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Beyond the Binary of Victimhood and Agency: An Exploration of Gender Dynamics in Tongqi's Marriages in Post-Socialist China

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Beyond the Binary of Victimhood and Agency: An
Exploration of Gender Dynamics in Tongqi's Marriages
in Post-Socialist China

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A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

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Abstract

This thesis provides an in-depth feminist sociological investigation into the lives of tongqi, a term denoting women married to homosexual men (*tongzhi*) in China. Using an intersectional framework, the study probes the intricate relationships between gender, sexuality, and social class in shaping tongqi's experiences and subjectivities. The thesis challenges simplistic binary narratives that paint gay husbands as villains and tongqi wives as victims, urging a nuanced understanding of the entrenched gender-role kinships within which these tongqi women actively navigate. Based on qualitative data collected from 32 tongqi women and 31 married tongzhi during 2018–2019, alongside field observations in China, the research exposes the underlying gender-role system that produces Chinese women's sufferings within their marriages, which have been clouded by the stigmatisation of homosexuality. Key findings suggest a significant epistemic gap between women who are passively labelled as "wives to gay men" and those who actively self-identify as tongqi, irrespective of their husbands' sexual orientation. Departing from existing narratives that position tongqi as victims, the study reframes these women as active agents in resistance. Findings reveal that male homosexuality is intrinsically linked to tongqi's strategic defiance rather than to their victimisation. Through astute alignments with the party-state's agenda to sustain hetero-patriarchal marital stability, tongqi produce a subversive gender script of "marriage fraud" to resist domestic oppression and abuse. This reconceptualisation offers valuable insights not only into the unique challenges faced by women in tongqi marriages but also into broader marital systems in contemporary China. By doing so, the research advocates for a more inclusive and equitable marital landscape in the context of China's fast-changing sociocultural milieu.

Keywords: Tongqi, Chinese marriage, tongzhi, domestic abuse, marriage fraud, compulsory heterosexuality

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Chapter 1. Introduction: The Emergence of Tongqi

The term *tongqi*, derived from *tong* (gay) and *qi* (wife), describes Chinese women who find themselves wed to *tongzhi* (homosexual men) in post-socialist China. Since 2014, thousands of Chinese women have been voicing their marital struggles under the banner of *tongqi* across both online platforms (Douban, Zhihu, Baidu Tieba, QQ and Wechat groups) and offline communities (PFLAG, the All-China Women's Federation, and local LGBTQ events). Several studies suggest that approximately 14 million *tongqi* exist in China, a rough estimate derived from the country's overall married population among local *tongzhi* (Tang and Liu, 2014; Wan and Xi, 2014; Xing, 2012; Yu, 2014).

In Chinese media and academia, *tongqi* are often seen as female victims enduring domestic distress stemming from their husbands' homosexual identity and affairs (Bram, 2016; Liu, 2020; Tang and Liu, 2017; Tsang, 2021; Zhu, 2017). *Tongqi*'s marriage is often categorised as mis-aligned-orientation marriage (Li et al., 2016, 2021; Liu and Tang, 2014), which is regarded as a "flawed" relationship burdened with "sin" for its mere existence. Moreover, the *tongqi* identity and these women's struggling marriages have grown into a Chinese nationwide "tongqi phenomenon", in which the wife receives sympathy, the husband is condemned, and their marital union becomes a social anomaly.

The impetus for this study originated in 2017, when I first encountered narratives of Chinese "tongqi", predominantly detailing accounts of mistreatment by their gay husbands. These narratives encapsulated instances of domestic violence, sexual deprivation, and the social stigma affiliated with the risk of HIV. Sensational media headlines frequently highlighted these devastating experiences in direct correlation with their husbands' homosexual sexual orientation, with an intense focus on the intimate details of their conjugal sexual relationships. Concurrently, the market reform since the 1980s in China has witnessed a rapid transition of the "marriage crisis", in which Chinese women are the primary "rebels" responsible for the social trend of delaying, dissolving, and denationalising conjugal relations (Fincher, 2016; He, 2022; Xiao, 2014). This women-initiated "marriage crisis" prompted me to question the defining characteristics of "tongqi" and whether this label represents a consequence of Chinese male homosexuality, or instead, mirrors a more prevalent female

identity that reflects the evolving gender dynamics, sexual desires, and socio-economic changes in post-socialist China.

This interview-based feminist research extends beyond the simplistic binary of victimhood and agency: it delves into the nuanced gender-based dynamics in tongqi marriages. It aims to address an overarching question: **How does gender, rather than sexual orientation, exert a greater influence in shaping tongqi's identity and marriages?** To answer this main question, I will explore these sub-questions in the analytical chapters 5-9:

1. How does the interplay of the post-socialist context and women's marital resistance engender the tongqi identity?
2. How does gender interplay with sexuality in producing an abusive experience for tongqi in their sexless marriages?
3. How do tongqi renegotiate their gender norms to engage everyday resistance?
4. How does gender intersect with social class in influencing tongqi's divorce decisions?
5. How do tongzhi's sexual experience and marriage expectations interplay with tongqi's marital struggles?

The first four questions explore gender and tongqi's marriage from tongqi's stories, whereas the last question shifts the investigative lens to married tongzhi's narratives. The interview-based qualitative study investigates how the Chinese gender role system, intersecting with sexuality and class, produces domestic oppression in tongqi's marriages while sparking these tongqi women's resistance. The study also investigates the impact of tongqi identity on how Chinese women reframe their marriages. It probes whether this collective identity of female victimhood strengthens or exacerbates their marital strife.

An Intellectual Recalibration: Where to Begin a Study on Tongqi?

Typically, mainstream media and academic works centre their investigations of tongqi on the primary question: why do Chinese gay men marry women? This perspective insinuates that the tongqi controversy would dissipate if such marriages ceased. However, this thesis sets a contrary starting point for the intellectual puzzle of the tongqi phenomenon.

If one concedes that “Why do Chinese gay men marry women?” is the fundamental question to address the birth of the tongqi identity, one must agree on the following two presumptions. First, Chinese homosexual men regard their sexuality as a permanent trait, and as incompatible with the cross-sex marriage system. However, many scholars have argued that the Confucian family ethics are the rich soil for profound tolerance and the quick revival of homoeroticism in modern Chinese society, because one’s homoeroticism is not questioned as long as one’s familial duties are fulfilled (Adamczyk and Cheng, 2015; Coleman and Chou, 2013; Zheng, 2015). Thus, it is problematic to assume that these Chinese men necessarily see same-sex attraction as being at odds with traditional marriage. The second presumption underlying this question is that tongqi women are simply a by-product – an affiliated subject of their husbands’ homosexuality. This perspective places the blame for marital disharmony solely on the husbands’ homosexuality and frames tongqi women as passive victims without social agency.

Feminist research is defined as having a focus on women with overt political commitment to changing women’s lives (Stanley and Wise, 2013, p. 21). Accordingly, I recalibrate the inquiry. Instead of asking, “Why do 14 million gay men marry women?”, the pivotal angle I set out for the thesis is: “Why are numerous Chinese women expressing their marital frustration in relation to their husbands’ homosexuality?” The former question rests on biologically-determined and essentialised assumptions of Chinese sexuality, as well as the negligence of female agency. The latter, in contrast, illustrates a panorama of active, dynamic, and varied ways in which Chinese tongqi negotiate their socio-cultural context. This revised approach underscores the importance of women’s subjective narratives and gendered experiences, aligning with the principles of a feminist inquiry.

Objectives of the Thesis

Gender roles and relations in Chinese marriage are an expansive topic. This thesis sets out to explore the multi-faceted, dynamic, and often conflict-ridden landscape of gender relations in Chinese tongqi's marriages, intersecting with sexuality and class. This study is driven by three primary objectives. The first aim is to map how gender interplays with sexuality and class in shaping post-socialist marriage in China. This study provides an account of how active agents – tongqi and tongzhi – are renegotiating and manoeuvring their gender roles and performance when facing diverse individualistic desires, financial insecurities, and marriage expectations in post-socialist China. In undertaking this endeavour, this thesis reframes tongqi as a non-monolithic identity that is ever-changing and shaped by various socio-economic and cultural factors.

The second objective seeks to elucidate the relationship between the gender system and tongqi's marital hardship experience. Building on existing research, this study looks beyond the commonly assumed direct and exclusive causality between tongqi's marital sufferings and their husbands' homosexuality. While studying male homosexuality, this thesis aims to intersect the patriarchal gender roles, sexual subjugation within heterosexual frameworks, and post-reform logics of sexualised femininity to provide a sociological analysis of the interlocking social institutions that produce tongqi's sufferings. Specifically, it foregrounds gender as the principal analytical framework, drilling down to how dominance-based masculinity and hegemonic male heterosexuality in modern Chinese husband-hood operates to cause or exacerbates tongqi women's marital woes. Moreover, this gender lens reveals tongqi's cloaked yet active resistance, subverting the oppressive gender script in traditional Chinese conjugality. Tongqi in this study are studied as the agents of knowledge and agents of resistance (Harding, 2004), who have always been the marginalised knowers and have always resisted normative gender roles.

The final objective is to fill the epistemic gap in existing knowledge about the influences of the tongqi identity onto tongqi women's marriages. There is a noticeable gap between "a gay man's wife" and "a woman self-identifying as a tongqi" in the broader tongqi discourse. Limited research has ventured into how adopting the tongqi identity might transform a woman's gender performance and marital dynamics. This thesis endeavours to uncover the dual roles of the tongqi identity – both as an empowering tool and a potential constraint – in shaping Chinese women's marital struggles and resistance.

The research examines, beyond the veil of female victimhood, how Chinese tongqi renegotiate hegemonic gender norms and resist domestic oppression in ingenious ways. Tongqi is a newly-emerged, situational, and collective female identity, and arguably is the first resistant agent in Chinese history to strategically associate women's marital struggles with male homosexuality. Even today, it is not common to find equivalent narratives to tongqi in other regions in the world.

Layout of the Thesis

The introduction positions this research on tongqi in gender relations in post-socialist China. It sets out its academic lens of tongqi in their gender roles and their agency, and then maps out the layout and objectives of the study.

Chapter 2 necessitates a deep exploration of gender, heterosexuality, and power: three fundamental concepts that underpin this feminist investigation of tongqi. While most scholarship on Chinese gender relations mainly rests on the concept of patriarchy, this study addresses its often-overlooked interconnection with heterosexuality, and weaves it with indigenous Chinese gender and Foucauldian disciplinary power into a theoretical framework for a nuanced understanding of the tongqi's subject construction and their marital experience in contemporary China.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach employed for this research – an interview-based and feminist interpretive approach to explore gender and marriage in China. This study evolves through stages of research design, fieldwork, analysis, and the final thesis write-up, navigating each phase with academic diligence and ethical care. Though faced with unique challenges at each turn, I formulated solutions to uncover the core intellectual enigma of women's experience, anchored in a feminist standpoint and aiming for social justice.

Chapter 4 grounds this study in the socio-historical context in which the tongqi identity was produced and widely-circulated in post-socialist China. It illustrates three key historical junctures that facilitated the emergence of tongqi: the addition of desire-driven conjugal relations to the patriarchal duty-based matrimony; the rising modern Chinese female subjectivity, advocating personal happiness and economic independence; and the party-

state's continued reinforcement of a heterosexuality-premised family structure that binds class gap and gender hierarchy, where homosexuality is scapegoated for various social issues. This compressed social landscape, with its unique Chinese characteristics and historical locale, produces tongqi as a troubling subject and social phenomenon in the larger crisis of Chinese marriage, gender, and socio-political stability.

Chapter 5 is the first analytical chapter of the thesis. This chapter delves into the invention of tongqi, by which Chinese women enact legitimate voices for their marital frustrations. The chapter unravels how the tongqi subject is a public transcript produced as a renegotiation between the state and unhappy married women in China. The social norms of universal marriage, patriarchal family, and traditional gender scripts in China often normalise married women's domestic oppression and abuse, as well as suppressing their resistant voices. I argue that the tongqi subject serves the interests of both the party-state's hetero-patriarchal political agenda and the tongqi women's need to disrupt entrenched marital norms. Furthermore, this chapter establishes the foundational tone of the study, which aims to delve into an under-investigated aspect of the tongqi phenomenon: the commonalities between tongqi and the broader demographic of married women arising from domestic gender hierarchies and imbalanced conjugal power dynamics in post-socialist China.

