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# When Tongzhi Marry: Experiments of Cooperative Marriage between Lalas and Gay Men in Urban China

ANG LEE'S FILM *THE WEDDING BANQUET* could be classic introductory material for tongzhi studies and, particularly, for research on cooperative marriage.<sup>1</sup> In the film, Wai-Tung, a Taiwanese landlord who lives happily with his American boyfriend Simon in New York, is troubled by his parents' constant efforts to try and find him a bride. His partner Simon suggests he could arrange a marriage of convenience with Wai-Tung's tenant Wei Wei who is from mainland China and is also in need of a green card to stay in the United States. However, their plan backfires when Wai-Tung's enthusiastic parents arrive in the United States and plan a big wedding banquet. As the film critic and scholar Chris

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1. *Tongzhi*, literally "same purpose," is the Chinese term for "comrade." Since the 1990s, it has been appropriated to replace the more formal *tóngxìngliàn* (same-sex love) to refer to gay men and lalas (same-sex desiring women) in the Chinese-speaking world.

The translation of *xinghun* as "cooperative marriage" is debatable, as *xinghun* literally means "pro-forma marriage." In other works, "contract marriage," "fake marriage," or "pro-forma marriage" are used to refer to gay-lala marriage. Informed by Lucetta Kam's work, I use "cooperative marriage" to highlight that such marriage is not merely functional without sustenance, but is contingent on the cooperation and negotiation between multiple parties in the relationship, as my findings suggest. See Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 85.

Berry points out, analysis of the film rests not on any individual, but on the Confucian family as “it negotiates the interface with globally hegemonic American culture,” suggesting that there exists an understanding of gayness in the context of the family that is distinct in Chinese culture.<sup>2</sup> Berry continues to argue that the moral ambivalence produced by the film is structured by different sets of values: the gay person is not merely concerned about individual identity fulfillment, but he also adjusts his actions to satisfy the family expectation; the parents, especially the father figure, is not merely a patriarch with strict moral provisions and standards, but someone who can allow for implicit negotiation to keep the surface harmony as long as he gets a grandson; the woman is not merely an independent agent freed from social constraints, but a bride who is also attached to emotional comfort and conjugal ideals. Just as *The Wedding Banquet* tactfully reveals one type of cooperative marriage with its mutual benefits and examines the multilayered complexity of each individual player in the marriage game, this research takes as its subject cooperative marriage between gay men and lalas as an exciting departure to understand queer subjectivities and queer kinship intersected with gender, sexuality, class, and tongzhi politics in urban China.<sup>3</sup>

Though seemingly monolithic, marriage and family have become contested terrains for tongzhi to negotiate their gender performance, queer desires, and aspirations for better lives. The transnational makings of gayness and rights-based identity politics have contributed to the increasing awareness of a cosmopolitan gay identity and the desiring of alternative life choices of Chinese tongzhi, which lays the very foundation of their motivation to seek ways to cope with the heteronormative family model. Coming out and gay marriage are upheld as primary tropes of identity politics, facilitated by the self-identified tongzhi grassroots groups that emerged during the initiation of AIDS work in 1994 for gay men and at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, which gathered hundreds of lesbians from around the world in Beijing.<sup>4</sup> How-

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2. Chris Berry, “Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair,” in his *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 183.
  3. *Lala* is a slang term in China for same-sex desiring women and includes lesbian, bisexual, and trans women.
  4. Katie King, “‘There Are No Lesbians Here’: Lesbianisms, Feminisms, and Global Gay Formations,” in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife*

ever, heterosexual marriage remains the dominant “solution” for tongzhi, especially for those in smaller cities, rural areas, and ethnic minority areas with fewer resources and more pressure to conform. Despite being restrained by the normative notion of heterosexual marriage, some resourceful gay men and lalas have either chosen to immigrate to countries that endorse marriage equality rights, or they have formed transnational same-sex rainbow families by means of surrogacy, artificial insemination, and adoption. However, not many tongzhi can afford to have their babies abroad because of the legal restrictions at home, nor are they adamant enough to be open about their lifestyles. Cooperative marriage has been increasingly tried out by many gay men and lalas as a more pragmatic approach to negotiating their sexuality in the context of the expectations of the heteronormative family.

The first advertisement of a lala seeking a gay husband appeared in the late 1990s in a queer magazine called *Pengyou Tongxun* (Friends communication) edited by Professor Zhang Bei Chuan.<sup>5</sup> The number of cooperatively married couples has increased rapidly from five hundred in 2004 to over a hundred thousand in 2018, the latter figure estimated by the cooperative marriage dating platform site ChinaGayLes.com, which was founded in 2005 to offer matchmaking services to gay men and lalas seeking marriage. This number does not include those who find cooperative marriage partners in online forums, groups, and offline activities, which are numerous. A large number of gay men and lalas are experimenting with new ways of being together, maintaining relationships with their families and friends, and defining who they are as tongzhi in urban China. Informed by transnational gay and lesbian studies, existing literature on queer socialities, and a feminist decolonial approach, I ask, Why is cooperative marriage considered a painful yet inevitable path to be taken by tongzhi? How do tongzhi challenge, reinforce, and create new scripts of gender performance, family practices, and living arrangements in their everyday doing of cooperative marriage? What kind of ethics and community do these practices foster in tongzhi’s conscious or unconscious negotiation with their intimate

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*of Colonialism*, ed. Martin F. Manalansan and Arnaldo Cruz (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 33.

