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Yue Opera in Queer Gaze

Chinese Gay Fans of Yue Opera in Negotiation with Heteronormative Mainstream Society and Identity Politics

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***Yue* Opera in Queer Gaze:
Chinese Gay Fans of *Yue* Opera in Negotiation with
Heteronormative Mainstream Society and Identity Politics**

by

Zhenzhong Mu

A Thesis submitted for the Degree of
PhD in Chinese Studies Research

King's College London

Abstract

This project researches Chinese gay fans of *yue* opera. It asks, how do gay fans of *yue* opera form queer culture within the community to negotiate with heteronormative mainstream society and identity politics in China? To answer this research question, participant observation was conducted at three gay fan galas in rural Zhejiang and twenty-three in-depth interviews were held with both rural and urban gay fans in southern China, starting in 2016. There are three key findings. First, through the celebration of a shared passion for *yue* opera, these gay fans establish queer kinship bonds and seek sexual relations in the community so as to leave heterosexual marriages and families behind. While many gay fans gain a sense of sisterhood, mutual support, and sometimes sexual fulfillment, some become bitter victims of the hierarchy constructed inside the community and of non-consensual sex. Second, through the appropriation of *yue* opera, gay fans are enabled to resist heteronormativity and gender stereotypes; their immersion in this traditional culture and mimicking of opera characters help them find their own path to establish and maintain a connection with mainstream social values and discourses. Third, these gay fans have strong attachments to the southern Chinese culture and their rural locality, which cannot be overshadowed by global gayness or overarching Chineseness. However, these local attachments are undergoing changes as trans-regional and transnational mobility increases. These findings provide new perspectives on Chinese gayness beyond the metropolitan elite, revealing a form of queer culture that bonds with not only modernity and the West, but also tradition and locality.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to explore Chinese gay males' consumption of traditional *yue* opera in negotiation with heteronormative mainstream society and identity politics. *Yue* opera, an all-female-troupes Chinese opera that originated in Shengzhou, Zhejiang Province in southeast China and gained its popularity in Shanghai, has developed into a cultural form that is appreciated throughout China due to its artistic values¹. There have been many studies demonstrated the value of studying Chinese traditional operas to understand various interrelated social discourses in distinct eras of twentieth century Chinese history, *i.e.* patriotism versus colonialism², public judges versus individual stigma³, and feminism versus patriarchy⁴. It is also believed that such traditional operas, with their cross-gendered performances, have been "given more official and cultural leeway than popular modes of cultural production... to portray sexual diversity on the post-Mao Chinese stage"⁵. Since imperial China, the gender roles on the stage and the sexual relations at the backstage were defined by costumes and gestures⁶, and it is believed that Chinese opera performances today, which have sustained the cross-gender convention,

¹ Jin Jiang, "The Origins of *Yue* Opera," in *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2009), 26.

² Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, "'Farewell My Concubine': History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (Autumn, 1995): 16-27.

³ Teresa de Lauretis, "Popular Culture, Public and Private Fantasies: Femininity and Fetishism in David Cronenberg's '*M. Butterfly*,'" *Signs* 24, no. 2 (Winter, 1999): 303-334.

⁴ Hui-ling Chou, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese State," *TDR* 41, no. 2 (Summer, 1997): 130-152.

⁵ Megan Evans, "*Two Belles in Love*: Staging a 'Tradition' of Sexual Diversity in a Grand Scape Contemporary Chinese Opera," (2012).

⁶ Susan L. Mann, "Same-Sex Relationships and Transgendered Performances," in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 137-153.

interrogated the gender binary and challenged a singular way of gender performances⁷. However, these interrogation and challenge, according to Tan, still cannot alter the gender-straight nature of opera as the onstage impersonators “do not play stereotypes”⁸, and the cross-gendered performances are believed to be simply serving for a love story between opposite sexes and an overall heteronormative script⁹. Moreover, the cross-gendered performances are believed to be passively signifying the opposite-sex character rather than autonomously becoming to resist any socio-cultural norms¹⁰. These literatures relevant to Chinese opera and cross-gendered performances either uncovered the development of the traditional culture or tried to unfold their relation to the contemporary social discourses in China. However, they failed to investigate the contemporary consumption of opera and cross-dressing in globalising China, especially by sexual minorities.

Therefore, this research asks a core question: what is queer about gay fans of *yue* opera? I hope to discover and understand the negotiation between the increasingly visible homosexual identity in contemporary mainland China and this Chinese traditional culture. The negotiation is based on both how Chinese homosexuals interpret their own identity, compared to their Western counterpart and how they situate the sexual deviant within the historic continuum in both local and global contexts. To be more specific, I hope to explore the following

⁷ Siu Leung Li, “Gender and Performance: Crossing Reality/Fiction and Acting the Other Sex,” in *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 155-169.

⁸ See-Kam Tan, “The Cross-Gender Performances of Yan Kim-Fei, or the Queer Factor in Postwar Hong Kong Cantonese Opera/Opera Films,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 39, no. 3-4 (2000): 208.

⁹ See-Kam Tan and Annette Aw, “*The Love Eterne*: Almost a (Heterosexual) Love Story,” in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 160-166.

¹⁰ Song Hwee Lim, “The Uses of Femininity: Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* and Zhang Yuan’s *East Palace, West Palace*,” in *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 69-98.

theoretical questions: How homosexual identity has been affecting this group of gay men's personal and public life in the mainstream culture? How do they react to the social and cultural norms in China? I hope to navigate how *yue* opera helps them in coping with heteronormativity and homonormativity, and how the appreciation of *yue* opera allow them to feel the past, the present, and the future?

By asking these questions, this research hopes to produce new knowledge about Chinese gayness, particularly the understanding of Chinese gay identities and queer agency as a transregional and transcultural phenomenon. Given that previous theories that claimed a universal gayness originating from the West¹¹ has been widely critiqued, and a different theoretical approach that chants transnationalism has been preferred¹², this thesis also tries to contest global gay stereotypes by contributing an unacknowledged diversity of ways of being gay in China.

To achieve these aims, the research will mainly adopt ethnographic methodologies. I conducted field research in southern China for approximately nine months during 2016. It involves conducting semi-structured interviews with and participant observations of gay fans of *yue* opera in China. I went through hardships in locating the community and entering the field given the fact that homosexuality is not an identity celebrated by the mainstream and gay fans of *yue* opera are extremely careful of exposure. Throughout the fieldwork, I conducted twenty-three in-depth interviews in southern China, most of which in Zhejiang Province, and three participant observations of *yue* opera gay fan gatherings that lasted averagely two to three days in various rural areas of Zhejiang Province. It is very important to see both interviews and participant observations as complementary methods in this project rather than independent or irrelevant, and they were conducted almost simultaneously when I was trying to locate gay and queer fans in rural areas. All these respondents are male *yue*

¹¹ Dennis Altman, "On Global Queering," *Australian Humanities Review* 2 (1996), accessed 2nd April 2015, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/altman.html>.

¹² Lisa Rofel, "Queer positions, Queer Asian Studies" *positions* 20, no. 1 (2012): 187.

opera lovers who are 18 years old and over, and they are self-identified as gay, *tongzhi*, or queer. Due to the sensitivity of the research question, it is crucially important to consider the willingness and privacy of the interviewees while gathering data. Before starting interviews, ethical approvals were signed by both respondents and me. During the process, I encountered challenges and confusions as I was not merely a researcher, but also an active participant in the gaze of all respondents. More detailed discussion and analysis of my dual roles in the field will be done in the Methodology Chapter.

This thesis consists of five chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter reviews the current literature on scholarly discussions about queerness in both Chinese and global contexts. The second chapter introduces how I entered the field, and analysed discomfort and fear that a researcher faced when meeting with the respondents. The third chapter demonstrates and analyses how gay fans of *yue* opera negotiate with the notions of intimacy, and showcases the queer fan community as a whole, with a complicated package of bondings, politics, hierarchies, eroticism, and sexual relations within. The fourth chapter examines the becoming of *yue* opera fans, and the ways in which my respondents instrumentalise this traditional art form, through singing, performing and mimicking *yue* opera, to deal with the heteronormative mainstreams. The fifth chapter puts the community of gay opera fans into both local and global contexts to scrutinise how they are empowered by negotiating with locality and mobility in today's China.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This literature review aims to demonstrate the theoretical framework for the analysis of Chinese gay men's consumption of traditional *yue* opera. It can be mainly divided into two different sections. One, from the perspective of homosexuality's geopolitical meanings, it shows the recent debates in Queer Theory on globalism, transnationalism, and decentralism. I begin with the popular comparison between globalism and transnationalism, which not only recognises the recently increasing visibility of Chinese homosexuality that is considered to have picked up and internalised both global and local traits, but more significantly reveals how power disciplines nations, communities, and subjects differently and unevenly. Then, I will demonstrate the decentralist point of view, which articulates that overexposing the alterity of Chinese homosexuality in a transnational context is a form of claiming cultural essentialism, or self-orientalism of the Chinese gay community, yet it still fails to bypass the binary of the West versus China. Instead, decentralism encourages intra-regional comparison between gayness in non-Western contexts to generate a different referential knowledge of Chinese homosexuality to contribute to a deimperialised, decolonised, and de-Cold-War epistemology. To relate these theories to my project, on the one hand, I tend to unfold how gay fans of traditional *yue* opera live with their both global and local identities, especially how they consume the global pop gay culture, respond to the global trend of gay rights campaign, and in the local sense, how they creatively develop queer strategies to cope with the family and marriage norms, the discourse of *suzhi*, Chinese masculinity and femininity, et al.; on the other hand, I take the suggestion of decentralism to destructure the overarching term of China by comparing the difference between *yue* opera and other Chinese operas peculiarly Peking opera, and the difference between northern Chinese and southern Chinese gay identities.

Two, from the perspective of queer temporalities, I will review debates on the current gay rights campaigns' heteronormativity, the gay politics' homonormativity, and the core debate on the utopian/dystopian queerness. By applying these theories to my thesis, I hope to scrutinise both heteronormative and homonormative traits in Chinese gay community, and argue that Chinese homosexuals' appropriation of socio-familial norms can be regarded as a very

queer, if not queerer, form of autonomy compared to their Western counterparts. These Chinese gay men challenged not only heteronormativity, but the gay politics; their life is filled with both joys out of resisting norms and discomfort when lingering with traditional culture; and through traditional operas they enjoy how their queer fantasies can be performed out on the stage, the fantasies that include both their desire of breaking out of constraints and move forward, and their nostalgia of staying behind and appreciating the past. So, I am hoping to crystallise how queering the issue of time(s) denaturalises what has been taken for granted, and more importantly to theorise Chinese homosexuality that is “out of time *and* of the time.”¹³

1.1. Queer Geopolitics

1.1.1. One World, One Queerness?

Since the emergence of queer theory in the United States, the researches on LGBTQs have been primarily focused on some particular nation-states and their cultural production¹⁴. To mobilise queer theory to broader critiques of more queer issues with greater depth, and to apply queer studies to not only Western societies but the understanding of the East, as David Eng reckons, we need more frequent and equal exchanges of queer knowledge between English literature and scholars working and producing in non-English languages¹⁵. Whilst doing so, we first of all need to carefully bridge the national and the queerness. To be more project-specific, we have to understand how gay men in China negotiate their sexual orientation with Chineseness, and how such

¹³ Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher S. Nealon, and Tan Hoang Nguyen, “Theorising Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 191.

¹⁴ Karma R. Chávez, “Pushing Boundaries: Queer Intercultural Communication,” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 6, no.2 (2013): 90.

¹⁵ David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?,” in *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 84-85 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 15.

negotiation has productively formed their identity.

It has been articulated since the last century that global capitalism has changed the social discourses of sexuality, and the booming market of capitalism successfully integrated the gay community¹⁶. To prolong this argument, Altman specifically adds that the development of social media successfully bring lifestyles and appearances of gayness, which are peculiarly American, to the rest of the globe¹⁷. In Altman's later words,

[a]s globalisation extends western concepts of identity, consumerism, and self-fulfilment to other societies, so too it replaces existing scripts about sex with those of Hollywood and the romance novel¹⁸.

Compared to the U.S.'s fantasy of global gay-friendly markets, any stubbornly existing nostalgia, tradition, unequal relations are all simply "justifications to perpetuate the worst kinds of institutionalised subordination and barbarism"¹⁹. Therefore, in his way of understanding sexuality in the globalised world, the sexual difference and the American style of sexuality should be legitimised and struggled for in all nation-states²⁰. This argument makes some sense when we look into the uncomfortable news about homosexuals being mistreated in some countries. For instance, nation-states of the global South and post-Soviet Russia have lately witnessed a wave of homophobic violence, and according to some, "what is happening is wrong, wrong not simply by the standards of Western liberalism and possible post-colonial paternalism, but wrong by emerging values of human solidarity", and the world should look for a modern

¹⁶ John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Power of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharan Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 102.

¹⁷ Dennis Altman, "On Global Queering," *Australian Humanities Review* 2 (1996), accessed 2nd April 2015, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/altman.html>.

¹⁸ Dennis Altman, "Conclusion: A Global Sexual Politics?," in *Global Sex* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 160.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

global culture that respects sexual rights and is free from suppressing local traditions²¹. In other words, freedom and sexual rights have become significant criteria for the assessment of modernity in a nation-state, and such criteria are believed to be exported from Euro-America to the rest of the world.

With my deep resentment towards any abuse or violence against sexual variants, I still find the globalist understanding of homosexuality and gay rights rather questionable. First, within the geographic boundary of the West, there is no consensus about homosexuality, which renders the globalised gay rights as human rights unconvincing. At this moment, the public in the West has been engaged in many intense debates over gay rights and the legalisation of same-sex marriage²². Homosexual individuals are far from being treated equally in many places. Beyond the equality, what the gay community has won may only be the approved self-portray as a desexualised human rights fighter, rather than the gay sensitivity or a fair representation of the community in media²³. Besides the fuelling discussion in the heteronormative society, the gay community has also been through different opinions towards gay marriage. If gay tolerance is still a fantasy in the West and the freedom of lifestyle precarious, the journey of the American version of homosexuality to the rest of the world can merely turn out difficult and bumpy. Briefly speaking, the heterogeneous attitudes towards and within Western gay community, which other gay men are assumed to be mimicking and struggling for, makes the global gayness homogenisation quite impossible.

Second, by naturalising the embrace of sexual tolerance in global North, the universal notion of gay rights, akin to other traits of modernity, e.g. neoliberal economy and democracy, is problematically used to draw a radical line between

²¹ Jeffrey Weeks, "Sexual Wrongs and Sexual Rights: Globalisation and the Search for Justice," in *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 203.

²² Ibid., 92.

²³ David M. Halperin, "Gay Identity and Its Discontents," in *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 72-76.

the West and the other. Rofel interprets the universalism of homosexuality as to initiate an external modern force that changes and provides salvations to Asian cultures, and she critiques that the notion, especially by Altman, is guided by an imperialist perception that tends to stabilise and cement meanings²⁴. During the preaching of a globalised gay identity and tolerance, “a myth of freedom” can easily be turned into a reminder of nationalism and the reinforcement of inequality²⁵, because only winners in globalisation can be taken care of, while the losers are likely to administer xenophobia and re-ethnicisation²⁶. Indeed, some scholars find gay rights are often instrumentalised as a governmental agenda to marginalise and imperialise other differences and the backward, which is believed to be the demonstration and legitimisation of Islamophobia and xenophobia²⁷. In accordance with Chakrabarty’s work, the notion of modernity versus backwardness emerged as a product of colonialism, and within the continuum of modernity, the West is already modern and the rest of world is made akin to a be in a waiting room of history, where most non-Western nation-states are not yet modern or civilised enough²⁸. By taking biological determinism of sexuality for granted, homosexuality is thus naturalised, and simultaneously any exotic tradition or law against gay rights are blamed to be against the nature, inhuman, and merely cultural²⁹. To conclude, in the gap opened by the opposition of modernity versus backwardness and the binary of

²⁴ Lisa Rofel, “Quality of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities,” in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 89-92.

²⁵ Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 19, no. 1-2 (2002): 39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁷ Karma R. Chávez, “Pushing Boundaries,” 86, 87; Éric Fassin, “National Identities and Transnational Intimacies: Sexual Democracy and the Politics of Immigration in Europe,” *Public Culture* 22, no. 3 (2010): 507-529.

²⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Introduction,” in *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 8.

²⁹ Stefan P. Dudink, “Homosexuality, Race, and the Rhetoric of Nationalism,” *History of the Present* 1, no. 2 (2011): 262.

gay rights versus gay wrongs, a new form of inequality is thus installed to the global hegemony, which is paradoxically against the imaginary of Western democracy and the ideal of equality.

Third, according to Eng's iteration, the gay liberation and same-sex intimacy in the West are achieved with the cost of racialisation, which makes the globalist theory of gay culture unable to explain how the Western homosexuality, together with the colonialist residual, can ever be evenly welcome by gay subjects living in non-Western cultures. To be more explicit, the intimacy and the nuclear family tradition are considered as "a racialised property right – one predicated on a long U.S. history of racial subordination and the legal protection of white privilege – now serves to constitute normative gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects as possessive individuals"³⁰, which is to say gay rights are giving "comforts of bourgeois domesticity" that fails "to recognise the racial genealogy of exploitation and domination that underwrites the very inclusion of queers and queers of colour in this abstract liberal polity"³¹. Therefore, we have to rethink whether the emergence of queer freedom is the racialised product, and whether it relates to "the profound legacies and difficult histories of racial pain"³². Even until today, it is believed that queerness and queer theory have a history and location in the West and they show a kind of Western white male imperialism³³. In order to deimperialise and decolonise them, an alternative theoretical approach to understand homosexuality in the non-West, specifically in China where my project is based, is asked for – transnationalism – hoping to redrew the image of Chinese gay men as active

³⁰ David L. Eng, "The Law of Kinship: *Lawrence v. Texas* and the Emergence of Queer Liberalism," in *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialisation of Intimacy* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³² David L. Eng, "The Prospect of Kinship: Transnational Adoption and Racial Reparation," in *The Feeling of Kinship*, 165.

³³ Clare Hemmings, "What's in a Name? Bisexuality, Transnational Sexuality Studies and Western Colonial Legacies," *International Journal of Human Rights* 11, no. 1-2 (2007): 20

and autonomous rather than passively waiting to be emancipated by the Western gay liberation.

1.1.2. Chinese Homosexuality, Another Otherness?

As Rofel points out in her conclusion of recent development of queer Asian studies, we have been encouraged to trace “the embodied entanglements between the erotic, desire, and political economy and geopolitical power in [a] broader sense” rather than simply perpetuating the universalism to the dissident desires in contemporary non-Western, specifically Asian contexts³⁴. An outstanding instance of such detachment of theoretical approach from universalism can be found in her eloquently written book *Desiring China*. Within her investigation of Chinese gay men, she highlights three major local traits of Chinese homosexuality, including the local linguistic appropriation of homosexual knowledge, the significance of family and kinship, and the practice of *suzhi*, a pursuit of high quality in Chinese society³⁵. I will explain the three traits in more detail.

First, in terms of the variation of terms referring to homosexuality, Rofel found a contemporarily popular word for gay and lesbian people in Hong Kong and mainland China is *tongzhi*, which was appropriated from a communist term “comrade” in order to produce positive and politically correct meanings for the community³⁶. The mainstream society tends to use *tongxinglian*, the Chinese translation of homosexuality to represent the community and social phenomenon³⁷. In Taiwan, some intellectuals transliterated the word *queer* into *ku'er*, which means the extremely cool or fashionable youngster³⁸. Furthermore,

³⁴ Lisa Rofel, “Queer *positions*, Queer Asian Studies” *positions* 20, no. 1 (2012): 187,

³⁵ Lisa Rofel, “Quality of Desire,” 103.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-103; Wah-Shan Chou, “Introduction: The Cultural Politics of *Tongzhi*,” in *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

³⁷ Wah-Shan Chou, “Introduction”, in *Tongzhi*, 3.

³⁸ Song Hwee Lim, “How to Be Queer in Taiwan: Translation, Appropriation and the Construction of the Queer Identity in Taiwan,” in *AsiaPacifiQueer*:

the English word *gay* and an abbreviated word *lala* (lesbian) are frequently used³⁹. Most recently, with the development of Internet, a new word *gaoji* that literally means “to engage in homosexual conducts” becomes popular among young people in Chinese urban areas, and it has even started to be used to apply to strong bonds between heterosexual males⁴⁰. Rofel assumed that many gay men in Beijing interchangeably use terms of *gay*, *tongzhi*, and *tongxinglian*⁴¹, whereas another ethnographic research in Shanghai by Bao shows that these terms show different spatial belongings, i.e. “the transnational and multilingual ‘gay’, the young and energetic *tongzhi*, as well as the older and often married *tongxinglian*”⁴².

Second, family and the “marital terrain” make an individual a social member and establish their social identities in China⁴³. Kinship plays a big part in

Rethinking Genders and Sexualities, ed. Fran Martin, Peter A. Jackson, Mark McLelland, and Andrey Yue (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 235.

³⁹ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, “Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals: Affective Ties and Relationship Strategies among *Lala* (Lesbian) Women in Contemporary Beijing,” *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 6, no. 3 (2009) 4; Lisa Rofel, “Quality of Desire,” 103; Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, “Introduction: Reconnecting Selves and Communities,” in *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 1.

⁴⁰ Wei Wei, “The *Gao-Ji/Gaau-Gey* Discourse in Chinese Youth Culture: Homosexually-Themed Language, Homosociality, and the Transformation of Masculinity,” in *XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology*, 13-19 July 2014.

⁴¹ Lisa Rofel, “Qualities of Desire,” 103.

⁴² Hongwei Bao, “Queering/Querying Cosmopolitanism: Queer Spaces in Shanghai,” in *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 4, no. 1 (2011): 112.

⁴³ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, “Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals,” 4; Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, “Is Face More Important Than Happiness?,” in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.

shaping their belongings, establishing their human normality, and accessing their moral privilege⁴⁴. Some parents think it is their responsibility to help their children find an appropriate marital heterosexual partner to embark the life journey of a new family⁴⁵. Any individual who refuses to form a family through the institution of marriage or cannot undertake the filial obligations is condemned as a stigma⁴⁶. Such stigma is not merely about the face of the individual, but of his whole family⁴⁷. Marriage to the opposite sex is almost compulsory as a Chinese man is supposed to follow the Confucian ethics to continue the family line by having a (preferably male) child⁴⁸. Having such norms in the social context adds to the specialities of Chinese queer identity.

Third, *suzhi*, the quality, is a concept and discourse including “a broad-ranging semiotic politics” that has been pervasively discussed among Chinese gay men and the wider society⁴⁹. Some believe that *suzhi* is a social code produced during the economic reform that is now a value that legitimises the neoliberal exploitation and the divisions caused by capitalism⁵⁰; while other conceptualise it as the quality that helps with self-governance and the cultivation of citizens who are aware of their place and willing to work for a wealthy yet divided society⁵¹. To relate to homosexuality in China, a trait of high-

⁴⁴ Lisa Rofel, “Qualities of Desire,” 100.

⁴⁵ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, “Private Dilemma,” in *Shanghai Lalas*, 67.

⁴⁶ Yinhe Li, “Regulating Male Same-Sex Relationships in the People’s Republic of China,” in *Sex and Sexuality in China*, ed. Elaine Jeffreys (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 82.

⁴⁷ Lisa Rofel, “Qualities of Desire,” 102.

⁴⁸ Chris Berry, “*Wedding Banquet*: A Family (Melodrama) Affair,” in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 238.

⁴⁹ Lisa Rofel, “Qualities of Desire,” 103; Lisa Rofel, “Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 4 (1999): 466.

⁵⁰ Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*),” *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 190-193.

⁵¹ Tamara Jacka, “Cultivating Citizens: *Suzhi* (Quality) Discourse in the PRC,” *positions* 17, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 526.

quality homosexual in China, for example, is to distance money boys and gay migrant workers from rural areas⁵², as these groups are frequently related to and stigmatised by presumed relatively lower economic status and their higher risk of AIDS⁵³. Such instance witnessed the discrimination based on economic equality and the gap between the urban and the rural.

In theorising the gap between the rural and the urban, Gray et al points out in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies* that “[r]ecent work on the queer urban-rural dichotomy focuses on the constructedness of a ‘metronormativity’ and its hegemonic encompassing of queer subjectivity.”⁵⁴ Johnson and Gray believes that

The sentiment of urban enlightened and sexually free subjects creates an impasse that effectively tell rural LGBTQ-identifying people that they cannot be happily queer right where they are and should expect hostility- and in fact deserve it-if they do stay in their communities.⁵⁵

The political registers of a gay activism and queer theory position rurality as a marginal subjective space.⁵⁶

Therefore, scholars like Gray have made significant efforts to investigate into queer rurality to resist metronormativity, and it becomes “useful for critiquing

⁵² Lisa Rofel, “Qualities of Desire,” 105, 106.

⁵³ Kyung-Hee Choi, Esther Sid Hudes, and Wayne T. Steward, “Social Discrimination, Concurrent Sexual Partnerships, and HIV Risk Among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Shanghai, China,” *AIDS and Behavior* 12, no. 1 (April 2008): 71-77; Travis Shiu-Ki Kong, “Risk Factors Affecting Condom Use Among Male Sex Workers Who Serve Men in China: A Qualitative Study,” *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 84, no. 6 (2008): 444-48.

⁵⁴ Colin R. Johnson, Brian J. Gilley, and Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, “Introduction,” in eds. Mary L. Gray et al, *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies. Vol. 11* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

forms of queer spatial hegemony”⁵⁷. While highlighting the rural as it “can be a supreme site of queer critique given that stereotypical images of the region of the rural can be used for unexpected ends”⁵⁸, Herring reminds that we have to adopt a “critically queer anti-urbanism”⁵⁹, so to avoid the reactionary and phobic anti-urbanism.

However, queering the countryside in China is rather different from Gray’s work which focuses on the rurality in the United States. Most studies of China’s inequality reported the large and increasing gap between urban and rural household incomes in mainland China, and the gap of public services including health care, education, and local infrastructure also remains huge⁶⁰. Recent focus on boosting public spending in rural areas has brought about some development in the rural area, but the huge number of migrant workers from the rural to the urban since the economic reform and opening up still proves that the urban benefits more from China’s industrialisation. The emancipation from working units and the relaxation of household registration system have led to a large number of migrants from the rural to urban, and allowed homosexuals to leave their household and hometown where familial norms irritates them⁶¹. Hence, on the one hand, shedding lights upon the rural as Gray and Herring suggest offers a very productive and useful lens to understand rural gayness and to critique metronormativity. On the other, it is understandable that the arrival in cosmopolitan cities provides homosexuals in China identity-specific spaces, where gay culture in them were pointed out to be increasingly

⁵⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁸ Scott Herring, “Introduction,” in *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 13.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁰ Terry Sicular, Ximing Yue, Björn Gustafsson, and Shi Li, “The Urban-Rural Income Gap and Inequality in China,” *World Institute for Development Economic Research (UNU-WIDER)*, no.RP135, (2006): 1.

⁶¹ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, “Lala Communities in the Shaping”, in *Shanghai Lalas*, 23-24; Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, “Desiring T, Desiring Self: ‘T-Style’ Pop Singers and Lesbian Culture in China,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 18, no. 3 (2014): 258.

commercial⁶². In mainland China, gay men who are young⁶³, high-class⁶⁴, fluent in English⁶⁵, having a city household registration and financial ability⁶⁶, are considered to be of higher *suzhi*. Briefly, *suzhi* discourse has wedded a wide range of traits of neoliberalism, and has generated a new power imbalance and division within the gay community that is maintained by differences of “identity components”, *i.e.* class, age, gender, physical fitness, education⁶⁷.

Hence, it is noted that the assumption of global gayness fails to integrate the complexity of Chinese gay culture⁶⁸, whereas the transnational approach maps well the growing mobility of people, culture, and capital across the boundaries between nations⁶⁹. By choosing transnational over the globalist, we become able to understand the process of identification rather than a fixed and stable version of universal gay identity, an active process that is fruitful for being profoundly associated with its “historical and cultural contingency”⁷⁰. When we look at identification as a hybrid process, we have to cautiously avoid reproducing the stereotypical opposition between a backward Asia and a modern West. Recently, some researches have been conducted to unveil how the global governance makes difference in Asia, especially that some internationally based non-governmental organisations have formed a

⁶² Denise Tse-Shang Tang, “Introduction,” in *Conditional Spaces: Hong Kong Lesbian Desires and Everyday Life* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 16.

⁶³ Denise Tse-Shang Tang, “Consumption Spaces,” in *Conditional Spaces*, 43.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁵ Denise Tse-Shang Tang, “Political Spaces,” in *Conditional Spaces*, 104-105.

⁶⁶ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, “Convenient Resistance?,” in *Queer Women in Urban China*, 112.

⁶⁷ Travis Shiu-Ki Kong, “Queer at Your Own Risk: Marginality, Community and Hong Kong Gay Male Bodies,” *Sexualities* 7, no. 1 (February 2004): 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, and George Chauncey, “Thinking Sexuality Transnationally: An Introduction,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 4 (1999): 446.

⁷⁰ Lisa Rofel, “Quality of Desire,” 110.

collaborative relation with the local government or culture in Asia to perpetuate the oppression of marginalised sexual variants in the names of protecting women and children⁷¹, perpetuating traditional cultural heritage, and the religious belief renaissance⁷². Queers are recently called to contest such “sexual authoritarianism, coupled with the shifting of alliances and developing global governance”⁷³. And more notoriously, the opposition of global versus local has lost the symmetry with the binary of modern versus backward in these cases. Indeed, in most regions of Asia, the value of traditional culture, the hope for decolonisation, and different value systems implanted by different governments in different eras have been interwoven into the socio-cultural fabric that leads to a pursuit of different forms and versions of modernity, namely “modernities, plural”⁷⁴. Consequently, it is recommendable to understand Asia’s changing attitude towards queerness and sexuality as a certain modernity prevailing the other, rather than assess it in comparison to a one-dimensional continuum of globalist modernity.

In Hongwei Bao’s recent work, he reminds us that

It is important to note that not all forms of transnationalism are hegemonic and not all are dominated by the nation state or supranational entities. There are always people-to-people communications and collaborations between individuals and grassroots

⁷¹ Josephine Chuen-juei Ho, “Is Global Governance Bad for East Asian Queers?,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 4 (2008): 465; Josephine Chuen-juei Ho, “Queer Existence under Global Governance: A Taiwan Exemplar,” *positions* 18, no. 2 (2010): 551,.

⁷² Phil C. W. Chan, “Stonewalling through Schizophrenia: An Anti-Gay Rights Culture in Hong Kong?,” *Sexuality & Culture* 12, no. 2 (2008): 80-82.

⁷³ Josephine Chuen-juei Ho, “Queer Existence under Global Governance,” 551.

