly. You thought you knew the person as you talked with each other online, but you might find out she was faking her personal characteristics once you were in a relationship.

Sally's attitude toward online dating was neither representative nor rare. For many respondents, especially those born in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a sharp distinction between meeting a person in "real life" and meeting a person through the "virtual web." Real-life encounters happened in school, workplace, volunteer groups, and other established social organizations where people shared certain mutual networks, interests, and memberships. On the other hand, people without pre-existing social relations were considered as strangers. Such attitude reflects the ambiguous boundary between the traditional kinship networks and the stranger sociality in industrialized societies (Lee, 2014). This was further pronounced in online interactions which were often anonymous in the beginning. Povinelli (2006) meditates on the dialectics of kinship sociality in the Aboriginal community and stranger sociality among American radical faeries. The two seeming competing concepts are useful tools for understanding China's recent trust crisis under socio-economic changes. Whereas pre-modern Chinese society relied heavily on kinship sociality, the market reforms inevitably led to increased interactions among strangers who shared no past. Lee (2014) suggests the notion of romantic love may be the "most privileged trope of modern stranger sociality" linked with the sense of modernity (p. 274, see also Panm, 2015). It implies an aspiration that romantic love can bring two strangers together and turning them into intimate kins.

In this context, online dating practices in Chinese queer life-worlds further complicate the two kinds of sociality with extended anonymity. The tendency for queer women to use nicknames and only talk about their love life without exchanging details about their family and job in T-bars in Taiwan has been described as "fictive real" (Chao, 1999). I suggest the descriptive sense of "fictive real" can be extended to emerging online queer spaces in urban China. In terms of online interactions, anonymity is often employed as a form of privacy enabler and an instrument for self-defense (Sardá et al., 2019). Queer women need to decide how open they are with others as they negotiate visibility, privacy,

and identity across social media platforms. The second time I chatted with Sally, I asked her if she would participate in my research. Like many other respondents, she gave me her consent but never her full legal name. I never asked for respondents' full names, either. As Berlant (1998) points out, intimacy is associated with "tacit fantasies, tacit rules, and tacit obligations to remain unproblematic" (p. 287). During another get-together, Sally warned others not to reveal their real names and jobs when they started dating someone on the Internet. The conversation continued as we discussed when it was appropriate to disclose personal details to an online date. Someone argued it would be fine to talk about one's family background after a few dates, and someone said she and her girlfriend never saw each other's IDs until they were together for a year. There was no clear line between being too naive and being too suspicious of the other in turning a virtual stranger into an intimate lover.

While queer women like Sally preferred to develop intimate relationships with people from established offline social webs, they were aware of the small dating pool in "real life." In the meantime, the practice of seeking lovers from online platforms evoked manifold uncertainties and risks in post-reform China, straight and queer alike. For example, one could not consult any mutual acquaintance or authority member about another stranger's socio-economic background and moral reputation. This is particularly problematic in the context of rising online romance frauds.

Shazhu Pan (pig-butchering scam) and *Mai Chaye* (selling tea)

Shazhu pan, literally meaning pig-butchering scam, has become a popular buzzword in Chinese forums since 2019. According to Xinhua.net, *Shazhu pan* refers specifically to an emerging type of online fraud in which swindlers attempt to gain the trust form victims through a romantic relationship before tricking them into financing traps. In their training material, the swindlers used "pigs" to refer to their targets, which were slaughtered after being fatted. While the official news websites have reported many *Shazhu Pan* frauds since 2019, all reported victims are heterosexual. Online love scams among queer people attract little attention from the public and the police.

During my fieldwork in 2019, this was a story spreading in the major online lesbian communities. A woman who claimed to be P and working in Shenzhen met several Ts from "les sky" and started a relationship with them after they met offline. This woman then pretended to suffer serious family crises and borrowed a large amount of money from these Ts from time to time. A few months later, one of her T-girlfriends found out that her job title and family background had been falsified. The T-victim immediately exposed this woman to multiple online forums. The story became heated as other T victims of this fraud showed up one by one to expose the P swindler's personal details.

Other than borrowing money, there were a lot more examples of *Shazhu Pan* frauds. Many queer women found the swindlers attempted to persuade them to invest in their fictitious commodities or play the lottery in made-up websites. In these cases, the swindlers were not individuals, but organized groups. The money involved in the online love frauds ranged from several hundred to millions. Hardly any of the victims had their

money back due to inadequate evidence and incomplete policies regarding online fraud. Since 2019, I have witnessed a growing number of online posts warning single lesbian/*lala* women about swindlers. In May and July 2019, the "les sky" forum moderators made two top posts about *Shazhu Pan* frauds. One top post titled "7 out of 10 people who call themselves 'P' here are making online gaming scams; be careful, many cheaters on Douban!" (see https://www.douban.com/group/topic/140972997/). In these posts, many discussants revealed their experiences of encountering swindlers. A T-identified lesbian concluded:

> Of course homosexual people like us are the target of love fraud. We are lonely and desperate for love and pretty girls! All swindlers need to do is to post a fake photo and wait for us to swallow the bait!