5. L. Yang, “Perfection of Chinese Style: Initial Investigation of Formal Marriage” (masters thesis, Hunan Normal University, 2009), 1.

others? And lastly, how does cooperative marriage foreground politics around gender, sexuality, class, and marriage in contemporary China?

Drawing on two years of ethnographic research in five cities in mainland China, this article seeks to understand cooperative marriage by lalas and gay men as experiments and strategies simultaneously shaped and produced by the Chinese party-state's use of heteronormative and intergenerational family structure as a foundation for nation-building and modernizing projects and by the growing influence of normalizing global gay narratives. I argue that urban lower- to middle-class tongzhi in China find creative means to be incorporated into the marriage and family system, while queering the heteronormative scripts with alternative practices. Such strategies include coming out as a married tongzhi, being the filial subject instead of the filial victim, experimenting in pioneering life options, and allying with each other via different means of communication and solidarity. By utilizing tongzhi as a historical, transnational, and relational analytic category, I highlight the gendered, class, and relational struggles that tongzhi encounter in the everyday relations of cooperative marriage. These struggles suggest that camaraderie among tongzhi is often idealized; however, in practice, it is highly contested and contingent on negotiation between multiple parties in such relationships.

#### WHEN TONGZHI MARRY

This section provides theoretical and contextual explanations to understand the historical, political, and economic significance of marriage and family in urban China and how tongzhi is constructed as a diasporic subject in the realms of the home and the nation. By situating tongzhi temporally and spatially in the Chinese home, I explore why cooperative marriage is the painful yet inevitable strategy taken by many tongzhi in post-socialist China<sup>6</sup>. I utilize tongzhi as beyond an identitarian term for Chinese gay men and lalas, but as a historical, transnational, and relational analytic category to explore this paradox. The relational tongzhi explains that, as much as they might celebrate their sexuality as informed by transnational and cosmopolitan gay lifestyles, Chinese gay

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6. Post-socialism in China, also called the post-reform period, is a historical and discursive juncture marked by the opening up of socialist China to global capital in the late 1970s, which drastically transformed the political, economic, and social landscapes in China.

men and lalas benefit from the socially and politically sanctioned institutions of marriage and family while, at the same time, they are constrained by them, both materially and relationally. Marriage as a modern heteronormative contract reentrenches the conflicts that tongzhi uncomfortably find themselves in, yet it is also the most viable means for them to seek desirable lives and create new family formations.

Both tongzhi and marriage are unstable and shifting categories. They are post-socialist and modern inventions, suffused with historical and cultural vestiges, and are sanctioned by social and political economic imperatives. Anthropological and historical research on Chinese kinship since the early 1900s reveals that the centrality of the patrilineal family is a result of complex negotiations of cultural, social, politico-economic conditions.<sup>7</sup> Regarding the patrilineal family as the foundation of political and social order, imperial governments promoted it via state propaganda and disciplining policies.<sup>8</sup> The valorization and consolidation of family helped to regulate both women's sexuality and also contain the so-called "bare sticks"—rootless young males in the realm of the family. Such heterosexualized state projects continued in different political periods of China via different formations. The Chinese Communist Party demonstrated its commitment to rural men who struggled to marry and carry on their family lines (and in lesser part to women's liberation) through its promulgation of the 1950 Marriage Law, enacted soon after the 1949 Communist revolution and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China.<sup>9</sup> However, Deborah Davis suggests that post-reform leadership rejected the extreme politicization of private life and reduced the obstacles to divorce in the 1980 Marriage Law and its 2001 revision. The trend toward the privatization of marriage resulted in a concurrent rise in divorce rates, marriage, and

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7. See Gonçalo Duro Dos Santos, "The Anthropology of Chinese Kinship: A Critical Overview," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2006): 290.

8. See Susan L. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 14.

9. The institution of this law has had a gradual and differential effect on educating women about their rights in urban and rural settings, but it was nonetheless a significant step toward the improvement of women's rights in mainland China. See Gail Hershatler, "Disquiet in the House of Gender," *Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (2012): 878.

remarriage rates.<sup>10</sup> Yunxiang Yan, among many others, observes a partial individualization process transforming the village of Xiajia in north-east China, with the conjugal family gaining more weight in people's lives.<sup>11</sup> Modern notions of love and sex, influenced by state imperatives and market logics, started to shape how Chinese people understand marriage and family.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the retreat of socialist welfare policies and increasing commodification of care have fortified the mutual bonds between parents and their one child since the family planning policy of the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Pressured by the patriarchal expectation of women's caring roles, research has shown that daughters provide more support for their parents than sons do.<sup>14</sup> The parallel workings of state modernization projects and neoliberal cultural transformation simultaneously produce an idealized vision for modern China, resting firmly on heteronormative and intergenerational norms for love. The premise of such love is to revere the nation, which provides the material and ideological bases for the family. The state-sanctioned idea of family and marriage has created anxiety and social tensions for women with class privilege and higher educational attainment, as their delaying marriage as an empowerment strategy often causes them to be stigmatized with the term "leftover women."<sup>15</sup> According to Yue Qian and Zhenchao Qian, there is a high discrepancy between the marriage rates of college-educated men and women, with the latter viewed as too qualified to marry due to a resurgence of traditional notions of womanhood in post-reform China.<sup>16</sup> On the same note, it has also troubled millions of tongzhi who