⁷⁴ Fran Martin, “Introduction: Mobile Knowledge – Sexuality in Globalisation,” in *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 9.

organisations, which function as a form of “minor transnationalism”.⁷⁵

Through documenting drag scenes in Shanghai, he captures the backstage full of “playfulness, fun and pleasure [that] counters the dominant narrative of queers living in the shadow and in sadness often portrayed on international media.”⁷⁶

Worth noting, the complexity of the intersectionality not only becomes an active variable that keeps forming the queer identification, but also transforms ways in which Chinese gay men deal with these socio-familial norms. The ways in which Chinese gay men respond to the heteronormative mainstream are various, if not polarised. On the one hand, some Chinese gay men choose to be normalised by strategising the socio-familial norms. For them, coming out can be reckoned as an undesirable parody of the Western way of resistance, which is too confrontational and sometimes considered immoral and ungrateful to the family⁷⁷. Instead, this group chooses to “come home” by bypassing the concept of homosexuality and introducing their same-sex partner to the family to gradually build up some sort of quasi-kinship⁷⁸. Chou gives some generous comments on this way of negotiation with family norms, saying that it productively breaks down binary settings of being out versus closeted, and of being a family outsider versus an insider⁷⁹. It is worth noting that Chou’s argument in favour of such coming-home and non-confrontational discourse per se is risky. It can be adopted as a tool against universalism, but its disciplining meaning should be avoided. Because albeit coming home, passing down the family line is still important and the unmarried status is stigmatised in China, a

⁷⁵ Bao, Hongwei. “‘Shanghai is burning’: Extravaganza, transgender representation and transnational cinema.” *Global Media and China* 3, no. 4 (2018): 248.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 242.

⁷⁷ Rodney H. Jones, “Imagined Comrades and Imaginary Protections: Identity, Community and Sexual Risk among Men Who Have Sex with Men in China,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 53, no. 3 (2007): 97-103.

⁷⁸ Wah-Shan Chou, “From Coming Out to Coming Home,” in *Tongzhi*, 258-268.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

big number of gay men choose to either marry a straight woman to live a secret dual life⁸⁰, or achieve an agreement with a lesbian friend to have a contract marriage⁸¹, as in either way, they become more likely to obtain the significant access – family – to a broader social relations and a higher social status⁸². Such seemingly non-confrontational strategy seeking for normalisation developed by Chinese queers is a localised struggle for self-representation and individualism, and it is noted that in so doing, they tend to obtain freedom from, at least to a certain degree, the identity politics and the collective homosexual consciousness⁸³. On the other hand, some activists believe that the above mentioned reticent way of dealing with socio-familial norms is far from enough because these strategies has the risk of slipping back to invisibility⁸⁴, and thus the homosexuals would be continuously marginalised and further binaries around the gay community of primary versus secondary and real versus fake are being reserved⁸⁵. However, in spite of the significance of this tactic in arousing the public consciousness, obtaining visibility, and establishing a positive image of gayness, Chinese homosexual activism still differs from what gays in Anglo-American contexts do, insomuch as in China all events of activism have to be managed in harmony with the government, and there is a swing between how to be a good citizen not to risk others' wellbeing or the

⁸⁰ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, "Negotiating the Public and the Private," in *Shanghai Lalas*, 82.

⁸¹ Ibid., 84-86; Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Convenient Resistance? *Lala*-Gay Contract Marriages," in *Queer Women in Urban China*, (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 104-123.

⁸² Lisa Rofel, "Quality of Desire," 102.

⁸³ Hein Hok-Sze Leung, "Do It Yourself," in *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 115.

⁸⁴ Jen-Peng Liu and Naifei Ding, "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 30.

⁸⁵ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, "A Smile on the Surface: The Politics of Public Correctness," in *Shanghai Lalas*, 102.

family reputation, and how to live comfortably as a gay man⁸⁶.

It is also important to remain alert, as Jackson reminds us, that many Asian subjects that are sometimes “pre-gay” which “relates more to the pre-industrial rural pasts of their societies than to the postmodernising urban present”⁸⁷, or “post-queer” which means “they exist outside Eurocentric understandings of sexual and gender difference”. In Jackson’s understanding, he considers “Western eroticisms not as the model but as one set of historically specific forms beside many others”⁸⁸.

As both Chinese gay identification and Chinese queer autonomy demonstrate traits that the universal gayness fails to include, they become a productive force contesting the global definition of queerness by providing it with a variety of local knowledges. However, the transnational queer approach that highlights China’s specificities tends “to situate China as the paradigmatic Other [that] has served a number of important functions in the development of queer theory”⁸⁹. The incommensurable traits of Chinese gay identity may just become a form of cultural essentialism that naturalises and justifies the West “as an indispensable and normative point of comparison”⁹⁰. We are reminded of a frequent problem in many works of recent Asian queer studies, and that is the lingering comparison between the West and Asia which defies Asian gay identity as “a regional variant of the (Western) universal... that is defined with

⁸⁶ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, “Queer Ethnography in Theory and Practice: Reflections on Studying Sexual Globalization and Women’s Queer Activism in Beijing,” *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5, no. 2 (2008): 97.

⁸⁷ Peter A. Jackson, “Pre-Gay, Post-Queer,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 40:3-4 (2001), 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁹ Petrus Liu, “Marxism, Queer Liberalism, and The Quandary of Two Chinas,” in *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015): 26.

⁹⁰ Petrus Liu, “Why Does Queer Theory Need China?,” *position* 18, no. 2 (2010): 314.

and against ‘the global’⁹¹. It is a slippage “into self- or re-Orientalism”⁹².

Therefore, this study focus on a number of traits of local gayness in Chinese queer studies, together with the seemingly inevitable and insuperable comparisons between the West and China, to some degree, reproduces new version of universalism, albeit their preceding anti-universalist intention in the first place.

1.1.3. Decentralising the West and Chineseness

In order to decentralise the West and bypass the universalist comparison between the West and China, Kuan-Hsing Chen suggest we use

the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, [and] societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilised to provide alternative horizons and perspectives⁹³

without sustaining the knowledge production based on the colonialist and imperialist dichotomy of “Western theory versus Asian footnotes”⁹⁴. However, how to avoid the generation of a new hegemony becomes a quite significant question. For instance, when we think of Chinese homosexuals, which actually should be various Chinese gay identities in different locales, a certain locale, namely the mainland’s People’s Republic of China, comes immediately yet

⁹¹ James Welker, “(Re)Positioning (Asian) Queer Studies,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 1-2 (2014): 194.

⁹² Howard Chiang, “(De)Provincialising China: Queer Historicism and Sinophone Postcolonial Critique,” in *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, ed. Howard Chiang, and Ari Larissa Heinrich (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 32.

⁹³ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “Asia as Method: Overcoming the Present Conditions of Knowledge Production,” in *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialisation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 212.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 226; Kuan-Hsing Chen, “The Imperial Order of Things, or Notes on Han Chinese Racism,” in *Asia as Method*, 268.

problematically to dominate our imaginary⁹⁵. It proves the imperialism and colonialism have indeed been profoundly conditioning the intellectual and popular knowledge on both global and regional scales⁹⁶, and behold, even when we are recovering the internal complicity in Asia, we slip into a new hierarchy. In order to bypass not only the existence of the West, but also the hegemonic umbrella term of Chinese (queer) identity as previously mentioned, Shih inaugurates the notion of “the Sinophone” which means “a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margin of China and Chineseness” where Chinese culture has been locally appropriated⁹⁷. In so doing, we are supposed to be able to discover what it means to be more Chinese without referring to the West. By combining queer theory and Sinophonic approach, according to Shih in a later work, we manage to construct “a form of minor-to-minor alliance” that queers both Western centrism and Chineseness as a universal term⁹⁸; and moreover, by recognising the activeness and agency of subjects and identities marginalised by both centres, and by encouraging intra-Asia and intra-regional studies, we find alternative locales “to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that our anxiety over the West can be diluted, and productive critical work can move forward”⁹⁹.

Although the notion of Sinophone is problematic for being incommensurable with the genealogist meanings of Anglophone or Francophone¹⁰⁰, its conjunction with queer studies inspires us to examine what we can learn from by pushing the line between the central and the marginal a bit further. For

⁹⁵ Petrus Liu, and Lisa Rofel, “Beyond the Strai(gh)ts: Transnationalism and Queer Chinese Politics,” *position* 18, no. 2 (2010): 281.

⁹⁶ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “Asia as Method,” 212.

⁹⁷ Shu-Mei Shih, “Introduction,” in *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007), 4.

⁹⁸ Shu-Mei Shih, “On the Conjunctive Method,” in *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, 223.

⁹⁹ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “Asia as Method,” 223.

¹⁰⁰ Shu-Mei Shih, “Introduction,” 28.

instance, if the line is pushed all the way from the Taiwan Strait to Qinling-Mountains-and-Huai-River line that divides China into north and south, how would the trans-local difference matter to our understanding of Chineseness?

In conclusion, by using this theoretical framework, hope to discover the ways in which the global gay culture, such as pop music from Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and gay rights campaigns are accepted by Chinese gay men, how Chinese local norms, e.g. family, *suzhi*, gender performance, et al., are tackled, and simultaneously what their varying opinions about different operas, from either south China or north China, tell about their queer detachment from the notion of a singular Chineseness.

1.2. Queer Temporalities

1.2.1. Heteronormative Present

Within the powerful process of individualisation in the twenty first century, gay men in quite a few Western countries have witnessed some monumental achievements in the long-term campaign of gay rights. Thanks to the LGBT activists and the change of time, the mainstream society has shown the increasing though not equally distributed tolerance to sexual deviants,¹⁰¹ and both heterosexual and homosexual people can form the alliance for sexual equality and freedom.¹⁰² Moreover, since the end of the last century, a series of

¹⁰¹ Robert Anderson, and Tina Fetner, "Economic Inequality and Intolerance: Attitudes toward Homosexuality in 35 Democracies," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 (October 2008): 956.

¹⁰² Adam W. Fingerhut, "Straight Allies: What Predicts Heterosexuals' Alliance with the LGBT Community?," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 41, no. 9 (2011): 2231.

countries, such as the Netherlands,¹⁰³ France,¹⁰⁴ England and Wales,¹⁰⁵ United States,¹⁰⁶ et al., have legalised same-sex marriage. Thus, the opposition between *us*, the LGBT community, and *them*, the heterosexual mainstream, starts to be uncoupled, and the former expression of “*us versus them*” claimed to be gradually replaced by a newer “*us and them*.”¹⁰⁷

I used to be reduced to tears when I read a piece of news like this online when I was in China, and I, as a homosexual, can surely feel the deep sympathy with what Spivak’s comments on liberalism, “that which we cannot not want,”¹⁰⁸ on the issue of rights and *our* time. However, after scanning through the homogeneity of those newly wedded gay couples’ smiley faces on these web pages, I found it necessary to rethink whether this is enough, whether same-sex marriage is the termination of our rights campaign, whether there is any alternative of the universal rights, how we continue to be different, and how we are able to walk out of the present complacency, a gay-friendly comfort zone that we finally have built up after all the respected struggles and costs.

¹⁰³ Marcel Lubbers, Eva Jaspers, and Wout Ultee, “Primary and Secondary Socialisation Impacts on Support for Same-Sex Marriage after Legalisation in the Netherlands,” *Journal of Family Issues* 30, no. 12 (December 2009): 1714.

¹⁰⁴ “French Gay Marriage: Hollande Signs Bill into Law,” BBC News, last modified 18th May 2013, accessed 10th July 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22579093>.

¹⁰⁵ “Same-Sex Marriage Now Legal as First Couple Wed,” BBC News, last modified 29th March 2014, accessed 10th July 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26793127>.

¹⁰⁶ “US Supreme Court Rules Gay Marriage Is Legal Nationwide,” BBC News, last modified 27th June 2015, accessed 10th July 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-33290341>.

¹⁰⁷ Amin Ghaziani, “Post-Gay Collective Identity Construction,” *Social Problems* 58, no. 1 (2011): 101.

¹⁰⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Bonding in Difference: Interview with Alfred Arteaga,” in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Donna Landry, and Gerald MacLean (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 28.

Therefore, I hope to explain my concerns about same-sex marriage legalisation through the following arguments.

On the one hand, it is argued that same-sex marriage is still a highly heteronormative institution. Halperin articulated in his eloquently written *How to Be Gay* that successes of LGBT community are only achieved through the problematic process of de-homosexualisation.¹⁰⁹ First, he interrogates the nature of questions that many gay men are becoming tired of answering, for instance, whether a gay man is a top or bottom, or which one of a couple is the husband and which is the “wife”, by critiquing that such assumption of sex roles in gay relationships or families is based on the heterosexual setting – to put it in Halperin’s words, “polarised sex-roles existed only in homophobic fantasy.”¹¹⁰ That is to say, even when the mainstream is increasingly tolerant, homosexual relationships have continued to be portrayed as a heterosexual parody by both heterosexuals and, occasionally, homosexuals *ourselves*. Moreover, in theorising the recent phenomenon of gay parenting, Berkowitz discovers that it is emotionally and socially more difficult for a non-biologically related parent to obtain his or her identity as a parent,¹¹¹ compared to the partner whose sperm was used or whose breastmilk is feeding the infant. A question that gay and lesbian parents may be frequently asked – which one of you is the real father/mother? – indicates the social preference of blood ties between generations, a quality that has always been perpetuated as a very significant symbol of heterosexual reproduction.¹¹² Second, the progress of gay rights in recent time is made at the huge expense of gay sentiments and feelings. Halperin articulates that the gay rights campaign has always championed the minority identity over subjectivity, and it stubbornly emphasises “matters as social equality, the benefits of diversity, the pleasures of difference, the ethics of

¹⁰⁹ David M. Halperin, “Gay Identity and Its Discontents,” in *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge and LONDON: Harvard University Press, 2012), 76.

¹¹⁰ David M. Halperin, “History of an Error,” in *How to Be Gay*, 52.

¹¹¹ Dana Berkowitz, “Theorising Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Past, Present, and Future Scholarship,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 1, no. 3 (2009): 119.

¹¹² Kath Weston, “Exiles from Kinship,” in *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 34.

peaceful coexistence.”¹¹³ Indeed, given that the most visible gay images on recent media are much polarised, either a rights fighter or a victim of homophobia (preferably in a Muslim country), I suggest a wider variety of gay images that reflects the multiplicity and complication of gay sensibility need more frequent and fairer exposure in public.

On the other hand, the legalisation of same-sex marriage strengthens the institution of marriage that aims at reproduction and de-legitimises other queer forms of sexual relationships and social intimacy, so it fails the “sexual freedom” and the diversity of intimacy that we were promised. The recent transformation of care and intimacy has witnessed how heterosexuals or homosexuals who leave their original families for education or employment may turn their friendships into families of choice based on personal interests and emotional needs.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the increasing diversity of “non-normative intimacies” and the kinship between lovers, ex-lovers, friends, et al. fluidises the conceptual borders between different partnerships, sexual or sexless.¹¹⁵ Despite all the complications and diversities of chosen families, the legal recognition of same-sex marriage privileges some specific families and marginalises others¹¹⁶. The state-recognised monogamy of same-sex relationships may risk stigmatising other desires for intimacy within the homosexual community, e.g. sadism, masochism, barebacking, double-income families with no kids, et al. In Dean’s investigation of bareback culture, which has been considered as “deviant or pathological”¹¹⁷, it is argued that throughout the struggle for gay rights, the community has portrayed a positive image of good gay men that is visible and acceptable to the public and the heteronormative mainstream, and

¹¹³ David M. Halperin, “Gay Identity and Its Discontents,” 72.

¹¹⁴ Dana Berkowitz, “Theorising Lesbian and Gay Parenting,” 126.

¹¹⁵ Sasha Roseneil and Shelly Budgeon, “Cultures of Intimacy and Care Beyond ‘the Family’: Personal Life and Social Change in the Early 21st Century,” *Current Sociology* 52, no. 2 (March 2004): 138.

¹¹⁶ Kathe Weston, “The Politics of Gay Families,” in *Families We Choose*, 209.

¹¹⁷ Tim Dean, “Introduction: Confessions of a Barebacker,” in *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

simultaneously it fails to abandon “the false comfort of hypocrisy”¹¹⁸ to admit that our sexual identity is thus “expunged by the intensification of sexual shame. You could feel better about being gay as long as you felt worse about being a slut”.¹¹⁹ Indeed, within our journey to gay rights, our desire of sexual freedom seems compromised. To further extend my analysis, I would like to invite Berlant’s concept of the “relation of cruel optimism,” which “exists when something you desire becomes an obstacle to your flourishing.”¹²⁰ In this case, the contemporary object of our desire, namely a family that aims at reproduction, is what has stopped us from freedom in the first place. Surprisingly, the norm that has been hegemonic in the first place is turned, by legalising same-sex marriage, into a privilege that we hope to attain. In the spring of 2015, some homosexual and gay-friendly heterosexual celebrities started a campaign to boycott Dolce & Gabbana products because of these two gay designers’ dissident remarks on gay families, “I am gay. I cannot have a child. I guess you cannot have everything in life,” but the two homosexual designers’ insistence on what they believe whilst showing respect to other people’s freedom to choose and love¹²¹, makes a radical point that the certain version of gay freedom is somehow configured against those gay men who simply prefer different intimacies. Their vocalisation sounds more akin to the assertion we used to make - “I am here, I am queer, get used to it!” - to bullies around us, yet the difference is that the bullied and the shamed has been overturned and become the bullying and the shaming. As mentioned by Judith Butler, with the legalisation of same-sex marriage law, a new hierarchy emerges in the public culture, a hierarchy that not only enforces the distinction of good and bad gays, but also decides what can be legalised, and what has not been,

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹²⁰ Lauren Berlant, “Introduction: Affect in the Present,” in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

¹²¹ Cavan Sieczkowski, “Dolce & Gabbana Respond to Backlash Over Their Remarks about Gay Families,” The Huffington Post, last modified 16th March 2015, accessed 5th July 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/16/dolce-gabbana-respond-gay-families_n_6877476.html.

or even may never be, legitimised¹²².

To sum up, whilst we are celebrating our achievement of gay visibility and sexual freedom, we need to ponder if the achievement is what we were promised, and whether such achievement is equally accessible those who have also been through the difficult and unbearable. My point is that the gay rights we have claimed in Western democracies remain problematic because they slip into “the new homonormative... a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”¹²³

1.2.2. Fuck the Gay Pride

After the discussion of how the transition from “*us versus them*” to “*us and them*” turns out to be anything but, given that it remains to be both heteronormative and homonormative, I am going to argue how gay pride is causing problems and losses considering the issue of time, especially how it shames the shamed and the past.

First, sexual freedom and gay liberation at present are being used to define modernity nowadays, and they exemplified “a culturally advanced position as opposed to one that would be deemed pre-modern.”¹²⁴ In Weeks’s term, sexual rights are defined against “sexual wrongs.”¹²⁵ Consequently, the freedom is instrumentalised as a cultural device, according to Judith Butler, to legitimate

¹²² Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 18.

¹²³ Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materialising Democracy: Toward a Revitalised Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo, and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

¹²⁴ Judith Butler, “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 1 (2008): 3.

¹²⁵ Jeffrey Weeks, “Sexual Wrongs and Sexual Rights,” 199.

Islamophobia and so-called “civilizational mission” against barbarism, which actually is a coercion against “the ostensibly ‘backward’ or pre-modern Islamic Other.”¹²⁶ In this case, Islam is considered as *another* time that has yet to be modernised enough to fit into *this* time of ours (the West’s). Therefore, in order to avoid the perpetuation of coercion in the name of modernity, we need to think about *this* time “outside of that teleology that violently installs itself as both origin and end of the culturally thinkable.”¹²⁷ It does not mean we need to abandon sexual freedom as a norm, but it is time to cease using a certain freedom or a single form of modernity as a homogenising framework.¹²⁸

Second, the celebration of gay pride shapes a politics that not only undervalues the productivity of negativities, but marginalises the queer identities that fail to escape backward feelings. I will explain this from two perspectives as divided in the last sentence. On the one hand, the goal of the gay rights campaign has been attempting to destigmatise gayness since the Stonewall Riots in 1969, but it never completely benefits the entire community as it originally aimed.¹²⁹ It is worth noticing that the requirement for destigmatisation means that both personal and social shames attached to homoerotic desires have to be overcome and eliminated.¹³⁰ Furthermore, the collective pride within the community “produces an additional level of shame – it makes us shamed of our shame.”¹³¹ Therefore, the public affirmation of gay pride overshadows its political antagonist, which means the grassroots queer identities that are still experiencing shame and resisting both hetero- and homo- normativities¹³². Within a capitalist system, a group of people’s successes are produced through

¹²⁶ Judith Butler, “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time,” 19.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹²⁹ David M. Halperin, and Valerie Traub, “Beyond Gay Pride,” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹³¹ David Caron, “Shame on Me: The Naked Truth about Me and Marlene Dietrich,” in *Gay Shame*, 120.

¹³² David M. Halperin, and Valerie Traub, “Beyond Gay Pride,” 9.

failing other people, and the neoliberal culture we are born in and growing up with imparts its population the idea that success is worth fighting for and obtainable through positive thinking and diligence.¹³³ But there are always inevitable failures, disappointment, and ultimately death in the life. Halberstam analyses several underdog animated film characters, photos of Olympic athletes who just missed the podium, et al., and it is uncovered that alongside the negative feelings, they share desires of not only being self or following dreams, but simultaneously spreading socialist and queer messages, or even mobilising the audience to resist exploitation and inequality.¹³⁴ As a result, the shamed group of gay men, rather than negating and hopelessly resisting the finite, find themselves more creatively empowered by experiencing failure and backwardness and become productive as well just akin to the proud and successful.¹³⁵ Such productivity brought by gay shame, which counters the gay pride domination in public sphere, is what the taken-for-granted connection between success and profit may be missing.

On the other, the chanting of gay pride that excludes a note of shame turns our back against the past pains that shaped homosexual identity in the first place, and undervalues how the queer past served contemporary discourse of sexuality. Heather K. Love believes that when “feelings of shame, secrecy, and self-hatred are still with us,”¹³⁶ it is a violation for the Stonewall movement and recent gay liberation to have drawn a line between pride and shame, the past and the present, or simply to “write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead”,¹³⁷ in order to universalise one gay attitude within the whole community. Supplementary to Love’s articulation, Castiglia points out that the AIDS epidemic in the last century “became an occasion for a powerful

¹³³ Judith Halberstam, “Introduction: Low Theory,” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³⁵ Judith Halberstam, “Animating Failure: Ending, Fleeing, Surviving,” in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 186 & 187.

¹³⁶ Heather K. Love, “Introduction,” in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer Theory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 20.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

concentration of cultural forces that made (and continue to make) the syndrome of an agent of amnesia, wiping out memories not only of everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death and sought to memorialise our losses.”¹³⁸ The pride is leading us to a place where some people may think sexual orientations no longer matter given the equality, yet it is on account of what we have lost and unremembered rather than how much we have won – we lost the chance to let the useful past of death, pain and homophobia transform the present and beyond with its “imaginatively reparative work.”¹³⁹ The contemporary sexual politics is “produced by othering what came before,”¹⁴⁰ so it slips into the historicist epistemology that Charkrabarty critiques, only in this case the past locked “the waiting room”¹⁴¹ of modernity and progress. Regardless of all complicated and multiple stigmas on queers who are continuously in struggle with forces of racism, poverty, disease, immigration, disability, et al., the proud elites simplistically put discriminative locks on the closet which many queers are still in, and bossily shut the door to the bittersweet past through which we could have mourned for and otherwise flourished in a different way. The sexual politics we are living with is less like a defeat of homophobia or heteronormativity than like the victory of a desexualised gay identity over those dykes and drag queens of the past who bravely challenged the stereotypes of gender before *this* time.¹⁴² We are helplessly compelled by gay pride to move forward to a promised promising future, which is more like a time of brutal assimilation into heteronormativity and further commodification of gay identity.¹⁴³ The dominating force of progress, or

¹³⁸ Christopher Castiglia, and Christopher Reed, “Introduction: In the Interest of Time,” in *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴⁰ Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 1 (2013): 32.

¹⁴¹ Dipesh Charkrabarty, “Introduction,” 8.

¹⁴² David M. Halperin, “Gender and Genre,” in *How to Be Gay*, 328 & 329.

¹⁴³ Heather K. Love, “Epilogue: The Politics of Refusal,” in *Feeling Backward*, 153.

the forward Pride, as how Love puts to echo Benjamin's idea, is

...is a 'single catastrophe,' a pile of wreckage that just keeps getting bigger... [W]hile most people are content to forget the horrors of the past and move on toward a better future, [an] angel resists the storm of progress. By turning his back on the future and fixing his gaze on this scene of destruction, the angel refuses to turn the losses of the past... into the material of progress. The angel longs to redeem the past... but he cannot. As he tries to linger with the dead, the wind tears at his wings, carrying him, against his will, into the future¹⁴⁴.

This paragraph is heartbreakingly eloquent, though I would like to inveigh against a gender-specific angle. To be brief, there is nothing wrong with moving forward, which should "be distinguished from progress,"¹⁴⁵ but the contemporary optimist gay culture has produced too many of its oppositions, i.e. the othered Islamic modernity, gay shame, and the past, which cannot be assimilated into the progressive narrative, or cannot be brought forward into the future.

1.2.3. Utopian or Dystopian: The Queer Futurity

As we move forward by giving voices to the shame and the backward, some more problems emerged. Here, I will try to unveil the problems of a gay shame politics, which will lead to my exploration of whether there is a future for queerness and queer identities.

It is very timely to "look on the dark side" and think seriously about the negative feelings of being queer,¹⁴⁶ but Bersani worries that the ghetto for shamed gays is simply "another occasion for gay self-congratulation," and the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 148.

¹⁴⁵ "Rethinking Secularism: Judith Butler and Cornel West in Conversation," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, last modified 4th December 2009, accessed 4th July 2015, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/12/04/judith-butler-and-cornel-west-in-conversation/>.

¹⁴⁶ Heather K. Love, "Emotional Rescue," in *Gay Shame*, 263.

gay shame just another proud politics.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, among all shamed identities, some, for instance the white gay masculinity, obtained more visibility and gained a relatively central position and it may lead to a new round of shaming.¹⁴⁸ That is to say, the dramatisation of white melancholy, middle-class pressure, and masculine crisis is a more noticeable shade of grey on the dark side than other negative complaints about “sticky rice”, vagina monologue, lesbian barebacking, et al. Therefore, a new question emerges, what is the teleology of queerness, if queers have to avoid rendering any specific identity superior to others, if we have to detach from all politics?

Lee Edelman in his influential work *No Future* radically defines the recent politics that centres the children as our future as “reproductive futurism,” which naturalises children’s importance and privileges heteronormativity as the affirmed social order.¹⁴⁹ The symbolic clout of children leaves almost no space for dissidents.¹⁵⁰ Any political hope can easily be used as a conformity that rewards individuals who live with hopes and utopianism and at the same time deliberately obscures bad sentiments.¹⁵¹ Moreover, within the politics that fights for our children, Edelman invites queerness to not merely oppose this specific form of futurism, but more radically resist every social structure that prefers a form of goodness and avoids the other.¹⁵² Muñoz critiqued Edelman for not considering the reality of race discrimination and bullies of coloured kids, saying “all children are not the privileged white babies to whom contemporary society

¹⁴⁷ Leo Bersani, “Excluding Shame,” in *Gay Shame*, 176.

¹⁴⁸ Jennifer Moon, “Gay Shame and the Politics of Identity,” in *Gay Shame*, 360

¹⁴⁹ Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid Stuff,” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵¹ Lisa Duggan, and José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 276.

¹⁵² Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid Stuff,” 3.

caters,”¹⁵³ so *this* time is neither queer nor underdog-friendly enough yet and we will have a queer future to come. However, behind the argument of “[q]ueerness is not yet here,”¹⁵⁴ there is a *straight* logics that the past and the present are valued because they requires future redemption.¹⁵⁵ It again is an endeavour to exaggerate the difference between times.

Is queerness utopian or dystopian? Does our optimism always lose to reality? Or should we aim to expand more references for fantasies, bright or dark, in order “to live beyond survival, toward flourishing not later but in the ongoing now?”¹⁵⁶ Why do we have to put an “or” between utopian and dystopian? Both Duggan and Muñoz believe that there must be ways to allow hope to fraternise with anti-sociality in order to break out of both heteronormative constraints and the homonormative complacency.¹⁵⁷ We can no longer afford to walk in the front, assuming we are particularly wilful or avant-garde as opposed to conventions or norms, because as I argued above, it is actually a front that cements “a freedom to exploit others.”¹⁵⁸ We hope to be allowed to walk differently, and stay back a little in order to have more time and space to question and ask, not to tell.¹⁵⁹ Rather than telling what things *should* be, we

¹⁵³ José Esteban Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity,” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 94.

¹⁵⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: Feeling Utopia,” in *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

¹⁵⁵ Christopher Castiglia, and Christopher Reed, “Introduction: In the Interest of Time,” 6; Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 820.

¹⁵⁶ Lauren Berlant, and Lee Edelman, “Sex without Optimism,” in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 5.

¹⁵⁷ Lisa Duggan, and José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,” 281.

¹⁵⁸ Sara Ahmed, “Willfulness as a Style of Politics,” in *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 171 & 172.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

can question what things otherwise *could* be.¹⁶⁰

Bearing these debates in mind, I am equipped with the theoretical tool to understand how Chinese homosexuals resist to the mainstream. There are loads of questions they are faced with every day. Should they come out of the closet or remain their strategy of reticent resistance? How to face the pressure without jeopardising things that they value? What are they protecting or struggling for so insistently that they would not sacrifice in exchange for being out, proud/complacent gay men? Hence, there are very helpful archives to uncover the Chinese queer fantasies that detach themselves from not only heteronormativity but homonormativity.

Therefore, I hope this theoretical field of literature can be used to understand the ways in which Chinese gay opera fans manage to dynamically combine their pleasure and discomfort of living with a taboo-like identity, and of resenting and simultaneously appreciating conventions and heritages, whether their appreciation of traditional *yue* opera can be interpreted as a form of their agency to denaturalise meanings of backwardness and modernity through their sexual and non-sexual practices, in what way they utilise the traditional to fulfil their pleasure, and why some Chinese gay men sometimes show their nostalgia or their willingness to stay behind, appreciating and lingering with the history and coercions they have lived or never actually experienced?

When I argue for the high queerness of Chinese gay identity, I never mean to exaggerate the difference between any two temporalities. Rather, I am trying to theorise traits of anachronism at the present and here, a hybridity of times, without prevailing either *then* or *now* over another. I am hoping that homosexuality in China that is “out of time *and* of the time” becomes an alternative understanding or knowledge that discovers what things *could* otherwise be without further othering.

¹⁶⁰ Lisa Duggan, and José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,” 278.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This dissertation is based on the fieldwork I conducted from February to September 2016. During this period of time, I chose to live in Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang, hoping the hometown of *yue* opera would give me closer accesses to more gay and queer fans. Moreover, a base in Hangzhou allows more convenient field visits in and around the city. I conducted twenty-three in-depth interviews in southern China, most of which in Zhejiang Province, and three participant observations of *yue* opera gay fan gatherings that lasted averagely two to three days in various rural areas of Zhejiang Province. It is very important to see both interviews and participant observations as complementary methods in this project rather than independent or irrelevant, and they were conducted almost simultaneously when I was trying to locate gay and queer fans in rural areas. All these respondents are male *yue* opera lovers who are 18 years old and over, and they are self-identified as gay, *tongzhi*, or queer.

Throughout the fieldwork, Mandarin was used most of time, and Shengzhou dialect was used occasionally given that it is what *yue* opera is sung in. Most fans are able to interweave the dialect into their communications and interviews. It is worth noting that the instrumentalisation of dual languages per se turns out carrying social and cultural meanings I tend to further explore in my following data chapters.