Not long after the appearance of *Shazhu pan* scams, the members of "les sky" Douban group started to use the term "selling tea (mai chaye)," a term created by potential victims instead of scammers, to represent all kinds of online love scams. As the "les sky" members noted, the scammers, or "tea girls," would post fake pretty selfies and travel photos with vague personal information. When chatting with a potential victim, the scammer would fake a desirable "high quality" lesbian who was good-looking, well-educated, middle-class, and moral. They often mentioned that they had already come out to parents and didn't mind a long-distance relationship. Some "tea girls" would actively approach people who wrote "friend-seeking" posts and pretended to be interested in them. It appeared that lesbian who identified as T was more frequently the victim of fraud, taking on the financial provider role. In such narratives, the victim T was often portrayed by themselves and others as like the male victim who was fooled by a pretty woman through online dating.

Fu (2015) has explored the gay social sites in Shenyang which changed from urban public spaces in the 1980s to consumer-driven spaces in the 21st century. Same-sex desires in the old days were characterized as "simple" and "nice" when one didn't have to worry about property safety or health risks. Same-sex desire in the recent decade was regarded as dangerous when male-male sex consumption, swindling activities, and HIV/AIDS risks visibly increased. While Fu's research doesn't focus on gay and lesbian social media platforms, online interactions and offline interactions are inseparable and equally valid in queer daily life. Similar to Fu's respondents, lesbian/*lala* women in this research blamed the capitalist system as the main reason behind the lowering of the moral bottom line and loss of trust among strangers in same-sex communities. The development of the private sector since the reform era has led to the rise of the "enterprising/desiring self," which is expressed and maintained mostly in terms of individual desires and self-interests and is, at the same time, brought under the restraining power of the Chinese state through the language of neoliberalism (Kleinman et al., 2011; Rofel, 2007). The emergence of individualization has inevitably created losers and winners. As a result, most Chinese individuals "had to internalize the negative impacts of individualization by assuming more responsibilities, experiencing greater uncertainty and risk, and working harder" (Kleinman et al., 2011: 15). Queer women seeking romantic relationships, in this case, had to learn to recognize suspicious behavior and be vigilant

crime-fighters themselves since the market economy didn't offer any solution to the moral crisis. Many posts on "les sky" nowadays start with the statement "I am not selling tea (I am not a scammer)" or "Tea girls (scammers) stay away from me." One of my respondents, Xiao, complained:

> I think all these frauds in the online *lala* world scared me. When I see a good-looking girl on 'les sky' now, my first reaction is suspecting her of selling tea. Is her selfie real? Is she a lesbian or a tea girl? The rising number of love scams has made us so vigilant when chatting online.

Being involved in love fraud was understood as an example of extreme immoral behavior by most Chinese people but, unfortunately, it had a prodigiously negative impact on personal trust in queer life-worlds. As Rege (2009) notes, online love scams disrupt one's sense of trust in themselves, potential online dates, and the overall online networking experience. Moreover, encountering scammers was just one of the worries queer people had. In the case of same-sex online dating, one might easily justify their moral values and behavioral norms as they were interacting with people completely outside their circle of social relations.

It's not an honest relationship but an extramarital affair

Guan was in a gay-lesbian *xinghun* (contract) marriage when I first met her in 2018. *Xinghun*, short for *xingshi hunyin*, is also translated as nominal marriage, cooperative marriage, or marriage of convenience between a gay man and a lesbian. According to Guan, her situation left her no other choice but to get married. Guan's parents in her hometown had been expecting her to have offspring. Guan had a stable job in a state-owned enterprise in Guangzhou and enjoyed well-off life, but not well-off enough to raise a child by herself. The study conducted by United Nations Development Programme (2016) shows a strong injunction for Chinese people to get married and have children, heterosexual and non-heterosexual alike. Singlehood remains rare, as youths may have increased freedom to choose whom to marry, but they may not have such freedom to choose not to marry at all (Xu and Xia, 2014).

When Guan turned 30 years old in 2017, she married a gay man and gave birth to a son in the following year. Whether one approved of the practice of *xinghun* marriage or not, it was widely agreed in queer communities that *xinghun* marriage was much more complicated than business deals. Although Guan claimed it was a nominal marriage, she obtained the marriage certificate with the gay man, and her child is biologically linked to her *xinghun* husband. Guan's familial and parenting experience is by no means unique.