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10. Deborah S. Davis, "Privatization of Marriage in Post-Socialist China," *Modern China* 40, no. 6 (2014): 569.
  11. Yunxiang Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (New York: Berg, 2009), 65.
  12. Wang Xiyi, *Gender, Dating, and Violence in Urban China* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 64.
  13. Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 127.
  14. Yingchun Ji, "A Mosaic Temporality: New Dynamics of the Gender and Marriage System in Contemporary Urban China," *Temporalités* 26 (2017): 233.
  15. Jing Zheng, "Mate Selection and Gender Reflexivity: The Emphasis of *Gan jue* and the Emergence of a New Generational Pattern of Intimacy in Contemporary China," *Asian Women* 33, no. 1 (2017): 67.
  16. Yue Qian and Zhenchao Qian, "The Gender Divide in Urban China: Singlehood and Assortative Mating by Age and Education," *Demographic Research* 31, art. 45 (2014): 1355.

find heterosexual marriage distasteful to their own preferences, especially for those living in urban centers.

The first use of *tongzhi* as a linguistic play on *tóngxìnglián* (homosexual) and an appropriation of the Communist Party rhetoric of “comrade” to refer to gay men and lalas is attributed to Edward Lam, a gay playwright who referred to the first Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1989 as the Tongzhi Film Festival. The term has become widely used as a queer identification term in the Chinese-speaking world. The transnationally recognizable gayness or the culturally specific term of *tongzhi*, when situated in China, are both beyond the identitarian function of such terms, but rather are (re)inventions that are always in flux and actively negotiating with post-socialist forms of gender, intimacy, and heteronormativity, as Lisa Rofel critically illustrates.<sup>17</sup> According to a 2016 national survey on being LGBTI in China, many lalas and gay men addressed the discrimination they face in relation to their family and workplace.<sup>18</sup> Urban *tongzhi* find themselves in an impossible position perplexed by the tension between the pressure to conform to the heteronormative family system, which is socially and politically sanctioned, and the now increasingly appealing global gay discourses that signify modernity, self-determination, and moral superiority.

Queer-of-color critique and transnational gay and lesbian studies have confronted the “queerness as white” narratives that privilege white gay men and lesbians’ experiences. They critically argue that the post-Stonewall notion of being gay, which celebrates individuation by leaving home and coming out, does not align with the experiences of many from the so-called peripheries in the world. Coming out requires an active initiation of leaving home and establishing nonbiological friendship as alternative kinship bonds.<sup>19</sup> Martin Manalansan insightfully points out that “gay identity and the cultural practices around

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17. Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China, Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 85.

18. “Being LGBTI in China: A National Survey on Social Attitudes towards Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression” (United Nations Development Programme, 2016), 29.

19. Judith Stacey, “Cruising to Familyland: Gay Hypergamity and Rainbow Kinship,” *Current Sociology* 52, no. 2 (2004): 183. Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9.

it heighten anxiety around family and kin, and this anxiety in turn is enhanced if not further validated by mainstream American cultural values around individualism and commitment.”<sup>20</sup> While the rainbow flag has become a powerful symbol of gay internationalism, it has also introduced and demanded a universal and singular model of being queer, which is American, or at least Western.<sup>21</sup> Shuzhen Huang suggests that queerness has become a colonizing tool of “subjectivity management” in China.<sup>22</sup> Influenced by the circulation of transnational queer flows and human rights narratives, there is a growing imperative for Chinese gay men and lalas to publicly announce and display their sexuality so that they are regarded as “authentic” and modern subjects. Constrained by the antagonistic structures of Western/non-Western and individual/familial binaries, Chinese tongzhi are stuck in a liminal space and become diasporic subjects even in their own homes, since they cannot fully reside in the patriarchal and heteronormative family structure, nor are they regarded as thoroughly “liberated” modern subjects like their white counterparts. Rather, as Huang sharply indicates, “They are not able to fully belong to either category, nor are they able to totally separate from either of them.”<sup>23</sup>

To challenge such a hegemonic paradigm, Manalansan and Noelle Stout, among others, have argued that queer socialities are contingent on modes of relating that are materially, culturally, and politically specific. Manalansan discusses the importance of biological family to Filipino gay men in the United States. When migration offered them opportunities to create new selves, their strategies to survive and flourish were very much dependent on the messy negotiation with and reference to their culture, language, and social relations.<sup>24</sup> Stout analyzes how post-Castro Cuban queer social networks were reordered by the emergent market logics, transforming the intimate spheres of lesbians and

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20. Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

21. Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 32.

22. Shuzhen Huang, “Post-Oppositional Queer Politics and the Non-confrontational Negotiation of Queer Desires in Contemporary China” (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2016), 20.

23. *Ibid.*, 21.

24. Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 72.

gay men inside and outside of the sex trade.<sup>25</sup> While Cuban urban gays drew on state-sanctioned rhetoric that differentiated them from rural gay and transgender sex workers against the backdrop of privatization and the commodification of sex, in practice, socialist notions of love and intimacy rendered these borders permeable. In a multi-year ethnography of the Beijing lala community, Elisabeth Engebretsen shows why conjugal ideals (hetero marriage or homo partnership) carry great weight in Beijing lalas' articulation of a normative life, as they reconcile same-sex desires with normative social pressures.<sup>26</sup> Lucetta Kam also identifies the negotiation of marriage to be Shanghai lalas' greatest concern when they reach marriageable age, arguing that many of them lead a double life as publicly heterosexual and privately homosexual.<sup>27</sup> Theorized as "the politics of public correctness," Kam provides a framework to understand the tongzhi strategies that foreground markers of familiarity and class: one should fulfill the societal normative expectations first (which means being married and financially independent) in order to be "qualified" to be gay. Many lalas feel compelled to marry to fulfill their filial responsibility since many of them are single children of their families, and unmarried persons bear intense social scrutiny and stigmatization. As a silent force of resistance to the force of repression in contemporary Chinese families, Kam concludes that cooperative marriage is "the most elaborate form of the politics of public correctness," a coping strategy for lalas to pass as heterosexuals and survive in heteronormative society, given limited options for survival. Chou Wah-shan, a Hong Kong scholar who emphasizes the cultural specificity of same-sex eroticism in China, claims that tongzhi should "come home" instead of come out like their Western counterparts.<sup>28</sup> While Chou's theorization indicates a decolonial understanding of the tongzhi subject, feminist scholars such as Kam and Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei challenge his essentialist framing as reinforcing "silence as a violent form of

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25. Noelle M. Stout, *After Love: Queer Intimacy and Erotic Economies in Post-Soviet Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 175.

26. Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals: Affective Ties and Relationship Strategies among *Lala* (Lesbian) Women in Contemporary Beijing," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 6, no. 3 (2009): 6.

27. Kam, *Shanghai Lalas*, 40.

28. Wah-shan Chou, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2000), 26.

symbolic erasure” in the realm of family and the state.<sup>29</sup> While coming home does not necessitate the reading of such strategy as an overall surrender under the family patriarch, a “coming with” strategy brings more agency into the picture. Recently, Huang argued in her dissertation that a decolonial reading should be taken up to understand such nonconfrontational politics that Chinese queer subjects adopt that “[engage] the home space with queer desires, transforming the heteronormative family institution from within, toward a more livable queer life without exiting the family kinship system.”<sup>30</sup>

This section reviews why marriage is still regarded as the most important institution for the tongzhi subjects in urban China. As much as tongzhi want to inhabit the form of heteronormative marriage and family, they can never be fully incorporated within such a system because of their nonconforming queer desires. Meanwhile, tongzhi’s disruption of the family structure reveals that marriage and family are never stable categories. Such queering processes are enabled and limited by the ethics of camaraderie/solidarity among tongzhi, which is contested and contingent on negotiation, as I will elaborate in the later sections.

#### ETHNOGRAPHY CLOSE TO HEART

Through the methodology of my research, which was inspired by feminist standpoint theory and decolonizing methodologies and consisted of in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, and participant observation, I examine tongzhi’s tactics, practices of intimacy, and everyday hopes and struggles in their lives in urban China.<sup>31</sup> I particularly focus on lala narratives and experiences, as public discourses and past scholarship largely attend to gay men’s realities and therefore render lalas invisible. Cooperative marriage in media and academic writing is often conveyed in an over-simplified manner, as such relationships are examined with preconceived notions of social conformity without taking into account the nuanced complexities of tongzhi’s lives. Numerous failure

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29. Kam, *Shanghai Lalas*, 92; Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei, “Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 49.

30. Huang, “Post-Oppositional Queer Politics,” i.

31. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

stories circulate in the tongzhi community as “bad examples” to warn people off such experiments, stigmatizing those who are in cooperative relationships. Discursive valorizations of identity politics, which advocate coming out and open gay marriage, depict tongzhi’s complex struggles in an incomplete manner at best, silencing them at worst.

As a queer woman in a patriarchal Hakka (ethnic group) family who faces similar marriage pressure, my personal struggle stimulated my interest in understanding cooperative marriage as a contentious strategy for tongzhi in urban China. Born in the state-mandated one-child generation, I grew up in an environment where women are the sole caretakers of their parents. The responsibility of and reliance on sons to pass on the family line extended to girls and women. Positioned at these critical junctures, I consider this research a scholarly and activist intervention, as my nonjudgmental attitudes help shape the inquiries into a collaborative community project. Intending neither to romanticize nor to criticize, I believe a reflexive approach provides a fuller picture of understanding queer subjectivities, tongzhi politics, and queer kinship in mainland China.

I met the informants in five cities in mainland China—Beijing, Shenyang, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, and Foshan—through snowball sampling facilitated by my personal and community network. The multiple sites resulted from the sensitivity of such a topic and not many people in these marriages being willing to talk to an unknown young researcher despite her queerness. I organized community events with local lala groups to share my work in progress and invited people in cooperative marriages to share their experiences in Beijing and Guangzhou. I presented my research at national lala conferences where the majority of grassroots lala groups participated. Two of my informants invited me to be the emcee of a lala dating event in Guangzhou. I also joined as a participant in cooperative marriage matchmaking events in Guangzhou and Hangzhou to experience firsthand the ins and outs of such workings. My informants are mostly in their late twenties and thirties, an age cohort in which marriage pressure is paramount.