In this chapter, I will explicitly explain how I used these two methods, what benefits and challenges I have been faced, how I overcome these challenges, and how I am going to analyse my data in mainly four categories.

2.1. Entering the Field

Before I went into the field in mainland China, I had a primary plan of how to deploy my fieldwork. I hoped to use both interviews and participant observation to understand how Chinese gay men consume the cross-gendered *yue* opera. There are some considerable challenges throughout the fieldwork, but after trying various tactics, I came across forty-two male fans of *yue* opera that are identified as gay or queer. Among them, twenty-one (possibly twenty-three soon) consented a meeting with me in person to be interviewed.

2.1.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

In order to locate and contact my potential respondents for interviews, I made efforts in mainly two different ways. On the one hand, I started to interview gay friends of mine who are into *yue* opera, and hoped that I could be introduced to more friends of theirs who share the same interests in this specific traditional culture. In this way, I interviewed six respondents during my pilot projects, and I was introduced to several more informants as soon as I return to mainland China.

On the other hand, before any interviews, I tried to find gay or queer fans of *yue* opera via China's biggest searching engine Baidu, and on the social media such as Tencent QQ, and Sina Weibo. I used keywords including "gay", "*yueju* (*yue* opera)", "*tongzhi*", and "*tongxinglian* (homosexual)" on Baidu, and the results fell into two categories. One, there are some articles and blogs on lesbian experiences in all-female *yue* opera troupes and audience. The relation between lesbian identity and all-female *yue* opera has been discussed by Jiang in *Women Playing Men*¹⁶¹; simultaneously, given that my research is about gay males' consumption of *yue* opera, hence these results are irrelevant to this project. Two, I found only two threads under *Yuejuba* (*yue* opera Tieba) that contained both "gay" and "*yue* opera" as keywords, initiated by the same Baidu account. One of them that was followed and replied by more Tieba users witnessed a radical divide of opinions. Some netizens criticised and condemned this thread creator as a "sick" person carrying something "abnormal and abominable" or "disgrace for bring these filthy and disgusting things to contaminate the realm of art", while the other believed that the society needs more openness and tolerance. When I tried to contact this Tieba user, he did not reply to my message whatsoever; and it seemed that this Baidu account has not been active recently. This early discovery reveals the inconvenient fact that homosexuality and queer identity are still marginalised in China, and a less doom and gloom trend that the neoliberal attitude towards the minority identity is sounding off. Though the lack of access to this Tieba user is a shame, the

¹⁶¹ Jiang, Jin, "The Opera as History", in *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2009), 202-209

bright side is that I managed to collect several Tencent QQ IDs from these threads. Encouraged by this finding, I opened this Chinese social application and embarked a brand new journey to contact more respondents. Instead of sending friend requests to individual QQ users, I thought it would be less abrupt to start to enter the community with joining a *yue* opera QQ group, Group of *Yue* Communication (pseudo name for the protection of my respondents), whose ID was present on a Baidu Tieba thread. After joining the group and reading through these QQ IDs information, it is found that most group members were from Yangtze River Delta regions including Shanghai, Zhejiang Province, and Jiangsu Province; and there are a few gay fans living in other parts of China, e.g. Shandong Province and Tianjin. After the successful exploration on Baidu, I tried the same keywords on Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalence of Twitter, but the results were disappointing and unsatisfying because there is no direct connection between gayness or queerness and *yue* opera after scanning thousands of Weibo posts among all results. Results that include both “*tongzhi*” and “*yue* opera” did not have anything to do identity whatsoever, in so much as *tongzhi* is frequently used following an opera performer’s name, meaning “the comrade” in a socialist term. Therefore, Tencent QQ is the platform that I chose to focus on in order to contact more respondents, among all eighty male members within Group of *Yue* Communication. To sum up, through both snowballing and contacting informants directly via their Tencent QQ IDs, I hope to increase the diversity of samples and to avoid the possibly biased data of snowballing¹⁶². The early stages of contact on Tencent QQ were difficult, as most potential respondents ignored my messages. Therefore, data collected from online observations plays a relatively weaker and supplementary role.

After I found these potential respondents on social media in addition to my friends, I started to look into the ways in which interviews can be more fruitfully conducted. To respect individual differences and to relax my interviewees, I adopted semi-structured interviews for data collection. According to Longhurst, even though interviewers are supposed to have a predetermined question list at

¹⁶² Patrick Biernacki, and Dan Walford, “Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling,” *Sociological Methods Research* 10, no.2 (November 1981), 141.

hand, “semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important”¹⁶³ in a more informal and conversational occasion. Whilst preparing the interview question list, I invited a “top-down pyramid model” introduced by Tom Wengraf¹⁶⁴. That is to say, I focused on the core research question, under which several theoretical questions were generated. Given that most interviewees do not have the same academic background, I had to render these theoretical questions understandable and sensible to them, by converting the academic expression to ordinarily conversational. For instance, in order to understand Chinese gay men’s agency in *yue* opera consumption, one perspective is to uncover how this community perceives notions of tradition and modernity, as well as the ways in which they position themselves in relation to different temporalities – the past, the contemporary, and the future. Instead of asking these questions, I rephrased them into interview questions like: Is being a gay man in China easy or difficult? Compared to the past, what do you think about Chinese society’s attitudes towards homosexuality today? In this model, I designed most of my interview questions before I went into the field, and the list is open-ended because more perspectives of questions in accordance with increasingly emerging themes and narratives throughout my fieldwork are continuously added to the list (the complete interview question list is presented in Appendix 1).

Most interviews consist of only two people, i.e. me as the interviewer and a single interviewee. I deliberately chose to conduct most interviews this way after learning a lesson from an interview in March that invited two interviewees who are mutually friends with. There are three problems emerging during that interview. One, this triangle interview makes it very difficult for either interviewee

¹⁶³ Robyn Longhurst, “Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups,” in *Key Methods in Geography (The Third Edition)*, ed. Nicolas Clifford, Meghan Cope, Thomas Gillespie, and Shaun French (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2016), 143.

¹⁶⁴ Tom Wengraf, “Preparing for Any Interviewing Sequence,” in *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 73.

to be fully engaged and concentrated. The tricky thing is that waiting for the turn to speak rendered both interviewees uncomfortable and bored, and it was even trickier to continue and deepen a discussion based on a previous answer offered by the first interviewee because the well prepared second interviewee cuts in and starts his routine answer. Two, this interview setting tends to lead to a significant loss of information. It is because not only interviewees sometimes tend to say less as soon as they consider anything as redundant and repetitive, but also either one of them would choose not to be completely honest because a friend's presence makes him feel as if there is a kind of censorship. The waiting time also encourages the second speaker to prepare for answers that he believes to be most appropriate, polite, and even politically correct. Therefore, the loss of some information caused by the three-people interview makes the panorama of a person's story incomplete. Three, such situation causes a shock when both informants realise any difference between them on a certain topic, and makes it hard for what happens in the interview stays in the interview. Reactions like "really? I never thought you would think that way" always caused some dramatic tension during the interview. In attempts to avoid these problems, I abandoned the idea of interviewing more than one person at once.

Since the second half of my fieldwork period, more visual support was involved in my interviews. Since I started to participate in gay or queer fans' parties in real life, I came to realise the face painting and *yue* opera costumes are unneglectably important components in the building of this group of people's identities. In order to put their identity into a transnational context, and to understand the similarities and differences between gay opera fans' stage image and the drag culture in the West, I demonstrated pictures of drag queens in the West as well as an album cover of 2014 Eurovision Song Contest winner Conchita Wurst to test their opinions towards these cultural scenes. Most respondents' nodding to drag queens yet immediate denial of Conchita's image created the tension between the acceptable and unacceptable, which is a very helpful point of entry to understand how they draw the boundary of their transgressive identity. Furthermore, bringing the visual support is also a way of rewarding something back to those who are keen to know anything about gayness in the West, which I will explain more explicitly in the next sub-section.

2.1.2. Participant Observation

In addition to semi-structured interviews, participant observation has been accepted as the other important method for my empirical research since the beginning. I first planned to find some *yue* opera themed or related societies and clubs after my return to mainland China, and to select the most active few that would involve the largest number of gay males for participant observation. There are scepticisms about ethnographic studies since the last century, believing that ethnography is to take cultural snapshots and thus the meaning of a specific culture would have changed when its ethnography is written up¹⁶⁵. However, it is believed that “going out there” to reveal the hidden or less-recognised cultures per se is worthwhile and significant¹⁶⁶. Moreover, I will simultaneously analyse the data when the observation is conducted in order to capture emergent themes that I may have left out in the first place¹⁶⁷. In so doing, the semi-structured interview question list remains open to extension. Other important concerns about participant observation, based on some researchers’ experience, include being accepted by the studied group can be difficult and time-consuming¹⁶⁸. I felt the exact difficulty since the moment I became a member of Group of *Yue* Communication on Tencent QQ, as well as during three gay fans’ parties in the real life. However, there are also some good surprises during my fieldwork.

¹⁶⁵ Julie Scott Jones, “Origins and Ancestors: A Brief History of Ethnography,” in *Ethnography in Social Science Practice*, ed. Julie Scott Jones, and Sal Watt (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 26.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶⁷ Kathy Charmaz and Richard G. Mitchell, “Grounded Theory in Ethnography,” in *Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. Paul Anthony Atkinson, Sara Delamont, Amanda Coffe, John Lofland, and Lyn H. Lofland (London: Sage, 2007), 160.

¹⁶⁸ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, “Introduction, Reconnecting Selves and Communities,” in *Shanghai Lolas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 14.

Dealing with the Hardship during Participant Observation

As soon as I joined the online group, I immediately introduced myself to the whole group, telling them that I am a Chinese gay man doing some researches on Chinese gayness and queerness in relation to *yue* opera and hoping they would help me. However, being too point blank about my purpose did not work at all. Most group members did react to my words whatsoever. The worse thing is one of the group managers, Lengmeng (pseudo name), spoke contemptuously back, articulating that sexuality is boring; before he changed the topic to other things, he said as if he was the chief representative that *they* are not at all intrigued in *these stuff*.

The frustration of being sneered at forced to alter the ways in which I approached them and became accepted as one of *them*. There are three behaviours that turned out effective in gaining attentions and building bridges between them and me, the newcomer. First, I invited more opera-related topics into my interaction with the group, hoping to break the ice. Sometimes I searched for opera videos online and shared them within the group. Or I would ask group members questions about different opera factions, performers' characteristics, et al. By fluidising my identity from an academic researcher to a passionate opera fan and exposing this identity to them, I gradually began to feel welcome and integrated in the group. Second, I occasionally uploaded clips of my cover of an opera episode to the QQ group and asked for their feedback, and simultaneously I learnt to give generous compliments to other people's singing. Even though there were always divided opinions over these non-professional clips, people have been bonding well under the same umbrella of *yue* opera as well as its feminine characteristics. Thus, the opera craving within the crowd is reinforced. Third, after obtaining some basic ideas of some activist group members' personality, I joined their conversations and bantering. For example, endearments like "*jiejie* (elder sister, 姐姐)" and "*meimei* (younger sister, 妹妹)" were used, and bitching about other amateur opera fans' voices or looks became more frequent at my presence.

After three months of immersing into the group, singing and sharing opinions, the challenge to be accepted by a community was finally overcome. An increasing number of gay fans agreed to talk to me, and Chan, one of the

activist gay male who likes to perform tragic female characters became the first interviewee from this group. Most importantly, I was invited to a *yue* opera fans' gathering in an agricultural village, Town A. This gathering was the first chance for me to leave the cyberspace and join a gay fan party in the actual life. From April to September 2016, I joined three different *yue* opera fan parties in rural areas of Zhejiang Province, during which participant observations were conducted.

On 30th April the first day of the Labour Holiday break in mainland China, I took an early shuttle to the remote Town A, and then a local tricycle from the inter-village bus station to a very small and old stage in the centre of the small village. Standing on the small open space in front of the stage, I saw the cheap lighting being tested, and heard the sound equipment repeating a Chinese folk song album. After talking to a gay fan of opera on the site, I was introduced to a small lane leading to the backstage, where more fans were mingling, among which some were painting their faces and wearing clean white clothes that go under the colourful costumes. All of them were getting ready for a voluntary *yue* opera gala on that evening, and I was told that more than ten scenes or episodes of various plays would be performed. Then and there, I strolled between the backstage and the frontstage and started my participant observation of this *yue* opera gay fan community in the countryside. I felt the adrenaline surging because I did not expect a formal performance since people in Group of *Yue* Communication on QQ mentioned this would be "just a fan party." In addition, the vibes were very different from the atmosphere when I was interviewing gay fan friends of mine in Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang Province, so I am feeling both great excitement and an odd sense of discomfort. The excitement encouraged me take notes of everything I sensed as a researcher. The discomfort came from the distance between them and me – I was totally strange to all the other gay fans who had already known each other well. This makes it easy to be an observer, but barely a participator. Therefore, in order to make my empirical study work, I tried mainly four strategies, not only during the first gay fan party but throughout my participant observations of all three parties, to get closer to them and better mimic those within the community.

The first strategy is to take the position like a naive that hopes to get

educated and taken care of by the community. Before the evening gala in Town A began, I highlighted the fact that the visit to Town A was the first time I have ever participated in a gay fan party, so I felt very nervous, lost and a little out of water when I met some people on the site for the first time, and some of them showed their compassion and kindly tried to calm me by telling me this is a friendly community so I should go to the backstage and say hi to other people. During their voluntary performance to people in this agricultural village, I would ask questions about the scene on play or the performer, e.g. “which play is this scene from?”, “how long has he been singing opera like this?”, “Wow, how did you do that gesture with these long sleeves?”, “How did you protect your makeup from sweat given the high temperature and your heavy hat?”, et al. Most of my questions and reactions were positive and complimentary, so I was more likely to build an image of a friendly person who was unexperienced yet very willing to learn within and from the community. Shortly before the gala hit the final note, I reached out for their help again by asking where they planned to stay over the night and how to find the hotel most of them booked. Two men who appeared to be 40 years old offered me a lift after the gala to the hotel. The humble and keen person that I played on the site earned very generous help and care from some community members, thanks to whom I felt I was pulled into a more central ground of this circle where what the community looks and sounds like becomes more overt.

Second, I learnt to speak their language and mimicked behaviours of some gay fans’ after I built a relatively solid friendship with them, and this strategy emancipates many people’s from restriction and awkwardness, and simultaneously helps to create an opportunity for a larger considerable amount of data to emerge. It was by accident that I met Donghua, an extremely skinny gay man who collected money from gay fans who wished to join a dinner party after the evening gala, when I was taking observation notes at the backstage. He borrowed my pen, kindly invited me to join their dinner, and charged me after I decided to go. The dinner we had was fast-fried street food, but we all gathered around three big round tables. To ease the atmosphere, I talked to the person seated next to me, Ruoyu, and our conversation soon was joined by more people around this table. Ruoyu started by calling me “*gu’niang* (beautiful little girl)” in an operatic tune before he asked me where I came from, and soon

not merely me but the entire table was filled with sexual innuendos like, bitchy banters, and deliberate misuse of gender terms, e.g. *gu'niang*, *meimei*, et al. In addition to all the verbal interaction, I bonded with them by following their public behaviours, e.g. joining the *jiaobeijiu* (cross-cupped rite), and picking up the pinky-up drinking. With almost everyone drinking on the site, the street vendor witnessed a very delightful atmosphere where all of us felt relaxed and free to express whatever we wanted. After the dinner and drinking, a gay man who preferred to be called Siyi built a WeChat group, and all gay fans that showed up in Town A were included in the group. During all three parties, I booked the same hotel that most of them chose, and we always kept our doors of hotel rooms open until late and continued our celebration of gathering over there. Thus, both speaking their language and conducting their behaviours worked well in integrating me into their little circle of gay fans, or a form of “sisterhood”.

Third, I tried to keep the balance between me and every member of the community. Whilst I was learning their knowledges and accepting their help, I felt comfortable imparting them with what it is like in Western gay scenes. As long as they asked, I would try to explain what the gay bars in the West are like, how London gay men deal with different races, what it means by “sticky rice” or “mash potato”, et al. Some gay fans of *yue* opera were very keen to know the difference between Chinese gay men and Western Caucasian gays. Though my offer is never neutral or objective, but I made great efforts to give both stereotypical and anti-normative versions of the story. In so doing, I am not only taking from the community, but paying something different back to it. The balance that I have been trying to maintain succeeded in attracting some very informative interviewees who are also very close friends to me.

The final strategy is to allow more contacts with these gay men who gathered in rural areas of Zhejiang Province before I invited them for interviews. This non-action strategy was perpetuated throughout three participant observation occasions, until the late August when I was about to wrap up my fieldwork in Zhejiang Province. Gay fans were planning the fourth party in 2016 in Town B at the outskirts of Hangzhou, but the plan was soon given up due to the tight control throughout Hangzhou in August and September when the entire city and beyond were preparing for G20 Conference. During the three gay fan parties, I dedicated myself to all various events organised by these gay fans,

and note taking as soon as I observed anything. All party organisers know that I am a research student, but I never mentioned the need to interview them throughout three participant observation occasions. It turned out to be a useful strategy because the more frequently we have met each other in person or interacted on social media, the more relaxed and comfortable they felt about being interviewed and talking more privately.

To sum up, the biggest difficulty of conducting participant observations online and during three different parties in the rural area organised and attended by gay fans is to be accepted and fully engaged as any other group member. In order to overcome the difficulty, I developed various strategies in both online and offline fields. In cyberspace, I attempted to share more opera videos, ask about opera performing, and upload clips of my singing gain more credibility as a gay opera fan like them. In the countryside parties, I positioned myself as a naive to start with, spoke their languages and mimicked their behaviours to strengthen the relationship, keep the balance between me and them, and finally continuously created a more comfortable atmosphere on the site aiming to know all potential respondents more closely before interviews.

Enjoying the Inspiring Field as both an Insider and an Outsider

As Coffey reminded, it has been quite common for researches to retell the personal dimension of the fieldwork, but there are fewer works on reflecting how the forming an intimate relationship between the field, the studied community, and the selfhood comes to construct the identity of the researcher. Indeed, during the fieldwork process, I was simultaneously frustrated by the hardship of data collection and inspired by the field¹⁶⁹. I hope to further explain it in two major ways in which the field has inspired and transformed me and my thoughts unexpectedly. The first is the field eliminated the fear I had before the fieldwork of how the dual roles as both an observer and a participant can be tricky as the

¹⁶⁹ Amanda Coffey, "Introduction," in *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity* (London: Sage, 1999), 1.

previous researches show¹⁷⁰. The second, more significantly, is the fieldwork encouraged me to change a part of my project design from comparing Chinese localities between north and south to understanding both consonances and dissonances of gay or queer identity in different locations.

During the fieldwork, I have been putting on the dual roles as a both observer and participant. I appreciate my insider role as a gay fan of *yue* opera which brings great convenience to understand both the *yue* opera as a cultural scene and the gayness or queerness within it. The insider role makes entering the community, getting accepted and building trust relatively easier. However, the role as an outsider to the observed community and the dynamics caused by the difference between them and me turned out to be very fruitful. Before I explain how the outsider role contributes to data collection, I need to highlight the two layers of “outsider”. The first layer is my non-rural identity as an outsider to the community’s celebration of *yue* opera culture in Zhejiang’s agricultural villages. I was sceptical in the beginning about a solid division between the rural and the urban given the accelerated movement of people in contemporary China as well as the rapidly developing though not fully developed transport between cities and villages. However, I had to accept that I cannot identify myself as a rural attached gay man when an important trait turned up – after three days and two nights of staying with these gay men in Town A, I was exhausted and desperate to return to the urban Hangzhou; it might be exhaustion from observing, note taking, and sleeping on unfamiliar bed, but the moment when I arrived in Hangzhou and seated myself in a bar sipping a chill craft beer instead of heading home, I felt shocked and convinced by how much I have been transformed and adapted to the urban consumerist lifestyle, and thus I am already distanced from the rural identity. The first layer of the outsider role that I became better aware of as the fieldwork continued makes me wonder about the motivation of this group of gay male fans that would like to be so much bothered to beat the far distance and inconvenient transport to various rural locations that are isolated, hot and moist for *yue* opera themed parties.

¹⁷⁰ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, “Introduction, Reconnecting Selves and Communities,” 14; also Ann Bonner, & Gerda Tolhust, “Insider-Outsider Perspectives of Participant Observation,” *Nurse Researcher* 9, no.4 (2002), 16-18.

The second layer of the outsider role is me as a researcher who has an educational background from the West. Instead of hiding the observer's role or identity, I exposed who I am and what I hoped to achieve when joining the Tencent QQ group and participating all gay fan parties since the very beginning. However, this layer was less overt when I was in the QQ group where all online members seemed uninterested and indifferent to me as a person coming *back* to southern China to conduct a fieldwork, but it became overt when some people, i.e. Chan and Nanhui, widened their eyes that shone with curiosity and admiration as they were listening to me talking about my life as a gay man in London, and when other gay fans caught me taking notes in English by the opera stage. This layer of my outsider identity has two advantages. First, it found both the observed and the observer a new field to talk about, and it contributed more data to the gay fandom of *yue* opera in a transnational context. Second, the dramatic difference of reactions to this identity of mine demonstrated how the community boundary is nuancedly drawn and the intimacy between community members appears to change when people moved from the online to the offline domain.

Even though I am carrying such dual roles, my informants have been very understanding and tolerant to me ever since I gained their acceptance. As the process of fieldwork continues, I came to know that most of them were once or still married to women and some even fathered. Hence, they have their own daily lives and work that require very different sides of who they are. Mr Donghua for instance has been emphasising that performing the gayness is just like playing a caring husband or a loving father, which is simply one of many identities he is supposed to perform in the complicated theatre of life. I will further analyse the ways in which my respondents perceive multiple identities in relation to the academic theorisation of queer identities in my coming data chapters. Here, the important thing is being both an observer and a participant has not been a significant disadvantage in this community, but rather it gained the momentum to lift more veils covering the panorama of Chinese gayness and queerness in relation to the appreciation of *yue* opera.

Finally, it is the earlier data collection in the field and the initial data analysis that made me change a part of my project design. Before entering the field, I intended to understand how Chinese gay and queer males' consumption of *yue*

opera reveals their resistance to norms by focusing on gay fans from southern China where *yue* opera has a more solid fan base, and simultaneously interviewing some gay men who are fond of Peking opera in Beijing as the control group to examine whether and how locality plays a role within this cultural phenomenon. However, respondents from Shanghai, Hangzhou, Beijing and Nanjing tend to share some homogeneous opinions towards sexuality that are cosmopolitan and globalised. As opposed to data collected from interviewing people in cities, data from the rural area points more to Chinese rural locality, traditional moral values, discourses of family and marriage and other discourses that the global gayness has less touched on. Therefore, I chose to change the focus from north versus south comparison to how sexuality varies between the urban and the rural. The binary division of gay fans is not based on the location of their daily life or work, because not all gay fans coming for the parties or voluntary on-stage performing live in the countryside. For instance, an informant and my friend who is the most celebrated amateur performer and opera fan among villagers and farmers named Sun Lei lives in Ningbo, a fast developing city on the coast line of Zhejiang Province. It is important to understand the “rural” as a number of gay fans who prefer rural locations to celebrate *yue* opera and play out their sexual identity. So is what it means by the “urban”, which to be precise is the category of those who is currently consuming *yue* opera in the city. This modification of my research project uncovers more tension between these two locations and helps to emancipate narratives of class, social mobility, *suzhi* (quality) et al in a more dramatic way.

2.2. Discomfort and Fear: A Researcher in the Gaze of the Researched

For empirical researches that go into the field to study sexuality, they are not merely going to observe a group of unfeeling objects, but exposed to a community that is actively observing them back. The research project in understanding sexuality and a gay sub-community can be even trickier, because when feelings, eroticism, and intimacy are interwoven into the experience of informants, the researcher can also be easy to be “drawn to them

for both personal and professional reasons”¹⁷¹. It has been argued that during the communication or sometimes miscommunication on problems of sexuality, the researcher can hardly remain a staunch neutral and irrelevant being, but a subject utilised or even sometimes “positioned as a sexualised subject within the field”¹⁷². During the fieldwork, positioning the ethnographer self as a powerful and mighty person different from them never worked. However, when I took a closer look at them, I started to realise the fact that these gay fans of *yue* opera are not powerless whatsoever. Therefore, it is very difficult to maintain the balance between the personal and the professional. Moreover, it becomes fearful when the balance is broken.

2.2.1. Personal versus Professional

I met Honglei in the party in Town A. He was the most celebrated performers, for on the one hand it could be easily told from audience’s enthusiastic reaction throughout his performances, and on the other he was the only voluntary performer who was awarded a big bouquet of flowers by a spectator in those two days of performing. When I focused on him and wondered what made him special compared to other gay men on the site, he noticed my attention on him as well. Since that moment we developed a very solid friendship. During the second party in Town B, he asked me for opinions of his face painting, and dined with me after the afternoon performance was over, and stood next to me leaning on my shoulder when he was not performing or preparing for performance. And before the third party in Town C, he booked a hotel room with one double bed, and asked me to share a room. Between parties, he constantly sent me messages, asking me what I was doing or planning to do. After I interviewed him and got ready to leave Ningbo, he told me that he has been quite smitten with me. The similar story happened to other respondents like Wang Mei, who asked me whether I felt tired after the interview so he could

¹⁷¹ Ralph Bolton, “Tricks, Friends, and Lovers: Erotic Encounters in the Field,” in *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, ed. Don Kulick and Margaret Willson (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 148.

¹⁷² Margaret Willson, “Perspective and Difference: Sexualisation, the Field, and the Ethnographer,” in *Taboo*, 251.

check in a hotel close by and spent some time cuddling. Sun Lei and Wang Mei were not the only respondents that showed interests in knowing me further as a person and beyond. Some gay fans kept sending text messages to me via WeChat. Moreover, some of my respondents, such as Honglei and Jiangyu, called me quite often.

Hence I sometimes struggle to face the impasse where they constantly interrupt my personal life. On the one hand, I value them as my interviewees and the source of my data, so I cannot afford to be rude to lose their contact; on the other hand, I cannot stand the pressure brought by their intensive attention and their hope to relate to me more intimately. To get out of the impasse, I tried to be as polite as possible. I smiled back when they offered a hotel room, and told them that I was not at all “tired”, and I insisted to be living alone. The politeness continued when I suggest we be friends because I was not looking for any kind of relationship or sexual experience then, hoping they would understand. Thankfully, there was no further fuss in most cases.

The blurred line between the personal and the professional in the above circumstances is described to remind other and future researchers to try to tackle similar situation in a professional manner. Furthermore, this uncomfortable experience has made me question how I have been gazed by my respondents within the gay or queer group, how I was sexualised by respondents, and whether such situation only happens to me. I had a hunch that I am not the only participant of the community that has been through such excessive attention and invitations for more physical interactions. Therefore, by keeping record of the experience of how their activeness strongly affected my emotion, I discovered a hidden phenomenon within the field that other people are very likely to have experienced as well. Eventually, this contemplation led to me to add more questions like “how did you find this event”, “why do you think so many came gay men from different places to gather here”, and “what exactly is attracting *them* here” into my later interviews with the “rural” group members, in order to find out whether and how other respondents have ever come across the experience or stories of sexual luring.

2.2.2. Private versus Public

During the fieldwork, all my interviewees were told to choose the time and place they feel most comfortable with to conduct interviews. The following occasion taught me as a researcher I have to be cautious about respondents' choices. In an afternoon in August, I took an inter-village shuttle to Town B where a respondent named Nanhui lives in order to interview him in a local park, but did not come due to his family emergency. We rescheduled it to the next morning, so I had to check in a local hotel next to the park. However, he arrived earlier than the appointment, and asked me which hotel room I lived, because he did not have much time before he had to rush back and his families. When I hesitated, he said he would not feel comfortable talking about sexuality in the public space. This excuse he gave and my acute hope to hear something private in the interview finally let the room number out. The interview went incredibly well because he revealed a hefty lot of information that connects many dots I found interesting yet a little confused from my previous fieldwork. I often end an interview by asking the respondent "do you have any questions for me?" as a way of keeping balance between them and me, and let them feel better that they are respected. He nodded and said, "Don't you feel tired. Stop pretending you don't want to do it. Come lie down for a while before you check out." Again, I declined his offer by saying politely, but then he started to get a little violent, grabbing my wrist and trying to pull me onto the bed. I was shocked and scared, and at the same time intuitively pulled my arm back. I told him seriously that I did not want to have any sort of sexual relationship with him, and I really had to check out immediately. Fortunately, I am slightly stronger than him after all, so he gave up reaching out for me again and stormed out of the hotel room disappointedly.

It is not a very good experience, but I feel lucky enough that it did not turn into sexual violence, but it forces me to ponder carefully about how to keep the balance between my safety and engaging them into a more personal and private conversation. It draws my attention to think about the line between a public field I hope to study and the private space that each participant of the community in the field owns. After this interview, I continued the rest of the interviews in a semi-public place they chose, like a stall in a restaurant, a corner of a coffee house, or a quiet park.

More importantly, the fearful experience unveiled more information about

some gay men's alternative perception of bonding within the *yue* opera fan community. Sisterhood is not the whole story, because sexualisation of participants has become increasingly frequent. In this situation, I genuinely felt threatened, and my emotional reactions to this experience are anger and fear. I came to understand that an empirical study should be not merely about the objective observation, but also allow these emotions of a research to "become valid fieldwork data and an acceptable part of the fieldwork narrative"¹⁷³ letting it guide our attention our interpretation of what we observed¹⁷⁴. When I tried very hard to become an active participant in the community, I simultaneously crossed the thin line between *them* and *me*, and my interviewees' experiences are no longer stories of the *Other*, but a story of *Us*.

In this case of this interview in Town B, I was scared of becoming victimised by the respondent. The threat I was faced with, according to another interviewee of mine, is not unique. It can be something realistic that some gay fans of *yue* opera also face. And the anger and frustration were shared by Nanhui and me, but for very different reasons. He might feel disappointed by not having sexual intercourse after coming all the way to meet me in an absurdly early morning. And I felt offended by him assuming asking questions about sexuality means an approval to have sex with him. Recognising and facing these negative emotions helped me sympathise how other gay men in the rural sides may also be affected, and how this almost violent form of sexual desires they showed say about the relationships between gay opera fans. To include previous discussions about how other gay fans had crushes on me and I turned them down, it also becomes obvious that there is some kind of miscommunication and asymmetrical expectations between the researched and the researcher. I must conclude that entering the field does not mean that the ethnographer is not irrelevant in the field that seemed distant (in remote rural

¹⁷³ Ibid., 253; also Alison M. Jagger, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, edited by Alison M. Jagger & Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 165.

¹⁷⁴ Jean Gearing, "Fear and Loving in the West Indies: Research from the Heart (as Well as the Head)," in *Taboo*, 207.

areas in Zhejiang Province). Rather, the interrogation of boundaries between personal and profession, private and public, shows the ways in which tensions caused by divisions like classes, different educational backgrounds, and different emotional engagement within the same community have come to dynamically interact with the complex and complicated narrative of gay or queer desires.