Guan had been using lesbian dating apps and forums to look for a girlfriend for years. In a dinner, Guan complained about some lesbian/*lala* WeChat groups asking new members to provide photos:

> I don't feel comfortable letting strangers know what I look like before we meet in person. Their rules make me feel that I am wrong to value my privacy! Anyway, I have my solution. Every time they requested my photo, I just sent a photo of a random woman downloaded from the Internet. I will never reveal my details on the Internet.

Guan's argument revealed the conflicting moral norms in the lesbian community. Guan framed her behavior of sending fake photos to other lesbians as a good habit not to trust strangers. In this way she could maintain complete anonymity and protect herself. She explained that she didn't want many unrelated strangers to know her sexuality, even if they were lesbian. Yet, such behavior would be characterized as cheating and cowardly by many other young lesbians under the rhetoric of coming-out politics: "If they don't even dare to show their faces on same-sex socializing sites and come out to us, how can you count on them to come out to straight people?" (Yina, age 27). Interestingly, the discourses on privacy and coming-out were used as backbones for incompatible moral judgments.

Later during the dinner, Guan mentioned she was also hiding her married and parental status in online lesbian communities because she wanted to increase her opportunity for finding a girlfriend:

> Lesbians like me who got married and have children have little chance to find a girlfriend. Other lesbians heard you are married, no matter with a gay (in cooperative/*xinghun* marriage) or heterosexual man, they stop replying to your message and run away without giving you a second chance. When they can find an unmarried lesbian, why choose us?

Guan's prior experience discouraged her from revealing her status as married and a mother co-parenting with a gay man. Bisexual and lesbian women like Guan who were in heterosexual marriages and in the meantime presented themselves as single women were regarded as a negative example in today's online queer communities. Indeed, many young people have blamed gay men and lesbians who chose to enter heterosexual marriages as dependent and lacking negotiating power with their parents, thus having no right to enter same-sex conjugal relations. For most young queer women in first-tier cities, hiding one's married and parental status while seeking same-sex intimate relationships was morally intolerable. There have been numerous posts in "les sky" forum that warn against dating married women. Compared to "tea girls" scammers, married women who cheat for same-sex intimate relationships might cause less financial loss but often more emotional harm. Members of "les sky" and other online communities such as Lesdo argued that married lesbians were not pitiful and should be shamed for making unwitting mistresses.

At the same time, one must be observant of such behaviors because others might easily disguise their familial status on social media platforms without feeling what they did were essentially immoral. Take Guan as an example; she never sent her photos to others and never mentioned her marriage and child to others online for "privacy concerns." In 2019, Guan found a date through a WeChat group. As they started an intimate relationship in real life and got to know where each other resided, Guan couldn't hide about her marriage and son anymore. Guan left her son to her parents in her hometown and told her girlfriend that she had divorced the gay man. Her girlfriend blamed her for cheating but eventually accepted her. Still, both Guan's girlfriend and I were not sure if Guan was divorced or not. When I met Guan and her girlfriend in 2020, her girlfriend once said, "I feel like a xiaosan (mistress) if you (Guan) don't divorce, but it's too late to take back my

affection." Likewise, a member of "les sky," Louyi, shared her experience finding out her online lover was faking her family status:

> She often said she was too busy to have a video chat with me, so I flew to her city and went straight to her company. It turned out she is married, and her kid is already two years old. I was speechless. There is nothing left but a waste of time and enormous emotional pain after the end of this yearlong long-distance relationship.

Discussion

In short, queer people's practices of seeking same-sex lovers have changed dramatically in the last decade. Contrasting to cruising public parks and consumerist bars, an increasing number of queer women in urban China realize online same-sex communities, including same-sex socializing/dating apps and online forums, as emerging spaces for seeking long-term loving relationships. The emerging digital platforms have become a seeming cultural space for young queer women to locate potential friends and lovers who share similar cultural tastes, backgrounds, and social statuses. Online queer spaces have therefore allowed the construction of newer kinds of queer affective bonds (Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 2018). The rhetoric of morality, *suzhi* (quality), and taste/interests have played a central role in queer women's online dating practices. Queer women in today's urban China increasingly perceive their same-sex partners beyond erotic lovers. Through the process of seeking online dates, queer women come to recognize their own position in the hierarchy of *suzhi* as well as the need to match with a high *suzhi* partner. Overall, what my friend-respondents desired from same-sex romantic relationships in many ways looks like conjugal relations, characterized by reliability and companionship.