NEGOTIATING GENDERED,  
CLASS, AND RELATIONAL STRUGGLES

*"Married women are spilled water!": Maneuvering Gendered Constraints*

This section engages with the gendered struggles in which normative notions of womanhood, family, and filial piety still exert influence in cooperative marriages. It is rare that both the parents and in-laws are aware of their tongzhi children's sexuality and are complicit in managing the marriage façade because they want to "save face" and avoid pressure and gossip. In most cases, lalas are expected to perform certain gendered roles and provide affective labor for the extended kin. Due to the cooperative nature of the marriage, a more equal negotiation can be reached with consensus between gay men and lalas. However, in cases where agreement doesn't translate into actual practices, conflicts sometimes lead to fissures or even breakup of the relationship. For example, some lalas are required to undertake domestic chores when spending time with their families, and some of them are pressured by their in-laws to have babies. Nonetheless, lalas are able to creatively manipulate cooperative marriage to escape the supervision of their natal families and enjoy a relatively autonomous life, however temporarily.

Xin, a lala born and raised in the city in southern China, had been together with her girlfriend for five years by the time she married her first gay husband. Xin used to date men before she met her girlfriend but preferred to only date women because she found herself more relaxed and in a more equal position in relationship with women. They bought a house together (under the guidance and supervision of Xin) and wanted to make it their home. Xin's girlfriend was also in a cooperative marriage, since they both thought it'd be a good strategy to resolve the marriage pressure while still being able to spend time together in their own house. Xin told me, "Gay men are freer. If they don't come home, their parents wouldn't say anything. In contrast, girls are judged if they don't come home at night if they are not married. If you don't go to your husband's place, you can only come back to your parents'. This is very troublesome for the girls." Although they had bought a house together, Xin had to live with her parents as long as she remained unmarried. In urban cities in China, it is not unusual for adults, particularly women, to live with their families due to skyrocketing housing prices.

Xin married a gay man nine years older than herself, who was working as a government official. Not long after their wedding, family disputes started to arise. They lived together in the same household with her parents-in-law, while her gay husband was away in another city during the week. Contrary to Xin's idea of cooperative marriage giving her more time and space from her natal family, Xin's freedom was jeopardized due to her mother-in-law's constant control over her life. Her parents-in-law didn't even allow Xin to care for her own family, as Xin recounted with anger:

One time I went to take care of my father after his surgery in the hospital. My mother was not very well so I was the only one there. To my surprise, my father-in-law called my parents to complain that I should not do that since I'm a married woman and I'm the spilled water! They said my mother should be responsible for my father but not me. My parents were so upset but they apologized. They had to take pills to prevent a heart attack at that night. I'm really disgusted by this kind of traditional idea. I am a modern woman and I cannot take it. I've always been a woman with strong personality, even in my previous straight relationships. I think the reason that I can no longer be with men is because I am a feminist and most men are really patriarchal, even gay men!

Despite numerous complaints Xin made to her gay husband, he didn't mediate the tension or try to find somewhere else for the couple to move away from his parents. Xin broke down and decided to divorce him. Xin had continued to look for another potential gay husband. By the time of our second interview, she was cohabiting with her new "boy-friend" just to get away from her natal family. Since Xin was very keen on the idea of having a baby, cooperative marriage can serve as the legal protection for child bearing and rearing. Perhaps, Xin will demand a more equal arrangement in her next cooperative marriage.

Lalas' experiences of cooperative marriage are quite different from gay men's because heterosexual marriage has historically been used as a transactional and regulatory mechanism over women's bodies and spaces in patriarchal families in China. Several authors have strongly critiqued the interlocking systems of oppression that women have to face in this type of marital arrangement, highlighting the structural inequality pertinent to the institution of heterosexual marriage. Engbretsen further argues that although contract marriage may seem to

be a convenient solution for handling marriage pressure at first, it is in fact highly problematic, especially in the post-wedding arrangements, as it “to a large extent cancels out [women’s] professional and personal achievements, including their financial power, educational attainment and residential independence.”<sup>32</sup> However, Xin’s dissolution of her previous cooperative marriage and her feminist reflections show her awareness of the gender inequality in the marriage; it can also be understood as an individual protest against that inequality. Although with relatively relaxed attitudes in China toward divorce, divorced women still carry a social stigma, albeit with different meanings. As divorce has become more commonplace, my lala informants told me it’s better to be divorced than unmarried: “At least they think that you’ve tried,” explained Xin.

A popular saying in tongzhi communities is that “When you come out of the closet, your parents go into the closet.” Balancing this tension, cooperative marriage provides a façade for both tongzhi and their parents (whether wittingly or unwittingly). By getting married, lalas hope to manipulate the system and deploy cultural norms for their own benefit. However, as cooperative marriage involves two families, it is often harder for the lalas to assuage the tensions and assert their own rights. Lalas’ gendered struggles in the process of negotiating cooperative marriage suggest that the mandate for women to conform to both heteronormativity and patriarchal expectations persists in queer relationships. But unlike many heterosexual women who are trapped in marriage in the guise of love, lalas have more awareness and bargaining power with their marital partners once they notice things are going in the wrong direction. The greater ease with which lalas exit marriages shows their agency and pragmatism in using cooperative marriage as a tool for their own benefit. As I find in other stories from my informants, lalas resort to creative ways of confronting or mediating gender inequality within these relationships, such as living separately from marital partners or in-laws or negotiating household and financial responsibility when needed.

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32. Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 105.