2.3. Make a List of Themes

After the 7-month fieldwork in China and continuous follow-up contacts with my respondents, I have collected a considerable amount of data that revealed four major themes that are important to the studied group and highly relevant to my research project. I made a list of these themes as suggested¹⁷⁵. Under each theme, there are several subcategories respectively to be further explored and more carefully analysed. With the transcripts of all interviews and the ethnographic stories at hand, I locate these themes via two methods. One, I circled out all recurrent key words that are resonant with existing academic literature on Chinese gayness or queerness, such as *suzhi* (quality, 素质), *qiwang* (hope or expectation, 期望), masculinity, femininity, family et al, and see how they remarked on questions around these discourses. Two, I focus on contents that they were most energised by, and compare both consonant and dissonant remarks on their appreciation of *yue* opera as well their participation in the community as a gay or queer. Some data can be tentative in terms of finding the most appropriate themes above to be categorise, so when highlighting the key words on my transcripts and list all multiple meanings they carry. It is fine for respondents to have different perspectives and possibly very different stories in the gay scene, but I am not concerned about whether their experience as a gay fan of *yue* opera is representative in the gay community, and instead I am very fond of how these gay men who share the same cultural phenomenon have both similarities and differences, and how both repetitively and perpetually flirt with, reinforce, or challenge various cultural and social norms.

¹⁷⁵ James P. Spradley, "Taking a Cultural Inventory," in *Participant Observation* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1980), 157.

The first theme I am going to explore is the intrinsic queerness of *yue* opera. I will link respondents' stories of their first exposure to *yue* opera, and what they value the most in *yue* opera, and their remarks on their favourite opera performer or faction, to the findings of whether and how *yue* opera style, i.e. the camp cross-gendered performance, the flamboyant appearance and costume of *yue* opera performers, the constant switches between singing and speaking, is consumed in relation to their perception of gender, camp, masculinity versus femininity. For the rural gay men, their mimic of some certain professional performers can also be brought into the analysis of the ways in which they internalised the transgression of gender dichotomy in shaping their own existentialist being.

The second theme is hope versus hopelessness of the gay fans. I asked my respondents what kind of opera they love, comedy or tragedy, and the answers are much polarised. I will examine the interesting symmetry between their interpretation of their favourite plays or opera scenes as well as their explanation of why they value the specific one and their (dis)satisfaction with their previous and current phases of life as a gay or queer, together with their perception of their future.

Third, gay opera fan community as a relatively closed-up group is my next analytical focus. Under this theme, I will categorise their different behaviours to and opinions about each other into bonding versus hurting or bitching. Both accepting another gay opera fan and sneering at one can be used to uncover on the one hand the moral they valued and applied on others and on the other their strategies, e.g. building a sisterhood, sexualising others, and criticising other voluntary performers, et al, to discover the existentialist meanings of being. Furthermore, the chapter that explicitly discuss about the community will focus on how gender dichotomy is utilised or challenged by gay fans of opera. For instance, I will draw the map of both how and why they call each other *gu'niang* or *meimei*, and how many gay fans are conducting a family life with wives and kids, to help with the theorisation of gender troubles in the gay opera fan community.

The final theme that emerges overtly from the data is gay *suzhi* (quality, 素质). I will study how the urban and rural gay men told me different stories about

yue opera as a culture compared to other cultural forms that are unevenly accessible to gay men with different backgrounds. By comparing the urban and the rural stories and narratives, I hope to understand how various divisions and equalities among gay men play out in the theatre of opera. Finally, I will combine both their conformation and challenge to these *suzhi* divisions to examine whether consuming the traditional *yue* opera is truly anti-normative, whether it is a behaviour that protects or further stigmatises this sub-community. By categorising my data carefully and theorise them under these four themes, I hope to share my findings from the gay male fandom of Chinese *yue* opera, and extend the understanding of gayness and queerness in the transnational milieu.

Chapter 3: Opera Gay Men's Family and Queer Kinship

This chapter will demonstrate and analyse how gay fans of *yue* opera negotiate with the discourse of family and kinship. The literature on Chinese gay men in relation to family and kinship has articulated firstly the significance of these socio-cultural discourses to them, and secondly Chinese homosexuality, despite all attempts to strategise these norms such as getting a gay-lesbian contract marriage¹⁷⁶, or living a “secret dual life” after deceiving about their sexual orientation and marrying a heterosexual female¹⁷⁷, is still an invisible and lesser identity¹⁷⁸. Indeed, some informants share what has been articulated, and perceive heterosexual marriage as a constant pressure against their freedom. These people believe the marriage pressure is the most disenchanting reality that gay men have to be faced with in contemporary China. However, some other respondents, especially those from rural areas think differently about heterosexual marriage, believing the experience as a husband of a wife and father of a child can be very appealing and favourable sometimes, even though they are self-identified as gay or *tongzhi*. For these gay men, a traditional marriage and living a gay life do not have to be in contrast. It echoes what Xiaopei He found about Chinese homosexuals, some of whom believe marriage still “can be the site of a mix of pleasures, affections and happiness”¹⁷⁹. My respondents who are living and working in the rural area demonstrate their

¹⁷⁶ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, “Convenient Resistance? *Lala*-Gay Contract Marriages,” in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 104-123.

¹⁷⁷ Lucetta Yip Lo kam, “Negotiating the Public and the Private,” in *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 82.

¹⁷⁸ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, “A Smile on the Surface: The Politics of Public Correctness,” in *Shanghai Lalas*, 102; Jen-Peng Liu and Naifei Ding, “Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 30-55.

¹⁷⁹ Xiaopei He, “My Unconventional Marriage or ménage à trois in Beijing,” in *As Normal as Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong*, ed. Ching Yao (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 104.

creative fluidisation of meanings of marriage and the binary of gender. In the first section of the chapter, I will refer to my fieldwork data and demonstrate how marriage and family norms can be queered. In the end of the section, I will point out the problematic lacking of sex and intimacy within their marriage or unmarried respondents' imagined marriage life.

The second section will focus on the relatively closed-up gay fan community that holds parties in the rural areas, and how queer opera fans bonds with each other outside of their heterosexual families. With the shared passion in *yue* opera, these gay men bond with each other through not only queer daily language but also queer behaviours during community parties. I will analyse how these verbal and behavioural devices reflect the queerness of non-familial intimacies like friendship and "sisterhood", and try to understand the motivations of gay males joining this community. However, based on the participant observation, I am concerned that the community is not always efficient when it comes to the preservation of such intimacy, because there is a hierarchy between veteran members and newcomers. Moreover, there are overt conflicts of interests, competition for the performance of a certain role, and oppositions between effeminate camp fans and straight-acting fans. Hence, I see the gay fan community as a space not merely shielding the queerness, but simultaneously undermining it.

The third section of the chapter will explore sex and eroticism among gay opera fans in the community. Different from the more "obvious" truth that "99 percent of males into *yue* opera are gay" claimed by most informants from this community, sex and eroticism within the community is an inconvenient truth that was less mentioned. I will combine interview data from asking questions on sex, relationship, patronage, and rape with findings from participant observation, especially those of the ways in which I as a researcher and participant was sometimes gazed and sexualised in the field, to theorise an unexpected asymmetry between gay opera fans' expectations before joining the community and what community bonding sometimes leads them to. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how sex between opera gay fans is pursued and simultaneously disciplined within the community.

Using the bonding of gay opera fans as a point of entry, this chapter will demonstrate various forms of gay identity in China that are different from their

Western counterparts and also nuanced from cosmopolitan homosexuality in China. With these findings, I hope to draw more attention to a community that not merely has been marginalised by heteronormativity, but also been different from the overarching globalist gayness.

3.1. Queering Heteronormative Marriage and Family: Pressure or Pleasure?

In this section, I will demonstrate strategies urban and rural gay males use to resist heteronormative marriage and family, i.e. living a dual life, or get contract married. For urban gay males, they are living with a degree of freedom because they are more distant from their parents and independent from their relatives. They are partially out because they are able to be out to close friends but they still remain closeted to families, and they would either try to get a contract marriage with a lesbian partner, or would have to live with homosexual identity secretly. In terms of gay males who are living and working in the rural area, close to their parents and relatives, they would perceive family and marriage in a way that is different from their urban counterparts. They find both pressure and pleasure from the traditional form of marriage. On the one hand, marriage for them is not always evil or oppressive, and they challenge the meaning of marriage and the gender binary for their own needs. However, both urban and rural sides of the story interestingly lack the mention of sex and intimacy with their opposite-sex partners. I argue that their consumption of *yue* opera opens up a space where they find more freedom to explore such intimacy or eroticism.

3.1.1. Partially Out in the Urban

Urban gay fans of *yue* opera I interviewed are all living in cities away from their families. On the one hand, they are celebrating a form of freedom as gay men in relatively more tolerant urban spaces; on the other, they still have to deal with the pressure of heterosexual marriage and the stigma attached to their identity. Therefore, they choose to be partially out, which means they are out to friends and sometimes schoolmates and simultaneously closeted to parents or other families.

Most of time, they believe living in China as a gay man is not at all difficult. On the contrary, honesty with friends and sometimes colleagues would make

their lives more comfortable. A respondent pseudo-named Clark is a 29-year-old gay man who owns a small café with his gay partner in Hangzhou. He believes that gay life in China is easy:

Of course, different people have different personalities. Some people are cagey about their identity or they don't feel like sharing too much about it. Personally, I am very willing to tell people who I think I know well, because it makes our relationship more honest.

He is very lucky to have a group of open-minded friends, who accept his sexuality from the very beginning. Clark told me breezily, "there is nothing embarrassing or unpleasant about it." Jack, who is working in finance and also 29 years old, claims that being out works more than that:

All friends and my old schoolmates know. I decided to be honest with them for two reasons. One, they are relatively close friends, and I want to share something important with them. The other is, in many occasions, if your friends know who you are, they can help you avoid awkward moments.

For Jack, being out to friends wins more support in a long term. People can even friendly tease about his sexuality to delight the vibes of every party. Based on mutual understanding and such comfort, there are many things Jack has comfortably shared with and easily learnt from his friends since his revelation of sexuality. "It is impossible for anyone to go through and digest everything all by himself." Most urban respondents believe that people around them in the city are open-minded and tolerant about homosexuality, because, in Jack's words, "we all have received high education, haven't we?"

Jason, in his late 30s, is teaching college students English in Nanjing. Although his colleagues do not know his identity, but he deliberately mentioned the English word "gay" in his class and attempted to normalise it:

This word also means happy, doesn't it? When I said it means more than just homosexual, the whole class burst into laughter... So I asked a male student who was laughing, 'are you gay?' He was like... because I just introduced them to this another meaning, his

face and his ears turned red, answering 'yes, uh... no!,' and looking very confused.

Jay, who is teaching English at a middle school in central Hangzhou, revealed not merely he has been in a gay relationship since he was a university student, but also that there are constant mentions of sexuality even among his teenage students.

I think the domestic environment for gay community is and will continue to be better. My students' generation, they are like thirteen or fourteen years old, even knows about 'the top' and 'the bottom', and they are not ashamed or anything. They are very aware of what is going on outside of the school.

These stories demonstrate that sexuality is no longer a taboo in public spaces most of the time. The relatively tolerant society the urban manages to provide makes their living easier. Jay also believes that there is no religion in China that inflamed discrimination against the gay community in particular. "Russia has that, but our history and our general environment are quite benign I think."

The fieldwork shows most of my urban informants are generally satisfied with their lives as gay men in contemporary mainland China. They believe the mainstream society has become more tolerant than before, and homosexuality is not as victimised as in Muslim countries, Russia, or the West decades ago. Given the development of Chinese economy, the increasing popularity of social media, the rapid diversification of popular culture, and the high education more accessible and affordable for a larger population, most people no longer feel surprised by the discourse of homosexuality. When these gay men are surrounded by strangers in big cities, their sexual orientation does not upset anyone. They can work and support themselves like any other person, and the neoliberal complacency does not need much to be changed.

However, the progressive social trend does not mean these informants' lives as gay men are always wine and roses. To start with, it sounds to me that both Jay and Jason are only partially out, because they remain closeted at their respective workplaces. It does not mean that coming out as gay in their schools would necessarily cost them jobs, but it certainly shows their perception of

sexuality as well as its public meaning. They believe their identity would bring negative impact on their career in education.

Not only at workplace, but during their interviews with me, the feeling of shame is traceable. Firstly, there is always a dramatic turning down of speaking volume when the sharing of their opera experience ends and questions of sexuality start. Secondly, none of my informants felt comfortable to straightforwardly articulate terms like “homosexuality”, “gay”, or *tongzhi* when we first touched upon the topic. For example, when I started to ask Clark how he experiences sexuality, he answered so briefly and diplomatically that he managed to avoid repeating keywords like *tongzhi* that I applied in the question. He was only certain that talking about sexuality in his own coffee house was safe after I fired away nine questions. Not only Clark, but all urban respondents chose to express themselves in the ways in which all sexuality-related terms were replaced by pronouns, i.e. *ta* (it) and *zhege* (this). It sounds to me that they were trying to avoid chanting terms like “gay” or *tongzhi* out loud in public. Despite their later claim that no stranger would be annoyed, their inevitable discomfort and insecurity showed that the stigma of being gay is never completely gone. Moreover, when asked their expectation of Chinese gay men’s future and their view of the possibility to pass same-sex marriage law in China, most informants show no interests in these questions. As Clark said, “I am a person who never asks too much. In terms of the progress on a national or social level, I am not in pursuit of anything, so questions like that never come across.” It appears to me that there is a tension between their satisfaction of living a happy life as a gay man in China and the discomfort of speaking out sexuality terminology as well as the reluctance to discuss about sexuality in a political context. Homosexual identity has been kept by these informants as a personal thing. I will further analyse their reflection on same-sex marriage and gay rights in the coming chapter, “Queer Temporality in Question”.

Other than the internalised shame of being gay, the biggest pressure for these urban respondents does not come directly from the public, but family and marriage. They all believe that it is almost compulsory to get married to opposite sex in China; so under such pressure, none of them has come out to their parents yet. When coming across this topic, Clark, who was most of the time optimistic turned to a downbeat mood and told me he would never tell his

parents or families throughout his life. “It’s impossible to tell them. I don’t think they can ever accept that. Many people in my hometown don’t even know what this notion means.” The marriage pressure would be heftier as the Chinese New Year comes when a gay man must return to and reunite with families. In order to keep his sexual identity secret to the parents, Clark learnt to draw a clear line between his friends and relatives, and he chose to open only to the former group and very cautious and cagey to the latter. Jay briefed what he was concerned with and his reason of silence, “It would bring about considerable harm to them if I let go of the secret, no matter how open-minded or playful they usually seem to be.”

Among all my respondents, Jack is the only exception who refused to keep a life-long lie. He has revealed his sexual identity to his older sister and three other relatives, hoping that when he comes out to his parents one day they would support him and work with him through the hard time his parents would have to get through after knowing. Jack’s plan to come out to parents sounds incredibly torturous because on the one hand, he shares with all other respondents the imagined difficulty to be accepted as a gay son, and on the other, he feels obligated to protect his parents feelings. He firmly believes in a bright future as a gay man, as he states “It is a long-term plan, but I am sure I can achieve the consensus with my parents, and we all live happily and honestly together.”

But, if one day the pressure becomes too huge to bear, most of them would still choose marriage over their freedom. It does not mean that they would live a life like a heterosexual, family-attached husband in the marriage. Instead, my respondents have found two options. One, they would resort to *xinghun*, or a gay-lesbian contract marriage as Engebretsen previously theorised¹⁸⁰; two, they have to live a “secret dual life”¹⁸¹ after deceiving about their sexual orientation

¹⁸⁰ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, “Convenient Resistance? *Lala*-Gay Contract Marriages,” in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 104-123.

¹⁸¹ Lucetta Yip Lo kam, “Negotiating the Public and the Private,” in *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 82.

and marrying a heterosexual female. Jay believes it would be best to find a lesbian for *xinghun*, because there are many *lalas* in Hangzhou. Gay males who have this option also understand its cons. For instance, Shengli, who is in his 40s and working locally in an office of art and culture at rural people's government, told me his uncomfortable experience of visiting his gay friend in a *xinghun* family.

I think this family is very depressing and abnormal. I head to their place in the city with two other friends for dinner, but his [lesbian] wife never came out of her room. It does not feel like a family at all. That makes everyone in their social circles very uncomfortable. All the wreckage keeps piling up, and they are suffering from more depression than other people, and they have to bear more things in their own minds.

Moreover, Shengli reflects whether and how to have a kid would be issues among others that both a gay husband and a lesbian wife have to deal with in this form of marriage. His revelation, overall, is cruelly realistic, and it to some degree unveils a helpless and inconvenient truth many young and unmarried gay men often neglect – that the heteronormative force upon *tongzhi* and *lala* does not terminate when the contract marriage is formed, because social and familial expectation on us continues to be oppressive, if not lifted even higher, when the primary expectation is met.

A more helpless option, compared to *xinghun*, is to pretend to be straight and get married to an unknowing woman. Jason, the college English teacher, confessed that he got married when he was thirty-two years old, and he is already a father of a two-year-old boy. He lives alone and works in Nanjing, leaving his wife and son at home in the rural side. Jason sound upset about this because he “feel[s] very guilty and sorry for her, but unfortunately there was nothing else to do.” Jason and his wife have my compassion, because in this marriage, Jason had to continue his lie painstakingly, and his wife suffers from a lesser version of what she had expected from a familial relationship. Both parties are victims under the heteronormative marriage pressure. In addition, some informants coming from the rural South of China also contributed to the discussion on the dual-life form of marriage, iterating that some gay men would still go cruising after their marriage, and they managed to conceal their affairs

so well that their straight wives can do nothing but doubting. Even though cheating and infidelity happen to traditional families and straight couples, but the above-mentioned cases' relation to the discourse of sexuality can never be overshadowed. These certainly are fairly tragic examples, as a considerable number of gay males are involuntarily chained to the norm of marriage, and simultaneously they are reluctantly depriving *tongqi* – or “homowives”¹⁸² – of awareness right and many forms of intimacy that they deserve in the first place. There are some other scholars' contributions to the debate on *tongqi* phenomenon in contemporary China¹⁸³, but this is not the focus of this thesis.

These urban informants perceive heterosexual marriage as a constant pressure against their freedom. These people believe the marriage pressure is the most disenchanting reality that gay men have to be faced with in contemporary China. But, like Jason, it appears to me that these urban informants are already lucky since they manage to keep his own free space in the city so they can be partially out and honest. As opposed to these urban gay males, informants who are both living and working in rural area are constantly stuck with the heteronormative family and marriage pressure, and sometimes contract marriage is not even an option for them due to the lack of resources. However, it is worth noting that rural gay males are not always living with the pressure passively, for they are actively and creatively dealing with the norm.

3.1.2. Gay Males and Marriage in the Rural

Different from the above-mentioned urban gay males who consider marriage as something abominable yet compulsory, informants who are living and working in the rural area turn out to be perceiving marriage in a surprisingly fluid way. On the one hand, marriage for them is not evil or oppressive whatsoever, and it turns out to be of enormous use and pleasure. On the other hand, some of them

¹⁸² Richard Burger, “China’s ‘homowives,’” Huffington Post, accessed on 8th September 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-burger/china-homowives_b_3574084.html.

¹⁸³ Kuiyu Tang, and Dong Liu, “The causal analysis of *tongqi* phenomenon from the socio-cultural perspective: a virtual sociologist anthropologic study (社会文化视角下 ‘同妻’ 现象的生成原因分析——一项虚拟社会人类学研究)”, *Journal of Eastern Liaoning University (Social Sciences)* 16, no. 2 (April 2014): 127-135.

challenge the gender binary and queer the heterosexual marriage to fulfil their desires and needs.

Good Marriage or Not That Good?

Some respondents revealed that they either long for a marriage to women, or would enjoy the married life. I met Chan online. He is 33 years old and got divorced four years ago. He was the first interviewee who came from the rural area and the very person who introduced me to three rural opera fan parties that I participated in the summer of 2016. He loves singing performing tragic female characters during *yue* opera fan parties. He is enjoying being single at the moment, but when I asked him if you would keep sexuality private throughout his life. He nodded and answered: “Yes. When my son gets older, I still want to find a woman to get married. As you get older, you would need a life partner for company and help.” Motuo, a 38-year-old machinist, would share Chan’s view. He used to have sex with other men before his marriage, but he got rid of the “bad habit” as soon as he became fathered to a son. “Why not do it now? Because I have a family, I have my son. So those things sound distant to me now.” Shengli is among the most enthusiastic respondents when it comes to this topic. He articulates,

I should learn to be satisfied and grateful for living on this piece of land, being a good son to my old parents, good husband in my wife’s eyes, and responsible father to my child... I have a relatively happy family, even though I might need to keep [my sexuality] in secret throughout my entire life... But, soon after the marriage, everything will change, you know, into kinship. Like... after a easy but comfy meal, a straight couple can hold their kid’s hands and have a stroll outside, isn’t it great?

He shows his longing for a “normal” life, and apparently, he enjoys having a positive self-image despite his inner bitterness of concealing his sexuality from the public. He also told me that he would still want a traditional family even if same-sex marriage were legalised in China, because he believes the traditional family based on heterosexual marriage would give him the access to a broader social circles.

I asked these rural respondents whether they would press a magic button if it would allow them to reset their life completely. They all hesitated and assured to me that they would maintain the status quo because they tend to be happy with it. Yuzhao, a 34-year-old respondent who is recently employed by an environment agency in a city, painfully declined the magic button and raised a point slightly different from others':

I am afraid I will not press it. If I did, my parents would... I don't have anything to change now. I hope to give my parents something in return. If I pressed it, it would be, kind of like negating my parents. They brought me up with great efforts and hardship, so I can't put too much pressure on them. I already brought them too much pressure, because I am still unmarried. In our rural side, to be honest, other people would gossip a lot, like "oh, your son is not seeing anyone", or "look, your generation line might end here" or something. So I don't want to give them more pressure any more. I owe them too much.

It is believed by some that getting married would mute gossips and end relieve their families from pain and pressure. This can be interpreted in two distinct ways. On the one hand, they prioritise family and marriage over sexual freedom, because letting to be conformed would bring about something good, which I would explicitly discuss in the next paragraph. On the other hand, socio-familial norms are not merely disciplining both Chinese gay males and their families, but internalised by these gay males, making them afraid of the cost of not doing so.

According to their answers, getting married to a straight woman does not sound as horrible as many urban gay males may have thought. They try to paint me a beautiful picture of marriage life during interviews, and highlight sweet companionship, beloved children, a rich social life extended by the norm of family and marriage in this picture. However, when the picture is put under more careful scrutiny, it is not a completely delightful picture to behold.

First, throughout this group of gay male's description of how marriage can be beneficial, the femaleness of the partner, as well as the physical intimacy with the opposite sex, has been severely neglected. For example, Chan needs the company and help for his aged future, yet there is no mention of how a wife

instead of a gay partner would make a difference. It seems as if the female is objectified and instrumentalised as a bearer of children, a crotch for the old, or a posh suit for a social occasion, to fulfill these gay men's needs and life ambition. It is certainly sad for the female partner to be put in that position.

Second, all these good things they highlight – companionship, children, social life, et al – are something adhered to, not fundamental to, the notion of heterosexual marriage, as most of these very things can as well be achieved and enjoyed if they had been living with or married to a gay partner. Many of them have barely thought of this option, or to some degree they might have not been imparted with the discourse of same-sex marriage. Their picture of heterosexual family seems to be a lesser version of gay family. But, we have to be very careful, not to look at this group of gay men as passively left with a plan B, or to hastily attribute this to their lack of understanding of marriage or solely to the limited knowledge of other alternatives like gay partnership and so on. It can be interpreted in a different way. When sexuality discourse and gay culture are not disseminated evenly in the public, they have managed to fluidise the meaning of marriage to some degree, so that they are able to benefit something from the norm.

Within the field, it is not merely the meaning of marriage that has been fluidised. Some of my respondents are also questioning and challenging the notion of gender. Donghua is a skinny gay man and 34 years old. When he was interviewed, he was more lecturing me than answering my questions when I asked him how on earth the marriage between a gay man and a straight woman works. He articulated:

I don't think there is any pressure. In fact, I live my life without asking too much. I always believe a family is the most important thing. You know what? I am talking about families and kinship. How long does a romantic relationship last anyway? To be point blank with you, when I heard you talking about coming out or same-sex marriage, I think your way of thinking is problematic and your mind is distorted. Girls are not that horrible, and you shouldn't demonise them. Both men and women would *sajiao* (act cute like a spoiled child, 撒娇). When we are looking for a man, we wouldn't just pick up any random guy from the street. You will have to go through a selection process,

won't you? It also applies to women. We get married to a woman that successfully passes the selection process, and we establish our own family. Once you choose one, you two become families rather than lovers... In terms of sex, again, don't be mentally distorted. I think men and women share some similarities. The difference is you have to be more in charge and more active with women. The truth is, who is going to have sex that often after the marriage? It's just two people living together, only that the person you live with turns out to be a female. In a family, I can cook, and she does dishes. It's all very good. Don't you realise both men and women like to *sajiao* in the same way? All you need to do is to look at her as if she was the one you fantasise.

Donghua's articulation shocks me. He sounds very delighted by his marriage, and he calls me "distorted" for not thinking likewise. To continue his argument, he showed his disapproval of coming out to parents, and claimed that hurting parents' feelings that way is nothing but behaviour of cruelty and irresponsibility.

Another rural respondent I met, Weiwei, who is a 30-year-old tiny gay man from Town C, also shared his perception of his wife right after he finished telling me about his regret of spending a huge amount of money on a male friend because he feels sexually attracted to that man. "I think she is like a kid. I like a kind of softness in her personality."

There is something worrying in these cases. Not only Donghua and Weiwei, but also many other respondents, sent out a message that sex is not important after marriage or after the birth of their first child – as my respondent Shengli puts it, "it's just a mission that has to be accomplished." Despite Donghua's talk about pleasure in family life, his adaptation to the norm by visualising someone other than his legal life partner sounds to me more pressure than pleasure. Perhaps for him a family life that would not jeopardise his or his parents' reputation is what he is after, his wish of living as an out and proud gay male comes secondary. It means that struggling to maintain the heterosexual family and often needing to hide his identity is a much lesser version of that wish.

Although, Donghua makes a solid point that men and women are not always that different in terms of many qualities other than biological sex. Both can

sajiao in order to win more attention and affection from their partners. His example of *sajiao* demonstrates that he does not view a quality or behaviour restricted to any specific gender. As long as these qualities reach his standard, the person of these qualities can pass as the one he is willing to bond as a family. In Weiwei's case, his wife is viewed as a child that has no say of what he does or who he invests in outside of the family. In both cases, Donghua and Weiwei developed new ways to treat their partners, in which women are gender-specific in public spaces so these gay males can tick the norm of marriage, yet in private genderless, un-desired, and cheated on.

As Engebretsen points out, family and the "marital terrain" make an individual a social member and establish their social identities in China¹⁸⁴. Kinship plays a big part in shaping their belongings, establishing their human normality, and accessing their moral privilege¹⁸⁵. Some parents think it is their responsibility to help their children find an appropriate marital heterosexual partner to embark the life journey of a new family¹⁸⁶. Any individual who refuses to form a family through the institution of marriage or cannot undertake the filial obligations is condemned as a stigma¹⁸⁷. Such stigma is not merely about the face of the individual, but of his whole family¹⁸⁸. Marriage to the opposite sex is almost compulsory as a Chinese man is supposed to follow the Confucian ethics to continue the family line by having a (preferably male) child¹⁸⁹. Having such

¹⁸⁴ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals," 4; Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Is *Face* More Important Than Happiness?," in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.

¹⁸⁵ Lisa Rofel, "Qualities of Desire," in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University, 2007), 100.

¹⁸⁶ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, "Private Dilemma," in *Shanghai Lalas*, 67.

¹⁸⁷ Yinhe Li, "Regulating Male Same-Sex Relationships in the People's Republic of China," in *Sex and Sexuality in China*, ed. Elaine Jeffreys (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 82.

¹⁸⁸ Lisa Rofel, "Qualities of Desire," 102.

¹⁸⁹ Chris Berry. "Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 238.

norms in the social context adds to the specialities of Chinese queer identity. The urban side of the story is to live a gay life and a straight-acting familial life separately, or to get a contract marriage to resist the marriage pressure.

3.2. Queer Fan Community and Its Politics

Yue opera fans I met and interviewed can be primarily divided into two groups – the urban and the rural. By urban gay opera fans, I mean those who live and work in Shanghai, Hangzhou the capital of Zhejiang Province, and Nanjing the capital of Jiangsu Province. Their current ways of appreciating *yue* opera include occasional visits to the opera theatres with other fan friends, listening to opera on CDs or online. For these urban gay men, *yue* opera is a form of traditional music culture, and it is obviously different from yet homogenous with other music genres they might also appreciate. Most of them picked up this cultural form since their childhood, and they are proud to be able to appreciate this traditional music for reasons varying from nostalgia, southern local identity, to cultural *suzhi* (quality, 素质), aesthetic consumption, et al. I will specify these reasons in different chapters respectively.

In terms of the rural group of respondents, they live or work at the outskirts of Province capitals or in the countryside. They share urban group's interests of entering theatres and listening to opera CDs or in cyberspace. The biggest characteristic that distinguishes them from the urban is their active participation in gay *yue* opera fan *juhuis* (parties, 聚会) that have been held in different rural regions from less developed villages or countries in Zhejiang to outskirts of Shanghai. These *juhuis* are regularly organised from spring to fall, and each one lasts two to three days. A *juhui* has to be organised at a carefully selected location where a public free-to-all stage is available for voluntary performances for rural locals, a backstage room is ready in which they paint their faces and try on their opera costumes, a cheap hotel is booked where they rest or playfully spend the night, and presumably a roadside restaurant or vender near the stage where they sit around tasting local flavours and drinking local light beers. Their understandings of gender, sexual, and national/local identities are largely shaped by their passion for *yue* opera. It is worth mentioning that none of my respondents are professional *yue* opera artists, and

they were informed ahead of every *juhui* and willing to pay for all costs happened throughout, i.e. transport, hotel, food, and drinks.

3.2.1. Welcome to the Rural Queer Fan Community

In this section, I will share some of my experience during the first gay opera fan party at Town A. I had been an isolated, individual fan of opera until I met Chan in person. He was one of the earliest respondents who agreed to be interviewed in person. Thanks to him, I was kindly introduced to the first ever queer fan party in my life, which efficiently starts to offer the panorama of the rural queer fan community.

The first party was held during the 3-day break in celebration of International Workers' Day 2014. I took a shuttle, a rural bus, and a tricycle painted in red from Hangzhou to Town A, before I finally found the old stage where the first party was based, at about half past four in the afternoon. The entire size of the stage area is about 80 square metres, divided into front and back stages by a digitally painted curtain, on which there is nothing but a traditional ink-wash painting of mountains and river. Huge loudspeaker boxes on both sides of the front stage was randomly playing Chinese folk songs to a square, where several rows of thin wooden benches were untidily placed and a few of local people were chatting. I stood at the front row, excitingly admiring three male performers painting their own faces at the front stage. They were all wearing an all-white layer of clothing which will is supposed to be beneath the colourful yet sometimes very heavy opera costumes. I understand that it is not necessary to get fully dressed up until several minutes before their show, especially when the temperature reaches 32 degree Celsius. Some of them were wearing a black net on their head which tidies up their thin hairs and helps stabilising the helmet they were going to put on later. This scene was not how I expected a gay fan party would look like, for I did not see many modern fashionable dresses, or any booze around the corner. Neither did I hear any popular songs from Chinese or Western gay icons. The fan party area resembled nothing I had ever seen in other queer events, or anything I imagined in association with the term "party" in general.