Chapter 6 examines the prevalent condition of sexual deprivation in tongqi marriages. Sexual deprivation remains an under-acknowledged form of abuse, often resulting in emotional trauma. Linking marital intercourse with gender and heterosexuality, this chapter reveals how this non-violent sexual relationship produces domestic abuse against women, perpetuated by husbands asserting their male dominance to normalise sexual evasion and women's self-conforming to post-socialist gender norms. These norms simultaneously propel and stigmatise women's sexual desire, as well as curtail their sexual autonomy. This chapter contests prior studies that link tongqi's marital experiences of sexual deprivation solely to incompatible sexual orientations, proposing that these challenges stem from a gendered abuse of power, facilitated by heteronormative expectations. While a husband's homosexuality might trigger instances of male aggression as a defence for sexual inactivity, the pervasive nature of such aggression towards tongqi wives is more fundamentally rooted in the gender hierarchies prevalent within the role-based Chinese family structure. Additionally, the chapter posits that the forms of abuse endured by sexually deprived tongqi are relatable to

those faced by women in the “normal” heterosexual yet sexless marriages in China, highlighting a common thread of gender-based oppression.

Chapter 7 explores tongqi’s astute and adaptive everyday resistance against the normative gender script and domestic oppression in marriage. It characterises tongqi as conscious agents, demonstrating their diverse tactics revolving around the symbiosis of their victimhood and resistance. By producing a legitimate victimhood within “marriage fraud”, tongqi tactically bypass restrictive gender norms and gain legitimacy for defiance. Tongqi leverage the gender stereotype of females as the weaker sex and stigmatised homosexuality, intentionally bonding with the state and social power to resist systematic oppressions, such as familial domination, gender discrimination, and labour exploitation. In doing so, they cleverly navigate state and familial patriarchies that otherwise criminalise organized protest or penalise women’s everyday oppositional acts. The chapter argues that tongqi emerge as resistant female agents rather than victims, while the abused and oppressed women in “normal” Chinese marriages do not gain legitimacy to publicly resist oppressive gender norms.

Chapter 8 examines how divorce has made an imperative within tongqi communities. It uncovers how traditional gender norms intersect with economic concerns to produce desires and fears about tongqi’s divorce. This chapter reveals the gendered predicaments women face in Chinese divorces, and how they intersect with social stratification on education, income, rural/urban location, and values on sexuality. It also uncovers the underlying class-based hegemony within the divorce imperative: it is an elite-driven directive propagated online as a universal solution for all distressed tongqi. To advocate divorce for all tongqi entails the serious risk of further marginalising those tongqi who are less privileged.

Chapter 9 shifts the lens from tongqi to tongzhi, investigating the “marriage fraud” discourse from the husband’s perspective. By showing tongzhi’s fluid sexual and conjugal experiences, the chapter argues that this discourse is problematic due to its oversimplification, Western-centric views, and homophobic foundations. Chinese tongzhi’s dynamic sexual experiences and diverse sexual identifications contradict the essentialised homosexuality imposed by the “marriage fraud” narrative. Additionally, the discourse applies Western ideas of marriage and homosexuality onto Chinese homoeroticism and conjugal relations, overlooking the complexities and indigeneity of their experiences.

Chapter 10, the concluding chapter, revisits the overarching question of the study regarding the gender relations in tongqi's marriages. This study delinks tongqi's subjectivity from male homosexuality and repositions these women's lived struggles in gender-role-based patriarchy, normative heterosexuality, and post-socialist market logics, demonstrating the varied gender-based oppression they suffer and the vivid resistance in which they actively engage. This chapter proposes that future tongqi studies focus on the entrenched dynamics of gender-role kinship within the Chinese context, rather than simplifying it into a "hetero-homo" binary, to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of these Chinese women's marital challenges.

Chapter 2. Theorising Gender Relations, Heterosexuality, and Power

The previous chapter outlined the objectives and layout of the thesis. This chapter lays the foundation for the theoretical basis of this study, as well as exploring the existing literature on tongqi. In this chapter, the exploration of gender, heterosexuality, and power will facilitate the understanding of tongqi's marital struggles and resistance.

The forthcoming sections illuminates the complexities surrounding the obfuscating construction of the tongqi identity, the ever-shifting gender relations within tongqi marriages, and the heterosexualising power infrastructure inherent in these relationships since modern China. The objective of this chapter is to provide a conceptual framework that facilitates a nuanced understanding of the emerging “tongqi” identity and their lived marital experiences in post-socialist China.

Gender in Post-Socialist China

The key tenets of gender serve as an overarching lens for this study of tongqi and their marital experiences. Gender is generally recognised as a social construct that embodies a range of identities, roles, and expectations that society prescribes to denote masculinity and femininity to individuals based on their perceived sex. According to postmodernist feminist scholars, gender is constitutive “through a stylised repetition of acts” (Butler, 2006, p. 191), fictive as “an imitation without an origin” (Butler, 2003, p. 43), and socially theatrical as “an achieved property of situated conduct” (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126).

This recent Western academic approach to deconstructs the conventional binary understanding of constructed gender and biological sex finds resonance in historical perspectives on gender in China. In the traditional Chinese context, gender is determined more by the “acts” on social duties and expectations than by one's anatomical sex (Guisso, 1981; Rosenlee, 2012; Sommer, 2002). Local feminist scholar Li Xiaojiang reinforced this point. In critiquing the adoption of Western theories in Chinese soil, she argues that the “female” (*nv*) and “male” (*nan*) genders in China have long been perceived as social, entwined in a complex matrix of human subjectivity, social relations, and cosmological relations (Li, 2016). Overseas Sinophone scholar Liu Jieyu also emphasised the adaptable,

situational, and familism-premised constituents of gender as role-based in Chinese society (Liu, 2017). Thus, it is fitting to examine Chinese gender and its social relations through a theoretical lens that treats gender as fluid, performative, and relational.

Gender Relations, Marriage, and Patriarchy

Gender, as a social construct, cannot be treated in isolation. It is intricately connected to broader societal systems, notably the marriage system, which plays a crucial role in linking individual subjectivities to Confucian family values. The Chinese marriage system delineates binary marital roles and emphasising reproduction, thus playing a pivotal role in the gender construction within Chinese society. As Susan Mann noted, through matrimony, women and men establish themselves with social recognition; through marital roles, women and men are placed in unequal relations where their gendered subjects are produced (Mann, 2011).

Several feminist scholars have paved the foundation to theorise the binary and hierarchical gender relations that oppress women in the role-oriented Chinese marriage institution (Barlow, 2004; Croll and Croll, 1981; Evans, 1997; Ko and Taylor, 1995; Wolf, 1985). Harris Evans explained how Chinese women and men are produced via dualistically different duties in their marital roles, and that “female gender is defined by a series of innate and essential characteristics associated with certain responses, needs, and capacities that naturally make women wives and mothers” (Evans, 2002, p. 336). Moreover, the gender roles of mothers and wives are not solely constructed within the familial system. In contemporary China, they are embroiled in multifaceted and intersected dualistic relations, comprising Confucian familial ethics, which honour the “heaven husband and earth wife” (Rosenlee, 2012), the Daoist philosophical principle of passive “yin” and positive “yang” (Ho, 1995), and the modern market logic of the breadwinner husband and homemaker wife (Zuo, 2003). In a sense, gender relations in today’s Chinese marriage have systematically subjugated women to a disadvantageous position of wifeness via multiple binaries of roles and norms, which organically synergise into a gender structure that perpetuates husbands’ dominance and wives’ subordination.

The critique of patriarchy has been central to address women’s oppression in feminist research. Yet, patriarchy, in studying Chinese marital relations, is often more obscuring than

illuminating, as it is often used in an oversimplistic manner that universalises women's position in gender relations or fails to satisfactorily capture the rapid transformations in gender dynamics in post-socialist China. Building on Weber's "patriarchalism" (Weber, 1978) and Kandiyoti's "classic patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988), Harrell and Santos recently defined Chinese classic patriarchy, premised on the rubric of intersectionality, as "a hierarchical system of domestic relations that includes multiple intersecting structures of inequality including gender and generational inequalities, among others" (Santos and Harrell, 2017, p. 10). To further indigenise the use of patriarchy in the Chinese context, the "intersecting structures" of inequal domestic relations are not external social categories but "already subsumed in the role-oriented gender system" (Liu, 2017, p. 38).

As this thesis focuses on marital interactions between tongqi and their husbands, patriarchy therefore is used with its analytical lens specifically on its structuring and stabilising mechanisms of role-based spousal relations. In other words, I use patriarchy to explain how Chinese women and men are mobilised into performatively adhering to their respective gender roles of "wife" and "husband". Moreover, patriarchy is employed not as an authoritative and monolithic force, but as an intricate mechanism that seeks (but often fails) to homogenise diverse gender relations within each unique Chinese marriage.

Diverse Gender Ideologies in Post-Socialist China

Recent Chinese scholarship finds that the concept of "compressed modernity" (Chang, 2014), developed by South Korean scholar Kyung-Sup Chang, is applicable to capture the rapid-changing multi-layered gender reconfiguration, given the rapid and drastic modernisation of social, economic, and political conditions in post-socialist China (Ji, 2017; Roulleau-Berger and Liang, 2022). Taking on Butler's gender as performative constructs (Butler, 2006), it is evident that multiple genders from diverse historically and socially constructed realities, or discursive parallel universes, seem to have converged and merged into one in the "compressed" landscape of post-socialist China.

Within a compressed modernity, gender roles and relations are influenced and reshaped by a multitude of factors in a condensed time and space, producing an overlapping and interlacing tapestry overloaded with divergent gender ideologies derived from multiple social systems in

an accelerated and overwhelmed historical window. This produces inconsistent, volatile, and chaotic gender performances, giving subjects little time or room to embark on sense-making.

Post-socialist Chinese gender, featuring its complexity and paradoxicality, is both relational and collective, and both fluid and essentialised. The relational nature of Chinese self-identity and gender production has been captured by many scholars (Evans, 1997; Ho, 1995, 1993; Liu, 2017), and is predominantly evident in the role-based family and marriage system, which refers to the dynamic and theatrical gender being produced based on individuals' positions relative to each other. This relational and interactional gender is disrupted in communist China, and further reinforced in post-socialist China. The former not only politicalised a homogeneous socialist gender system, binding each individual to the collective interests of the nation while obfuscating the linkage between gender and the "feudalistic" kinship system (Evans, 1997; Honig and Hershatter, 1988), but also ordained attributes corresponding to biological functions to "scientifically" construct modern gender via "essentialist conflation of sexuality with gender" (Evans, 1995, p. 360). In post-socialist China, the neoliberal capitalism reinforces this essentialised gender to produce the cosmopolitan "middle-class normality" (Zhang, 2022, p. 16), normal heterosexual subjects (Zheng, 2015), and gendered labour division for the market economy (Liu, 2007; Rofel and Rofel, 1999). However, the dynamics are less influenced by collectivism and more complexly interwoven with the desire-driven individualism that neoliberalism fuels in post-reform China.

Moreover, post-socialist Chinese gender relations are simultaneously binary and uniform, and both hierarchical and egalitarian. It is well-studied that the indigenously gendered cosmology of "Yin and Yang" is binary and hierarchical, operating at the fundamental basis of constructing gender relations as oppressive to women, by inscribing complementary yet dichotomous femininity and masculinity to the sexed bodies of women and men, which produces male domination (Furth, 1999; Mann, 2011; Rosenlee, 2012; Watson and Ebrey, 1991). Meanwhile, the socialist policy of gender equality, expressed in the slogan "The times have changed, men and women are the same" (Honig, 2002, p. 266) from Mao's regime, still has its lingering social effect. Although the communist gender sameness discourse promotes a nominal gender equality yet *de facto* masculinisation of the female gender (Evans, 1995, p. 360), it perpetuates a socialist revolutionary gender script that deviates from traditional binary gender. Instead, it equates female to male gender manner, codes, and performances,

albeit with the idealisation of masculinity. This gender neutrality discourse paves the way for egalitarian gender relations on conjugality in post-socialist China, which the younger generation and the more cosmopolitan population tend to embrace, not necessarily for men but definitely for women (Jankowiak and Li, 2017; Yu, 2021). These West-influenced egalitarian gender relations are simultaneously complicated by the resurgence of Neo-Confucianism in post-socialist China, which calls for a total return to traditional hierarchical marital relations to stabilise a “harmonious society” (Sekiguchi, 2010).

Thus, post-socialist Chinese gender unfolds itself as a chaotic, incongruent, ambiguous, and paradoxical social milieu where previously parallel genders in diverse realities find themselves at the same time-space window in which they are conflating and conflicting in unpredictable ways. This complex interweaving tapestry creates a social terrain that is constantly in flux, necessitating a continuous (re)negotiation of identities, roles, and gender relations.

It is worth noting that I do not intend to present a tapestry of gender ideologies in multiple sets of polarisations. Rather, I aim to present numerous sets of gender spectrums, crescendos, or ombres that are entangled and imbricated, in which individuals continuously oscillate in each spectrum and circulate across dimensions in tension, given the fast-changing coincidental conditions in which one finds oneself overwhelmed in a highly “compressed” reality.