*"Don't dream like a twelve-year-old, be realistic!": A Class Analysis*

The soaring economic disparities and structural inequalities resulting from the post-reform period individualized personal misfortunes and produced a class-based discourse of personal *suzhi* (personal quality), which establishes hierarchical difference between people based on class, educational qualification, rural/urban origin, etc.<sup>33</sup> Cooperative marriage is also a class-influenced project of tongzhi to position themselves to attain a lifestyle that largely conforms to heteronormative and elitist values, which are increasingly informed by the neoliberal market economy. The ability to manage cooperative marriage is partially dependent on the class status of tongzhi, as is shown in Xin's story. Her purchasing of an apartment for her same-sex relationship is a crucial spatial component in her cultivation of multiple relationships. Heterosexual marriage is for the most part the only choice for the less resourceful tongzhi in smaller cities, rural areas, and ethnic minority areas. Therefore, it is essential to understand how urban lower- to middle-class tongzhi utilize cooperative marriage to negotiate their sexuality and families.

The story of Sha shows how cooperative marriage was constructed as a precursor to her ultimate ideal life and how she was able to offset the unsatisfactory result of marriage with her uncooperative gay husband using her class privilege. Sha was thirty-three-years old, a part-time financial manager, and a full-time PhD student in a major city in the south of China. She had married a gay man working in the government three years ago and was planning to have her second child when she met me. Sha discovered her attraction toward women when she was very young, and she told me that her future planning started since then. Knowing that she was not like the majority of the people, she seemed to be pushing herself extra hard in school and work. Apparently, she considered economic independence as the ultimate foundation to freedom, meaning access to higher quality life, education, and citizenship. She was planning to immigrate to Hong Kong with her children. Sha distinguished her friends, whom she said were highly educated, professional women who earned a high income (*san gao*), from the other *lalas*

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33. Travis S.K. Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 89; Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 111.

she knew who were of lower-class status, explaining that she didn't have common language (*mei hua ti*) with them. The same class distinction also applied when she was searching for the potential candidate for cooperative marriage. Sha said that her gay husband had a master's degree, worked in the government, and was relatively good-looking. As a financial manager, Sha was very successful in risk investment and had helped her ex-girlfriends and her gay husband double or triple their investment in the stock market. Coming from a big family, she had the ingrained idea that family should support each other. However, she was very disappointed at how her gay husband responded to her help, because he never thanked her for helping him financially and was stingy in family spending. Sha told me that she would probably divorce her gay husband after they had their second child (with artificial insemination) because she didn't view him as a person capable of taking care of the children. During the several years that I knew Sha, she always seemed very determined and even a bit cold. Her pragmatism is revealed most clearly in the following remarks that she made:

Some people are just too naive. If you really want to achieve something, you'll have to let go of something. You cannot have everything! They [tongzhi] want to be recognized by the society, and they also want harmony in their family and everything to be perfect—these are a twelve-year-old's dream! I believe that economic conditions determine everything else. People listen to you when you have power. No power, no talk!

For Sha, cooperative marriage was a means for her to achieve the future plans she made when she was young. Even though she didn't talk about it explicitly, it was obvious that Sha was aware of the patriarchal hostility toward unmarried women and especially to lalas. Her framing of sexuality in the context of family, but not in terms of identity, situates the concerns and desires of Chinese tongzhi more concretely. It reflects the multidimensional concerns for a lala to make her life work and the complicated negotiations she had been going through with her significant others, including her same-sex relationship, her marital partner, and her family. Her economic independence and her ability to make money and to immigrate to Hong Kong later enabled her to have more authority and freedom in maintaining her multiple relationships. Compared to other informants, Sha was much more well-off, which

undoubtedly enhanced her bargaining power in her relationship with her gay husband when things went wrong. As Engebretsen highlights the connections between multiple systems of oppression and the importance of intersectional analysis of cooperative marriage, Sha's example complicates the simple "lalas are oppressed" narrative in these relationships, and it also reveals the highly classed and economistic values that are rampant in today's China.<sup>34</sup> These values also shape how tongzhi understands their lives.

*"One-eye open, one-eye closed":*

*Navigating Spaces within Heteronormative Families*

Given the central place of marriage and family in tongzhi life, the Western identity-based norm of gay people leaving home does not resonate with most tongzhi desires. Rather, tongzhi choose to "come with" the family so as to engage within the heteronormative spaces with queer desires, without exiting the family system. I propose seeing cooperative marriage as a culturally and socially specific strategy for Chinese lalas and gay men. I depart from the "performative family" theory and suggest that the process of negotiating cooperative marriage is mutually interactive for both the parents and tongzhi. They dance over what can be compromised or negotiated with implicit or explicit understanding of each other's intentions.

The institution of family and the meanings associated with filial piety have undergone significant changes during recent decades. Yan argues that intergenerational intimacy has transformed from unconditional obedience and submission to "caring and supportive but not obedient" (*xiaoer bushun*), and Xiaoying Qi shows that family relations in China have transformed socially and materially but remain morphologically similar to the conventional filiality (*xiao*).<sup>35</sup> The "performative family" model theorized by Suzanne Choi and Ming Luo articulates

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34. Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, "Under Pressure: Lesbian-Gay Contract Marriages and Their Patriarchal Bargains," in *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gonalo Santos and Stevan Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 165.

35. Yunxiang Yan, "Intergenerational Intimacy and Descending Familism in Rural North China," *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 2 (2016): 245; Xiaoying Qi, "Filial Obligation in Contemporary China: Evolution of the Culture-System," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 45, no. 1 (2015): 141.

cooperative marriage as an intergenerational negotiation by delineating the mechanisms with which parents influence their gay children's decision to marry and the strategies that lalas and gay men adopt to fulfill parental expectation and negotiate spaces for themselves. Choi and Luo argue, "By focusing on nominal marriages, we can largely remove personal motivation for marriage from the equation and thus highlight the role of parental influence."<sup>36</sup> However, centering parental pressure as their only motivation to marriage is problematic since lalas and gay men have various other gendered, class, and relational motivations as I argued earlier. Focusing on the mechanism with which parents exert influence, the "performative family" model pays little attention to how parents' reactions are also dependent on their tongzhi children. Equally important, the model fails to locate lalas and gay men in the larger extended family that they create for themselves, for example, their same-sex lovers, their marital partners, and the tongzhi community that they intentionally build as their safety net and sometimes last resort.