I stood there for fifteen minutes, shocked, before a skinny man wearing big glasses and dashing turquoise Lacoste polo finally walked towards me. My

“gaydar” beeped. He smiled, and said hi, “[y]ou must be new to the fan party?” I felt relieved that he broke the ice first, and slightly surprised that he distinguished me from other local country audience. I nodded and asked him whether this was the location, when the performance would begin, and whether he would perform. He patiently answered me that he was not ready to perform, “I wish I could, but I am not at all talented. I am here for fun, and to support some of my friends.” He then encouraged me to go to the backstage and make myself acquainted. He told me not worry, “[t]hey are all very nice”, before he left to buy some cigarettes.

I cautiously walked to the side of stage and climbed up several stairs that lead to the entrance to the back stage, where more people were either painting their faces or trying costumes. I did not know any of them, so I kept smiling back to whoever made eye contacts with me. I waited for Chan’s arrival, whilst curiously looked around. The backstage witnessed all male fans focusing on their make-up, and only a few uttered sounds of sucking teeth or swore to the air when the brush made wrong strokes on their face. Before I started to feel disconnected to the intense atmosphere, a extremely skinny and girlish person, who is pseudo-named Donghua stormed in, with several pieces of A4-seized paper in his one hand and a pen in the other. He stopped at the entrance, looking surprised. At a deliberately high pitch, he screamed in an incredibly camp voice, “Mama Mia! Girls, chill out! It’s too early for the makeup. Aren’t you going to have a bite first? We won’t start until 7:30.” I later learnt that Donghua was there coordinating the whole party and performing event.

As more queer fans that I later invited to interview including Shengli, Nanhui, Motuo, Ruoyu, Yuzhao, and Honglei started to turn up, the backstage became more vibrant and queerer. They hugged each other, and some kept their hands held when they were updating to each other with how their lives go. Nanhui is a handsy person in particular. He grabbed the arse of the person he fired the question at “[w]here have you been, *ni zhe xiao biaozi* (you little naughty bitch, 你这小婊子)?”, and placed his hand high up on the thigh of that person whilst being answered. No one appeared to be bothered by this way of salutation. Yuzhao, who always carried an SLR camera, liked to comment on other gay fans’ fashion sense. It came as a shock to me that when Yuzhao came upstairs and met Ruoyu on his first sight, he started speaking in an operatic tone, “[a]h

gu'niang (dear miss, 姑娘), you look as elegant and skinny as the willow in the wind!" What is even more interesting is that Ruoyu responded by mimicking Lin Daiyu from *Dearm of the Red Chamber*, looking shy and singing "stop talking drills. I will report such flirtation and naughtiness to your father if you continue to tease me so." Yet almost at the same time, another gay fan with costume jumped towards Yuzhao and pinched his nipples through his T-shirt. "Is wearing this stupid shirt even polite?" Yuzhao was criticized so, but only smiled and hugged him to skip the topic.

About an hour before the performance, Chan, the first person I interviewed in this group, showed up. I approached to him, and said hi. "Hi, Chan! Glad to see you again. Did you lose weight?" He was thrilled that I noticed, and then warmly seat me down next to him. "Oh, all my efforts are made for the performance. I barely eat anything for a long time, even on a hot pot dinner with my dearest son! But it's so worthy. Nothing looks worse than a fat man in a female costume, don't you agree?" He said whilst rolled his eyes. Then we discussed the episode he was about to sing that evening, and I wished him good luck with the performance. He led me to a corner of a backstage room, where he unfolded his huge mirror, took out the colourful oils and powder, and started to paint his face. During the painting, he lowered his voice and complaint to me,

I think the organiser of this party is very unthoughtful. We are going to be performing, but no one prepared any meal box at all. You know, in all parties I went to last year, any fan who has volunteered to perform would get a meal for free at least. What's worse, you know they are going to gather and have a late dinner somewhere else. Any fan can go, as long as you pay a hundred *yuan*. I am nothing against charging some amount, but a hundred per person is ridiculous. What are we eating? Gold?

During the painting, he mentioned to me that there would be a group dinner after three hours of stage performance, "[y]ou are welcome to join us as long as you register with Donghua. He will charge you a hundred *yuan* in order to split the bill." I was glad that there was an extra way to get to know these gay fans better. Soon he got invited to mount the stage by Donghua, whose invitation was extremely operatic and queer, "Meet the *niangniang* (empress, 娘娘)!" as

he bowed on crossed legs and hands held on the waist side. Chan continued the way of talking by teasing Donghua back. “You *jianbi* (bitch, or cheap maid, 贱婢), help your *lao’niang* (mother, 老娘) stand up then,” Chan said and laughed as he walked to the side of stage.

When I found Donghua later to register myself, and expressed my willingness of joining their dinner. He took a funny look at me, from my head to toe, and said, “okay, but it takes each person a hundred *yuan*.” I told him not to worry about the money. He then warmed me that, “it’s going to be very interesting and crazy, I am telling you. Be prepared!” I passed him my bill money, “great! I can’t wait.” He carefully put the note under the light to check its authenticity before sliding it into his pocket. Then he borrowed my pen to add my name to his dinner guest list, whilst asking who I am and what I was doing there with all my note-taking. It turned out that he did not know how to write my name in Chinese, which is slightly complicated, so I kindly offered my autograph. It seemed to me that there were more than twenty names already on the list. “When the performance tonight is over, I will come find you. We can go there together. Some people need to go to the hotel to check in before heading for dinner. Speaking of that, have you booked a hotel yet?” He then explained to me that some gay fans have decided to live in the same hotel, and I should join them. After making sure that the price was very friendly, I accepted his thoughtful suggestion.

Throughout the three-hour performance in the evening, I was standing at the side of the stage where I could peek into the backstage and simultaneously keeping an eye on what was going on on the front stage. The square that the stage faces became increasingly crowded in the dusk. Most of the audience consisted of local peasants. At the backstage, these fans were getting busier on their own colourful makeup, tailored costumes, and vocal practice. Some were very kind to remind each other every time their turn to go onto the stage comes, such as “it’s almost your show time, *jiejie* (older sister, 姐姐)!” or “are you ready, *meimei* (younger sister, 妹妹)? Oh I have no doubt that you’ll be great!” Those encouragement and mutual kindness were the mainstream voices I heard before the performance. When the appointed Shengli, the anchorman, walked to the centre of the stage, most fans gathered where I was standing,

keen to witness the first performer and his show. That was the moment when sweet sisterhood paused, and bitter bitchiness started.

The wig of the first performer, who did not agree to be interviewed or named, were flawless, the costume and the makeup colourful and neat. He was as skinny as Donghua, and his movement on stage was smooth, and steps incredibly light. I did not expect an opera fan who is not professional at all would give such an impressive performance on the stage. The whole audience was applauding for his coming up and convincing control of his figure, and soon all crowds fell in silence as the band of traditional musical instruments ushered him to his first note of singing. However, it did not sound anything like in the original version – his horribly cracking voice was completely out of tune, and the disharmony of that surprisingly low man voice with the high pitch of *erhu*, or more well known as Chinese violin, shocked every audience. It took a second or two for all to absorb the shock before all bursted into laughters! As he kept on singing, his singing rhythm fell further behind of the instrumental music, and the complete awfulness of his singing stirred up the audience in front of the stage, and all opera fan folks on the side of the stage. Ruoyu, who was next to me, could not stop laughing: “Oh my god, what on earth is he singing? Where did he find the courage to stay on the stage after such a total tragedy. My heaven, help me. I am gasping for air.” Someone else complained: “His total shit is going to downgrade our performance as a whole.” Ruoyu responded to that complaints teasingly: “Rather. Why don’t you go upstage and rescue that poor little thing?” “No, you go.” At the meantime, I glanced across the stage, and saw Shengli, the anchorman, on the other side, compressing his lips to refrain himself from any disrespectful laughs.

It would be a horribly humiliating and intimidating moment had I been put in a situation like that, but it finally came to my relief when I realised that this first performer did not care too much other than simply enjoying himself in the flashlight. I took a step back, and searched the backstage dressing room, finding Honglei in the most comfortable corner, with best lighting in the room, polishing his makeup. There is the one and only small electric fan blowing cool winds exclusively towards him. I could not tell if he was male or female in the first place, until he started speaking to me. About the first performance, he told me his thought when he was interviewed about three months after this party in

Town A, “I personally don’t see the point of this joke. If you sing, please sing it properly. I understand some men have limited vocal range, so I accept if some lowered their pitch whilst singing; but some amateur fans’ performances are nothing but ridiculous. They don’t respect *yue* opera at all.” When he finished all the face painting, Honglei stood up and fetched a plastic bottle of water from the other side of the room. I kindly smiled to him when he first saw me. He asked me if I would perform, I said no, “I joined this group rather recently, and I didn’t expect a party to be like this at all, so I’m afraid I don’t have anything to offer this time.”

Honglei was playing a male character, so his makeup and heading were slightly more masculine, and he looked very tall in his white 10-centimetre-high platform shoes that are specifically for male characters in *yue* opera. His face was very professionally painted by himself, and all colours were carefully chosen and reasonable looking. I felt my heart beating faster when I talked to him. He looked incredibly handsome in this makeup, and the loose white under layer of costume made him resemble a skinny Taoist sage. When he asked me what I was doing there, if not singing, I tried very hard to impress him by demonstrating as many supposed merits as possible, including my educational background, my accurate Mandarin, and where I was based in China. He looked intrigued, but before we further our conversation, two mid-aged women came to the backstage, and asked Honglei for pictures. I started to presume that he is a celebrity within the fan community and to other audience, and later he played a scene from *Palm Civet for Prince* which proved him a good performer and singer. Honglei even received from audience the only bouquet of the evening after he retired to the backstage. However, each coin has two sides. His popularity sometimes carried him away. For example, in a cultural auditorium of Town C where the third fan party was held, he asked the anchorman to introduce him as a National B-Grade actor of China before he made to the stage, but some fans, including Daimeng and Donghua, laughed at Honglei at the backstage as they heard such introduction. Daimeng teased, “B-Grade actor? This must be kidding. He is never a B-Grade actor. He is barely half professional!” Donghua added, “Apparently, he is more like an A-Grade liar.”

The evening show in Town A came to an end around 22:00. Donghua's best friend, the co-organizer who also performed on the stage, Bao, came to the side of the stage where the folk music band that accompanied every performance on the stage throughout the evening on their traditional instruments, took out some cigarettes from his pockets and hand them to every member of the band as a gesture of gratitude. At the same time, Donghua was screaming loudly in front of the stage as the crowd of local audience dispersed, "Is there anyone going to the hotel with me?" Apparently, he was inviting people to share the vehicle, but it bursted every gay fan on the site into laughs. No one dared to answer his appeal, as he laughed at his own pun, "Gosh, I am so filthy!" He shook his butts and laughed proudly as he got into the front of a car.

After some quick cleaning on and around the old stage, I stuffed myself in the same car with Honglei, Nanhui and Donghua. Honglei, sharing the backseat with me, asked Donghua whether he performed a eunuch during a *juhui* last year. Donghua seemed to know Honglei's intention of tease, and smartly replied with a deliberate pride, "Yes. The eunuch is the main character! Last year, Bao and I rescued an episode because they need extra two supporting characters." Honglei did not let go, and said, "Of course, you played the eunuch too well!" Before Donghua continued to argue, he saw another gay fan at a crossroad. He rolled down the car window and shouted, "*Jiejie*, where are you going?" I could not see his face on the backseat, but I still heard "Going home. I'm trying to get a Didi (an equivalent to Uber app) car." They promised to meet up at the same old stage tomorrow, and Donghua rolled up the window and giggled. "Gosh did you see? He is still wearing the makeup. No taxi driver would stop near his painted face! He looks practically like a ghost in the midnight!"

Even though the conversation sounded like two gay men quarreling, they actually agreed on the fact that the role they play may relate to their status and class in the community. In this case, playing a prince or princess is apparently more privileged than playing a servant at the side, and a servant still slightly better than a eunuch. Throughout these parties, people who recently started to learn *yue* opera tended to perform three-minute or slightly longer scenes alone, or they would be asked to perform a female servant or *gonggong* by the side of other veteran fans. As opposed to newbies, veteran performers nominated themselves to play a protagonist prince, a princess, a handsome *caizi* (scholarly

man), or a beautiful *jiaren* (privileged lady) in scenes that last for approximately fifteen minutes.

When the car finally parked at a riverbank, as the bitching went on. Donghua let himself out of the front seat gracefully, and assembled approximately two dozens of people exiting different cars from different corners of the parking lot. Then he led all of us to a big street food market enclosed by walls. On the way to the gate of the market, Donghua was leading the “parade” along the wall around the market, with me and other following him tightly behind. He tried to ease the vibes by saying “let’s go, sisters. I am starving”, and soon realised we were without any shield from the public. He stuck his tongue and told a few people closest to him, including me, that “Haven’t you felt it? We are *yaoqi chongtian* (queening it up, 妖气冲天).” With laughters, we arrived at the destination. Interestingly, the dinner table seating said something about the difference between veterans and newbies too.

All male fans were divided into four tables. Honglei and some people who are considered more important or more privileged were seated at an VIP table closest to the air-conditioner, and the other three tables were placed closer to the exit of the little square. I nervously took a seat near the exit after most were seated. Ruoyu, Yuzhao, and Donghua were seated near me at the same table, and we started to mingle. Ruoyu kept rolling eyes every time we mentioned those at the VIP table, so it seemed to me that he was deliberately distancing himself from them, yet he guided it very well by telling me in an operatic tone, which was surprising and hilarious to me, “ah, *meimei*, I prefer to be with you, the seemingly newest member here, so that I can get to know you better.” I quickly stood up and made a semi-squat with hands folded on the side of my left waist, which is the way female characters in *yue* opera pay tribute, and replied in the same operatic way, “I am very grateful, *jiejie*!” Donghua opened a beer and was taking a sip when he heard us chatting, so he could not help but spitting all beers out before he rolled eyes, and cried, “Mama Mia, fairies are everywhere!” Throughout the dinner, we drank local light beers, and some with pinkie up. Thanks to this dinner, I feel more welcome by the community, and started to push myself closer to the centre of it.

I took the same car to the hotel that Donghua recommended, and checked in a standard room on the same floor with other gay fans. After I entered the room,

I turned on all lights, and kept the door open. Nanhui tailed me into the room, took off his shoes, and seated himself comfortably on the bed closer to the door. I took out my iPad and turn on some relaxing jazz music. He heard the music, jumped out of the bed, and took a few second studying my iPad front and back. Soon, he lost interest, and went into the toilet without asking my permission. He did not close the door of the toilet while he took a pee. After he finished using the toilet, he walked towards me as he zipped up his pants, and asked me, "are you going to sleep in this room alone?" I nodded as I glanced through my playlist. He continued, "are you going to feel scared, or lonely?" I smiled, and said I already got used to it. He stared at me, and his facial expression looked as if my answer was totally unexpected.

I walked to the door to check how other gay fans settled. Honglei's room was right opposite to mine. He shared the room with a tall guy, whose performance that night was less convincing than any other performers. The tall guy was not at all chatty. He was very shy. Chan sneaked out to the hallway when he heard me saying "hello" to Honglei. Gradually, the entire floor was filled with gay fans that were conversing and giggling. Some of us complaint about the poor condition of the hotel, while some admiring it, saying it is already one of the best hotels in the town; some were making fun of some fans sharing a room with any specific persons. It was a joyful quarter of hour before the noise died down and most of us were back to our own room. Nanhui was gone after I confirmed that his home is not too far from the hotel. When I was lying on bed, dozing on and off in the dark, I heard occasional noises from the hallway like high-pitched giggles, some swear words, and door shutting in the hallway. I suppose some gay fans had a rather restless night in this hotel.

It thrilled me that the ice between me and other fans started to thaw, and the growing comfort being on the site makes it easier for me to approach more gay opera fans. During all three parties, Motuo and Chan have grown a habit of inviting me to take photos with my SLR camera and simultaneously record a video with their phones whilst they performed on the stage. During the second party in Town B, Honglei asked me to be seated on his lap with his arms around me, when others started to tease about his single status. And during the party in Town B, Jiangyu kindly offered to company me taking a stroll through an ancient narrow street paved with large stones and guarded by old residences

on both sides. It is my honour that I managed to build up closer relations with more fans. However, it is also my relief to not have agreed to perform with costumes and headings with them, or I would have been laughed at, joked about, and bitched by some of them like most people did. In the coming section, I will make an analysis of the empirical data above.

3.2.2. Community Politics and Hierarchies

The empirical data and interviews aftermath demonstrate the organisation of the gay fan community. On the one hand, the gay fan community has become a space where all members can feel safe to be who they are, and enjoy the freedom from heteronormative discourse. I hope to scrutinise and reflect the queerness of the community from three perspectives, namely the queerness in community language, the queerness of their behaviours, and finally the queerness of the harmony between heterosexual marriage and homosexual identities within the community.

First, gay opera fans converse to each other in the ways in which most pronouns are often deliberately misused, and titles feminised, which helps the bonding between community members. At the backstage, they have been calling each other *jiejie* or *meimei* since the first afternoon I arrived at the party. Throughout all three parties and online group chat, no one seemed to be bothered being called by these female titles. Their misuse of titles is not merely evident between veteran community members, but adopted as a tool to include new-comers like me. As I smiled when they first called me *meimei*, it appeared to me that they got more relaxed because I, a new member, passed the first test by tacitly accepting their language, and can be recruited without challenging the exiting culture within their group. It surprises me that a word like *meimei* and a smile mean this much. It is worth noting that unlike in oral English, the gender of pronouns cannot be distinguished within spoken Chinese given that he, she, him, and her sound exactly the same, which is *ta*. However, these gay fans would deliberately avoid using pronouns that does not sound gender-specific, and instead, they chose to use “this/that *gu’niang* (dear miss)” when they mentioned or talked to another member. The preference of gender-specific titles over a straightforward pronoun demonstrates their intention to highlight their will to transgress the norm that a biological male should be called by a male title. Simultaneously, by playing with the gender norm, they strategised queerness

and gender transgression into an unwritten rule within the community, a rule that must be abided by if anyone wishes to be a part of it. To be brief, the queerness of the community language helps these gay fans develop a collective form of resistance to the mainstream gender norm, and becomes a shared tool that protect community members from being harassed by those who would not tolerate their sexuality.

Secondly, the interactions between these opera fans, either touching each other on sensitive body areas or holding hands with pinkies up, are effeminate and camp, reflecting how these gay men organised their personal and social lives beyond heteronormative frameworks. Throughout parties, their gentle physical touches throughout parties, and the ways in which they help each other tidying up costumes and headings, very much resemble women in professional troupes, and the ways in which they gather and gossip reminded me of a bunch of schoolgirls sharing the same cult of makeup or entertainment. On this, Shengli explained to me,

I think it is perfectly fine. We might be able to do the same to other ordinary friends. If someone is too *niang* (sissy, simplified Chinese: 娘), I think, as *yue* opera fans, we all can understand. Maybe a straight man, if hugged this way, or being squeezed on the arse, wouldn't feel normal. When we fans gathered, it is normal to have particularly intimate interactions... But, in public, it is better to keep an eye when doing these, because we are living in China, which is relatively traditional and feudal after all.

Shengli seems to believe that the gay fan community is more tolerant to camp gestures and intimate touches, but, can these practices be categorised as traits of sheer friendship? It is understandable when gay fans who know each other well perpetuate their bonding as “sisters” or friends by those touches. However, as I entered the field and barely knew any of them, some respondents such as Nanhui still touched me on my waist or the inside of my arms, which did not feel much friendly to me whatsoever. Furthermore, I was afterwards introduced to a complicated net of sexual relations some gay fans had, and confessed to that some respondents hoped to have further physical relationship with me. After I declined Weiwei's invitation to check in a hotel next door after our interview, he clarified,

We are friends, and that's why I made such a request. If we were not familiar, I wouldn't suggest we go sleep for an hour, would I? We knew each other well, and that's why. Some people would be casual, telling me, "okay, but just to comfort you, cuddle you, and fondle you." We don't have to go all the way to anal sex or anything.

Weiwei's handsiness represents his hope for lying down with another male fan and seeking for comfort and sense of security. Furthermore, by saying "not have to go all the way", he hinted that he was open to the option of having anal sex. Though these camp physical interactions represent care and support between sisterhood in most cases, it is better to be understood as gay fans' agency to go beyond the friend/lover binary of intimacy. I will further explore the eroticism within gay opera fan community in the next section.

Third, the community and the parties offer gay opera fans to leave their marriage and family lives behind once for a while, and simultaneously show great tolerance to their dual roles both as homosexual and as familial. Among my respondents, Jiangyu, Shengli, Donghua, and Motuo are married to straight women; Chan is divorced yet still planning for a second heterosexual marriage. However, in this community, some gay fans feel safe to stop acting like a heterosexual in their daily life or family life, and become bitchy, camp, effeminate people who mimicked female *yue* opera artists, and talked about men's genitalia or expressing their homosexual fantasies. It surprises me that expressing their gayness can be in harmony with discussions over heterosexual marriage they are in or to be. Even though Yuzhao touched upon this issue in our interview, believing that it is not fair to women married to these gay men, but there is nothing he can possibly do, no one revealed a shred of disapproval when they were on the site of gay fan parties. As opposed to my urban respondents, the rural gay fan community tends to keep the issue of *tongqi* in silence, accepted the dual roles of these gay fans throughout parties. It seems that, on the one hand, the community has reached a consensus that there is no point of mentioning this issue because both gay men and *tongqi* are victims of the heteronormative discourse; and on the other hand, gay males enjoyed the community because it resembles a sanctuary for gay men who elsewhere tend to feel morally interrogated or stigmatised for being gay yet married. But, it is worth noting that their tacit agreement on the issue of *tongqi* when they gather

for parties does not mean they would not think about it. As I put in the previous section, respondents like Yuzhao and Shengli reviewed the social phenomenon of *tongqi* and believe it is problematic; some other gay fans like Donghua and Weiwei challenged the male/female binary in relation to marriage, and believed that there are many features that both genders share, and thus marrying a straight woman as well as treating them well is not a big deal and it would not sacrifice their integrity.

Hence, in conclusion, the gay fan community that gathers in the rural regions share a language that appropriates gender-specific titles and names, develop some ambiguous physical interactions, and de-stigmatise gay men who were married to straight women. It opens up a space where gay opera fans can bond with each other, feel the temporary freedom from heteronormativity, and be empowered by expressing the queerness. However, on the other hand, the community is not always about tolerance and welcoming new members; there are also hierarchy and policing.

First, the difference of treatment between veteran and new members has been exposed not merely around the stage, both at the front stage and the back, but also during dinner parties and the leisure time. The whole process of Honglei's preparation for stage shows that he, as a veteran performer, or in accordance with the portfolio he drafted a "national B-Grade Actor", enjoys most of convenience at the backstage, including an electric fan for himself and unlimited bottled water. The arrangement of his performance, as the eighth out of all twelve scenes, also shows how the organiser tried to impress him as well as all audience. The bouquet he received whilst he performed rewarded all these efforts. Furthermore, veterans get to play a protagonist of a scene, yet new learners of opera only got to play a servant standing next to them. It is understandable, because on the one hand, the party was initiated by them, and they were the first to know the date and location of the party, and hence have the priority to choose what plays and roles to perform before other members; and on the other hand, they were more trusted with the on-stage experience, naturally. Veteran opera fans not merely put the binary of protagonist and servant into practise, but also reinforced it by mocking beginners or some veterans asked to help perform a eunuch or female servant due to the lack of volunteers. When I was seated next to Honglei in the car from the old stage in

Town A to the street vendor where we had the first dinner together, Honglei asked Ruoyu where he had been the whole evening, “I did not see you at all, or did you perform a *gonggong* (old eunuch, simplified Chinese: 公公) secretly somewhere?” Ruoyu cried, “you are more like a *gonggong* material than me!” None of them would prefer standing on the side of the stage, performing a voiceless role. In addition to my observation around the stage, the post-performance dinner reinforced the division between veterans and preliminary opera learners. When I tried to approach to Honglei on the spot, I was let seated at the table next to his, as he was invited by other senior opera fans to the table that is closest to the air conditioner.

This hierarchy is no merely offline, it is running through the online space as well. For instance, Jiangyu invited more than thirty gay opera fans, me included, and initiated a WeChat group called *Liyuan Zhiyin* (Opera Friends, simplified Chinese: 梨园知音) on 19th July 2017, in order to prepare a performance in August. However, the group was dismissed only after six days. After he took the liberty of deciding which opera scene and who to perform, Jiangyu’s suggested, “there are six roles in this scene of *Song Fengguan*, (giving out phoenix coronet, simplified Chinese: 送凤冠), and the oldest and most experienced here gets to choose first.” It ignited a fight for protagonist within the group. No one backed his idea, which would appoint himself as the leading role. After six days, no agreement was made. Jiangyu finally made a final yet slightly melodramatic announcement before this WeChat group stopped its short-lived history:

Ridiculous! Singing opera as well as chatting about it is for our happiness, but the group has been busy arguing over who gets the most out of it! It's just a performance. The State Council is not paying us for how much we performed on the stage or anything anyway! I am tired of these slapsticks, so peer fans, friends, gents, I am dismissing this group!

Jiangyu dismissed the group because his plan to lead a whole scene was challenged by other opera fans’ non-cooperation. Calling each other *jiejie* and *meimei* helps to strengthen the bonding between community members, but equally importantly, it highlights the superiority of *jiejie* over *meimei*.

Secondly, the rural opera gay fan community has formed a prejudice against fatness. Chan confessed that he was a chubby and over-sized when he was interviewed. He told me opera costumes tend to be a little loose, so they look good in motion, so the person wearing it has to be skinny, or the general figure with it on would turn out very disturbing. For every gay party, Chan would fast for a period to lose weight, and he always kept an empty stomach until his performance was over. He emphasised that losing weight and being empty-stomached are parts of readiness and responsibility for a better performance. His articulation was echoed by a few other gay fans, such as Honglei and Donghua. As Honglei put, “a fat person himself means irresponsibility and unprofessionalism, and he should not pass as a serious opera fan”. Hence, the binary of fat versus skinny is associated with their respect to *yue* opera culture and a requirement of professionalism on stage. It is worth noting that it also runs into their aesthetic point of view. It is understandable that most interviewees would prefer a thinner man as their partner. Moreover, opera fans reflected their preference of befriending straight acting community members over effeminate ones during their interviews, even though they are either performing female characters or mimicking female opera artists’ way of performing male characters. They revealed that they feel more attracted to straight-acting and masculine males, and simultaneously disgusted by those who are sissy and camp. I will further discuss about their taste in men in relation to the notion of Chinese masculinity as well as the current discourse of *xiaoxianrou* (little fresh meat, simplified Chinese: 小鲜肉) in the third Chapter, “The Feeling beneath the Painted Face and Costumes”.

Thirdly, there are other forms of discrimination existing in the field, i.e. differences of class, *suzhi* (quality), body figure, et al. People bitch about each other’s performing and singing skills, class difference, and even the degree of other people’s bitchiness. It is a community where people compare themselves to each other, believing they are still better, though they have somehow internalised the bitchy norm of the community. Other than that, it shows professionalism is related to how long they have been practising, their attitude towards a performance especially responsibility and readiness.

3.3. Eroticism and Sexual Relations in the Community

It is worth noting that opera fan parties are not merely a space for gay “sisters”, but also a site of eroticism and sexual relations. The sexual desire is a covert theme within the community. The exploration of the theme revealed that gay eroticism has different forms, and these forms are hierarchical. Gay opera fans’ experience and their remarks on gay sex have demonstrated how private and monogamous sexual behaviours, as well stable and long-term relations, are more acceptable than those that are not. It shows how heteronormativity has infiltrated into the community of queer opera fans. However, some gay fans’ self-contradictory behaviour of alluring other gay fans for sex, inviting their opera peers to the hotel, and raping, showed how they seek for the unacceptable and perform their queer agency.

Eroticism and sexual desires are less overt than campiness and sisterhood in this community. I have never heard anyone mentioning gay sex during parties. The topic remained concealed to me until I returned from the second party in Town B, which brought me closer to and trusted by some gay fans of *yue* opera. Some respondents brought up this topic during their interviews. Since then, I became more dedicated to the topic of gay sex, designed more sex-related questions, and added them to my interview question list.

Jiangyu was the first person who gossiped about Honglei having sex in the public toilet. Aware of the audio recording, he told me the story.

Well, I heard this from some local villagers. It’s about Honglei, and there is another guy from Jiangsu Province. He is a boss, and he gave Honglei a red packet with money in it. So he... well they both went to the fourth floor of a building. I mean it was during the day time, yet they were doing it. Many people talked about it. He is like “I sing, you give me a red packet, and then I can have sex with you”. This deed had a huge impact, because when Honglei and that boss were having sex in the public toilet on the fourth floor, a local came upstairs. They even employed another person standing outside like a sentry. When the local came, that sentry cried loudly “Watch out! Someone is here!” That local man wanted to use the toilet but was not let in. He insisted to use the toilet, and you know, only to find out

those two doing it in there. This kind of thing... you know it would make a very bad impression on the local people. They might think that we are all just like that.

The story was later re-mentioned and confirmed by Nanhui and Donghua. They told me that this event has spread afar and most gay fans have heard. They both believed that gay sex is not news within the circle of opera fans, but having sex in the public toilet and being caught by a local man are disgraceful, dreadful, and unacceptable. Weiwei remarked that homosexual sex is nothing different from heterosexual sex, and it is totally understandable, but it should be kept in private, because, as he concluded, “even straight people would not have sex in public.”

So I became interested in how they would release their desire and how they would find the right person for sexual behaviour. Weiwei appeared to be shy and pure when I asked him why so many fans would cover the long distance and endure the tiring transport to join the party, “Some of them came here in order to perform and sing, but some people, you know what I mean?” He nodded when I asked if he meant one night stand. He even told me he did not know too much about gay sex, but when he later invited to check in the hotel next door and “take a rest with him”, his explanation begs to differ.

I haven't had sex with men for a while, so I really want to do it with you... I mean we can give each other some comfort by cuddling and touching. I didn't mean that we have to do all the way to anal sex. I experienced it before, I didn't enjoy anal sex that much anyway. I just want to ask some comfort and warmth from you, that's it. You know, there is no results between two men.

It becomes a norm for every gay fan to frown and shake their heads when bringing up gay sex, as if it was something inappropriate and filthy. No one admitted the knowledge of gay sex. Yuzhao even articulated that gay sex between opera fans is problematic. He believes that most people came to join these parties for either money or sex. “Can there be any genuine relationship between two gay fans? Maybe one in ten thousand.” He joined this community for opera, not for the *luan* (disorder, simplified Chinese: 乱). Shengli also distanced himself from this “disorder” of gay sex,

I seldom have gay sex. For instance, there is a fan party in Town D last year. It looked like they chose to share rooms, but I didn't. I had a room for myself. It didn't mean that I look down upon them. The truth is, I prefer to be a loner in Town D, as well as in Town A and Town B. Every time we go somewhere else and spent the night there, I basically choose to have a room myself, unlike them sharing a room with one or two fans. It's such disorder... If I meet a person I like, we can chat casually about everything, instead of focusing on the issue of sex.