To understand how individuals cope with such a kaleidoscopic gender landscape, it is useful to adopt political scientist Colette Harris’s “gender masks” (Harris, 2004). The concept recognises an individual’s capacity to deliberately perform multiple and contradictory gendered characteristics for self-interests in specific contexts, in which “women can assume positions of dominance as well as ones of subordination” (Harris, 2004, p. 21). This concept efficiently encapsulates the complexity, volatility, and camouflage-like nature of Chinese women as they attempt to make sense of their circumstances and tactically resist through varied gender performances (refer to Chapter 7, on *Tongqi’s Resistance*).

In my study, I take a constructivist and processual view of gender. I use *gender* in my study in the sense of its perceived binary notion, associated with the categories of femininity and masculinity, as well as its chaotic and clumsy performances of numerous mutating and often

contradictory gender norms. In addition, I use the term “gender relations” to conceptualise the complex cross-sex interactions within wife-husband conjugality, grounded in power dynamics between women and men in the social institution of marriage, affected by socially prescribed femininity and masculinity, which are mutually constitutive and reinforced at everyday household and societal levels. This messy, inconsistent, and paradoxical system of gender and gender relations explains the construction of the co-cultural subject of tongqi and their troubled marital experience throughout the analytical chapters on *Inventing Tongqi, Conjugal Sex, Tongqi’s Resistance, and Decision to Leave*.

Intercourse, Sexuality and Heterosexuality

Feminist sociologist Jackson critiques that “heterosexuality was rarely named as the object of analysis” in cross-sex gender relations (Jackson, 2004, p. 19). Especially in the Chinese context, in which the notions of gender and sex are indigenously highly conflated (Li, 2016), it is imperative to regard sexuality and heterosexuality as fundamentals to analyse gender relations and its day-to-day-day oppressive mechanisms that affect women within the institution of marriage. Recent scholarship has shed light on how compulsory, romanticised, and normalised heterosexuality is an organising institution that produces sexual hierarchy and women’s subordination (Ingraham, 1994; Jackson, 1999; Rich, 1980; Rubin, 2002).

In such operation, marriage exists as the hegemonic form of heterosexuality not only in the West but also in Asian societies (Dasgupta, 2009; VanEvery, 1996). Rich literature situates Chinese domestic gender relations in the duty-based Confucian patriarchy (Santos and Harrell, 2017; Shu et al., 2013; Stacey, 1975; Yu, 2021; Zuo, 2009; Zuo and Bian, 2005). No equal attention by academic curiosity has been paid to the system of heterosexuality in shaping Chinese domestic gender relations, although such system has become a formidable yet discrete discursive power in an increasingly desire-driven modernising China.

Interplay of Essentialism and De-essentialism in Chinese Sexuality

Emerging from Foucault’s framework, which views sexuality not as a “natural given” but a “historical construct” subject to power dynamics (Foucault, 1978), many contemporary studies on gender and sexuality in China adopt this constructivist paradigm. They

problematise the indigenously fluid yet “scientifically” essentialised sexualities that interplay with diverse gender and class relations in modern China (Bao, 2020; Chiang, 2018; Liu, 2015).

Marriage in China, framed as a paramount “sexualised arrangement” (McMillan, 2014, p. 76), remains a pivotal institution that essentialises sexual differences and hierarchy. Marital, heterosexual, and reproductive intercourse has long been situated “alone at the top of the erotic pyramid” of hierarchical sexual values (Rubin, 2002, p. 11). Sexual intercourse, in the “unquestionable” heterosexual context, manifests in action as the penetration of an erect penis into a vagina and plays a crucial role in constructing sexuality. MacKinnon provided a pioneering work in analysing how unequal gender relations are produced through the dualism of the eroticised dominance in male and eroticised submission in heterosexualised intercourse (MacKinnon, 1989).

The indigenous Chinese sex hierarchy in traditional heterosexual intercourse practices perpetuates a system that subjugates women, reducing their sexual agency to primarily instrument for patrilineal reproduction (Mann, 2011; Watson and Ebrey, 1991). However, scholars have explored the nuanced dynamics of women’s sexual agency within local philosophical contexts. Notably, indigenous Daoist Yin-Yang theories articulates the mutually transformative and beneficial aspect of intercourse to women and men, via sexually exchanging the energy of *yin* and *yang* in female and male bodies to reach harmony, unity, and well-being (Furth, 1999; Rosenlee, 2012).

Despite the Yin-Yang philosophy’s emphasis on the mutability of male and female energies, Confucianism continues to relentlessly assert the distinction and hierarchy of *yang* (male) over *yin* (female). Traditionally, Confucian ethics have been central to this process of essentialising sexuality, subjugating individuals within their respective gendered marital roles and duties in relation to their perceived femininity and masculinity (Furth, 1999). Later, entering to the era of modern China, scientific discourses have been employed by social movements to essentialise sexuality to achieve rapid social modernisation. Discursive tools from gynaecology, neurology, and eugenics reinforce the hegemony of marital reproductive heterosexuality as biologically innate, syringing passive, chaste, and procreative qualities into the construction of female bodies and identities (Evans, 1997). More recently, in post-socialist China, the increasingly stratified social class further complicates the essentialisation

of sexuality. Male promiscuity and female sexualisation increasingly become valorised sexualities in specific privileged social classes (Liu, 2017; Osburg, 2013; Xiao, 2020). In essence, modern Chinese female sexuality, especially within heterosexual dynamics, is subject to a complex matrix of oppressive forces. These not only monitor Chinese women's allegiance to traditional, reproduction-centric notions of chastity but also demand their compliance with the male gaze in an increasingly capitalist and modern post-socialist society.

Meanwhile, Chinese sexuality fluctuates between essentialism and de-essentialism, given its rich homoerotic cultural roots. One's non-heterosexual acts are typically overlooked as long as one fulfils the marital and familial duties ascribed to one's roles (Dikötter, 1995; Hinsch, 1992). Intersecting gender, this dynamic sexuality manifests dichotomous patterns, given that China traditionally separate conceptualisation of male and female sexuality. Historical accounts of homoerotic behaviours among Chinese men are extensively documented, unlike the sparse records of similar activities among women (Hinsch, 1992). This disparity continues today, with uneven recognition and representation of gay (*tongzhi*) and lesbian (*lala*) experiences in China (Kam, 2013). Although this indigenous fluid sexuality creates a situational social space for non-heterosexuality, allowing sexuality to "transgress", the reality is that Chinese men typically enjoy broader sexual agency. They are more free to explore diverse sexual experiences, whereas Chinese women are often bound more rigidly by gender-specific sexual norms.

In addition to gender, the oscillation of Chinese sexuality between essentialism and de-essentialism is also subject to the mutable notion of social class, especially in post-socialist China. Traditionally, male homoeroticism was seen more as a class relation than a sexual one, leading to normalised homosexual relations distinguished by class (Hinsch, 1992). With the influx of sexuality ideologies from the West, post-socialist China witnesses a reinvigorated sexual fluidity that also carries class connotations. In a society with stark class divisions, the adoption of Western-inspired sexual identities, whether the fluidity of queerness or the fixity of gay identities, is often seen as a marker of a modern, cosmopolitan elite, standing in contrast to ingenious "*tongzhi*" (comrade/ homosexual) cultures, which are often labelled as "backward" (Zhou, 2022).

As Evans noted: "sexuality is a key site of the construction of gender differences and of the hierarchies inscribed in them" (Evans, 1997, p. 29). The underlying logic of this study

considers sexuality, like gender, to be situationally, relationally, and chronologically constructed rather than anatomically ordained. In separating gender and sexuality, my usage of “sexuality” predominantly refers to the erotic aspect of sexual acts and interactions.

Institutionalised Heterosexuality

Feminist researchers have a vested interest in the gender division and hierarchy inherent to heterosexuality, as “heterosexuality is, by definition, a gender relation” (Jackson, 2006, p. 107). This study focuses on heterosexuality not as a naturalised or deterministically labelled sexual “orientation”, but as an “institutional organising structure” (Ingraham, 1994, p. 216).

Heterosexuality, as viewed through this lens, becomes a complex performance, in which not only self-identified non-heterosexual individuals are observed performing heterosexuality, but also self-identified heterosexuals are compelled to emulate a prescribed version of heterosexuality, as heterosexuality is nothing more than a fanaticised “reality”, always *at risk* of failing “in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealisation” (Butler, 2015, p. 378).

A wide array of studies delve into the collective anxiety experienced by Chinese same-sex attracted individuals, pressured to “pass” as heterosexual through the adoption of a “gender mask” (Harris, 2004), which predominantly depends on performing as “married” in the Chinese context (Choi and Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2017; Kam, 2013; Ren et al., 2019; Wang, 2019; Zheng, 2015). Simultaneously, scholarship implicitly explores the anxieties inherent in the performances of heterosexuality by individuals self-identifying as heterosexual, as they grapple with their own imagined versions of heterosexual identities.

For instance, Chinese heterosexual men with “small penis” suffer from insecurities over masculinity and heterosexuality (E. Y. Zhang, 2015), and Chinese heterosexual women who feel “dirty” or disinterested in heterosexual intercourse would comply with their husbands’ sexual initiatives to fulfil their marital duties (Li, 2009; Parish et al., 2004, 2007a). Moreover, Chinese heterosexual men intentionally display a façade of promiscuous heterosexuality, such as maintaining a mistress, for social recognition in wealthier circles, despite their disinterest in these women (Xiao, 2020).

Due to the fictionalised and fabricated nature of heterosexuality, or what Ingraham refers to as the “heterosexual imaginary” (Ingraham, 1994), heterosexuality as an intricate social apparatus is constantly at the risk of being “undone” (Butler, 2015). This highlights the paradoxical nature of heterosexuality as seemingly formidable yet operationally fragile, such that it not only punishes the “outlawed” but also perpetually “regulates those kept within its boundaries” (Jackson, 2006, p. 105). Thus, it is apt, if not too late, to apply heterosexuality as an analytical lens to reveal how tongqi – as self-identified heterosexuals – navigate, resist, and comply with the heterosexual norms, as it is one of the main societal forces with which they grapple in their day-to-day lives. In my thesis, I employ the terms “heterosexualising” and “heterosexualised” to accentuate the unremitting momentum and the consequential repercussions of heterosexuality as a disciplinary apparatus that institutionalises gender hierarchy.

Refining the discussion on gender and sexuality, the use of the term “heterosexuality” in my thesis rests on three key pillars. Firstly, heterosexuality implies the eroticised male-female exchanges contingent upon penile-vaginal intercourse, which foster an asymmetrical gender dynamic, materialising as the feminised penetratee and masculinised penetrator. Secondly, heterosexuality denotes the romanticised male-female engagements set within the context of marital institutions adhering to the post-socialist paradigm of love-sex-monogamy in post-socialist China. This paradigm positions heterosexuality as the sole “authentic” and “natural” emotional bond conducive to conjugal life. Lastly, heterosexuality is construed as an institutionalised social framework, colluding with patriarchy to allocate women and men into dichotomous roles of homemaking wife and breadwinning husband, thereby reinforcing gender binarism and hierarchy. In essence, the application of heterosexuality in my thesis underscores its role in eroticising, romanticising, and institutionalising unequal gender dynamics within marital relationships in post-socialist China.

In examining the gender relations within tongqi marriages, this study adopts the term “heterosexuality” as conceptualised by feminists and gender theorists such as Rich, Jackson, and Ingraham. Feminist scholarship positions heterosexuality as a normative, compulsory, and idealised institution, organising the unequal gender structures between women and men. The alternative term “heteronormativity”, also useful for exploring the power dynamics between heterosexuality and homosexuality in queer studies, might mislead the analysis of

my thesis from gender relations to queer kinship. In addition, the concept of “heteronormativity” may subtly imply that there exist “benign” forms of heterosexuality, which are not or less hegemonic and compulsory, that are exempt from feminist scrutiny.

Power and Resistance

Feminist scholarship has long been invested in the Foucauldian “disciplinary power” to capture the nuanced gender relations. Foucault’s power theory explains well how subjectivities are produced and their actions are enabled in modern societies, in which power is not wielded by the dominant in the form of violence: instead, power permeates gently in a capillary fashion in social bodies and relations (Foucault, 1982). The individual, in Foucault’s term, “is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces” (Foucault, 1980, p. 4). Given this productive force of power, the power dynamics between sexes in conjugality are never stable but always orchestrating, navigating, and calibrating, to create new discourses, identities, and gender norms in maintaining the relentless operation of power at a micro-level.

When Foucault guides us to the imperceptible disciplinary power that saturates individuals, producing subjectivities via discursive techniques such as the “dividing practice” (Foucault, 1982), it is worth noting that he does not address the gender aspect in his power analysis. As Bartky critiqued, Foucault “is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine” (Bartky, 1997, p. 95). Given that power emerges and affects through interaction and social practices, subjects also affect power. As all individuals are implicated in gender performance (Butler, 1988), power, as a consequence of interactions, is always gendered. Power is not only gendered, but also has a gender, which is male. In the context of a heterosexualised gender system, the binary division of power eroticises dominant and possessive masculinity, subsequently producing its complementary narcissistic and masochist femininity, and this binary power extends beyond sexuality to every interactive gender practice in everyday life (Bartky, 2015).