Ke's story is an interesting example to discuss as she intentionally chose to be a filial subject rather than a filial victim in her management of cooperative marriage, with the help of her tongzhi community. Ke was a twenty-nine-year old lala living in a provincial city in the north of China. Her family owned a supermarket and other properties in the city and had business connections in other parts of China too. Ke's mother had suspected and confronted her on the issue of homosexuality when she was a teenager. In fact, her parents met several of her girlfriends when she was dating, and their attitudes changed from being very hostile to mildly accepting. Commenting on her relationship with her parents, Ke used a typical Chinese slang, "one-eye open, one-eye closed" (*zheng yizhi yan, bi yizhi yan*) to refer to a kind of implicit and nonverbal acknowledgement of her same-sex desires. Because of their business connections and influence, Ke decided to marry her gay male friend, who had already come out to his single mother.

The only problem was that Ke looked very tomboyish and did not conform to the heteronormative gender scripts most tongzhi consider necessary for the success of the "performance." Ke and her gay husband

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36. Susanne Y. P. Choi and Ming Luo, "Performative Family: Homosexuality, Marriage and Intergenerational Dynamics in China," *British Journal of Sociology* 67, no. 2 (2016): 264.

had a very interesting way of negotiating gender performance in their marriage. Ke dressed in whatever she liked, even in their wedding photographs. She explained to others that her husband liked her authentic self. Ke was helped by Xiong, a community organizer helping tongzhi deal with marriage pressure, including offering consultation about cooperative marriage. Ke and Xiong shared an apartment together with their respective lala partners. They planned the whole wedding themselves so that they could make it less heteronormative and more comfortable for tongzhi. Ke explained:

We had a wedding ceremony because my mother insisted. We seemed to be forced to do so, but we took the control back. I told my mother to stay out of the wedding planning and she agreed. The point was to make the process more comfortable for every one of us. On that day, I dressed as usual [tomboyish] and I told our guests that my husband just loves me the way I am. I really didn't care about what others thought or their comments, and there was actually more space than we normally presumed. Even though we live in the same city, my parents had never interfered with me cohabitating with the other three women and they never visited the house. We had an implicit understanding after all these years.

Due to the state's family planning policy, many children in China are single children and many of the tongzhi I interviewed were single children in their families (seventeen out of twenty-two among the informants). The fact that tongzhi are shouldered with a lot of family responsibility does not indicate that they lack bargaining power with their parents. Cooperative marriage cannot be seen as something solely forced by parental influence. It needs every party in the family (even in the larger tongzhi network) to cooperate and perform. In this sense, gay children are also complicit in their embracing of deeply ingrained Chinese family values by resorting to cooperative marriage. The negotiation is two-way and interactive, and the tongzhi children actually have greater resources such as the Internet and their tongzhi network/community to facilitate the marriage process. They don't simply perform for their parents, but also for themselves. There could be a radical reading of such relationships in that they are exploring the unknown gaps and spaces within traditional family and marriage while playing with heteronormative rules and testing their boundaries, all in the context of a politically and socially restricted China. For most urban tongzhi, the question is not to

argue for a radical break with patriarchal institutions of family and marriage, but to engage in finding how to potentially transform heteronormative family spaces from within.

*Building Camaraderie:*

*Contingent Negotiations of Gay Men and Lala Solidarity*

It has been argued by many queer theorists that queer kinship and its affective ties extend beyond marital and biological relationships. Queer kinship provides important insights for understanding the forming and practicing of cooperative marriages. In the context of intertwined and complex negotiation of local and global ideologies, many lalas and gay men, who are increasingly aware of their sexuality and societal rights-based discourses, start to form solidarity groups on the Internet, such as around cooperative marriage groups. Being tongzhi is an important basis underlying lalas and gay men's motivations in collaborating with each other. Remarks such as "helping people like us" and "we should help each other" are recurring in the interviews. These remarks imply that there is a shared lived experience and social stigma associated with being tongzhi in mainland China. The mutual understanding promotes ethics of camaraderie and solidarity among tongzhi, and it also establishes consensus in tackling their common concerns and problems. The biggest difference between a cooperative marriage and a heterosexual monogamous marriage is that lalas and gay men are allowed to have extra-marital relationships under the explicit understanding that they will also support each other's same-sex romance(s). It is the premise underlying cooperative marriage that represents an active basis for sharing, advising, and respecting the decisions for personal fulfillment.

Ling, a lala in her mid-twenties married Su, a gay man in his late-twenties who worked in local government in a city in southern China. Ling worked in her family business and had close interaction with family members on and off work. She reasoned that marriage actually freed her physically from her parents' home, and that she felt much happier after being married. Su worked in the government, and he told me that his marriage was primarily intended to foster advancement in his job. Ling and Su were very close friends. They lived together in Su's apartment and had spent a lot of time together, eating and chatting. Ling told me that sometimes they chat until three o'clock in the morning. To

Ling, Su was more than just a friend, but a very intimate family member whom she could confide in and seek support from. She told me,

He is my mentor! I could not confide in some friends I've known for ten years like I do with him. We would also share our views on sex and stuff. If I didn't come home at night, he would joke with me that I must have gone for a one-night stand. It's not awkward at all, we are both straightforward people, and we share a lot of things in common.