Luan was a term with negative meanings. According to Ho¹⁹⁰, *luan* in traditional China was caused by women and eunuchs and it refers to from "political unrest," "messing up the ethical code", "confusing the political order", to even "directing the country to the wrong path". Yuzhao accused random gay sex of committing *luan* have shown his prejudice, which demonstrates that casual gay sex is problematic for both personal development and the sake of the collective.

Even Honglei, the source and victim of the gossip, told me he was disappointed by the hypocrisy of gay partnership, and how he was wounded by his previous gay partner. During the time he talked me through his previous relationship with another opera fan, he repetitively highlighted his loyalty and full-heartedness throughout the relationship, and accused others of being promiscuous.

When gay fans gossiped about Honglei's sex with the Jiangsu boss in a public toilet, they all sounded disapproving his public display of sexual intercourse. In their opinions, gay sex has to be personal. Every respondent distinguished himself from the rest of gay opera fans, claiming that he is different and distant from the disorder of casual sex. Instead, a stable and serious relationship almost resembles a desirable virtue.

However, their proclamation of obeying to order is contradictory to what most of these rural fans' actual behaviour. According to Daimeng, a respondent who

¹⁹⁰ Clara Wing-chung Ho, "Fushi: The Second Sex and the Third Sex in Traditional China," *Ming Qing Yanjiu* 14, no. 01 (2006): 47.

just turned 18 years old when I interviewed him. He was introduced by an opera fan friend of his to the gay fan community when he was younger. His friend was dating an organiser of a fan party back then. It appalls me hear him saying that he was raped by a gay opera fan from this community when he was only sixteen years old. "He was forcing me to go to bed with him... I was too young to know what to do. I wanted to resist but he was stronger and older than me." Then he looked blankly as if his eyes was seeing through me and focusing on something behind me. I looked into his watery eyes with shock and compassion, until a milk tea he ordered arrived, and he uttered some words, "Indeed, but things like this must have happened before. Alas..." He took a sip of the drink and started to stir it for a while, purposelessly. He then told me he would like to leave the countryside as soon as he finishes the high school, and start a new life in urban areas. It appeared to me that he was traumatised by the rape, and did not like to further mention about it.

During all three parties I have been to, many gay fans would choose to share hotel rooms with peer fans. In Town A, it was already midnight when we returned to the hotel from dinner, yet it was only the start of the night life. Most of gay fans, including me, were arranged in rooms on the same floor. Almost every fan visited my room once or more to mingle. Other than friendly mingling and teasingly bitching about each other, some have shown in interests in knowing me further by staying the night with me in my room. Nanhui, 35 years old, for instance, offered to be my sleeping buddy to "protect" me in case I fear darkness after he confirmed that I checked in a double hotel room alone. Despite his subtle wording, I read his desires in his sly-looking facial expression, a facial expression I re-countered when I met him for the one-to-one interview in my hotel room. When I wrapped up my interview by asking if he has any questions for me, he looked more excited and kneeled up from the bed he was lying on when he was interviewed. "Yes, I do have a question. Don't you feel tired of pretending that you are not interested in having sex with me?" After I politely declined, he became violent and grabbed my right wrist at once, trying to pull me onto the same bed with me. I tried to keep my politeness until his sly facial expression turned up and his tightened his hands on my wrist. My fear was overcome by my will to survive and escape, and I roared at him with outrage that I did not want to have sex with him, and what I asked throughout

the interview did not mean my permission to have sexual intercourse with him. I was finally left alone and safe after some minutes of struggle.

I was luckier than Daimeng because I was not further violated, but it becomes increasingly clear that the gay fan community is not merely about bittersweet sisterhood or hierarchies, but sexualisation of community members. Before the second fan party in Town B, Honglei asked me to share a hotel room during the party, but I did not approve. When he introduced me to two of his friends in Town B, I was asked where I would be living. The two invited me to sleep with them in the same hotel room if I have not booked any room yet. "We can join these two beds together. It's a bit tight, but I guarantee you we will still be comfortable." I politely declined their offer, and ended up finding an economical hotel a block away from them. There is another example. Weiwei and Jiangyu encouraged me to check in a hotel room nearby after our interviews respectively to take a rest. Both of them tried to convince me several times after I repetitively turned them down. Also, when the party was over in Town B, a gay opera fan named Yu Shao offered me a lift to Hangzhou city, my temporary base throughout the fieldwork, but he deliberately drove me to his hometown. After several rounds of protest in the car, he finally let me off at the Hangzhou exit of high-speed express.

Before entering the field, I never tried to imagine how opera loving and sexual harassment can find any junction point. These experiences are very uncomfortable, but they already happened to many gay fans in this community.

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter tries to participate in queer-theory scholars' debates on universalism versus transnationalism, and showcases a convincing example of Chinese gay fans of *yue* opera's stray away from gay liberation and gay rights. In so doing, I argue that the fieldwork in the gay fan community further extends the scholarly articulation of a transnational gayness in China that is different from its Western counterpart, and it well exposes an opposition to the chanting of gay pride.

Firstly, the chapter reviews and analyses how both urban and rural gay fans of *yue* opera perceive marriage and family in China. A large group of Queer

Theory scholars, in interrogation of the universalism of homosexuality, believe that gayness in China has demonstrated significant difference from the West. According to Engebretsen, family remains a significant norm because it makes an individual subject a social member and helps to establish his or her social identities in China¹⁹¹. It is a matter of *face*¹⁹², and it plays a role in accessing the moral privilege¹⁹³. The refusal to form a family through the institution of marriage remains stigmatised¹⁹⁴. Furthermore, to follow the traditional ethics to continue the family line by having children is almost compulsory too¹⁹⁵. My project shows the transnational trait is overt in today's China. Some gay fans of *yue* opera, such as Weiwei and Chan from the rural area, and Jason from the urban, follows the normative path and got married. The description of their marriage life sounds as if the marriage is a ritual of becoming a proper adult, and they focuses much on filial piety and raising kids. Chan's ongoing hope for the second marriage with a female, together with Honglei's plan to find a wife and have a kid in the future, demonstrates how the discourse of family and marriage has been internalised by some gay males in China. The norm is not merely shaping how they think, but also how they behave in order to get along with the norm. Though a heteronormative marriage would not necessarily promise happiness, they still believe it as an important approach to betterment of identification.

¹⁹¹ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals," 4; Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Is *Face* More Important Than Happiness?," in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Lisa Rofel, "Quality of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities," in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 100.

¹⁹⁴ Yinhe Li, "Regulating Male Same-Sex Relationships in the People's Republic of China," in *Sex and Sexuality in China*, ed. Elaine Jeffreys (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 82.

¹⁹⁵ Chris Berry, "Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 238.

The chapter, through showing in detail how these gay fans turn to *yue* opera and form a community to celebrate their temporary freedom from heteronormativity, nods to existing scholarly findings of Chinese gay men's strategisation of the social-familial norms. Kam¹⁹⁶ and Engebretsen¹⁹⁷ respectively document homosexuals in China who choose to live a dual life in/out of the heterosexual marriage, and contract marriage between a gay man and a lesbian. They are theorised as non-confrontational strategies developed by Chinese homosexuals¹⁹⁸, and become forms of localised struggle for self-presentation and obtaining the access to a broader social relations. The gay fan community in rural area per se works as a space where a dissident lifestyle is allowed to be celebrated. In this community, bondings and sisterhoods are established through offline gay fan parties and online chats. Through the intimacy with the like-minded, gay fans managed to enjoy who they are. Gay fans of *yue* opera leave their home and families and share the collective homosexual consciousness and present their desires and pleasure in ways that are barely tolerable in heteronormative circumstances. Gay fans' rural parties serve as a location and time for the autonomy. After several days of intimacy with *jiejie* and *meimei*, these gay males take off opera costumes, wash off the painting oil on the face, and leave, while putting on a straight-acting performance to pass as a husband, a son, or a father in the heteronormative society.

The majority of respondents in this project, except for Jack, never consider coming out to families as an option. My urban interviewees would agree with Rodney H. Jones's iteration that coming out in China can be reckoned as an undesirable parody of the Western way of resistance, which is too

¹⁹⁶ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, "Negotiating the Public and the Private," in *Shanghai Lalas*, 82.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 84-86; Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Convenient Resistance? *Lala*-Gay Contract Marriages," in *Queer Women in Urban China*, (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 104-123.

¹⁹⁸ Heln Hok-Sze Leung, "Do It Yourself," in *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 115.

confrontational and sometimes considered immoral and ungrateful to the family¹⁹⁹. The rural respondents do not necessarily see coming out as a Western trait. I believe it can be best related to Jackson's theorisation of "post-queer" identity in many Asian regions²⁰⁰. Among them, Donghua's example stands out, as he not only condemns coming out for being selfish, hurting parents, and bringing unpredictability and negative impacts on the subject's future development, but also tries to persuade me that both men and women in a familial life have many things in common, and therefore, some gay men's misogyny, instead of the heteronormative marriage, is the problem.

Second, the chapter demonstrates empirical data to understand homonormativity within the gay fan community, and highlights the lingering of gay wrongs in the fieldwork. The second and third sections of the chapter uncovers that as the community grows bigger, hierarchies and politics become obvious, within which some fans gained privilege and power, yet some are victimised and marginalised. The community not only allows sisterhood, but also sexual relations, though in a subtle and tacit way. Judith Butler reminds us of the risk that a new hierarchy emerges within the gay community, a hierarchy that enforces the distinction of good versus bad gays²⁰¹. The politics adopted by gay opera fans manages to marginalise the fat, the old, bad vocals, et al., within the group. Some victimised gay fans have less visibility within the group. The binary of good gay fans versus bad gay fans is established.

Gay Shame notices that the public affirmation of gay rights and gay pride within the community becomes "an additional level of shame – it makes us shamed of our shame,"²⁰² and thus the grassroots queer identities that are still

¹⁹⁹ Rodney H. Jones, "Imagined Comrades and Imaginary Protections: Identity, Community and Sexual Risk among Men Who Have Sex with Men in China," *Journal of Homosexuality* 53, no. 3 (2007): 97-103.

²⁰⁰ Peter A. Jackson, "Pre-Gay, Post-Queer," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 40:3-4 (2001), 7.

²⁰¹ Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 18.

²⁰² David Caron, "Shame on Me: The Naked Truth about Me and Marlene Dietrich," in *Gay Shame*, 120.

experiencing shame and resisting both hetero- and homo- normativities²⁰³. The project hopes to shed lights upon the negative feelings of these gay fans of *yue* opera. On the one hand, the chapter through the analysis of most respondents' overt discomfort while being asked questions on homosexuality or gay rights in China, has echoed to Heather K. Love's articulation that "feelings of shame, secrecy, and self-hatred are still with us,"²⁰⁴ while we chant about gay pride and gay rights. The organised rural parties, the festive and flamboyant presentations on stage, also show the boosting productivity of these opera fans' internalised gay shame. On the other hand, the chapter unveils the eroticism and sexual relations in *yue* opera fan communities. It drives our attention away, for a while hopefully, from gay visibility and gay rights, to "look on the dark side" – in the case of this project – the traumatised community members, and think seriously about negativity.

²⁰³ David M. Halperin, and Valerie Traub, "Beyond Gay Pride," 9.

²⁰⁴ Heather K. Love, "Introduction," in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer Theory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 20.

Chapter 4: Queer Temporalities in Question

This chapter demonstrates how these gay men in China became interested in *yue* opera, and how the consumption of this traditional art form enables them to better explore the reality and the future. The first section is going to reveal that most of gay fans, despite the urban versus rural binary, started their experience with *yue* opera since their early childhood in their rural hometown. The second section examines how gay fans empower themselves through singing and performing *yue* opera to cope with the reality and the future. Through the analysis of the data, I argue that gay fans have managed to allow *yue* opera to run through different temporalities of their lives, thus they manage to maintain a relation to positive feelings of family and childhood. At the same time, *yue* opera's dual roles in Chinese culture, both a precious heritage with artistic values and a less popular art, or even outdated, that is sung in a local dialect, is instrumentalised by gay fans. By inviting *yue* opera's various narratives and performances, gay fans can better resist the mainstream yet at the same time to attach to it. Such agencies are queer.

4.1. The moment of becoming a *yue* opera fan

As a *yue* opera fan, I started to listen to *yue* opera since I was six or seven years old. I wonder when and how these peer fans started to enjoy the traditional art form. I not merely encouraged all respondents to recall their early memories related to *yue* opera, but also asked every interviewee whether they think the cross-gendered performance in *yue* opera is a problem. It is discovered that all respondents, no matter whether they are currently living in the city or the country, attributed their passion for *yue* opera to their sweet childhood experiences in their rural hometown. Moreover, by sharing their preferences of particular opera schools or favorite scenes, these opera queers demonstrated on the one hand their will to be different from other people, and on the other their longing to be normalized.

4.1.1. Urban Fans of *Yue* Opera

Same as the last chapter, I started my fieldwork from the urban area. Most of the urban respondents started to enjoy *yue* opera since they were seven to eight years old, and a few started even earlier. I was told that *yue* opera was a

very popular art form in Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Shanghai area, and many people, especially in the countryside, developed a hobby of listening to *yue* opera and a cultural activity of practicing and singing it. When immersed in such an environment, they picked up *yue* opera since they were young “naturally”.

Clark told me,

it has something to do with my family. I knew what *yue* opera is since I was very young. My grandmother used to be a *yue* opera performer. I heard my mom humming *yue* opera when she was doing nothing since my childhood. I think the melody is very beautiful, and it's perfect to be sung by the female. What's more, I think the melody suits us southerners. So I kept listening to it. I even sing a sentence or two when I am by myself.

Fernando, Jack, Jay, and Jason all mentioned about *yue* opera's melody, when explaining why they like *yue* opera. It has been frequently described by them that *yue* opera melody is *yin* (阴) soft, beautiful, and smooth. In addition, Jack thinks *yue* opera's costumes and makeup are attractive to him. “When *yue* opera is performed, there is a visual beauty, so I loved it naturally.” It is very interesting to dig a little profounder to see how they perceive southernness in relation to *yue* opera. Some rural gays fans, as I will come to discuss later, also highlighted the difference between *yue* opera and other opera forms, in relation to the binary of southern Chineseness versus northern Chineseness. And in the next core chapter, I will further the discussion of how locality was perceived by gay fans in both national and global contexts.

Their love of *yue* opera is not merely about the features of *yue* opera per se, but associated with the memory of families and neighborhoods in the childhood. I was told that there were folk *yue* opera troupes coming to the rural area to perform during festivals or the Chinese New Year when they young. Their parents or relatives would take them to the temporarily built stage or the auditorium in the center of the country to watch free opera performance. Clark still remembers something tremendously fascinating. Among all of these performances given by these voluntary troupes,

there is a scene involves a beggar. Every time this scene was carried onto the stage, the performer would literally beg for money on the stage, and some spectators in front of the stage would go forth and give them some money. The story is very simple. The character went broke in the middle of the story, and it didn't have food during the drifting, so it had to beg to strangers to live... It wouldn't be too much, audience normally handed over ten-*yuan* notes or at most fifty-*yuan* notes back then.

I was impressed by the story. After I went to the rural area and participated in a *yue* opera fan party in Town B, I was very lucky to have a chance to witness a similar scene performed by a gay fan by myself. He played a female protagonist in *Fang Yuniang Prays in the Buddhist Pagoda* (方玉娘祭塔). The female character is supposed to sing out a wish to Buddha on every floor she climbs in a pagoda. The gay fan slighted wittily altered the lyrics to please the local audience, so he would gain more applause and cash reward from the audience. His vocal was not very good, and his control of the melody did not sound beautiful either, but the audience gave him a-hundred-*yuan* notes instead of ten- or fifty-*yuan*. I understand my respondents better after this. Almost the entire country was empty because most people came to watch *yue* opera performance around the stage area. From five to six pm on, mobile vendors came out to sell roasted skewers, colored lights, balloon animals and so on. It was not merely a party for gay fans at the backstage, but also a carnival for local people.

Another question is whether and the ways in which they perpetuate the interests in *yue* opera as they grow up. Fernando and Jack, who were interviewed together, remain loyal fans of this art form, and they would still choose several short scenes of *yue* opera to sing in karaoke bars when gathering with friends in the city. Jack articulated that *yue* opera is a very special hobby, and he would not conceal what he likes from any other individuals or groups. "To some closer friends or in some particular circles, I would even actively show myself as a *yue* opera fan," because, as he explained, it shows he is a person with certain level of *xiuyang* (cultural

accomplishment, 修养). Fernando agreed to Jack, but he pointed out an exceptional occasion where he would remain his *yue* opera hobby low-profile.

When I am with people at the hometown, I would deliberately avoid this topic. If asked, perhaps I'd answer them: "oh, I might find *yue* opera interesting when I was young, but I no longer listen to it nowadays." This is an impression I wish to give them. How come? Because in their eyes, the addiction to opera or being an opera actor or actress is, well, inferior to other people. I don't want to cause any unnecessary misunderstanding or trouble when meeting those hometown folks.

Fernando's concern about *yue* opera is very similar to his concern about revealing his sexual identity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he is avoiding to meet middle school mates or other relatives, because he felt troubled and uncomfortable to explain his unmarried status to them. The similarity points to the correlation between gay men's consumption of *yue* opera and their gay identity.

When asked which *yue* opera performer or scene Fernando loves the most, he unveiled his special affection for Ms Mao Weitao, a *yue* opera superstar who has taken on male characters on stage. Fernando adores her her aria, thinking her voice is great, and she can sing into his heart. He confessed that when he was alone in the night, he would listen to the tape of Mao Weitao's famous *Lu You and Tang Wan* (陆游与唐婉), and let reduced to tears by its heartbreaking story, and sympathizing with its sad lyrics. "I couldn't afford to go watch her live performance back then, so I listened to her tapes and CDs. Two of her tapes were almost broken because I listened to them so often." *Lu You and Tang Wan* tells the sad love story between the poet Lu You in Southern Song Dynasty and his first love Tang Wan, and the opera version highlighted their last encounter in Shen Garden, where they swallowed the bitterness of misfortune and wrote poems on the wall in the garden. Fernando loves this scene the most.

Fernando is not the only person into excessive sad stories *yue* opera often adopts. Clark, the owner of a café, also showed his preference of sad stories. The scene of *Daiyu Burning Manuscripts* (黛玉焚稿) is Clark's favorite. He said,

I am very special. Many other people might appreciate popular scenes such as *From Heaven Fallen an Angel Sister Lin* (天上掉下个林妹妹) the most, but I'm different from them. In this scene, Daiyu is very sad. She was deceived, yet she didn't make efforts to resist the misfortune. I think it is very touching.

In addition, he introduced me to Qi Yaxian school of *yue* opera performing, which sounds unexpectedly sad. "I know there are many other schools. People all heard about Xu [Yulan] school, but I like Qi school. I prefer things that are stranger and, you know, less popular."

Urban gay fans of *yue* opera have been through a bittersweet life journey since their exposure to *yue* opera. It appears to me that they were gladly willing to associate their earlier opera interests with their lives in the rural hometown with families and relatives. Their relaxation whilst they shared the memory was evident – they looked upwards a little to think back, and smiled when talked to me. This is something noticeably different from when they were answering whether they have or will come out to their families. By talking about *yue* opera, these gay fans of *yue* opera seem to be able to relate themselves to positive feelings of family and childhood. The carnival-like vibes brought by amateur opera troupes to their hometown in early ages played an important role in developing the hobby. Earlier interactions with families and neighborhoods seem to be one of the main reasons why they started to appreciate *yue* opera. This characteristic is shared by their rural counterparts, as I will continue to demonstrate in the next sub-section. Today, by perpetuating the interest in *yue* opera, they are allowed agencies to react to the social norm. On the one hand, watching and singing *yue* opera means to some of them the mastery of something non-mainstream and it shows their superiority over their non-opera-loving peers; on the other hand, *yue* opera becomes utilized to release their negative emotions, and fulfill their will to be different. Urban gay fans' contemporary attachment to *yue* opera is enormously different from the rural respondents, and I will describe how rural gay fans consume *yue* opera in the coming sub-section. Both perspectives of urban gay men's attraction to *yue* opera show similarities, the will to struggle against the mainstream and pose a different stance. It convinces me that these agencies are queer.

4.1.2. Rural fans of *Yue Opera*

To find out the similarities and differences between rural and urban gay fans of *yue opera*, I also asked my rural respondents how they started to enjoy this art form, in what circumstances, and how they perceive their own love of *yue opera* today. It is found that when their passion for *yue opera* started from their childhood experience in the rural, the telling of such experience reveals a very strong attachment to their families, which is similar to their urban counterparts. However, rural gay fans tend to tell more detailed and more emotional stories when asked about these experience.

Many rural interviewees recall that *yue opera* was a highly popular art culture when they were young. Not many families before around 80s can afford televisions, so their access to other art culture was very limited. Fortunately for Nanhui, his family managed to buy a television when he was only a little boy. Anytime when there is a *yue opera* programme on televisions, neighbours would visit his family and enjoy the show together. "You can imagine what it was like. Whoever had a television at home would attract many visitors... My grandfather visited me very often because of that. It was a great memory." Nanhui put it very proudly. From his genuine smile, I saw a little boy huddled between loving families and neighbouring friends, listening to *yue opera* for the very first time.

The rural areas in Yangtze River Delta developed a custom to put on a series of *yue opera* performances during traditional holidays. Every time when an opera stage was set up, many kids like Weiwei and Honglei when they were only 7 years old, would expect a spectacle keenly. Weiwei gladly told me,

I loved *yue opera* since I was six or seven years old. I don't know why, but I suppose because I loved to go watching opera at that time. When they were building the stage, or when the stage was empty, I would climb up onto the stage and curiously looked around. It was a vibe of the festival, or because people love gathering and enjoying the livelihood. Most adults would be seated at the back row in front of the stage when the performance began; but we kids would like to run to

front rows and joined the fun there. I love having my grandparents with me seated in the front. It feels great.

It is worth noting that they enjoy not merely the festival-like atmosphere every time a *yue* opera troupe came to perform, but also their tight bonds with parents, grandparents, or other family members at that time. Donghua remembered well how his grandfather or father would carry him on shoulders from home to the village central square where the *yue* opera stage was established to watch opera performances, and Yuzhao recalled, at that time, his mother carried him in her arms or held his hand throughout the opera performance. These respondents' memories of *yue* opera vividly portrayed pictures in which they had a happy and harmonious time with families. The upbeat talking of these experience and their emotional mentioning of "on [father's] shoulders", "in [mother's] arms, or holding hands, convincingly reflect their strong attachment to families and how they value the familial love today. It contrasts dramatically with their emotions when they were telling me how they would never come out to their families as gay men, yet it helps to better understand why family is such an important discourse throughout their life.

Some respondents have families who used to work in *yue* opera troupes. Some family members were opera artists who even got to mount to the stage frequently, e.g. Motuo's elder sister used to be young performer in a local *yue* opera troupe based in Xinchang Zhejiang Province, Yuzhao's mother who played various supporting roles in a privately-run troupe. Ruoyu not only became familiar with *yue* opera culture but also earned their first chance to give amateur *yue* opera performance because of . Ruoyu's grandmother was a quite famous professional artist who used to performed male character, and his entire family became her loyal fans. Ruoyu said,

I was influenced by *yue* opera culture without knowing, and I always like it. I was particularly into *Visiting the Mrs in a Mulberry Orchard* (桑园访妻) then, and I managed to memorise every word and sentence of it. Hence, my elementary teacher kept asking me to perform during school art festivals.

Ruoyu laughed embarrassedly and shied away after he told me this.

In addition to watching live *yue* opera during traditional festivals or on television, some rural respondents embarked on their *yue* opera journey through the radio. Jiangyu started to appreciate *yue* opera since his elementary school stage. He not only listened to *yue* opera on radio, but also interacted with it during his middle school. He told the following fascinating story.

About 20 years ago, there was a local radio programme called Opera Singing produced by Xiaoshan People's Broadcasting Station, and it only talked about *yue* opera. They would also invite professional or amateur opera singers to sing before they made comments. So I went there with self-prepared musical accompaniment and sang *Diaochan Praying to the Moon* (貂蝉拜月) in their broadcasting room. I think they played my cover very often. After they played my cover, the anchorman asked audience: "Could you make a guess whether a gentleman or a beautiful lady sang this?" ...And then, the anchorman would finally reveal the answer, "I don't believe you can get the right answer. It was sung by a male. He has long been a loyal audience of our programme. His name is Jiangyu." It was hilarious, haha!

Jiangyu believed it is this experience that helped him make more like-minded friends and finally led him to the *yue* opera fan community in rural area. Throughout his telling, he was proud. However, when I asked whether he felt proud of being an opera fan, he told me he does not have the gut to sing it out loud in workplace or other public spaces. Jiangyu's concealment of such *yue* opera passion gives an unexpected twist following his proud emphasis on his accomplishment on radio.

Interestingly, something similar happens to Chan too. Chan firstly told me an experience two years ago.

I was strolling at a local square as exercise, I met some opera fans and mingled with them. I told them I liked *yue* opera and I can sing a little. Then I was soon told to sing a sentence or two. But they told me I was not good at all, and I should not have sung like that. I was confused. I mean, I loved *yue* opera for a long time, and who do they think they are

to judge me? Since that day, I would watch and learn from opera scenes on a computer almost every day, either after or during the work. I sang along the artist. After two months of practice, I met with those opera friends and sang to them again. This time, they were impressed and said to me: “Wow, you changed our mind about you. You sang really well now.”... After six months, I sang on the phone to a more experienced *yue* opera friend. He said, “Chan, you are not just making progress, but making serious, huge progress! I can give an 80 points out of 100 for your opera.”

Chan rolled his eyes to signal the end of the story, as if he knew he was marvelous while expecting my compliment. However, when I asked him whether he gives performances to families and friends, he looked away and cried in dismay that he only performs during those gay fan parties. Even though, as they mentioned, some of their families or colleagues are aware of their interest in *yue* opera in general, but I wonder what made they keep their remarkable achievements secret. Based on these interviews, listening to *yue* opera is acceptable to the public, but performing it or realising something specific in *yue* opera is not. Jiangyu and Chan sound trying to cut their *yue* opera fandom out of their public life outside of the community, fearing the fandom would give away their identity as homosexual.

Hence, some rural interviewees' focus on their achievement in *yue* opera revealed how a particular *yue* opera event left a noticeable and unforgettable mark in their life, and the rest of the interviewees showed how they were immersed in *yue* opera culture since childhood. The opera culture was utilised by these gay men as a tool to nurture a cultural identity that is related to rural origin and family discourse. More significantly, through this cultural identity, these gay fans snaked their path through the time and environment when and where nearly zero direct discussion of gayness could be traced back then, towards a consciously gay community. In the next section, I will demonstrate detailed data on which *yue* opera story and scene these gay fans find most enchanting, before I try to figure out the ways in which revealing *yue* opera fandom would give away their gay identity.

4.2. Sing about the Real Life and Hope

After surveying how my respondents started the interest in *yue* opera, I was eager to find out how they consume *yue* opera in the daily life. For example, I asked them which opera story or which scene they favour the most, and why they find it enchanting. I was struck by their interpretations and internalisation of various *yue* opera scenes and stories. Their favourite *yue* opera stories fall into mainly some different categories of themes, including romance, family, et al. By aligning respondents' interpretation of their favourite opera scenes with their life stories, I try to pinpoint the mechanism gay fans of *yue* opera develops to connect the reality with this particular form of art, and understand the strategy of such connection.

To start with, Fernando spoke highly of love stories in *yue* opera, including *He Wenxiu* (何文秀), *Lu You and Tang Wan*, *The Romance of West Chamber* et al, and he says: "I like male characters like He Wenxiu and Lu You in particular just because of their passionate and single-minded love. Don't these *caizi-jiaren* (scholar-beauty) stories reflect our hope for love? I wish I could be a man like them, and also I hope I can find my special someone just like them." Honglei is a huge fan of *caizi-jiaren* stories, especially *Butterfly Lovers*. "Liang Shanbo's love for Zhu Yingtai is very profound and incredible. He may be a frail-looking scholar, but he dares to make huge sacrifice for his love. Zhu Yingtai is an incredibly emotional person likewise." However, Donghua dislikes *Butterfly Lovers*, "because the story does not meet audience's expectation of true lovers eventually becoming spouse." Honglei and Donghua have different opinions on *Butterfly Lovers*, yet they both reflect their appreciation of passionate love and longing for a romantic relationship in their lives.

I continued to ask every respondent if an indelible love like those in these opera stories exists between gay men in China. All rural gay fans I interviewed refuse to believe the probability. Some put it in a rather pessimistic tone that the majority in gay community cares nothing but carnal pleasure and economic benefits. The rest believes that gay men cannot enjoy "enduring and loyal love" like heterosexual partners do, as gay partnership is "temporary and fleeting". Honglei, for instance, repetitively condemned the incompatibility between his

emotional and economic investments in his previous relationship and his ex-partner's ill treatment of him.

Do you still remember *Yushao* (pseudo-named), the guy who drove you back to Hangzhou from Town B? We had a history... He is a very materialist person. How come? I care about nothing but affection. What about him? He cares about money only. Once, I went all the way to Town A, his hometown, but I couldn't sleep properly at his place, so I told him I'd like to check in a cheap hotel nearby, you know, for peace and quiet. I was thinking, you are the host here, so you should treat me with something nice like a gentleman, more or less. But, I ended up paying for everything as soon as I go there... My friends all laughed at me for being stupidly affectionate. They were like, "Have all men in your hometown died? Why did you go all the way to Town A for humiliation and mistreatment?" You see, I am trying to make this relationship work, but why doesn't he do so? I paid all my heart to men like this, but what have I got in return? It feels like they were simply trifling with me and my feelings.

Honglei tries to tell me he has been disappointed by gay relationships tainted by greed and selfishness, and at the same time, he poses himself as a dedicating partner – a resemblance of some protagonists in those romance stories he favours the most – and opposes flaws he mentioned above. However, after the interview, he starts to update his WeChat Moment posts, which includes selfies of him in an underwear, messages like "Honglei, a *jishi* (skillful worker, 技师), is coming to a particular city on a date. Please make an appointment as soon as possible", and many screen prints of different amounts of money he received through WeChat red packets. They are telling me that Honglei is having sex for money in many different cities, and he earns some money from many clients. Together with the toilet sex scandal against him scattered about by some other rural gay fans, these Moment posts puts the claimed merits of Honglei's during his interview in question.