Building on Foucault, Byung-Chul Han expanded further on how power circulates in market-economy-based neoliberal societies through desire-driven self-optimisation (Han, 2017). Han proposed a “psychopower” to investigate how power operates at the level of the human

psyche that is charged with capitalism-oriented complacency. In the post-socialist China, which is saturated with the “logic of money” (Osburg, 2013) and digital panopticon (Zhao, 2020), it is apt to address tongqi’s lived realities using Han’s concept to supplement Foucault’s body-focused biopolitics (Foucault, 2019), to make sense of new identities, norms, and gender relations that are internalised surreptitiously at the “psychic realm” where power has ubiquitous effects (Han, 2017, p. 34).

In post-socialist China, both eroticism and romanticism operate on the notion of “desire”, perceived as instinctual and biological, and as reflecting “true” human nature. Libido and emotions are summoned to fuel the legality and hegemony of heterosexuality, rendering it one of the least detectable and seemingly “benign” forms of power that produces and governs gender relations.

Meanwhile, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Individuals are not simply passive recipients of societal norms, but actively participate in the construction and performance of their gender and gender relations. To reveal the subtle and nuanced resistance in intimate relationships like conjugality, James Scott sheds light on how the subordinates, who often do not have the privilege to organise public and large-scale social revolutions, formulate their own “hidden transcript”, resisting in a covert, individual, and dispersed fashion beyond direct observation by powerholders (Scott, 1985).

Existing Literature on Tongqi

In this section, I will explore the existing literature on tongqi and their marriages. I will also show how my study differs from or builds upon previous theoretical or empirical contributions. In general, previous research on tongqi hinges on their victimhood. Tongqi are largely regarded as the victims of Chinese gay men’s “marriage fraud”, being unwittingly coaxed into marrying these gay men and caught in marital distress.

All findings reach a consensus that tongqi suffer from low-quality marriage for various reasons. Local Chinese scholar Kuiyu Tang and his team carried out several virtual ethnographical studies on the subject of tongqi. Based on interviews and virtual online chatgroup observations, Tang and his team found that that 93.1% of the total 173 tongqi

interviewees considered their marriages “a disaster” due to a lack of conjugal intimacy or even physical abuse by their husbands (Liu and Tang, 2014; Tang and Chen, 2013). Later research also suggest that, due to prolonged low-quality marriage, the tongqi group is particularly prone to marital distress, such as physical violence (Wan, 2017; Yu, 2014), serious mental health issues, and suicide attempts (Wang et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2018). Moreover, Eileen Tsang found that tongqi suffer from being “socially dead” when they are physically and mentally trapped in a miserable marriage with a gay husband (Tsang, 2021).

Among the causes of low-quality marriage, sexual deprivation emerges as a common theme in most studies, in which tongqi are often described as “living widows” (Liu and Tang, 2014; Song et al., 2022; Tang and Liu, 2014). In Kuiyu Tang’s study, 30% of the tongqi interviewees had no sex life (Liu and Tang, 2014). In an online survey, Li’s team found that 44.2% of tongqi were celibate after discovering their husbands’ homosexuality, and 62% of the tongqi felt depressed about not having any sexual intercourse in their marriages (Li et al., 2017).

Moreover, both qualitative and quantitative studies have indicated that tongqi suffer from high HIV risk (Tomori et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2016). In his ethnographical studies, Kuiyu Tang found that 12% of his total 173 tongqi interviewees confirmed that they had contracted HIV from their partners (Liu and Tang, 2014; Tang and Chen, 2013). A study conducted by Eric Chow and his team, using qualitative data from China’s electronic academic databases, indicated that “tongqi is highly vulnerable to HIV infection owing to their unprotected sexual contacts with their highly at-risk husbands” (Chow et al., 2013, p. 964). Another recent study by local researcher Yan’s team found that low awareness of HIV among married women is another factor putting these wives at risk of HIV (Yan et al., 2020).

In studying tongqi, one cannot bypass the exploration of the “marriage fraud” discourse, which is essential in constructing the tongqi identity. The prevailing “marriage fraud” narrative is premised on a dualism of villain/victim, in which Chinese gay men purposely trick innocent women into entering a marriage *unwittingly* for personal gains, such as to save “face” for their families, to cover up their homosexuality, to marry a woman to perform unpaid domestic labour, and to have a mother to produce their future children (Cheng, 2016; Song et al., 2022; Tsang, 2021).

Among tongqi studies, there are two main schools of thoughts interpreting the “marriage fraud” accusation against Chinese gay men. One strand regards fixed homosexuality or its self-disclosure as a critical indicator to identify a tongqi and a “marriage fraud” (Li et al., 2016; Tang and Liu, 2014; Tsang, 2021). These studies are largely premised on biologically-determined sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality, defining tongqi’s marriages as defective due to their nature as “mis-aligned-orientation marriages”. Those who are aware of their husbands’ homosexuality are labelled as participants in “formality marriage”, or contract marriage, in which both parties know that their marriage is an artificial performance, mainly to please their parents (Cho, 2009; Kam, 2013; Liu, 2013). The notion of such marriages occurring “unwittingly” indicates a leverage of asymmetrical information flow, in which gay husbands have always known about their homosexuality and tongqi have never known about their husbands’ same-sex attraction. The uneven acknowledgement of the husband’s homosexuality, especially by the husband himself prior to marriage, is the pivotal point through which a gay husband’s fraudulent intention is judged and a woman’s tongqi identity is conferred.

Another strand of tongqi study, mostly by overseas scholars, has brought more nuanced discussions on the marital union of “straight wife and gay husband”, by labelling it as “mixed-orientation marriage” (Hernandez et al., 2011; Shao et al., 2022; Song et al., 2022; Wolkomir, 2009). These studies challenge the compulsory heterosexuality in the marriage system, yet do not deal with the fluidity and locality of “homosexuality” in the Chinese context.

For this study, I find overseas Sinophone researcher Jingshu Zhu’s paper “*Unqueer*” *Kinship? Critical Reflections on “Marriage Fraud” in Mainland China* particularly enlightening. It has paved the way to debunk the biologically-determined view on male homosexuality in understanding Chinese tongqi’s conjugal relations (Zhu, 2017). Zhu conducted an online participant observation in a 132-tongqi-member online chatroom for eight months, as well as 12 interviews with tongqi and seven with Chinese same-sex-attracted men (Zhu, 2017). Her study illuminates the epistemic flaw in previous tongqi research: the racist and homophobic notion in the tongqi phenomenon that is premised on Western-influenced fixed sexual identity and compulsory heterosexuality. My data from both tongqi and tongzhi interviewees (discussed in Chapter *Inventing Tongqi* and Chapter *Married*

Tongzhi) significantly echo with Zhu's findings on the dynamic, diverse, and often self-contradicting perception on homosexuality by Chinese women and men.

For instance, Zhu described a happy wife, Rou, who had been married to a gay husband for 22 years, and who still had an amicable marriage after he came out to her. They bonded over Karaoke and shopping together, and formed a novel conjugal relationship, differing from the "normal" heterosexuality-based marriages. Meanwhile, Zhu presented another story of married man Mingyu, who engaged in transactional same-sex encounters with male clients as a means to support his family financially. Mingyu did not identify himself as gay or straight: rather, he anchored his selfhood in familial and marital responsibility – to be a dutiful provider.

Acknowledging that both of these cases are atypical stories, Zhu nonetheless raised a strong argument that using "disclosure" of homosexuality by the husband as a critical condition to identify "marriage fraud" oversimplifies queer kinship in China. Zhu, with her data from varied tongqi experience through in-depth interviews, makes a compelling argument that, in studying tongqi marriage, if "homosexuality" is "used as a decontextualized ethical yardstick for queer kinship, may obscure the racist and homophobic prejudices that exist both outside and inside queer communities" (Zhu, 2017, p. 1). The complexity of the tongqi identity and their marriages hinders a more nuanced understanding of both the diverse conjugal realities in tongqi's marriages and the fluid sexuality that Chinese men experience.

Where Do I Position My Study?

This study differs from most of the previous studies, which focused on the compatibility of marital sexual orientations, and rejects their underlying notion of biologically-determined homosexuality and normative gender relations in Chinese marriages. This thesis builds on Zhu's finding, regarding not only human sexuality but also marital gender roles as "performative" (Butler, 2006) and situation-based in studying tongqi. This interview-based qualitative study aims to provide a more nuanced discussion on tongqi's marital experiences by examining their agency through a gender lens. While Jingshu Zhu focused primarily on the fluidity of male homosexuality, this study focuses more on tongqi women's diverse gender role renegotiations, marriage expectations, and marriage/divorce decisions in the

context of post-socialist China. While previous studies mostly explored tongqi's marriage by addressing the hetero-homo dichotomy, my thesis aims to enrich the knowledge production on tongqi via its gender lens.

This study also differs from a common conclusion drawn from many previous studies, which argues that “the fundamental solution for eliminating or eradicating the tongqi phenomenon is to build an inclusive social climate for gay or bisexual men or other sexual minorities who do not fit conventional marriage in China” (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 2592). Contrary to this stance, this thesis contends that the marital distress experienced by tongqi women is rooted in their gender roles and argues that the tongqi phenomenon is not as unique as previously suggested by many studies. For instance, in the chapter on *Conjugal Sex*, I will examine how the domestic abuse faced by tongqi related to female sexuality follows patterns similar to those observed in sexless heterosexual marriages in China.

Moreover, this thesis aligns with recent academic studies that have delved into tongqi's agency in renegotiating their marriage difficulties (Liu, 2020; Sun, 2020; Tang et al., 2020; Zhou, 2022). These studies shed light on how tongqi women are not passive victims but active agents navigating their marital lives. In her interview-based study, Eileen Tsang discovered that the tongqi interviewed were “all trying to find space to survive and find their own political, social, and civil life” (Tsang, 2021, p. 12), including those from the lower social class whose husbands had infected them with HIV. Zhou and her team interviewed 14 tongqi online and found that, in the domestic sphere, many tongqi actively reframe their conjugal relationships with their gay husband through open communication and mutual trust (Zhou et al., 2022). Wenjing Liu's study on tongqi's subjectivity in cyberspace reveals how, in the social and political resistance, tongqi intentionally and strategically use online space “to initiate and advocate for their social causes outside the heavily censored mainstream media” (Liu, 2020, p. 56). However, no existing literature has been found to address tongqi's agency in challenging and even subverting the normative gender script and power dynamics in these women's marital relations. This thesis aims to fill this knowledge gap.

Expanding upon current research focusing on the subjectivity and agency of tongqi women, this thesis aims to further investigate how identifying as tongqi affects these women's marital negotiations and decisions concerning marriage or divorce. While existing research has not explored the ramifications of the tongqi identity on women's marriages, Zhu highlights a

methodological challenge in her study – “the impossibility of sampling the silent” (Zhu, 2017, p. 9) – meaning that she could not reach potential female interviewees who do not even know about the notion of “tongqi”. Zhu’s obstacle highlights an epistemic gap in tongqi research: no woman is inherently a tongqi – it is a social label that many Chinese wives choose to adopt. My study differs from the previous studies by focusing on this epistemic gap and the ensuing complexities. I aim to contribute a nuanced understanding of the tongqi identity and its varied implications for Chinese marital relationships.

Having outlined the theories and concepts that are used in this thesis, I will now discuss the methodology of the thesis in the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Methodology, Reflectivity, and Research Ethics

This chapter details the research methodology of the thesis, including its epistemological framework, methods of data generation, cohort details, fieldwork setting, and the research ethics that the study encountered. The methodology in this chapter was the blueprint that guided me to reach valid and reliable conclusions related to my overarching question regarding gender relations in tongqi's marriages. This methodology is employed to arrive at the findings presented in my analytical chapters 5–9.

Interview-Based Qualitative Research

The methodology of this study can be summarised as an interview-based feminist study of gender and marriage in China. Previous studies of gender and marriage identified the difficulty of studying the intricate domestic relations in the private realm, particularly those closely associated with victimhood (Wies and Haldane, 2011; Zheng, 2022). Traditional anthropological research methods, such as ethnography and participant observation, are often ill-equipped to examine the intimate, private, conjugal interactions of the subjects due to ethical considerations. Moreover, the cultural shame and stigma associated with female victimhood may render traditional ethnographic research an added source of trauma due to its intrusive nature. Therefore, methodologies that respect the subject's privacy, culture, and personal experiences are necessary to ethically and effectively examine these socially and culturally sensitive issues in the private sphere.