Couples such as Su and Ling with such intimate bonds may not be the norm in cooperative marriages. Keeping some distance with each other's personal life is a more common practice. In so doing, marital partners can enjoy freedom in cooperative marriage while making it workable. When asked about whether they would introduce their boyfriends or girlfriends to each other and whether it would influence their relationship if the same-sex partners didn't like them, Ling responded,

We wouldn't interfere with each other on this subject. If we like each other's boyfriends or girlfriends, we can hang out together more. If not, we just don't interact as often. We are independent persons. But still, I take time in searching for a girlfriend.

Gay men and lalas in cooperative marriage are expected to honor the ethics of camaraderie among tongzhi, which includes knowing the common sufferings, covering up for each other, sharing information, honoring secrets and commitment, and having common goals. Compared to monogamous relationships, the explicit understanding of extramarital relationships can be the key difference and unique characteristic for lalas and gay men in a cooperative marriage. Lalas and gay men understand the difficulty of searching for and maintaining same-sex romances/relationships, especially in a society where most tongzhi are more or less closeted. In matchmaking activities, sharing sessions on cooperative marriage, and even the focus group interview in Guangzhou with eighteen lalas and gay men, participants had animated discussions about their experiences in finding suitable partners and solving related problems. Such offline activities were common in four out of the five cities I visited (except Foshan). Even in cities where local communities were not so well established, tongzhi could still seek help online by joining chat rooms or discussion forums.

Besides sharing information and helping each other to manage the marriage pressure, managing multiple relationships in cooperative marriage is perhaps a much more contentious area in which conflicts broke out often. Stories of betrayal leading up to divorce, forced coming out to their respective parents, and even legal complaints travel more quickly in the tongzhi community, making others who are contemplating this decision wary. Such disputes usually revolve around disagreements over financial matters. For instance, a gay man did not want to pay for all the expenses when the lala was bearing their child, but the lala considered the reproductive labor materially and affectively damaging to her career therefore deemed the financial compensation appropriate. Other contentions occur when one party in cooperative marriage decides to reveal their tongzhi identity to their parents, discrediting their cooperative marriage. In practice, the idealized camaraderie and solidarity among tongzhi is being contested with shifting desires of multiple parties in the relationship and is contingent on the negotiation over their gendered, class, and relational struggles.

#### CONCLUSION

This article is an attempt to understand the particular dilemma that gay men and lalas find themselves in, undergirded by competing discourses of the state modernization project based on heteronormative and intergenerational scripts of love and the traveling global gay narratives predicated on individuation and leaving home. Cooperative marriage is a gendered, classed, and relational endeavor negotiated by urban lower- and middle-class tongzhi in their hopes to queer the heteronormative family. Far from an idealized notion of camaraderie that rests on an imagined unitary tongzhi community, the ethics of camaraderie/solidarity are being contested and negotiated by gay men and lalas in the everyday implementation of cooperative marriage.

Recognizing the heteronormative limits and the need for nuanced intersectional analysis of cooperative marriage, I am cautious about theorizing cooperative marriage in a teleological fashion. It is interesting to note that the potential risk of divorce, family conflict, and problems of child-bearing are used as indicators to measure the success of cooperative marriage in most scholarly and media inquiries of such relationships without qualification, even though these same risks are common to most heterosexual marriages in China. This simple success-versus-failure demarcation, with its emphasis on the outcomes of this kind of queer kinship, alongside the desire to secure “an absolute and permanent success,”

further reveals authors' presupposition of a universally and publicly identifiable gay subjectivity and lifestyle, endorsed by the Western identity politics, human rights narratives, and marriage-equality rights campaigns that have swept the globe.<sup>37</sup> This framework reveals a moralizing judgment about the authenticity of marriages in which tongzhi are discredited for their fake performance of love in a sexless marriage. Jingshu Zhu's research on the "marriage fraud" between closeted gay men and noncomplicit women cautions us that using honesty as a decontextualized ethical yardstick for queer kinship "may obscure the racist and homophobic prejudices that exist both outside and inside queer communities."<sup>38</sup> In the case of cooperative marriage and the "marriage fraud," the values of authenticity and honesty are proclaimed, endorsed, and reinforced by the collusion of state-sanctioned family values and modern notions of identity and marriage, which subjugates those who practice such relationships as second-class national and global citizens.

It is my intention in this article to complicate and deconstruct the dichotomies and evaluative framework that risk erasing the nuances in tongzhi's everyday practices within cooperative marriages and their articulation of family and camaraderie that might not be intelligible to many people. I believe that historicization and contextualization are useful for understanding the transformation of and politics around gender, sexuality, class, and marriage in contemporary China. Adopting a decolonizing feminist methodology demands accounting for historical and contemporary contexts in order to understand queer subjectivities at this global juncture.

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37. Engebretsen, *Queer Women in Urban China*, 104.

38. Jingshu Zhu, "Unqueer' Kinship?: Critical Reflections on 'Marriage Fraud' in Mainland China." *Sexualities* 21, no. 7 (2018): 1075.