During the fieldwork and the interview, Honglei does not reveal any quality like having casual sex. There are a few questions worth asking. First, why does he present himself as a dedicated person to me? On the one hand, he

apparently hopes to know me better after two parties in Town A & Town B, and he might be afraid that being too *luan* would leave me a bad impression and scare me away. On the other hand, as his performance gets appreciated by some of his fans, it is important to remain a positive image, knowing that I am taking notes and recording while he is interviewed. Furthermore, when I first enters the field, many gay fans of *yue* opera thought I was a journalist, and they were reluctant to be called on or interviewed. Honglei, like the others, might have the same concern before he is fully certain that I am not a report working for any state-owned media. Second, it is common for WeChat users to categorise contacts and make some posts visible to some certain groups. Honglei is very likely to let these posts seen only by opera fans, other gay friends, and his clients; but still, why does he show such a schism between the interview self-presentation and his WeChat Moment? His disappointment in past relationships may play a role in his decision-making process. “When I think twice, I feel very tired. I feel unfair when I contribute so much to the relationship, yet I gained little from it.” Is it possible that a victim of gay relations turns into a playboy? He never tells. Other than the emotional reason, there is another more realistic reason – financial status. He is living alone in a tiny place in Ningbo, a tier-three city in China, and he can barely receive any help from his parents. Getting paid by sex buyers might be his way of dealing with his current dilemma.

When gay fans like Jiangyu, Nanhui, and Donghua shared the story of Honglei having sex with a Jiangsu boss in a public toilet, the narrative displays their disapproval of public display of sexual intercourse. To most gay fans of *yue* opera I have met, gay sex has to be personal. As I mentioned in the last chapter, every respondent distinguished himself from the rest of gay opera fans, claiming that he is different and distant from the *luan* (disorder 亂) of casual sex. Instead, a stable and serious relationship almost resembles a desirable virtue, and some gay fans’ particular interest in *yue* opera’s love and romance stories echoes their value. However, it is worth noting that some gay fans’ invitation to spend the night in the same hotel room during parties, a cuddle after the interview, or me and Daimeng’s traumatising experience turn out contradictory to what most of these rural fans’ value of virtue. The frustration out of their unmet desire more sex or physical comfort, and their distrust of having a gay

partner at the moment are overt, but it is understandable that rural gay fans have fewer approaches to an open gay life than their urban counterparts, and every encounter with another gay male in private means more of a chance to them. At the same time, singing about the *yue* opera story packed with love and romance would help to express their imagination of a fulfilled relationship.

In the urban area, however, gay fans of *yue* opera seem more likely to welcome the possibility of a stable gay relationship. Clark, for example, is successfully co-managing the café with his boyfriend of seven years in Hangzhou. Jay, the English teacher in the same city, is in a long-distance gay relationship for more than eight years. Jack, who plans to come out to parents, says he is keen to find the perfect person to form a civil union or get married someday despite the blank of gay marriage law in China. These examples do not mean that all urban gay fans are optimistic about a gay relationship, but they draw our attention to the nuance of attitudes between the rural and urban towards it.

According to the data, gay fans manage to discover and describe to me a desirable picture of what love is like through talking about their favourite *yue* opera appropriation of *caizi-jiaren* stories. However, these romance stories not merely reflect young men and women's pursuit of free and passionate love, but also highlight and dramatise the huge class division, the societal prejudice against the poor, or parents' ruthless commands to break the relationship that protagonists have to struggle against. Honglei's bitter story of his previous relationship, together with many other rural gay fans' perception of gay love, tells the ongoing suffering from various kinds of external difficulties. Interestingly, the suffering and victimhood are not unique to romance stories in *yue* opera.

Many gay fans expressed their love of a classic *yue* opera story, *Five Daughters Congratulating Parents on Birthday* (五女拜寿), which dramatically shows the rise and falls of a big family, in which poorer families members were looked down and – according to Donghua's analysis, “richer sons-in-law's ingratiating” – were immensely enjoyed by both old parents in the first place, yet those who show sincere filial piety, responsibility, and the capability to become a *zhuangyuan* (principal graduate, 状元) rescued the family in doom and gloom,

and hence changed parents' mind. I asked them the reason why this particular opera story is enchanting to them. Yuzhao tells me emotionally,

When I listen to *Five Daughters Congratulating Parents on Birthday*, I always think of my own family members. I find about the amazing resemblance. My grandparents have two sons. The younger one is richer, so all our relatives and families are closer to him. However, my father who is the older one has never been in a very good economic condition, so not many relatives would care for us. As long as you are rich, your relatives would visit you no matter how far you live. So, this similarity between the opera story and my family triggers a lot of thoughts in me. As you know, there are many opera stories, whose endings are unsatisfying to me. You listed several examples of what other people favour just now, but I find that protagonists in these opera stories are either dying or deprived of love. I am not satisfied with such endings. The best ending for me is some sort of a big reunion. Yes, I prefer that.

I continue to ask which episode or scene he would like to sing the most when he can. His answer rushed out of his mouth immediately. "Oh, it has to be *To Leave in Tears* (哭别)," Yuzhao said in a certain tone, and he continues to sing it, one of the saddest part of *Five Daughters Congratulating Parents on Birthday*:

Never had I expected losing all my power and fortune at once.
Where to find safety, health, and family bonds now?
After all these years of efforts and hardship,
how can I end up tasting such bitterness of life?

For Yuzhao, this particular part is likable because it is realistic, as he tells, "When things don't go along with my will, I'd think of this part. And I tell myself, the life journey is always difficult and cruel, but the ending should be perfect. It helps me through all forms of dissatisfaction in life," he said.

Jiangyu, a closeted husband and father, who performs female characters during the fan party in Town B, told me his favourite is an aria which is approximately five minutes long called *Returning Home*, from a classic family-

themed story *Green Jade Hairpin*. The opera story is about the misfortune of an innocent woman Li Xiuying in her marriage after a villain sets her up, and her husband Wang Yulin won *zhuangyuan* and finally apologised to her for years of unjust treatment. Jiangyu tells me that he feels for the abused female character who in this aria has to conceal her pain from her mother in order to protect the poor old woman from anxiety. He said: "The female character doesn't want to make a fuss about her pain, and chooses to swallow all wrongs against her into the stomach... Her cry of 'mom, my dear mother...' is very hard to mimic, you know. You have to sound willing and reluctant to tell the bitterness at the same time." It is very interesting that Li Xiuying does not reveal her pain to her mother, but she sang the suffering to the opera audience out loud. Jiangyu then added the scene at Lin Daiyu's death in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and several other tragedies to his list of favourites, and explained,

I seem to prefer tragic parts and stories all the time. I might shed some tears when I sing, especially when the sadness surges through me. I can throw myself into the character, and let my emotions out... I sing opera when I am alone, either during work or a walk... more often, I sing *yue* opera when I am sad and troubled. When the sad operatic melody flows out, I feel as if I am forgetting those saddening and troubling matters in the external world.

Clark extended to comment on many gay fans' favourite aria *Daiyu Burning Manuscripts* from the famous *Dream of the Red Chamber*: "I think this aria sounds incredibly sad. She might have been fooled, and she knows it somehow, but she has to accept the fate. There is no option for people like her." It appears to me that many gay fans have a particular interest in these sad, female characters in *yue* opera. Moreover, it is not merely these characters, but also sad-sounding Qi school of opera singing that turn out appealing to them, especially to Clark and Chan. Clark was the first person making this school of performing known to me. He said: "This school originated from the artist Qi Yaxian, and she is particularly good at playing old female characters. I dunno what it is, but perhaps it's something to do with her vocal. She is characterised with her saddening voice. I am attracted to her aura of sadness." A more expert

gay fan of Qi Yaxian, namely Chan, managed to complete the introduction of this female artist during his interview,

Qi school's vocal sounds husky. Some people might say, among all schools in *yue* opera, Qi Yaxian appears the ugliest. She does not look that fabulous on the stage. In most of her performances, she looks fat even. If I sound harsh, among all schools and artists expert in *danjue* (female protagonist, 旦角), she is the most unattractive one. Her waist is like a chubby bucket, and her costume is not [beautiful] at all. But I think she knows her appearance and image are not good, so she maximised her efforts in pursuit of better vocal performances. I really like her sad and sympathetic vocal... especially her performance in *Bloody Handprints*, in which she performed an old and misfortunate whore.

Chan not only enjoyed Qi school of *yue* opera, but also gave performances in a female costume on stage in Town A and B, mimicking Qi Yaxian. At the backstage in Town B, when he saw me holding a digital camera, he requested me to take photos for him. In this picture, he raised his long costume sleeves to conceal half of his face, and his eyes were focused somewhere distant on the ground, looking sad and thoughtful. I asked if he feels connected to characters he performed, he simply shook his head and denied.

To a few gay fans, Honglei for example, "if a male can play out a woman's qualities, pretty and coquettish, it'd be great, and it would add points to his capability. However, if he brings those qualities to daily life, it wouldn't fit in the society, I'm afraid..." It might be a chance to perform the femininity to them, but to Chan, playing a sad woman in a complaining tone is more complicated than that. He specifically comments on Qi Yaxian's choices of different costumes based on different characters she played, and simultaneously explained the importance of having the right costume for a specific character. He told me,

She can play a whore, but she can play a lady of a rich house. I like her costumes really. Like the whore in *Bloody Handprints*, her dress is fabulous and beautiful. I mean, she plays a whore, right? So it has to be very different. I also bought a costume like hers. It's pink.

Many other gay fans didn't like it, saying there is a green one at a more reasonable price. I replied to them, saying the green one is indeed very good, but it wouldn't make sense if I play a whore in green, because most prostitutes in brothels wear either red or pink. It should look like a garden of flowers.

It is important for Chan to understand the difference of characters, together with their social status, age, and other details in the *yue* opera script. He feels happy to perform, like Qi, the trouble of a certain female character in her particular status and age. Through the lyrics and aria of the character, he peeks into various categories of females that he plays. On the stage, he manages to cross over the boundary of identities and difference of age, to enjoy various life experiences. While knowing his low-pitched voice, Chan learns from Qi's awareness of her vocal limit, and makes best of his ability.

In Huai Bao's book *Cross-Gender China: Across Yin-Yang, Across Cultures, and Beyond* Jingju, he interviewed some younger cross-dressing performers and explored their "transgressive desires" conveyed in their cross-dressing practices²⁰⁵. In his analysis of *nandan* (male-to-female cross-gendered performers 男旦), he articulates that

Besides consciously mimicking women on the façade, the *nandan*, more or less, combines into their performance a "sense of gendered [feminine] self" that lurks in their unconscious as an *anima*. In this way, cross-dressing practice "reflects a desire to seek transgressive pleasure" and "may serve as a way of self-justification."

The *nandan* tradition of *xiqu* precisely creates "a safe space" for this kind of transgressive practice.²⁰⁶

Even though Chan is not a professional *nandan*, but performing *yue* opera in costumes and behind a painted face can be reckoned as his safe space. Chan's focus on the very details of different female characters, and his

²⁰⁵ Huai Bao, "Introduction," in *Cross-Gender China: Across Yin-Yang, Across Cultures, and Beyond* Jingju (Routledge, 2017), 8-9.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 3-4.

convincing performances on stage, can also be understood as seeking for please of transgression.

As for some other gay fans, such as Weiwei and Motuo, they enjoyed not very posh characters of *choujue* (clowns, 丑角) in *yue* opera stories. Weiwei likes *Oil Dealer* very much, because the protagonist is shy, loyal, and honest, as opposed to villains who are clever and treacherous, and “he sounds naïve and even ridiculous sometimes”, according to Weiwei, who also feels amused by the oil dealer’s attempts to look like a government officer even though he is not. “He is nowhere near the officer, so he looked hilarious and ridiculous when he tries on those decent clothes.” Unlike playing woman on stage, a clown character tends to highlight a form of misplacement, and make fun of its discomfort.

Ruoyu, another respondent who mentioned about clown characters in *yue* opera, performed a clown character in Town B. When he was on the stage, he looked and sounded funny as he was trying to please both the female protagonist of the play and the audience in front of the stage by ridiculing the tragic life journey the role has been through. He later in his interview denied any connection between his own personality and the court eunuch he performs on the stage, like Chan did. However, when I asked him why he chose to play such roles on stage, he told me that the gay fan community is full of tricks and politics despite those seemingly intimate *jiejie* and *meimei* names, so he had no choice but to help people who needed a supporting character like the clown to make the voluntary performance complete. He concluded his answer of this question with a shrug and said: “C’est la vie.” The thought provoking answer reflects his view of *yue* opera fan community and the real life. He is aware of the politics and hierarchy within the community. By distancing himself from the stage center, Ruoyu is refusing the becoming of “them” playing only protagonists. However, the resistance comes with a cost, as it solidifies the status of “them”, and visualises the power unbalance on the stage; hence he reinforced the gap.

4.3. Conclusion

This chapter explores how these Chinese gay men became interested in *yue* opera, and the ways in which their passion in *yue* opera has been instrumentalised to cope with the socio-cultural norms. In so doing, I would argue that *yue* opera fans on the one hand perpetuates Chinese social norms and traditional values to a certain extent, such as familial attachment, heteronormative marriage; and on the other, through singing *yue* opera, they demonstrates the intersection of temporalities amidst the self-presentation, in a sense that they searched for values and emotions in traditional art form and stories, to express their emotions in today's dilemma, and desires for resolutions.

The previous chapter has reviewed some academic discussions of the familial norm in China, represented by Chris Berry²⁰⁷ and Lisa Rofel²⁰⁸, and the queer strategies developed by Chinese gay males to deal with the mainstream in a reticent way²⁰⁹. These traits are what universalism of homosexuality fails to cover. A few gay fans of *yue* opera in this project has shown that a traditional heterosexual marriage and living a life as a gay male do not have to be in radical contrast. This chapter, through exploring southern gay males' earlier memories of becoming a *yue* opera fan and scanning through their favourite *yue* opera scripts, further emphasises the significance of familial attachment and marriage. Most of my respondents date their interest in *yue* opera back to

²⁰⁷ Chris Berry, "Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 238.

²⁰⁸ Lisa Rofel, "Quality of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities," in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 102.

²⁰⁹ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals," 4; Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Is Face More Important Than Happiness?," in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58; And Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, "Negotiating the Public and the Private," in *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 82.

the childhood. They tend to smile and show nostalgia when stories of family togetherness and affections were vividly told. When sharing their favourite opera arias and scenes, there is a clear preference for scripts about family reunions. Some of them would choose to sing when they long for family members, or when their family is struggling through a hard time. From their first encounter with *yue* opera, and the favourite *yue* opera scripts about heterosexual families, to a desired future when and where a better familial or marriage life lies, the familial norm is rather consistent. Xiaopei He finds that some Chinese homosexuals believe that kinship and marriage life can still “be the site of a mix of pleasures, affections and happiness”²¹⁰. By perpetuating the norm of family in this case, the gay fan community has further demonstrates the stubborn trait of Chineseness, and poses an interrogation of Anglo-Eurocentrism of queer studies.

In *How to Be Gay* by David M. Halperin, it is articulated that though recent progress of gay visibility and gay rights has been made, the mainstream campaign has always championed the minority identity over subjectivity, and it stubbornly emphasises “matters as social equality, the benefits of diversity, the pleasures of difference, the ethics of peaceful coexistence.”²¹¹ Love further to point out that the queer past of complicated feelings and shame have paved the path for the contemporary discourse of sexuality²¹². Hence it is timely to get a chance to let the useful past of death, pain and homophobia transform the present and beyond with its “imaginatively reparative work.”²¹³ The chapter shed lights upon gay fans’ intersection of temporalities. They dive into *yue*

²¹⁰ Xiaopei He, “My Unconventional Marriage or ménage à trois in Beijing,” in *As Normal as Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong*, ed. Ching Yao (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 104.

²¹¹ David M. Halperin, “Gay Identity and Its Discontents,” 72.

²¹² Heather K. Love, “Introduction,” in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer Theory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 20.

²¹³ Christopher Castiglia, and Christopher Reed, “Introduction: In the Interest of Time,” in *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 14.

opera culture and search through traditional script for family/romance stories and value of virtues, in order to struggle through the dilemma at the present; and through performing and singing some particular *yue* opera arias, they manage to express their feelings, sentiments, and heal the pain. Hence they can better desire for solutions and hope for a better future. It shows a productive journey of allowing the past and traditional narrative to fix the contemporary. Through the intersection of temporalities, gay fans of *yue* opera set an example to challenge the dominating force of gay rights and positivity through looking backward into the tradition before better prepared for the unpredictable future.

Chapter 5: Locality in Globalising China

In this chapter, I continue the field work by studying how gay fans of *yue* opera differentiate this particular art form from other operas and music genres, and the ways in which they perceive the challenge that traditional arts like *yue* opera have to face in an era when a tsunami of popular culture pours into or mushrooms in China. By analysing their responses to these questions, I hope to demonstrate that unlike avant-garde queer artists or gay activists in the West and in Chinese cosmopolitan cities, gay fans of *yue* opera are attached to locality – southernness and rurality – which cannot be overshadowed by any form of universal gayness or the overarching Chineseness. Simultaneously, I hope to unveil how the locality is open to mobility on both Chinese national and global scales.

5.1. Southernness and Pride

Yue opera is celebrated as a popular opera in China, only second to Peking opera. However, traditional opera has been faced with the challenge posed by the increasing diversity of cultural forms available in China. Therefore, I ask my respondents how they would cope with the challenge, and whether they have found other cultural forms fascinating. Through these questions, they demonstrate how they perceive the authenticity of *yue* opera in relation to locality.

Clark told me about his recent experience of going to the *yue* opera theatre in Hangzhou for a *yue* opera play titled *Good Soul of South Yangtze* (江南好人) by Zhejiang Xiaobaihua *Yue* Opera Troupe. He told me he thinks the latest trend in *yue* opera theatre is good and healthy for the sustainable development of *yue* opera.

When I watched the opera on the stage, I was wondering if this is still the traditional *yue* opera I knew of. The stage was decorated modernly, and all performers were gorgeously dressed. The theme of the opera is very new as well, nothing like the traditional *yue* opera. To me, it was already like a musical. They performed in an exaggerating way. Though it reserved some *yue* opera style of aria singing, but the form of acting has been different away from the traditional. The younger

generation prefers younger faces, prettier girls, and so on, hence the troupe boldly put loads of young performers on stage. The storyline was newly created, so it was unpredictable to the audience. I was impressed.

Fernando and Jack also mentioned *Good Soul of South Yangtze* during the interview. They believe that urban people have been used to a faster pace today, and *yue* opera's slow melody and old scripts may turn out less interesting to young people living in the city. Today's China has provided people with more choices in the field of art, so *yue* opera has to be modified to meet the need of the new time. Therefore, they both agreed that adding new elements borrowed from Western dramas and musicals to the traditional *yue* opera is helpful for the sustainability of *yue* opera. However, some essential elements have been kept in *yue* opera, as Fernando explains, "it has to be sung in Shengzhou dialect, and *yue* opera has to include both speaking and singing on the stage." Indeed, *yue* opera is characterised with its soft and smooth melody, as well as the Shengzhou dialect *yue* opera has to be performed in. Almost all respondents believe that these features made *yue* opera different from other opera forms and enchanting to them in the first place, because they feel related to these southern features. They claim that they grew up in Yangtze Delta area, and they have been listening to the dialect, with its particular pronunciation and terminology, since they were young, so they feel connected and belonged when they listen to *yue* opera.

The sense of belonging aroused by *yue* opera is best demonstrated by Jiangyu. He believed that *yue* opera was created by southern Chinese, so it can be best understood by only southerners. He believes that even if a northern Chinese likes *yue* opera and is keen to learn, he or she can never truly master *yue* opera because of the dialect barrier. "For example, when we need to express the term 'nowadays' (如今) in *yue* opera, we pronounce like 'si-jim', but in Mandarin or in Peking Opera, it is 'rujin', right?" Jiangyu sounds very excited and proud when he highlights the difference of pronunciation. He continues to express his view of cultural difference from a transnational perspective. "Some *yue* opera lyrics, like those in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, are sung in classical Chinese, and thus very intricate and obscure. Sometimes it is hard to be translated into modern Chinese, let alone any other languages. I think there is

no chance for foreigners who come to watch *yue* opera to understand at all.” His explanation shows his pride in this particular southern traditional art form. Ruoyu would agree with what Jiangyu said. He argued that people from other places cannot entirely master the pronunciation and the accent in *yue* opera no matter how hard they try.

This is an idea not merely expressed by many gay fans of *yue* opera during the private interview with me, some even made an announcement to emphasise it during the fan *juhui* in Town A. On the way from the parking lot to the dinner party after the first evening’s performance, Honglei was walking in front of us, and reiterated the same pride. He circled out a couple of gay fans who did not sing *yue* opera properly that evening on the stage simply because they were not born locally, hence the imprecise dialect they sang in made their performance inappropriate in general. I, not born in northern Zhejiang, confronted him by singing an aria from *Dream of the Red Chamber* with precise pronunciation of Shengzhou dialect, and articulated where I came from to him. He looked at me, surprised, and then said: “Like we can’t judge a book by its cover, some people cannot be judged hastily. I heard you speak Mandarin and you didn’t sound local, so I assumed you didn’t know much about *yue* opera”. That was for sure the first interaction we had, and it paved a way for a friendship in the coming days in Town A, as well as during the two fan parties in Town B and Town C. It is an interesting experience that unfolds two meanings to me. On the one hand, both my efforts to mimic Shengzhou dialect earlier in my life and his surprise actually highlight the significance of locality between us. I would not pursue the precision of accent painstakingly if I had never realised such significance. Nor would I try to surprise him if my showing off of locality had turned out not convincing. His reaction to my singing is a form of admission and approval to my efforts to acquire such dialect. Therefore, this encounter did not challenge the importance of locality in our value system, but rather reinforced the consensus that *yue* opera’s locality has to be fully respected. On the other hand, the singing in Shengzhou dialect demonstrates the locality is a remarkable cultural discourse in the gay fan community. This particular dialect Honglei took pride for and I sang in works as an opportunity to start our friendship, a motivation behind our ongoing interaction, and the common language we speak in. The locality of the dialect is not merely valued by these

gay fans of *yue* opera, but also a kind of media through which ideas, gossips, affection, and so on are exchanged.

Now let us return to the data concerned with the new trend in *yue* opera. It is not a surprise that not everyone welcomes this new trend. Jason claims that the new *yue* opera is not like *yue* opera at all, and instead it becomes a ridiculous hybrid of *yue* opera and musical. "Traditional culture should be respected. You should not change it for the purpose of change *per se*!" Jiangyu echoes what Jason believes. He said,

Many people liked Mao Weitao the most because she is a famous artist. She recently produced a lot of new *yue* opera stories, like *Good Soul of South Yangtze* and *Kong Yiji* (孔乙己) which is appropriated from Luxin's namesake novel. But I believe she has strayed too much from her original Yin school in these performances. Though Mao Weitao still speaks and sings in perfect Shengzhou dialect, she has changed her singing style too much and made it almost sound like pop music in general. I tried to understand but I remain skeptical about that. You know what, I recently heard about a piece of news, reporting that Mao Weitao is even considering about cooperation with Tencent company, to create a new hero in a mobile phone game called Honours of Kings. The hero will be speaking Shengzhou dialect and singing *yue* opera. They said the background of the hero is appropriated from the famous *Butterfly Lovers*. They would even use some lyrics in the game too. Some people said it's helpful to spread the *yue* opera and the traditional culture in today's modern world, but I more or less think she went too far. I think she did this only for money. You know those big companies has money, but they wouldn't care about the preservation of *yue* opera that much.

However, when I ask how *yue* opera can adapt to the change of the society if it remains unchanged, they seemed clueless. Jiangyu, like Jason, had no idea, saying, "it's not our place to change anything. It's the duty of those professional troupes and performers to figure out a solution. But I hope they can understand and respect us audience before they make any big and hasty change." It is interesting to see most of my respondents agreeing that *yue* opera needs to

cope with the challenge in the new era, but some people's comments on Xiaobaihua's attempt to modernise *yue* opera slip to the absolutely loyalty to heritage and tradition. *Yue* opera in their mind, as a part of southern culture, is better to be preserved in its original form, and it should avoid the collaboration with pop music. Jiangyu furthered the loyalty to the reluctance to slip into the capitalist trap, as he believes that hi-tech companies only take business profits into consideration while utilising the traditional culture, and they cannot bring about too much positive influence on the development of *yue* opera. This is rather different from D'Emilio's coupling of gay identity with capitalist development.²¹⁴ Jiangyu's criticism of Tencent company and other *yue* opera fans' joint determination of preserving *yue* opera culture in its original form showcase a struggle against commercialisation of the art form, and such resistance and the appreciation of tradition should certainly not be seen as simply a kind certain is not any kind of, in Altman's word, "institutionalised subordination and barbarism"²¹⁵ in Altman's words. Rafel correctly critiques Altman's notion of universalism of homosexuality as to initiate an external modern force that brings about salvations to Asian cultures²¹⁶. Instead, Jiangyu believes that the market and opera-friendly business plans are contaminating the traditional value of *yue* opera. The shared value of traditional *yue* opera art among these gay fans from southern China challenged the universalism of capitalist integration with gay communities.

In order to understand how they perceive other art forms, I asked my respondents how they perceive popular music by Western gay icons like Beyoncé or Lady Gaga, or any phenomenon popular in Western LGBT community. It surprises me that no respondents feel particularly keen on these

²¹⁴ John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Power of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharan Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 102.

²¹⁵ Dennis Altman, "Conclusion: A Global Sexual Politics?," in *Global Sex* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 164.

²¹⁶ Lisa Rofel, "Quality of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities," in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 89-92.

cultural phenomena. Jack, the only respondent who is making a plan to come out to his parents, tells me that he listens to Western pop music, but he would not focus on any particular artist simply because of his or her sexual identity or being a gay icon. Fernando nodded when during the co-interview, and said,

I don't see the difference. I won't be particularly interested in any celebrity simply because he is gay or hate anyone if he is not. The most important thing is the art itself. For example, some gay men would sing phrase of Leslie Cheung and all of his artworks. Well, I am not like that. I like one or two songs sung by him, because I like them; but I definitely wouldn't care much for other songs.

The English teacher Jason is not a fan of Western gay icons either. His criticism of over commercialisation resembles what Jiangyu comments on Mao Weitao's cooperation with Tencent. He said,

To be frank, I have a very conservative soul inside. I cannot accept people like Lady Gaga or Miley Cyrus at all! I don't like that kind of, you know, exposure. Maybe foreigners are more open-minded, but I simply cannot accept that. Also, I feel there are too much commercial package on those Western gay icons. I don't know if they are just like that, or they just created the selling point in a certain niche market.

It appears to me that most of my respondents are unaware of gay cultural phenomena such as gay icons, gay parade, Pride, or Eurovision Song Contest. I asked every respondent whether they heard about dragging, or Pride parade in the West, but Shengli turns out to be the only person who knew about gay parade, as he comments,

I cannot accept it at all, after I saw some pictures and some news of such event online once. They wore all kinds of weird costumes. Some people dressed up like women. Some looked flirtatious. Some were in nudity. I saw a picture of two men kissing in public or making even more intimate poses. I can only imagine it, but I would never join such thing for sure.

Shengli's words certainly highlighted the public versus private division, and he believes that sexuality is a personal matter, and it should not be overtly demonstrated to the public.

It is fascinating to see most respondents showing great respect to locality when they value the authenticity of *yue* opera performances. Most of them would highly recommend *yue* opera to foreign visitors because this is what they are proud of. Clark, who came to Hangzhou after he received the offer from a university in the city and then opened a café after graduation, told me that all cities are similar, because there are always concrete buildings, crowds of people, and busy transport, but rural China has more funny culture and interesting scenery to offer. Their attachment to locality is not merely reflected in their consumption of culture but also expressed in their idea of a perfect homosexual partner.

When describing the kind of men they fancy, most of my interviewees tend to prefer people who are thin and pale-skinned. When I asked them if they would consider a foreign partner, they looked surprised by my question, because they seem to never include foreigners in their imagination of a partner. Most people are like Yuzhao, who replied me, "I never thought about foreigners. I don't think I can communicate with them, even if a foreign gay man speaks good Chinese. I personally still like skinny, tall, sunny Chinese." Shengli has a similar taste in men, saying "[o]f course there are some foreigners that are good-looking, but I still enjoy Asian men like Chinese, Korean and Japanese." It sounds that Korean and Japanese are less alien than other nationalities. It is also worth noting that when talking about foreignness, these gay fans meant Euro-American white people.

Jason also has a quite staunch belief in this. When mentioning "foreigners", he included the white race and excluded the black. From his speech below, it sounds like the black race is neither Chinese or foreign. He said,

I accept a man of ethnic minority in China, and maybe one day I will accept foreigners too, but I cannot accept black men. In my opinion, I think our traditional view of aesthetics encourages whiteness. I can

... speak English to foreigners, but still think they are strange, and even a bit dirty... you know, foreigners are more likely to carry HIV.

Most of my respondents have never talked to any foreigners in their lives, let alone a foreign gay man. For some gay men who were born in the rural area and migrated to the urban since their university life, e.g. Clark and Fernando, they appreciate southern Chinese more than northerners, because they, as Fernando explains, “have always been in contact with all kinds of southerners, not many northern Chinese.” These gay fans are characterised with the Chinese southern locality, through which they act out both their passion in *yue* opera and their gayness. The global gayness is like a dim light distant from and strange for them. This feature makes them rather different from gay men in the West.

It is worth noting that when looking beyond the southernness, both rural fans like Shengli and urban fans like Jason share the common trait of racialisation. As David L. Eng iterates in his *The Feeling of Kinship*, gay liberation and gay rights are achieved to provide “comforts of bourgeois domesticity” that fails “to recognise the racial genealogy of exploitation and domination that underwrites the very inclusion of queers and queers of colour in this abstract liberal polity”²¹⁷. It is understandable that the universalism of homosexuality, with its cost of racist residual, cannot be evenly welcome by non-white gay subjects. When Shengli and Jason’s sexual preferences are put in scrutiny, we discover on the one hand they tend to draw an equal sign between *waiguo* (foreign countries, 外国) and the West; on the other hand, throughout the transcripts the black people are absolutely absent. The respondents tend to linger within Chinese or Asian borders while sexual preferences and views of male charisma are expressed. It is a surprise to me that *yue* opera fans in China inherit the colonialist residual of Western homosexuality. At the same time, their longing for acceptance by family members also resembles the intimacy within the nuclear

²¹⁷ David L. Eng, “The Law of Kinship: *Lawrence v. Texas* and the Emergence of Queer Liberalism,” in *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialisation of Intimacy* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 45.

family tradition, which Eng considers as “a racialised property right – one predicated on a long U.S. history of racial subordination and the legal protection of white privilege – now serves to constitute normative gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects as possessive individuals”²¹⁸. Gay fans of *yue* opera have not strayed completely away from Western colonial legacies, yet, quite oddly, turn out to be perpetuating a narrative of “Western white male imperialism”²¹⁹.

If they are unaware of most of foreign gay culture, I wonder if they have been to gay bars at all. It surprises me that almost all of them find gay bars uninteresting or even repelling. For gay men living in the city like Clark, Fernando, Jack, Jay, and Jason, they tend to stick with the existing gay circle they know instead of going to gay bar for new acquaintances. Jay and Jason are both teachers, so I assume they would like to go to gay bars in case their students find out their sexuality and it may risk jeopardising their career. Others are not, so I try to understand why. Clark says, “Er... I simply don’t know what gay bar goes would do over there. Do they go there to drink, or to socialise, or to entertain their client? I have no idea.” Fernando and Jack believe that gay bar goes tend to be *luan*. Fernando explains, “Don’t get me wrong. I guess our media has portrayed them this way, so I have concerns if I go there.”