In this tongqi research, I positioned myself as a social scientist and designed a qualitative research approach that consisted predominantly of in-depth interviews, supplemented with field observation and online content. Tongqi's marital struggles are deeply personal and subjective. In-depth interviews respect and capture this subjectivity, allowing individual voices and unique experiences to come forward.

During the year from September 2018 to August 2019, I completed interviews with 32 tongqi and 31 married tongzhi, excluding those designated as pilot or gatekeeper interviews. While I was personally located in the city of Shanghai, the majority of the interviews were conducted online via audio mode, using the Chinese messenger app Wechat. My research reaffirms the

significance of cyberspace as a crucial research arena for understanding the tongqi population, a notion previously established in previous research (Tang and Zhang, 2013). Tongqi are Chinese women who have marital struggles in “real” life, yet their identity is predominantly cultivated and disseminated online, largely due to China’s stringent censorship of civil societies and offline gatherings.

By using data generated from in-depth interviews and facilitated by observation and online content, this study addresses the multi-faceted marital experience of tongqi and their husbands. The convergence of multiple qualitative approaches is beneficial in understanding subjects’ sense-making of their everyday life and their mediated relationships within fast-changing and diverse social contexts (Liu, 2020; Miller et al., 2016).

Feminist Research Epistemology

The central attention of feminist epistemology is *situated knowledge*, referring to a reflection of the particular perspectives of the knower (Anderson, 2020). In the specific gender aspect, feminist epistemology addresses the traditionally-overlooked aspect of how gender situates the knowing subjects. This means that the experiences, biases, values, and social roles associated with one’s gender can influence what one observes, how one interprets those observations, and what one considers as valid or important knowledge (Haraway, 2013; Harding, 2004). By detailing the epistemologies underpinning this thesis, I aim to clarify the underlying logics involved in my relation to and production of social knowledge. In addressing the interplay between gender and marriage in China, I will present three epistemological notions that define this thesis.

Firstly, this study adheres to the principles of interpretivist epistemology, in focusing on the subjective nature of meaning that “is embedded in the language and actions of social actors” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 222). The interpretivist approach aligns with feminist epistemology in many key tenets, including subjectivity of knowledge, the importance of individualised experiences, and the social construction of knowledge and gender. This study explores the interpretation of tongqi’s marital experiences by the social actors involved, placing emphasis on understanding their unique lived experiences and the meanings they assign to them. In the chapters on *Inventing Tongqi* and *Married Tongzhi*, I will illustrate how the wife and the

husband interpret the nature of their sexuality and conjugality diversely. In the chapters on *Resistance* and *Divorce*, I will elucidate the complex and unevenness of the identity of “tongqi”, whose subjectivity varies given each one’s unique personal experience and social context.

Second, the epistemological standpoint is deeply rooted in feminist research. The standpoint theory challenges the supposed objectivity of facts and neutrality of research methods that are central to positivism, as critiqued by feminist scholars for being “universality imperative of masculine thinking” (Ruddick, 1989, p. 128). The epistemic advantage of standpoint theory is to present the constructed reality from the perspectives of subordinated social groups, because such position is more fundamental and less distorted (Anderson, 2020; Harding, 2004). In tongqi research, it is imperative to place the lived experiences of these women at the forefront of my analysis. By prioritising tongqi’s experiences, I can more effectively challenge normative assumptions about marriage and sexuality, as well as highlight the systemic factors contributing to their abnormalisation.

Third, the theory of intersectionality constitutes another pivotal pillar of feminist epistemology. Feminist scholar Crenshaw denounced the notion of a singular form of group inequality that accounts for all the others (Crenshaw, 1989). In gender studies, the notion of women possessing privileged epistemological insight into their shared oppression becomes complicated, due to the inherent diversity within their experiences, intersecting social categories such as class, gender, and ethnicity. In the chapters on *Resistance* and *Divorce*, I will present the complex and varied lived experiences within the tongqi social group, given their education, profession, financial status, and rural/urban origins.

The recognition of the interpretive nature of knowledge production, the diverse standpoints, and the intersected subjectivity indicate that sociological research premised on feminist epistemology is an ongoing process and is unable to offer definitive answer to social phenomena. Therefore, the exploration of gender relations within tongqi marriages adopts this dynamic and flexible approach, aiming to provide a nuanced, contextual understanding of these intricate marital dynamics, rather than definitive, static conclusions.

Multiple Methods for Feminist Research

What is feminist research? Feminist research “challenges the basic structures and ideologies that oppress women” (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 4). What, if any, is the feminist research method? Multiple feminist epistemologists argue that there is no one distinctive “feminist research method”; rather, feminist researchers are encouraged to use “any and every means available for investigating the ‘condition of women in sexist society’” (Stanley and Wise, 2013, p. 12), in order to pursue inclusive, reflective, and nuanced approaches to knowledge production.

Responsive In-depth Interviewing

In the academic discussion of knowledge production, the nature and meaning of the method of the in-depth interview have been constructed on two contrasting metaphors: the interviewer as a digger or as a traveller (Ritchie et al., 2013). The metaphor of the digger/miner refers to a positivist perspective that knowledge can be uncovered as the way it is by the interviewer; while the metaphor of the traveller stands for the post-positivist perspective that knowledge is to be generated during the course of the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). The traveller metaphor, which mostly refers to in-depth interview methods, is more appropriate for the overall interpretative epistemological framework of this study.

Given that my research sought to explore sensitive questions in individuals’ private lives, I adopted “responsive interviewing” as the style to generate oral narrative data. Responsive interviewing focuses on developing a relationship with the interviewee rather than imposing unbalanced power relations of the researcher and the subject (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). A good in-depth interview looks like a conversation, but with objectives and the roles of researcher and informants (Ritchie et al., 2013). The key to this approach to interviewing is to engage in a joint effort with the informant to work out the research questions with mutual respect and trust.

In the tongqi group, five interviews were conducted face-to-face, two were conducted via text in an online chat software (Tencent QQ), and the remainder were carried out using remote audio calls on the Chinese messenger App *Wechat*. With the married tongzhi group, three

interviews took place face-to-face, one participant chose to send a written story of his life, and the remainder were interviewed via remote audio calls. For both groups, the interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The face-to-face interviews tended to be slightly longer, averaging between 90 and 120 minutes.

The use of primarily remote interviews had a multifaceted impact on the characteristics of my research. On the positive side, using online interviews mitigated geographical and social constraints, resulting in a more diverse range of respondents in terms of location. This enhanced the territorial scope of the data collected. Conversely, the digital nature of these interviews potentially introduced bias. They were more likely to attract participants who were already adept at using the internet, thereby excluding those who were unfamiliar with or lacked access to such technology. This might lead to the underrepresentation of informants who belong to lower-income or older age groups.

Participant Observation

In sociological study, participant observation is a central method to study either community activity or the operation of social institutions (Jackson, 1983). This method is particularly relevant in feminist studies, where participant observation can elucidate the complex fabric of daily realities, social dynamics, and gender interactions that other research methods might miss. In my study, however, I applied this approach with ethical considerations in mind, and limited my participant observation to community events of tongqi and tongzhi (gay men) separately, rather than intruding into couples' private marital spaces. While this approach does not directly probe the intricate gender relations within marriage, it explores the complexity and stratification within both tongqi and tongzhi communities that leads to reconfiguration of the subjectivities within. This method illuminates the impacts of external social and discursive forces on the domestic gender dynamics of tongqi.

I conducted my fieldwork, both online and offline, primarily in Shanghai, China, from September 2018 to August 2019. For offline fieldwork, I participated in various community events to gather face-to-face data. These included the PFLAG event for tongzhi, a tongqi offline event for an anti-HIV survey sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO), tea sessions within the married tongzhi community, and private dinners with same-sex

couples (gatekeeping). For online fieldwork, I engaged in virtual community observation within married tongzhi communities on WeChat and tongqi online communities on QQ.

Online Content

In generating data in a digital era, Hine (2000) posits that the cyber sphere is not an isolated space, but rather it is tightly interwoven with our daily lives. This insight becomes especially relevant in studying the social group of tongqi. The blurring of boundaries between the “virtual” and “real” spaces provides a unique opportunity to access and understand the complex lived experiences of tongqi, whose narratives, community activity, and identity construction are predominantly practiced in online platforms.

My research primarily focused on two major social platforms frequented by tongqi: *Tongqi Ba* on the Baidu social platform and the *Tongqi in Action* (“*tongqi zai xingdong*”) forum on Douban.com. The overlapping content on these platforms signifies a shared demographic of tongqi and recurring narratives surrounding tongqi marriages across China's digital spaces; however, each platform had its distinctive tendency towards organising the tongqi community and prioritising certain tongqi’s narratives. Reading tongqi’s online posts thus became a crucial method to first reach potential participants and second understand the diverse marital experiences of tongqi.

Meanwhile, the internet, according to Hine, gains its meaning and significance through the practices, interactions, and interpretations of its users (Hine, 2000). Keeping this in mind, my approach to incorporating tongqi’s narratives from the digital realm was to continuously interrogate the sociological context that drives tongqi women to resort to virtual spaces for identity creation and collective activism.

Data Generation

British sociologist Jennifer Mason defined the selection of sampling as the “principles and procedures used to identify and gain access to relevant data sources that are potentially generated in relation to a wider universe and to select from them for the purposes of gaining meaningful insights into your intellectual puzzle” (Mason, 2017, p. 53). For my tongqi study, this illuminates the way my research design should be crafted to gather accessible, rich, and

relevant data. In identifying potential participants for gender and marriage analysis, diverse experiences were sought to prevent single narrative dominance. Access to offline meetings and online content was gained based on relevance, popularity, and perspective diversity. The selection strategy aligned with Mason's principle of purposive sampling, choosing data sources for their pertinence and insightfulness to the overarching research question, rather than statistical representativeness.

In adhering to the methodological and epistemic design of the thesis, I purposely designed data generation in both tongqi and married tongzhi social groups. This decision was made to ensure a multi-perspective and comprehensive understanding of marital gender dynamics between and within these two interconnected social groups and to embrace the multiplicity and synergy of experiences that characterise them.

In locating and sense-making who fitted the criteria of tongqi, it took me a long time to recognise the diverse potential definition of the tongqi subject. In my field, I observed Chinese women whose husbands had same-sex affairs but who did not identify themselves as tongqi, and one woman who could not confirm her husband's sexuality yet was actively engaging in multiple tongqi communities and events. Eventually, I decided to take the actor-oriented method (Long, 1990): a methodological framework that places strong emphasis on the agency of individuals within broader social structures and systems. In light of this method, I chose tongqi who self-identified as tongqi and engaged in tongqi-related social activities or communities. This decision respects the individual agency in self-identification and acknowledges the subjective, complex, context-dependent construction of social identity. The same logic was also applied to the married tongzhi group, where the identification of participants was also grounded in their self-identification as married tongzhi and their engagement in related social activities.

Thus, in my research, tongqi and married tongzhi informants are not just passive subjects affected by their circumstances, but active actors shaping their identities, gender dynamics, conjugal relationships, and social worlds. This approach opened up a rich terrain of negotiation, resistance, and adaptation by actors in their own marriages, which will be analysed in the chapters on *Resistance* and *Married Tongzhi*.

Approaching the Interviewees

The initial challenge in my fieldwork was recruitment. Being a native Chinese speaker and a social media columnist on a Chinese digital platform, as well as a former volunteer for Shanghai Pride Week, I had pre-existing connections with community leaders, or gatekeepers, in local tongzhi groups. Additionally, I was connected to researchers who had conducted virtual ethnographies among tongqi communities. These affiliations influenced the demographics of my interviewees. On one hand, participants recruited through these networks were more likely to trust the integrity of my research due to the referrals from respected community leaders. On the other hand, such a recruitment method skewed my participant pool towards individuals who had close relationships with their communities' leaders, consequently diminishing the chance of recruiting marginalised tongqi or tongzhi members.

Despite these connections, establishing mutual trust took three months, given the leaders' commendable commitment to protect group members' privacy. I started by holding informal meetings with leaders in these groups to explain my research project. I then conducted pilot interviews with these leaders to demonstrate the structure and intent of my research, my commitment to academic integrity, and my personal dedication to advocating for marginalised groups in China. As initial trust was established, the leaders began to introduce me to individual group members. Thanks to their endorsements and the effect of word-of-mouth, the snowball sampling ensued.

In addition, I tried to contact tongqi in Chinese online communities or social media, such as the *Tongqi Alliance* on the Chinese twitter *Weibo*, *Tongqi Ba* on the Baidu social platform, the *Tongqi in Action (tongqi za xingdong)* forum at Douban.com, and various tongqi and tongzhi QQ chat groups. The online approach method garnered positive responses from many tongqi, but was less rewarding in the married tongzhi demographic. This is because gay men who marry women are heavily stigmatised in the mainstream. My identity as a female researcher was perceived as a threat to many married tongzhi, who were cautious about any further villainization by academia.