In the meantime, seeking same-sex lovers through digital platforms symbolizes risk and uncertainty, as lesbian/*lala* women in this research expressed concerns about the inconsistent moral practices and the lack of trust within society. This is further linked with the variability of anonymity in the context of Internet. Sardá et al. (2019) suggest that online anonymity can be arguably compared to a weapon, which can be either used to harm or as a form of self-defense. On the one hand, online socializing platforms that afford greater degrees of anonymity seem to allow for more open and safe expressions of non-normative sexualities (Hanckel et al., 2019); on the other hand, online anonymity may facilitate (cyber)criminal activities such as illegal drug selling, pornography, and scamming (Aldridge, 2019; Rege, 2009). One critical guidance emerging from online dating with a same-sex lover is to make sure the potential date is honest and trustworthy, meaning the person doesn't intend to take advantage of or hide their marital status. Generationally, the concerns about same-sex dating have increasingly shifted from exposing one's sexuality to public judgment to being taken advantage of emotionally and financially (see also Fu, 2015). Many respondents stressed that even online dating in the lesbian world didn't imply immediate health risks, it was far from risk-free. In this sense, lesbian/*lala* women deal with different risks from straight people and queer men.

The vague path from an unrelated intimate stranger to a real-life partner in lesbian/*lala* online dating practices renders Chinese moral standards uncertain. While one's moral reputation and credibility are often relationally defined (Yan, 2011, 2017), the increased

interactions among strangers significantly disabled the traditional personal trust networks (Zhai, 2019). The rapid urbanization and modernization resulted in the loss of trust among strangers, and the market didn't seem to offer any solution. To cite from Lee (2014): "How to relate to a person with whom you share no past and cannot foresee or desire a common future?" (p. 12). Cyber love has further complicated such moral standards, as it encompasses the modern imaginary of romantic love and the prevalent moral crisis about stranger trust. When a queer subject develops an intimate relationship with an individual completed outside their established social webs, the lack of reference becomes especially problematic. As a result, their sentiments, health, and money are all at potential risks, which they must internalize by themselves (Kleinman et al., 2011). In other words, one is forced to take the responsibility to be a vigilant crime-fighter and mediate risks in the context of online anonymity and stranger sociality. Queer women's ambivalent attitudes toward online socializing platforms need to be understood within the context of sexual politics and the rapid modernization and ethical shifts in urban China. As researchers, it is vital not to view intimate love as merely interpersonal event (Povinelli, 2006). As Berlant further points out:

> These crises are not just personal. When states, populations, or persons sense that their definition of the real is under threat; when the normative relays between personal and collective ethics become frayed and exposed; and when traditional sites of pleasure and profit seem to get "taken away" by the political actions of subordinated groups, a sense of anxiety will be pervasively felt about how to determine responsibility for the disruption of hegemonic comfort (Berlant, 1998:287).

The findings show queer women's lumpy, varied, and inconsistent moral decisions and judgments regarding online dating, namely, how visible and how frank one should be to develop a trusting intimate relationship. To understand the split in moral judgments, we must acknowledge that the ability to be completely honest and out in online and offline spaces remains a class-specific privilege for Chinese non-heterosexual people. While lesbian/*lala* urban youths often state that exchanging photos, income status, and educational backgrounds were the entry point for turning virtual stranger encounters into a real-life committed relationship, other people, especially older lesbian/*lala* women with less negotiating power, could make the opposite claim. In this sense, online anonymity symbolizes not only protection but also risk for people seeking serious, conjugal love. While *Baihe.com*, the largest heterosexual Chinese online dating/matchmaking platform, claims to work with government agencies to verify their users' personal information and provide background check service for its VIP members; same-sex online platforms seem to face greater challenge in dealing with their image of being unreliable (*bu kaopu*) in Chinese queer communities.

Conclusion

To sum up, cyberspace has not only enabled new kinds of intimacies to be created, but also complicated the matter of trust and moral behavioral norms among queer women in urban China. When some queer women felt like hiding their personal information as they

looked for intimate relations online, others felt the need to know more personal cues, especially about the other's socio-cultural capital and moral quality (*suzhi*), to develop a committed relationship. The rising online love scams have further complicated the trust issue in lesbian/*lala* online dating practices. Queer women expressed concerns about being cheated by low quality(*suzhi*) lovers, swindlers, and married women. Same-sex dating apps and forums were scarcely considered a secure space in which one could find reliable and serious long-lasting relationships besides casual sex, as online interactions were often seen as revealing limited and even untrustworthy social cues about individuals. Therefore, seeing online socializing sites as either an erotic site or a cultural space for queer women is problematic. Consequently, the emerging modes of online and stranger sociality have both enabled and constrained queer women's practice of seeking loving relationships, and they had to internalize the potential financial and emotional risks by themselves.

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1.   This was posted in 13 February 2019 and deleted by Qiwen in May 2019.

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