This view is shared by many rural gay respondents. Chan revealed they have been to a gay bar in Hangzhou only once, only to see many sissy gay men fondling and cuddling in there “shamelessly”. He also says, “There is no such place in my hometown.” Ruoyu was forced by his friends to visit a gay bar once, but he did not find it interesting whatsoever. Yuzhao says he felt disgusted by his visit to gay bar, because “people in there seem to be so keen to intercourse me.” Jiangyu, who refused to admit he has been to the gay bar at the beginning and later confessed that he has been for only once, added another reason why he never belongs to gay bar,

²¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

²¹⁹ Clare Hemmings, “What’s in a Name? Bisexuality, Transnational Sexuality Studies and Western Colonial Legacies,” *International Journal of Human Rights* 11, no. 1-2 (2007): 20

I went [to the gay bar] by myself... If you have someone you rest your eyes on to company you, it might be okay to share some food or drinks in there. But I was alone, so I felt rather bored. And, you know, it felt weird, as other people might say, “Lo and behold, that guy over there is alone and... you know, unloveable.” Don’t you think so?

Jiangyu’s dishonest at first tells how he perceives going to the gay bar. He does not see it an experience to be proud of. Moreover, he believes having no gay partner or being lonely is considered shameful and pathetic in the gay community.

However, it is worth noting that such southern and rural locality is not anything unchangeable or strictly stable. It is open to mobility and fluidisation.

5.2. Rurality in Mobility

In this section, I will first demonstrate field work data on gay fans’ perception of street opera, commonly known to the gay fan community as *lutouxi* (路头戏), which is a sub-genre in *yue* opera. Second, I will investigate whether my respondents are willing to perform in opera costumes at their hometowns. In so doing, it appears to me that the rural locality sometimes undermines gay fans’ agency.

To be honest, I have never heard about the term *lutouxi* before I conducted my fieldwork. When I asked respondents whether they believe *yue* opera’s obscure classical lyrics would become an obstacle for new opera fans to understand the art form, some rural respondents, including Chan and Donghua, mentioned to me about this particular sub-genre. It is an early form of *yue* opera improvised by non-professional folk troupes. The performers are familiar with several *yue* opera melodies to meet the need of various scenes that are customary, such as a journey on the way, a romance in a garden, or a confrontation in court, et al. These performers are supposed to master some folk stories or classical scripts so that they can appropriate lyrics from them whilst performing under a particular topic, which is often decided or agreed before they mount onto the stage. Chan told me,

yue opera is not very hard to understand in general, especially those *lutouxi*. When a *lutouxi* is performed, you would have a rough idea of where the story goes and how it might end... Unlike professional *yue* opera troupes that carefully produce a performance from script to staging in a theatre, *lutouxi* troupes would only record some stories from folk people, you know, all kinds of stories. The stories they tell tend to be very funny and even ridiculous. For instance, some of them played out plots like how a woman steals a man, how a rich man from a privileged background falls in love with a woman from a poor and broke family, or how a loving father beats the son in law to death over something stupid... You know, all various stories from ordinary people.

Chan believes that *lutouxi* is lively and party-like with the hustle and bustle on the stage. However, when he was talking about *lutouxi*, he kept rolling his eyes and occasionally shook his head. The disdain Chan revealed throughout the talk gives away his negative attitudes toward it.

Donghua comments on *lutouxi* in a more straightforward way. He prefers professional troupes over *lutouxi* performers. "They [*lutouxi* performers] sing too casually, and their lyrics are randomly and wildly piled together. It's totally amateur." He agrees that *lutouxi* appears to be boisterous and it might be entertaining to rural audience, but professional *yue* opera troupes would pursue perfection. Donghua labeled *lutouxi* as unprofessional, amateur, and imperfect. It draws a line between folk opera culture in the rural area and professional opera troupes that give performances in glamorous theatres in cities or on television.

"Yue opera originated with a peasant form of story-singing in Zhejiang countryside in the mid-nineteenth century"²²⁰. *Lutouxi* performing is an earlier form of *yue* opera. However, Chan and Donghua's mention of it sound more like sneering at than phrasing this folk culture. It is rather posher professional opera troupes in the urban that both of them celebrate, yet the rural locality of *lutouxi*

²²⁰ Jin Jiang, "The Origins of Yue Opera," in *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), p.26.

is not. They turn their back against the operatic rural past that made *yue* opera emerge in the first place.

The locality in these gay fans of *yue* opera means a modern yet still modest version of *yue* opera that belongs in the posh theatre, namely they prefer *yue* opera performances given by professional troupes like Zhejiang Xiaobaihua over *lutouxi*, and simultaneously, they have mixed feelings about the latest trend in opera theatre that renders *yue* opera resembling *yue* musical.

When I was interviewing rural gay fans who attended rural gay fan parties, I tended to ask if they would feel nervous whilst performing on the stage with costumes on and face painted. Chan intrigued me to find out the spatial meaning of locality. He told me,

I have a younger friend in living in the same town, and he is one of my best friends in this community. He once said to me: "It's okay if you just sing *yue* opera. You better not to wear costumes or paint your face. If you sing with your face painted or costumes on, I'm not going to talk to you any more. Those stuff disgusts me." And I told my friend, "Don't worry. I certainly won't do those things in my hometown [in Town A]." But, when I go to some other places, no one else is going to recognise me anyway, so I wouldn't mind getting dressed and made-up. I mean, who is gonna recognise you if you paint your face. Right?

Indeed, throughout my fieldwork, I noticed many gay fans of *yue* opera tended not to perform in costumes during the *juhui* if the *juhui* is decided to be held in the village they live in, and they only do so after they are away from home. Therefore, they choose to detach from the locality of their home to obtain the freedom to perform and to express who they are. On the one hand, it is understandable that these rural gay men hope to keep their identity and the effeminate performance unrevealed in their own town or village. Being seen by families, relatives and friends outside of the community might bring them troubles and embarrassment. It leads us to reveal the ongoing stigmatization of sexual and gender dissidents in rural southern China, so the detachment from locality in order to perform is the endeavor to avoid stigma. On the other hand, by selecting different locations in the countryside for *juhui* every time, the gay

fan community considerately provides every member with chances to comfortably mount onto the stage with costumes and make-ups and to make their own voices heard from time to time.

To be brief, gay fans's disapproval of radical changes to *yue* opera and any form of returning to *lutouxi* past, as well as their leave from home to perform in costumes, is not merely an expression of their individual ideas, but also the demonstration of queering the notion of locality.

5.3. When the Local Meets the Global

In this section, I will demonstrate and analyze ethnographic data and interview data in relation to how my respondents interact with culture and phenomena from abroad. Among these interactions, the ways in which they mingle with me while being aware that I am a student back from London, as well as how they perceive and imagine queer culture out of China, stand out to me.

Before I was allowed to interview the first rural gay fan of *yue* opera, Chan, I tried very hard to explain and clarify that I am a PhD student from an oversea university who is about to conduct a fieldwork locally, because some people misconstrued my intention and the mis-information was spreading within the group that I am a local journalist writing for a newspaper in China. After my clarification, they feel much more relieved. The ways in which they let the guard down shows to me that they are not feeling safe if they are exposed to any Chinese press, yet most of them would prefer to be seen and heard by a non-Chinese institute.

When I was attending the parties in Town A, B, and C, I took most of ethnographic notes in English, so my respondents would not read my notes and be influenced by what I have written in the notebook. People passing me by normally took a glimpse of what I was doing, with some showing little curiosity. As I was taking notes against the wall in a hallway at the backstage, Donghua came past me and borrowed my pen twice. He did not give any performance as he had to help organizing the *juhui* and collect the money for the ice-breaking dinner afterwards. He was too busy to talk much to me, but he took a look at my notes, surprised, and confirmed with me, "What's this? English?" I said yes, and begged him not to feel disdain for me. He changed to a serious facial

expression and said, “No, there is no disdain. I really look up to you for that.” As he passed me second time, he told me about the dinner after the show, and charged me a hundred yuan and welcome me, “Welcome to Town A and our *juhui*, big *caizi* (scholar, 才子!)” He also asked me if I have booked a hotel, and told me, “If you need, you can come with us when are done with the performance and the dinner. We all live in a Hotel together. Of course you can find somewhere else better if you find this Hotel’s condition below your standard.” I smiled and said I would not mind at all living together in the same hotel, as “[A]fter all, I’m still a poor student.” It was the first encounter between Donghua and I, and I looked average in my boring shirt, but he still presumed that I might need a better hotel than other fans, simply because I was taking notes in English.

Nanhui came to me for the first time. He asked me who I am, where I was from, and what I was doing over there. He asked me if I found about this *juhui* through a Tencent QQ group, and immediately added me to the group after I said no. He then became very interested in me. He said to me,

I heard about you. They were talking about a journalist guy coming to interview us, and everybody panicked. It’s okay if you are just a student doing some studies. They said you were from abroad? Where were you from? And... [after he saw my notes in English] what is the level of your English?

When I was explaining to him that I use English language all the time while I was studying and living in the UK, he looked at me with sparks in his eyes. “Your English must be really good! I tried to learn decades ago, but I was never a good student. You must be very clever.” He even told me during his interview that he believes that speaking English is a privilege, and only talented people speak English. In the hallway, I mentioned that I used to have a “boyfriend in the UK”, a little local girl jumping by heard and interrogated me, “Are you a girl?” Nanhui heard it and patted her back head, “Haha, nah, it is more complicated than how you see it.” After learning my experience abroad, Nanhui have developed more interests in me. I noticed his eyes on me every time he came across something funny happening on the stage to check if I have noticed the fun as well.

It did not surprise me much that Nanhui and Donghua saw writing in English a good quality. Being able to speak a foreign language can be related to good education, which is not equally accessible especially in rural China. It is a merit that makes me look better and even higher-class to some gay fans. Tang points out in *Conditional Spaces* that in mainland China, gay men who are fluent in English are considered to be of higher *suzhi*²²¹. The discourse of *suzhi* has been married to a variety of neoliberal traits, according to Travis Shiu-Ki Kong, and it has generated a new power imbalance and division within the gay community that is maintained by differences of “identity components”, *i.e.* class, age, gender, physical fitness, education²²². The reactions to me taking notes in English and having an educational background in London echoes the observation of Tang and Kong.

I asked my respondents whether they would press a magic button if pressing it can change their lives, allowing them to decide where to be born, and where to live. Theirs answers are very different. On the one hand, there are some gay fans who choose to keep the status quo. Jason believes that it would not make much difference where to live if his sexuality is unchanged. His expression of gay shame is blunt when he said, “What’s the pointing of change if I remain a gay man.” The ongoing gay shame and the bitterness brought by his sexual identity is his concern. Yuzhao joined Jason to avoid pressing the button, and said,

I wouldn’t choose to go abroad and live there. I wouldn’t make radical changes to my life at the moment. The main consideration is my parents. I feel like I have very little favour to return to them. If I choose to change or move abroad, it’s like a denial to my parents’ efforts of bringing me up. I know that my family suffered a lot, and had too much bitterness when I was young, but still they work painstakingly to help me become who I am. Now I don’t want to give them too much pressure, or to disappoint them. I owe too much to them.

²²¹ Denise Tse-Shang Tang, “Political Spaces,” in *Conditional Spaces*, 104-105.

²²² Travis Shiu-Ki Kong, “Queer at Your Own Risk: Marginality, Community and Hong Kong Gay Male Bodies,” *Sexualities* 7, no. 1 (February 2004): 6.

On the one hand, Yuzhao considers the familial connection as one of the most important things in his life, and pressing the button means betrayal of his value. On the other, homosexuality has become an obstacle of living up to his familial value. The marginalisation of homosexuality has made him guilty throughout his adult life.

Another group of gay fans including Honglei, Ruoyu, and Nanhui chose to press the button. Though they repeatedly claimed that they know very little about foreign countries, they believe that the outside world must be freer and opener than China. Honglei pondered a while after I asked him the button question, and said,

I think I would press the magic button. I might choose the United States. I like that country, maybe because they are opener when it comes to *zhege* (this, 这个). I'm sure you know it better – foreign countries are opener. There are a few changes in China, but you see, the state and the government doesn't care about us. As far as I know, only a few of Chinese celebrities, like Jolin Tsai (蔡依林), are working on this.

Even though most rural gay fans of *yue* opera have limited knowledge of foreign countries, but they tend to have a positive impression of the other side of Chinese border. Though fragmented, news on legalisation of gay marriage and civil union, together with other media products from the West, have rendered the gay fan community to see the West as a freer and more open-minded wonderland.

I often finish my interviews by asking my respondents if they have any questions for me, if the process flows in accordance with my semi-structured interview questions. Out of curiosity, some of them would like hear about the transnational comparison between Chinese and Foreign gay males. Yuzhao, though choosing not to press that magic button, ended up asking me how gay people in foreign countries live, and whether they share the same value as domestic gay males. Weiwei asked me if I would consider dating and having a relationship with a foreign gay man. During my sincere sharing, he showed considerable interests when I mentioned my experiences in Pride in London, my

stories in gay bars, et al. He even burst into laughs when I introduced phenomenon like sticky rice, mash potato, potato queens, and rice queens.

It is necessary to make a few points from their answers and questions. When the term *waiguo* (foreign countries, 外国) is mentioned, my respondents mean the West. They directly couple *waiguo* with more openness and freedom than China. Indeed, even though homosexuality has been decriminalised in 1990s in Hong Kong and mainland China, and later been removed from the mental illness list in the mainland²²³, homoerotic sex can still be categorised as hooliganism and the government has periodically interrupt homosexual organisations and spaces in the name of “public morality”²²⁴. Zhou concludes that homosexuality is still overall stigmatised in Chinese society and the gay community has very limited visibility in Chinese traditional media²²⁵. Hereby, the binary of a still backward and suppressing China versus an imagined totally free and open-up wonderland of *waiguo* is established.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter, through demonstrating the empirical data in relation to the discussion of regionality, leads to an argument that recognising the activeness and agency of gay fans of *yue* opera encourages the intra-regional studies to queer both Western centrism and universalism of Chineseness; simultaneously as the local meets the global, it poses risks of re-establishing a binary of the West versus China, reinforcing the discourse of *suzhi*, alienation of the outsiders, and finally racialisation.

To decentralise the West and bypass the universalist comparison between the West and China, Kuan-Hsing Chen suggest we use “the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, [and] societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed,

²²³ Wah-Shan Chou, “Colonialism and the Birth of Sexual Identity Politics in Hong Kong,” in *Tongzhi*, 75-78.

²²⁴ Lisa Rofel, “Qualities of Desire,” in *Desiring China*, 96.

²²⁵ Yuxing Zhou, “Chinese Queer Images on Screen: A Case Study of Cui Zi’en’s Films,” *Asian Studies Review* 38, no. 1 (2014): 129.

and subjectivity rebuilt.”²²⁶ In this way, knowledge production can better avoid the colonialist and imperialist dichotomy of “Western theory versus Asian footnotes”²²⁷. Shih appeals to a Sinophonic approach to establish “a form of minor-to-minor alliance” that queers both Western centrism and Chineseness as a universal term²²⁸; and moreover, by recognising the activeness and agency of subjects and identities marginalised by both centres, and by encouraging intra-Asia and intra-regional studies, we find alternative locales “to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that our anxiety over the West can be diluted, and productive critical work can move forward”²²⁹. This chapter showcases *yue* opera gay fans’ pride of their southern Chinese heritage, through respecting the dialect of singing, and recommending the *yin* and soft art form of *yue* opera to other Chinese and foreign guests. The southern Chinese pride sets an example of highlighting regional importance. The seemingly uncontaminated culture by Western modernity can be seen as another force of shaping “pre-gay²³⁰, post-queer²³¹” subjectivities in the Yangtze River Delta region. The form of Asian diversity, according to Jackson, will de-centralise many aspects of Eurocentric theory, forcing us to see Western eroticisms not as the model but as one set of historically specific forms beside many others²³².

²²⁶ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “Asia as Method: Overcoming the Present Conditions of Knowledge Production,” in *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialisation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 212.

²²⁷ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “Asia as Method: Overcoming the Present Conditions of Knowledge Production,” in *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialisation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 226; Kuan-Hsing Chen, “The Imperial Order of Things, or Notes on Han Chinese Racism,” in *Asia as Method*, 268.

²²⁸ Shu-Mei Shih, “On the Conjunctive Method,” in *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, 223.

²²⁹ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “Asia as Method,” 223.

²³⁰ Peter A. Jackson, “Pre-Gay, Post-Queer,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 40:3-4 (2001), 5.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²³² *Ibid.*, 7.

However, as the development of infrastructure in China and the wider use of social media, gay fans of *yue* opera are increasingly exposed to various local and global culture. Lin Song points out that in Chinese popular culture, “queer sensibilities become an increasingly welcomed aesthetic”, yet it is still faced with “accelerated transnational cultural flows and persistent local media censorship”²³³. There are some other new challenges to the gay fan community. In theorising the gap between the rural and the urban, Gray et al points out in *Queering the Countryside* that “[r]ecent work on the queer urban-rural dichotomy focuses on the constructedness of a ‘metronormativity’ and its hegemonic encompassing of queer subjectivity.”²³⁴ While at the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the reactionary and phobic anti-urbanism should be avoided²³⁵. In the comparison between the rural *lutouxi* and urban *Xiaobaihua* theatre, gay opera fans claim to have a better standard of consuming *yue* opera, and it risks of reinforcing the narrative of *suzhi*. *Suzhi* is now seen as a value that legitimises the neoliberal exploitation and the divisions caused by capitalism²³⁶. In relation to the project, the chapter’s exposure of urban versus rural binary, and the emergence of racialisation when they chat about sexual fantasies, are reinforcing the socio-economic norms posed along with *suzhi* discourse. In the end of my interview, when some gay fans long for a freer West and, for instance Honglei, sees the United States a wonderland for gay men, the direct comparison between an illiberal society in China and an imagined land of freedom in the West is made. It is important to avoid slipping

²³³ Lin Song, “Entertainingly queer: illiberal homonormativity and transcultural queer politics in a Chinese Broadway musical,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no.1 (2021): 6.

²³⁴ Colin R. Johnson, Brian J. Gilley, and Mary L. Gray, “Introduction,” in eds. Mary L. Gray et al, *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies. Vol. 11* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 13.

²³⁵ Scott Herring, “Introduction,” in *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 12.

²³⁶ Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*),” *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 190-193.

back into the universalist Western centrism as some earlier scholars proposes²³⁷.

²³⁷ Dennis Altman, "On Global Queering," *Australian Humanities Review* 2 (1996).

Conclusion

This project looks into a group of gay fans of *yue* opera in China, and investigates how they negotiate with heteronormative and homonormative norms in China. Based on the fieldwork I conducted from February to September 2016, the research hopes to join the queer studies in debating on Western centrism, homonormativity, Chineseness, and the urban/rural dichotomy in China. The research argues that the community joined by gay fans of *yue* opera poses a challenge to a universalism of homosexuality; it enriches the understanding of Chinese gayness in a transnational and transregional sense; and it highlights the intersection of temporalities amidst the self-presentation, in a sense that they searched for values and emotions in traditional art form and stories, to express their sentiments in today's dilemma, and desires for future resolutions. By showcasing how they consume the traditional art form and form a community in rural southern China and to answer research questions put forward in the beginning, the research has come to several findings.

Gay fans of *yue* opera are collectively faced with the heteronormative norms in China, where marriage and family are crucial in rendering a subject a qualified social member and obtaining moral privilege²³⁸; hence they form the community based on a shared passion for *yue* opera, where they can live a dual life while enjoy gay bondings and intimacy. Through this reticent strategisation²³⁹ of socio-familial norms, they manage to get a sense of

²³⁸ Lisa Rofel, "Quality of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities," in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 102; and Chris Berry, "Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 238.

²³⁹ Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals," 4; Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen, "Is Face More Important Than Happiness?," in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58; And Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, "Negotiating the Public and the Private," in

sisterhood, mutual support, and sometimes sexual fulfillment, and thus are able to temporarily forget about heterosexual marriages and leave most of heteronormative pressure behind. As scholars have repeatedly highlight that family is crucial in making a subject a social member and obtaining moral privilege including In living a dual life, they found a community based on a shared passion for *yue* opera, where they enjoy bondings and kinship. They have formed a localised struggle for self-presentation and individualism. However, the non-confrontational way of dealing with socio-familial norms is far from enough because it risks slipping back to invisibility²⁴⁰, and thus the homosexuals would be continuously marginalised and further binaries around the gay community of primary versus secondary and real versus fake are being reserved²⁴¹. Indeed, gay fans of *yue* opera, to a large extent, tend to reinforce the norms of family and marriage. Through their memories of first encounter with *yue* opera in childhood, they have coupled the opera experience with family bondings. The familial attachment is also traceable in their appreciation of some opera scripts that end with familial re-unions, as well as their refusal to come out as it would hurt feelings of families. The heteronormative family has been largely internalised, and it renders some gay fans to get married to female as they believe it is a necessary approach to betterment.

However, the community fail to promise absolutely freedom. Some scholars already reminds us of the risk that a new hierarchy emerges within the gay community, a hierarchy that enforces the distinction of good versus bad

Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 82.

²⁴⁰ Jen-Peng Liu and Naifei Ding, "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 30.

²⁴¹ Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, "A Smile on the Surface: The Politics of Public Correctness," in *Shanghai Lalas*, 102.

gays²⁴², or pride versus shame²⁴³, activist gays versus backward gays²⁴⁴. It turns out that within the group, the politics adopted by opera fans manages to marginalise the fat, the old, bad vocals, et al. Some victimised gay fans have less visibility and thus in the community, a binary of good gay fans versus bad gay fans emerged. Moreover, the community has shaped a sense of southern Chinese pride, whose meanings are enriched by an absolute respect to authentic Shengzhou dialect while performing *yue* opera, and the tendency of finding southern Chinese males more attractive and desirable. It is also worth noting that as the local meets the global, such southern pride poses risks of reinforcing the hierarchical discourse of *suzhi*, alienation of outsiders, and racialisation.

The showcase of these traits of Chineseness contributes to extending scholarly articulations of a transnational gayness in China as opposed to universalism, and poses an interrogation of Anglo-Eurocentrism of queer studies. Moreover, by recognising the activeness and agency of gay fans of *yue* opera encourages the intra-regional studies, which looks for producing knowledges without falling into the dichotomy of “Western theory versus Asian footnotes”²⁴⁵, as the imperialism and colonialism have indeed been profoundly conditioning the intellectual and popular knowledge on both global and regional

²⁴² Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 18.

²⁴³ David M. Halperin, and Valerie Traub, “Beyond Gay Pride,” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3-4.

²⁴⁴ Heather K. Love, “Introduction,” in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer Theory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 20-30.

²⁴⁵ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “Asia as Method: Overcoming the Present Conditions of Knowledge Production,” in *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialisation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 226; Kuan-Hsing Chen, “The Imperial Order of Things, or Notes on Han Chinese Racism,” in *Asia as Method*, 268.

scales²⁴⁶. Meanwhile, *yue* opera fans' overt display of southernness can be a helpful toolbox in queering Chineseness as a universal term.

The research also tries to touch on a productive meaning of gay shame, as the queer past and shame have a significant impact on shaping the contemporary discourse of sexuality²⁴⁷. The feeling of shame is traceable in many ways. During my interviews, many respondents choose to express themselves in the ways in which all sexuality-related terms were replaced by pronouns, i.e. *ta* (it) and *zhege* (this). It sounds they were trying to avoid straightforwardly reiterating terms like “homosexuality” or “gay” out loud in public. More interestingly, they welcome the chance to let the negative feelings, pain and shame transform the present and beyond with its “imaginatively reparative work.”²⁴⁸ They immerse themselves in *yue* opera culture and search through traditional scripts for value of virtues and inspirations, which might help them struggle through the dilemma at the present; and then through performing and singing particular *yue* opera arias, they manage to express their feelings and sentiments, or heal the pain, and hence better desire for solutions and hope for a better future. The creative intersection of temporalities becomes an important characteristic of gay fans of *yue* opera.

However, I also understand that this project has limitations. Due to the sensibility of the research and concerns over privacy, particularly for rural gay men, I lost contacts with some respondents after the fieldwork was finished. Ideally, I hoped to find them again, and ask a few more follow-up questions to enrich the database for the project for more solid analysis. Also, as the technology advancing, it would be more fruitful and convincing to employ visual equipment to record all gay parties in rural areas, and more analysis done based on the recorded clips.

²⁴⁶ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “Asia as Method,” 212.

²⁴⁷ Heather K. Love, “Introduction,” in *Feeling Backward*, 20.

²⁴⁸ Christopher Castiglia, and Christopher Reed, “Introduction: In the Interest of Time,” in *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 14.

A Story by Lengmeng

I would like to conclude with a story from a respondent pseudo-named Lengmeng. He did not like to be interviewed in person, but he turned rather emotional and expressive when I chatted with him online via Tencent QQ. Through typing and distance, he comfortably told me his childhood story. Since he was a little boy, he might have no clear idea what a plane looked like, what Transformers are like, or what other neighbouring kids were playing with.

However, I have already started to impersonate several characters I loved from my favourites plays of the traditional all-female performing art, yue opera. To name a few, Jia Baoyu from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Wang Zhizhen from *Jade Dragonfly*, Cui Yingying from *Romance of the West Chamber*, and Zhu Yingtai from *The Butterfly Lovers* were most appreciated by me and frequently impersonated.

When his parents left him at home for their work, he sometimes wrapped towels around his arms to pretend they were the long sleeves that those classic opera performers normally have, changed his paces cautiously and prudently without changing much of the posture, and sang the opera lyrics in high pitches with occasional sobbing tones even though he barely understood them due to opera's obscurity. Those feminine movements that a boy would hardly be consented to by his parents occasioned odd excitement and uncommon relief from the redundancy of his homework, and at the same time the skilful singing submerged the boredom of living in a remote village that was yet well developed. It is interesting that the young boy's passion in yue opera continued to develop as he grew up as he develops his Chinese literacy later, because he became adequate to better understand these yue opera plays. He felt as if he could also hear the distant temple bell tolling upon Jia Baoyu's ears at the tragic ending scene of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, whilst he sang along, "Since you have left the filthy world like the crystalline ice and snow, how can I remain a clear stream flowing along with the tacky waves?" He could as well feel the nerve for Cui Yingying when she sneaked out of her boudoir to the back yard, hoping against the hope to see her dearest at dusk. He blushed when Zhu Yingtai, disguised by her male outfit, held the hand of her male classmate Shanbo and asked the Bodhisattva to witness their pretend wedding ceremony,

only to be kindly teased by Shanbo, “My dearest brother, do stop such ridiculing and drivelling. How can two men be married?” By performing these characters and scenes, he on the one hand felt pity for the tremendous pain, disappointment, and shame many of these characters have been through; on the other, his joy arose spontaneously when these opera protagonists searched out creative ways to resist the disciplines that have been posed against them.

This research attempts to document and discuss about gay fans of *yue* opera mostly in southern China. Living in a society that has been faced with significant economic, social and cultural transformations, the gay fan community is showing queer strategies to cope with. As China faces fast urbanising and globalising trends, and covid-19 is lingering in the world and reshaping geopolitics and cultural phenomenon, what kinds of future will dawn to these Chinese gay opera fans? I look forward to one where and when a diversity of being gay among us can paint a beautiful and more visible shade of colour to the panorama of humanity.

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Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Section 1: Yue Opera

1. Since when did you start to like *yue* opera? How did you find it interesting?
2. Do you like any other Chinese operas, such as Pecking opera? How do you like Beyoncé, Lady Gaga? Do you like Western opera? Why or why not?
3. In your opinion, what is the difference between *yue* opera and other operas or other music genres?
4. What is your favourite *yue* opera play/excerpt? Why?
5. Why do you like that character in the play the most? Could you briefly introduce his/her story?
6. Do you feel related to this specific character?
7. Any particular story or character in *yue* opera that you value? What does it mean to you or to the value in today's society? What do you learn or gain from *yue* opera performance?
8. Who is your favourite *yue* opera performer?
9. What do you think about *yue* opera's cross-gendered performance? Do you think it is confusing for beginners?
10. Do you think *yue* opera can develop along with the time in such a fast-paced society?
11. Do you find it difficult to understand the lyrics?
12. Are you ever worried if a traditional culture like Yue opera would go extinct?
13. Do you know anything about the traditional music in the West? How do you see the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western operas, or between *yue* opera and Western musical?
14. What would you recommend to foreign guests if you are asked to present them some Chinese culture? Will you introduce *yue* opera to them?
15. What would you recommend to guests from Beijing, Shanghai, Taiwanese, or Hong Kong then?

Section 2: Sexuality

16. When did you realise you are homosexual?
17. Did you tell your families or friends? Why or why not? How did they react?

18. Other than the theatre, have you been to a gay bar, gay gallery, or other gay events? Did you enjoy the experience?
19. Why kind of guys do you fancy? What type of men will you prefer to be your partner? Describe his countenance, personality, race, social status, nationality (if Chinese, please specify northern Chinese or southern Chinese), wealth, and education background, et al?
20. Are you satisfied with your life as a gay man?
21. Is being a gay man in China easy or difficult? Compared to the past, what do you think about Chinese society's attitudes towards homosexuality today?
22. How do you think about the popular saying in China, “*Gui*” (There is a pun in this sentence, as *gui* it means eminence, and it sounds similar to the English word ‘gay’) circle is so complicated and filthy” (simplified Chinese: “贵”圈真乱。)? How to understand gay sex in relation to this saying?
23. Some countries in the West have passed the same-sex marriage law, but China has not. What is your opinion?
24. Do you prefer a marriage?
25. Do you have any child? Do you want to have a kid?
26. What is your ideal lifestyle like?
27. What is your future expectation? Could you share your view about the future of Chinese homosexuality?

Section 3

28. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
29. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 2: List of Key Informants

1. Clark, 29 years old, interviewed in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province.
2. Jack, 29 years old, interviewed in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province.
3. Fernando, 32 years old, interviewed in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province.
4. Chan, 33 years old, interviewed in Fuyang, Zhejiang Province.
5. Jay, 29 years old, interviewed in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province.
6. Jiangyu, 45 years old, interviewed in Xiaoshan, Zhejiang Province.
7. Shengli, 47 years old, interviewed in Shengzhou, Zhejiang Province.
8. Yuzhao, 34 years old, interviewed in Xinchang, Zhejiang Province.
9. Weiwei, 30 years old, interviewed in Xinchang, Zhejiang Province.
10. Jason, 36 years old, interviewed in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province.
11. Honglei, 29 years old, interviewed in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province.
12. Daimeng, 20 years old, interviewed in Shengzhou, Zhejiang Province.
13. Donghua, 34 years old, interviewed in Xinchang, Zhejiang Province.
14. Ruoyu, about 30 years old, interviewed in Xinchang, Zhejiang Province.
15. Motuo, 38 years old, interviewed in Xinchang, Zhejiang Province.
16. Nanhui, 35 years old, interviewed in Shengzhou, Zhejiang Province.
17. Yushao, about 35 years old, interviewed in Xinchang, Zhejiang Province.
18. Lengmeng, about 40 years old, interviewed on Tencent QQ.
19. Eric, 34 years old, interviewed in Shanghai.

Notes: There are 4 more gay fans of *yue* opera I interviewed during the pilot project, whose data are less contributive to the submitted version of the thesis.