It took me much longer to build bonds with the married tongzhi community than with the tongqi community. Compared to tongqi, whose victimhood and social sympathy are socially

established, tongzhi in China are very guarded and vigilant about discrimination. Tiantian Zheng's study notes in detail how Chinese tongzhi, especially those from the elite social class, engage in covert sexual practices, such as forging anonymous transactional relationships (Zheng, 2015). My interviews with married tongzhi were more coded than those with tongqi, as tongzhi tended to obscure their personal and marriage details for their own protection.

Moreover, I eventually decided not to recruit interviewees through my personal column to avoid ethical complications, as my established online avatar might exacerbate the imbalanced power relations between the researcher and the informant. In the end, the multiple ways of approaching interviewees led to the successful completion of interviews with 36 married tongzhi and 34 tongqi individuals. This careful and ethical approach ensured the confidentiality and trust of all participants in my research.

Sampling

Among all interviews completed (38 male and 34 female), I selected 32 tongqi and 31 married tongzhi, excluding the pilot interviews, to constitute my sample pool for the thesis. To adhere to the feminist epistemology outlined above, I decide to avoid constructing a homogeneous group for either the tongqi or the married tongzhi cohort.

Methodologically, doing qualitative research means that the researcher should engage with the diversity, complexity, and specificity of the social world (Mason, 2017). In addition, given the rapid socio-cultural changes of Chinese society since the 1980s, social mobility via education, work migration, wealth accumulation, and matrimony has diversified not only Chinese individuals' experiences but also the identities of tongqi and married tongzhi. Thus, for this study, I chose to include participants of various education levels, professions, rural or urban backgrounds, and marital durations.

The only criterion I employed to narrow down my samples was age. In China, the legal age for marriage is stipulated at 20 for women and 22 for men. Furthermore, multiple scholars argue that the post-reform generation since the 1980s has veered significantly more towards secularism and individualism in gender and marriage attitudes (Sun and Wang, 2010; Yu and

Xie, 2015). Accordingly, I set my cohort within tongqi and tongzhi aged between 20 and 60: individuals who were born or came of age during or after the epoch of economic reform. This age bracket represents individuals shaped by the specific historical juncture of rising individualism, neoliberalism, and state capitalism in China.

After the completion of data generation, the majority of the tongqi I studied were young Chinese women in an elite social class. Of the 32 interviewed, only four were above the age of 50, with the remainder aged mostly between their late 20s and mid-30s. Additionally, 27 of the 32 participants held a college degree or higher, with two of them being PhD candidates. Financially, 29 had stable incomes from careers in white-collar jobs, entrepreneurship, skilled freelance work, or civil service. Only one participant worked in a blue-collar role as a building cleaner, while two were stay-at-home mothers. The rural/urban origins of these women were complex. These tongqi's good educational background indicates that most of the rural-born tongqi were able to migrate from rural areas to cities or witnessed the urbanisation of their hometowns during China's market reform era. Thus, the population mobility across rural and urban areas among these highly-educated women makes it challenging to categorise them strictly as rural or urban. Conducting the interviews online added another layer of complexity. While it allowed for participation from tongqi across various regions in China, it made it harder to pin down a distinct regional identity. In summary, the majority of tongqi in my research were well-educated urban residents with careers in sectors like white-collar jobs, civil service, and skilled professions.

All of my 32 tongqi interviewees were found on the Chinese internet, including tongqi chat groups on the mobile app *Wechat*, the tongqi help group on the online forum of *Douban*, tongqi story posts on the social media site *Weibo*, and my recruitment information on the *Zhihu* website. It is worth pointing out that, to date, the tongqi that have been studied are still largely within the demographic that has access to the internet, the money to possess digital devices, and the knowledge of using electronic devices, which indicates a clear delimitation of the knowledge of tongqi that has been accumulated within a specific, more privileged, social stratum.

The tongzhi group I interviewed presented a broader spectrum of backgrounds. While one informant was 60 years old, the majority ranged from their late 30s to mid-40s, making them on average about ten years older than the tongqi cohort. Of the 31 married tongzhi

participants, 15 had an education level of high school diploma or lower, while the remaining 16 had at least a college degree. At the time of the interviews, only one was unemployed. The others all had stable incomes from various occupations, including roles as factory workers, employees in state-owned or private enterprises, shop owners, and farmers. Just as with the tongqi group, the online format of the interviews blurred specific regional identities for the tongzhi participants.

Two tables that present the demographic profiles of the participants are provided in Appendix 1 (tongqi) and 2 (married tongzhi). A copy of the consent form used in this study is provided in Appendix 3.

Reflectivity: My Position as a Researcher

As positivist objectivity has been challenged, one can easily observe the greater stress on the presentation of the researcher in qualitative research. The data generation in fieldwork, as argued by England (1994 p. 80), is a dialogical process influenced by how the researcher is perceived. For feminist research, it is critical to engage the researcher's positionality reflectively to avoid an exploitative relationship between the researcher and the participants (Ali, 2015). I paid particular attention to several aspects regarding my research position in this study.

The first has to do with the risk of favouritism, due to my own gender identity and its relation to different genders. I am a socially identified female and self-identified feminist researcher. Therefore, I must be aware of the imbalance in my affiliation towards women (tongqi) and men (married tongzhi) in the study. I acknowledge a predisposition to form quicker, more comfortable bonds with the female group (tongqi) and to empathise more easily with them compared to their male counterparts. This inherent bias could inadvertently lead to an amplification of one narrative while silencing the other. Thus, it is important for me to remember that feminist research extends beyond women: it is firmly rooted in a commitment to equality and social justice (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007). In the context of tongqi marriages, both wives and husbands find themselves in unique positions of social and familial victimhood, which were acknowledged and examined.

The second aspect addresses the imbalanced power dynamics between me (the researcher) and the interviewees (the researched). Reflexivity is essential in cross-border qualitative research because of “the production of knowledge and the power relations that are inherent in research processes in order to undertake ethical research” (Sultana, 2007, p. 382). In my study on tongqi, my position within these power dynamics was influenced by two significant factors.

On the one hand, my identity as a British-educated overseas PhD researcher added an element of complexity to the power dynamics during my fieldwork. Due to my educational background, many interviewees perceived me as a “knowledgeable” and “respectable” figure. This occasionally led to a situation where the interviews, particularly in the initial 15–20 minutes, risked transforming into “counselling” sessions. Participants would seek advice, appearing to view me as a source of “advanced knowledge from the West” that could provide insight on their marital decisions or sexual self-identification. On the other hand, my social identity as an unmarried 31-year-old Chinese woman sometimes undermined my perceived credibility as a researcher. In China, respectability is closely associated with marital status (Fincher, 2016). As a result, I was often dismissed as a “baby girl with infant hair” (*huangmao yatou*) or even ridiculed as a “leftover woman”, who was unworthy to study marriage, by some informants from both the tongqi and the tongzhi group. In interviews, many participants did not take me seriously until I demonstrated a genuine understanding and respect for their life struggles. This dual positioning highlights the complexity of power relations intersecting gender and class in my fieldwork, reinforcing the necessity of reflexivity in research processes to ensure ethical and balanced interactions.

The third aspect of reflexivity in my study is my language positionality: I am a native speaker of mandarin Chinese and I conducted sociological research in a linguistic context that is my mother tongue. As a native speaker, I am deeply familiar with the colloquial terms that permeate my field and the cultural nuances when I engaged with other literature in Chinese studies. However, consistent with reflexivity theory, I must remain conscious of my role in the research process. My native speaker role does not make me immune to biases. I need to be cautious about the potential for my own biases and assumptions to influence the way I interpret and present the data.

Reflexivity is not only crucial during data collection in the field but also carries significance in the post-fieldwork phase. This is the stage when research data undergoes organisation, analysis, filtering, selection, interpretation, and processing to form the final thesis. The absence of reflexivity at this stage might lead to biases in the thesis as a result of inadvertent data manipulation. In this qualitative research with a feminist standpoint, I must maintain a reflexive stance throughout the research journey, so that gender relations in tongqi marriage are studied grounded in the subjects' own agency and lived realities rather than being reduced to assumptions.

Research Ethics

Feminist research often embraces a close relationship with the informants, as they challenge the positivist objective and its distant methods. I embraced the “ethics of care” model that is popular within feminist research methodology. This model allowed me to cultivate and sustain long-term, trusting, and empathetic relationships with research participants (Gabb, 2010). When investigating gender dynamics in tongqi's conjugal relationships, the approach of “ethics of care” is apt, as family life is often regarded as an emotional and personal sanctum (Larossa et al., 1981).

Meanwhile, emotions are an integral part of a conversation (Daly, 2007). The social groups with which I engaged, both tongqi and married tongzhi, often grapple with diverse social stigmas and systemic oppressions. In alignment with the “ethics of care” model, I responded to emotionally charged narratives with empathy and sensitivity. Additionally, I was mindful of each participant's emotional status, adjusting the duration and intensity of our interviews as needed. By adopting a reflexive approach, I used reflexive practices to consider the level of intrusiveness upon my participants' private lives and the ongoing implications of their conjugal arrangements, if they remained married.

Many researchers have stressed the importance of informed consent in research ethics (Gabb, 2010; Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; Larossa et al., 1981). Before conducting each interview, I presented a digital copy of the consent form that listed the objective of my research and my ethical obligation to keep all my participants' information confidential. Due

to the lack of equipment such as a digital pencil, most remotely-interviewed participants gave oral consent at the beginning of their interviews and confirmed their consent at the end.

Moreover, almost all interviewees, except two slightly older tongqi, resisted being recorded, as a significant portion of the conversation was about their private sexual lives (tongqi) or marginalised sexual identity (married tongzhi). Subsequently, after getting permission from every participant, I used the fast note-taking skills I accumulated when I worked as a conference interpreter for five years to text-record our conversations. The principle of “knowing responsibly” underscores that feminist research must ensure that the ongoing process of acquiring knowledge is ethical (Code, 2006). This principle underpins my commitment to respect participant comfort levels regarding the process of data generation.

Limitations: The Duality of Constructed Realities

Erving Goffman, in his seminal work, illustrated the concept that individuals actively curate and manage their social interaction to achieve impression management (Goffman, 1978). This theatrical act becomes heightened, especially when individuals are acutely aware of the broader implications of their narratives, such as in research settings. My fieldwork on tongqi-tongzhi marriages in China bears witness to such dynamics, bringing forth a set of limitations of this study.

Firstly, it is important to understand the context of my interviews. Both the tongqi and tongzhi groups, aware of the potential academic and societal ramifications of my research, had stakes in presenting specific narratives. The result is a constructed reality, tailored for their respective causes and interests. This, in turn, leads to conflicting representations of tongqi–tongzhi marriages in the data I have generated.

Tongqi women, in their interactions with me, were motivated by a desire to carve out a distinct space for themselves in the public discourse. They wished to establish a collective sense of victimhood that is legitimate, recognised, and grounded in their experiences as wives to gay men. Tongqi in my study showed a strong determination to mobilise societal, legal, and political support, particularly in domains like awareness campaigns, stigma removal, and favourable divorce settlements. Their narratives, therefore, stressed the oppression they

endured, often focusing on domestic abuse at the hands of their homosexual husbands. This specific practice of impression management (Goffman, 1978) can be understood by the concept Ange-Marie Hancock termed as “Oppression Olympics” (Hancock, 2011): that tongqi intentionally engaged in an impression competition to assert the severity of their plight. By doing so, they sought to demonstrate that they are the most marginalised and therefore the most deserving of activist support and resources.

In contrast, the tongzhi, facing a different set of challenges, presented a narrative rooted in their struggles with marginalisation due to their sexuality. To promote sympathy for their plight, they underscored their resistance against societal pressures that pushed them into heterosexual marriages. Rather than being the oppressors, as the tongqi narratives might suggest, the tongzhi stories pivoted around themes of inner guilt and their attempts at restitution towards their heterosexual spouses.

This duality of constructed reality significantly differs from my initial research design, which aimed for a dual-perspective yet congruent finding compounded by data from these two groups. The dichotomy in these narratives poses a significant limitation. Each group’s performance during their interactions with me, underpinned by their need for impression management, resulted in a dichotomous portrayal of tongqi–tongzhi marriages. While this duality adds depth and breadth to the understanding of the phenomenon, it also complicates the process of drawing conclusions, as it tends to show two conflicting and confusing realities.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter delineates the methodology I adopted for this study – an interview-based interpretive feminist approach to understanding gender and marriage in China. The evolution of my research, from research design to fieldwork, analysis, and eventual thesis write-up, is a fluid journey with academic rigor and ethics. At each stage of the study, I faced distinct challenges. However, I devised various solutions to keep myself on the track of solving the overarching intellectual puzzle of my research. The next chapter illustrates the social and historical context in which tongqi came to rise in post-socialist China.

Chapter 4. Contextualising Tongqi: Wives in Marital Struggles in Post-Socialist China

To investigate the gender relations in tongqi's marriages, this study must ground itself in the historical and social context in which the tongqi identity was born. This chapter will showcase the contextual landscape of the tongqi social group and their marriages in post-socialist China, by addressing the following key contextual aspects: the relations between women and marriage, the marriage "crisis", stigmatised homosexuality, and the emergence of tongqi in post-socialist China.

Women and Universal Marriage in China

The marriage institution has always been a very stable social system in China. Although the marriage rates among women with the highest education have been on a downward trend (Fincher, 2016; Gaetano, 2017), marriage remains a universal institution in the Chinese society, in which almost all women and more than 95% of men are married by the age of 39 (Ji and Yeung, 2014). Entering a cross-sex marriage and upholding the traditional family structure remains highly desired by individuals in post-socialist China (Davis, 2014; Davis and Friedman, 2014a; Ji and Yeung, 2014; Xie, 2013; Yeung and Hu, 2016).

The implementation of the 1950 and 1980 Marriage Law marks two monumental steps by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) toward their endeavour to reshape gender relations within the institution of marriage. The former established Chinese women's legal rights to choose their marriage partner, seek divorce, and own property, free from parental arrangement (Stacey, 1975; Wolf, 1972a). The latter loosened the party-state's control over personal lives in the "inner quarter" (private sphere), reflecting a more liberal approach to individual rights within the institution of marriage (Evans, 1997). Yet, Chinese women's marital roles do not evolve in a linear fashion. With the resurgence of Confucianism, rapid modernisation, and socialist ideologies, an idealised Chinese wife is now expected to bear conflated gender norms.

In post-socialist China, married women often shoulder the "double burden" of maintaining traditional domestic roles while participating in the rapidly expanding market economy. It has

been standardised that urban married women “make economic contribution to the family” (H. Zhang, 2015, p. 415). Yet, the domesticated gender ideal, encapsulated by the term “virtuous wife and good mother” (Hooper, 1998; Sekiguchi, 2010), still persists. Beyond that, women’s sexual attractiveness has become increasingly decisive in mate selections (Blair and Madigan, 2016). Chinese women nowadays struggle to prove their additional “values” of sexual attraction in the marriage market to achieve a satisfying marriage (Xiao, 2010).

Nevertheless, in today’s China, women actively renegotiate their gender roles and relations in marriage. The marriage institution has faced a challenge from a large number of unprecedentedly better-educated and more financially able women in the past four decades, born after the One-Child Policy (Fong, 2002). Chinese women are situated at a new and rare historical window, in which they have greater resources to renegotiate their subjectivities and marital expectations within the overwhelming matrix of gender ideologies.

The Post-Socialist Marriage Ideal: Sex, Love and Monogamy

While traditional Chinese marriage primarily connected intergenerational relationships (Fei et al., 1992), the post-socialist Chinese marriage has been shifting its focus towards conjugal intimacy (Efron, 2000; Farrer, 2014; Panm, 2015). Research shows that two-thirds of Chinese families are conjugality-based nuclear families (Xu and Xia, 2014). Chinese married couples now express a marriage ideal premised on modern notions of “love” (Jankowiak and Li, 2017; Liu et al., 2019), harmonious sexual relations (Giddens, 2013; Panm, 2015), and monogamous commitment (Kim, 2016). These notions are deeply mediated through Chinese socio-cultural characteristics.

The post-socialist “love” in Chinese marriage refers to emotional intimacy between two individuals (Bruckermann and Feuchtwang, 2016; Li, 2009; Parish and Farrer, 2000; Yan, 2003). In traditional marriage, loveless conjugality was never a problem in generational lineage (Watson and Ebrey, 1991).

Although the modern vocabulary of “love” suggests an emulation of its origin in the West, Chinese conjugal love focuses more on duty and pragmatism than on erotic and romantic chemistry. When asked to define conjugal love, Chinese couples refer frequently to “respect”,

“companionship”, “mutual understandings” and “support” (Liu, 1997; Pimentel, 2000). In the market-oriented China, conjugal love now has another layer of pragmatism: it not only addresses the basic living needs but also allocates individuals to a certain class, which determines their perceived “face”, respectability, and social status. Binding transnational notions of gender, sexuality, and class with Chinese characteristics, “love” in post-socialist China has been regarded not only as essential to conjugality, but also as “the idealised way of living” (Zhang, 2022, p. 94).

In China, the notion of “love” is highly intertwined with passion, romance, and materialism. It shows diverse patterns resulting from the social stratification of the rural/urban divide and wealth-based class. For instance, in the urban areas, anthropologist Roberta Zavoretti observed the rise of consumer behaviours intertwined with modern Chinese “love”. For instance, young women receiving gifts and bouquets in the foreign festival of Valentine’s Day has become a hegemonic ideal of heterosexual intimate relationship in the new Chinese middle class (Zavoretti, 2013). Meanwhile, in her field observation with migrant workers, Wanning Sun noted how “socioeconomic inequality in contemporary China impacts the love lives of underprivileged individuals” (Sun, 2023, p. 7), as the household registration system *hukou* imposes structural oppression that hinders the love agency of rural migrant workers.

Sexual harmony is another emerging agenda in post-socialist Chinese marriage. Having a harmonious sexual relationship in marriage is a common notion shared by women and men (Brownell and Wasserstrom, 2002; Farrer, 2014). The nationwide implementation of the One-Child policy, reducing the number of children to only one per family, opened up opportunities for pleasure-driven sexual exploration outside of the domain of reproduction (Jeffreys, 2007; Pan, 2006). This post-socialist discourse of conjugal sexual pleasure is imbricated in recent discussions of love, binding together emotional intimacy, sexual needs, and the marriage system (Jankowiak and Li, 2017). Chinese women who were born in the One-Child generation, especially the urbanites, are very expressive regarding the impact of sexual satisfaction on the quality of marriage (Guo and Huang, 2005; Ji et al., 2002; Lou et al., 2017). Sexual disharmony or dissatisfaction stands as one of the primary grounds on which divorce petitions are initiated. The emerging co-dependence of a good sex life and a good marriage signifies how traditional duty-based conjugality is being re-negotiated in light of post-reform individualistic ideals.

In addition to love and sex, since the Maoist era, monogamy has become the only lawful marriage system and relationship that legitimises sexual relations (Evans, 1997). In the post-socialist context, transnational pop culture, local TV dramas, and romance literature relentlessly depict monogamous relationships as the ideal (Panm, 2015; Zhang, 2022). Nevertheless, the actual practice of monogamy is inconsistent and highly gender-biased. For Chinese men, having multiple sexual partners has evolved as a means of reinforcing an idealised post-reform idea of masculinity indicating high social status and economic success (Osburg, 2013). This is evident in the widespread acceptance and availability of “female paid mistresses” (*er nai*), “extramarital lovers” (*xiao san*), and prostitution for men (Jeffreys, 2007; Xi and King, 2014; X. Zhang, 2010). In contrast, women face much more stringent social surveillance and punishment for their infidelity, premarital sex, and unmarried cohabitation (Farrer and Sun, 2003; Yeung and Hu, 2016). Consequently, Chinese women feel more insecure about their husbands’ loyalty, and cope with a covert tolerance of male infidelity (Chang, 1999; Jeffreys, 2010).

Under the veil of the romanticised conjugal ideal, Chinese women’s marriage decisions are largely based on pragmatic concerns. Post-socialist Chinese marriage remains large in the framework of hypergamy (women marrying up) (Xie, 2013) – a phenomenon shaped by gender norms and post-reform social mobility. Evident manifestations of this phenomenon are the two largest unmarried demographics – the elite urban women and grassroots rural men (Chesnokova and van Peer, 2021) – reflecting women’s practical concerns about housing, education, economic disparities, and the rural–urban divide in the post-socialist marriage market.

Given the expanding social disparities since the reform era, the agency women exercise over emulating the marriage ideal varies drastically across social strata. Urban Chinese women enjoy much more negotiating power in mate selection and marriage decisions, given their better education and employment opportunities, property ownership, and social services (Davis, 2014; Fong, 2002; Liu, 2007). Meanwhile, for rural women, marriage becomes a significant vehicle for social upward mobility and financial securities, given the still deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions of exogamy and patrilocality in rural China (Jacka, 2006). The dominance of love-sex-monogamy features an internal hegemony of “elite” femininity over “grassroots” femininity in producing and narrating women’s experiences in marriage (Wu and Dong, 2019).

At the core of transforming Chinese marriage is the love-sex-monogamy triad, which emphasises individualistic happiness rather than familial duties. While being an ideal, this new marriage model is deeply entwined with the realities of class, gender norms, and socio-economic transformations. The disparity between this constructed ideal and tongqi's lived reality will be discussed in the chapter on *Inventing Tongqi*, revealing how unfilled societal ideals produce “abnormal” and “troubling” subjects.

Heterosexualising Marital Desires

Heterosexuality has always been the norm that governs Chinese marriage. While the Confucian tradition of filial piety binds heterosexuality and matrimony through reproductive duties, the post-socialist Chinese marriage perpetuates heterosexual norms in more insidious ways via desires. As Charlie Yi Zhang notes, in the post-Mao era, “heterosexuality has been further valorised as the norm to gauge and evaluate all other (supposedly perverse) desires to reshape the Chinese population in accordance with scaled-up marketization” (Zhang, 2022, p. 55).

The desire for love is heterosexualised in modern Chinese marriage by post-socialist modernisation and consumerism. The ideal love in China now is largely constructed on a heterosexualised “middle-classness” fantasy, such as bourgeois dating reality shows (Zhang, 2022), a Westernised white wedding ceremony (McWilliams, 2012), and gifts and bouquets on Valentine's Day (Zavoretti, 2013). In the rapidly-changing market economy, post-socialist love mobilises individuals' emotional affections and materialistic desires, and channels them into conforming to new gender binaries in marriage that open up new opportunities and uncertainties for Chinese wives.

Another aspect of normative heterosexuality in Chinese marriage is conjugal sexuality. In the Maoist era, heterosexuality was perpetuated in marriage binding with conjugal harmony and reproductive purposes (Evans, 1995; Hershatter, 1994; Ruan, 1991; Sigley and Jeffreys, 1999; Stacey, 1983). Since the One-Child policy, reducing the number of children to one per family has opened up the era of “sexual revolution” that orients to pleasure-driven relationships (Jeffreys, 2007; Pan, 2006). On the one hand, masturbation, premarital sex,

extramarital sex, paid sex, and sex in unconventional positions are tolerated, and some are even welcomed situationally in public discourses (Bo and Geng, 1992; Farrer, 2014, 2002; Farrer and Sun, 2003; Pan, 2006; Parish et al., 2007b; Parish and Farrer, 2000).

On the other hand, these liberated sexual behaviours continue to be limited within a hegemonic heterosexual framework that defines sex only as penetrative intercourse between a penis and a vagina. Intimacy and sexual pleasure are packaged as “innate” human desires and are channelled exclusively to heterosexual configurations (Jeffreys, 2007; Panm, 2015). In modern China, women’s imaginary on sexual relationship regards penial penetration as the only “normal” and “natural” way to have human sex, and shows either aversion or marginal acceptance of alternative sexual acts in conjugality, such as anal or oral sex (Li, 1991; Parish et al., 2007b). While normative heterosexuality dominates Chinese marital relations, the marriage system serves as the crucial apparatus reinforcing the primacy and supremacy of heterosexuality within Chinese sexualities (Evans, 1997; Zheng, 2015).

Marriage “Crisis”: The Unhappy Wives

In post-socialist China, Chinese women’s greater expectations of marriage may increase self-conscious marriage dissatisfaction. This is manifested in the emergence of a collective voice – the unhappy wives. Unhappy wives are situated as a wide spectrum of marital dissatisfaction, ranging from domestic abuse to emotional disharmony. The notion of domestic abuse, including marital rape, physical violence, and emotional abuse, has gained increasing awareness to explain Chinese wives’ marital distress. Nevertheless, it is either normalised by gender roles, or is dismissed as a private matter, immune to legal intervention (Cao et al., 2023; Chan, 2009; Parish et al., 2007a; Zheng, 2022). Recent studies also reveal how the cultural and institutional systems, such as patriarchal norms, the judicial system, the lack of legal aid, and social services conjointly suppress women’s outcry about domestic abuse and divorce initiations to stabilise “social harmony” in both rural and urban China (He, 2022; Li, 2022; Zheng, 2022).

For emotional disharmony, younger women struggle to navigate their individualistic well-being in the traditional gender framework. Due to the rapid socio-economic change, what the older generation deemed “normal” is no longer tolerated by the post-socialist generation of

wives. Chinese women in post-socialist China are heading more towards more egalitarian conjugality and reciprocal obligations in marriage (Jankowiak and Li, 2017; Pimentel, 2006; H. Zhang, 2015). This shift, however, is juxtaposed against the preservation of conservative family values among men in China (Raymo et al., 2015). While Chinese men actively embrace globalised masculinity that attends to their wives' emotional needs, they still subscribe to "a hegemonic prescription of masculinity that equals manhood with power and wealth" (Song and Hird, 2013, p. 93). Studies find the increasing backlash in men's attitudes against gender-equal marital roles and call for the return of the traditional hierarchical gender structure (Pimentel, 2006; Sun and Chen, 2014).

In fact, the clash over gender attitudes increases the risk of domestic violence in China. A recent study showed that domestic abuse from a husband increases when his traditional gender views conflict with his wife's more egalitarian ones (Cheung and Choi, 2016). Danish sociologist Esping-Andersen highlighted this duality, observing that women are more inclined to challenge traditional gender values than men, as they stand to gain more from such change (Esping-Andersen, 2009).

Moreover, recent research shows that, among young Chinese couples, it is the wife's perceived conjugal gender equality of sacrifice that determines the marital satisfaction (Lan et al., 2017; H. Zhang, 2015). While Chinese marital satisfaction has a considerable influence on personal levels of depression (Miller et al., 2013), the voices of unhappy Chinese wives are expected to steadily grow and expand. Tongqi surface as one strand of these voices.

The Fleeing Wives: From Women's Emancipation to Familial Stability

Under the universal marriage institution, Chinese women face immense social pressure to stay married. The overall divorce rate shows a sharp increase, climbing from 0.34% in 1950 to 0.98% in 2001, and then to 3.02 in 2011 (Mo, 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). Nevertheless, marriages in China are actually much more stable compared to those in other East Asian societies, given that the majority of Chinese marriages remain intact after a decade (Yu and Xie, 2021).

In post-socialist China, the divorce rate increased sharply, bearing an evident gender pattern with more than 70% divorces being initiated by the wives (Jeffreys, 2007; Platte, 1988). Traditionally, it was very difficult for women to end a marriage due to the subservient gender role of females in the Confucian family (Liao and Heaton, 1992). This new women-initiated divorce trend is particularly striking, given the intense cultural discrimination faced by divorced women (He, 2022) and the lack of substantial legal and social support in China, such as shelters, *pro bono* law services, or NGOs (He, 2022; Zheng, 2022). Nevertheless, the majority of divorces in recent years are initiated by women. The market reform in China provides an unprecedented opportunity for Chinese women's economic independence, which increases the chance for unhappy wives to walk out of any unsatisfactory or abusive marriage.

The increasing trend of divorce, though still relatively limited in scale, makes a sharp discord against the party-state's agenda of "harmonious society". This is a Confucianism-inspired concept, "where conjugal and familial stability constitute the moral flipside of material prosperity" in post-socialist China (Zavoretti, 2013, p. 2). In the panic of dissolving marriage as a social and political "crisis", in 2021, the party-state wielded direct state power to quickly enact a tighter divorce rule – the "cooling off" law, which requires couples who are mutually seeking a divorce to wait for 30 days before formalising it (Davidson, 2021). By introducing this law, the party-state makes a step towards reversing its policy from the 1980s of withdrawing interference in citizens' private lives. This renewed intervention into personal relationships reflects a totalising political effort to impose traditional family values to Chinese wives who appear to grow doubts about these norms.

Women Who Stay Married and their Everyday Resistance

Prolonged marriages do not equate to satisfactory marriages; nor does the majority of Chinese women who stay married equate to the total conformity to social norms. Unhappy Chinese wives have always engaged in varied forms of resistance, leveraging new opportunities in the market economy to reshape their married lives. Traditionally, women would gain power through a special bond with their male children, forming a matriarchal unit – a "uterine family" within the broader patrilineal Chinese family (Wolf, 1972b). However,

the ways of resistance have changed as modern Chinese families have transitioned to the nuclear model.

Since the market reform, both dominance and subversion in China marriages occur in more covert ways, binding class and economic power. On the one hand, market logics are deployed to sexualise and commodify women in the marriage market, rationalising their dependency on their husbands and thus diminishing their agency to resist domestic oppression (Peng, 2021; Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2022). On the other hand, the market economy offers greater economic securities for unhappy wives to express their dissatisfaction and challenge traditional gender norms (Parish and Farrer, 2000).

For urban women, although an increase in their income does not significantly increase their economic power at home, they gain more say in everyday decisions regarding budgeting, mundane activities, and childcare (Shu et al., 2013). Moreover, the One-Child policy largely disrupted the tradition of patrilocal exogamy in the cities, so unhappy urban wives often mobilise for the natal family's support in conjugal conflicts (Zheng, 2022). Rural-born wives with fewer resources engage in cloaked resistance by masking themselves as dutiful and obedient, either to seize actual marital power or to avoid being abused (Lui, 2018; Zheng, 2022)

In short, apart from unhappy wives who divorce, the majority of unhappy Chinese wives who stay married do not passively accept their marital distress. They engage in varied forms of everyday resistance to navigate traditional gender norms and emergent marital expectations.

The New Stigma on Homosexuality: The Married Status of Tongzhi

In modern China, tongzhi – a term influenced by the West but locally coined for same-sex attracted men since the 1980s – have been facing waves of social stigmatisation. Recently, with the emergence of the tongqi phenomenon, a tongzhi's decision to marry is often questioned, producing a new stigma influenced by modern Chinese conjugality. To date, limited research has delved into the everyday marital lives of this group (Song et al., 2023). Most tongzhi studies focus on their decisions to marry due to filial and heteronormative

pressures, emphasising familial and societal oppression more than gender dynamics in their conjugality.

Traditionally, same-sex attractions in China did not threaten marital stability. Historically, such attractions were seen as fluid behaviours and were largely tolerated, as long as the individual fulfilled his familial duties (Dikötter, 1995; Hinsch, 1992). Pre-modern China regarded “heterosexuality and homosexuality as analogous”: thus “men were free to live out their full range of sexual desire” (Hinsch, 1992, p. 50). While wives were legally required to tolerate their husbands’ sexual affairs, they were less concerned by male paramours. This is because traditional wives mainly worried about their “primary wife” status in polygamy, which was under greater threat from the reproductive function of female concubines by additional male heirs (Hooper, 1975).

In modern China, such tolerance ceased in the early twentieth century, in the nationalist sentiment of modernisation to the advanced West. Decriminalised in 1991 and depathologised by the state in 2001 (Liu, 2015), the stigma surrounding homosexuality has shifted from Maoist sanctions to post-socialist disciplinaries. It is now stigmatised by psychological perversion, sexual promiscuity, HIV risks, and being unfilial to family duties (Adamczyk and Cheng, 2015; Chou, 2001; Coleman and Chou, 2013; Zheng, 2015). Hence, the once-fluid sexuality has been dichotomised into the hetero/homo, normal/abnormal frameworks defined by one’s sexual attractions, and bisexuality barely has any visibility in the modern era (Zhu, 2017).

In a country where universal marriage prevails (Yeung and Hu, 2016), marriage is the primary contention for Chinese homosexuality. The greatest challenge of Chinese tongzhi is not social discrimination, but the desire for parental approval (Adamczyk and Cheng, 2015; Chou, 2001; Zheng, 2015). Yet, parental approval hinges on the son’s resistance against marriage. While the majority of Chinese tongzhi enter heterosexual marriages, many others engage in varied forms of resistance and renegotiations, such as contract marriages with lesbians (Choi and Luo, 2016; Wang, 2019). Many other tongzhi seek help from the social organisation of PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), whose predominant mission lies in kinship negotiations (Deklerck, 2017; Wei and Yan, 2021).

While homosexuality faces systematic oppressions, it also faces situation-based tolerance. Among younger and better educated Chinese, the attitude towards homosexuality is becoming more positive (Cao et al., 2010; Chiang, 2010; Feng et al., 2012). Yet, these studies do not include the factor of the marriage status of tongzhi. Recently, tongzhi who choose to marry women typically face accusations of “marriage fraud” (Zhu, 2017). Married tongzhi are condemned for their “corrupted morality” for seducing unwitting Chinese women into marriage. This accusation denies the fluidity in Chinese tongzhi’s sexual identity development (Song et al., 2021) and the transformation of their marriage and kinship attitudes. The later remains largely understudied.

Conclusion: When Marriage Confronts Conjugalities and Homosexuality

The narrative of tongqi emerged in a specific post-socialist historical juncture when “China has been assigned the weight of throwing off historical constraints and of creating a new cosmopolitan human nature” (Rofel, 2007, p. 198). In this historical window, the Chinese marriage system confronts the modernising of conjugality and essentialising of homosexuality, producing tongqi as one of its unexpected consequences that is charged with individual anxiety and social tension.

Traditional Chinese marriage had nothing to do with the modern love-sex monogamy marriage ideal, but was a union of kinship and familial duties (Baber, 1934; Watson and Ebrey, 1991). In pre-modern China, same-sex eroticism of the husband was not questioned as long as he fulfilled his familial duties (Chou, 2001; Cristini, 2007; Dikötter, 1995; Hinsch, 1992). Yet, having been defined as fixed and innate for the past century, homosexuality is now regarded as a “clash” against the cross-sex marital union in post-socialist China.

The current discourse of this incompatibility operates in a framework that consists of tension among multiple social forces. Firstly, the “clash” embodies the discord between traditional duty-based familial ethics and the modern desire-driven conjugality. This conflict underscores the shifting nature of marriage in China, moving from a primarily socio-economic construct to one constituted by personal fulfilment and interpersonal intimacy (Davis and Friedman, 2014b; Jankowiak and Li, 2017).

Secondly, the “clash” signifies the tension between the traditional gender norms, which portray the wife as “tolerant” and “submissive”, and the emerging image of modern wifehood in post-socialist China. This urban, independent, and elite female image encourages Chinese women to discontinue their unsatisfactory or abusive marriages, and to pursue personal freedom and happiness. This post-socialist female subjectivity advocates an individualistic gender identity whose constitution is independent of patriarchal marital relations.

Thirdly, the “clash” embodies the party-state’s agenda of perpetuating the heterosexuality-premised traditional family structure. Homosexuality, as noted by scholar Tiantian Zheng, has become a “scapegoat” for various social problems in post-socialist China, such as the marriage crisis and the HIV epidemic (Zheng, 2015, p. 72). This “clash” serves to maintain the ideological structure of compulsory heterosexuality, thereby preserving the social order based on a heterosexual family unit in the fast-changing Chinese society.

This unique sociocultural circumstance in China contrasts with similar relationship structures studied in other social contexts. For instance, in Western academia, the marriage between a self-identified gay man and a self-identified heterosexual woman is often studied as a “mixed-orientation marriage” in the field of family theory (Corley and Kort, 2006; Hernandez et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2012). Similarly, sociological studies from America, Australia, Britain, and Israel have examined the causes and patterns of marital struggles of married gay men (Higgins, 2002; Hudson, 2013; Scotcher, 2014; Zack and Ben-Ari, 2019). However, unlike the case of tongqi in China, these studies do not identify a collective victimhood among the wives of these men. Moreover, in Japan, the stereotypical image of effeminate gay men is often romanticised by Japanese women as ideal partners to resist the hegemonic masculinity (McLelland, 1999).

Thus, tongqi is a tension-charged identity and phenomenon in today’s China. It embodies the conflicts of divergent social forces, navigating the treacherous crossroads between evolving gender norms, stigmatised homosexuality, and transitional marital structures at precisely this historic juncture in post-socialist China.

The next chapter will delve into the emergence of the tongqi identity, analysing it as an outcome of the renegotiation between Chinese women’s marital resistance and state-endorsed homophobia.

Chapter 5. Inventing Tongqi: The “Abnormal” Subject in Chinese Marriage

Who becomes tongqi? They are Chinese married women expressing confusions, frustrations, and sufferings closely linked to their marital lives. Who needs the subject of tongqi to grow into a social phenomenon that absorbs discontents regarding marriage in public debates? It is the model of marriage that currently sits on the pedestal of “ideal matrimony” – heterosexual patriarchal marriage, or, in the lexicon coined by the Chinese party-state, the “harmonious family”. This model is deeply rooted in Confucianism, which venerates “the hierarchical harmony of the family [based on gender and generation] upheld as an unquestionable value” (King, 2018, p. 4) to the stability of the Chinese society.

This chapter addresses the primary question: how does the interplay of the post-socialist context and women’s marital resistance engender the tongqi identity? I will look into how tongqi has emerged as a new social identity that encapsulates the desires and needs of Chinese women to restructure their marital gender relations, and of the post-socialist party-state to keep the apparatus of heterosexual patriarchal marriage running.

Analysing this emerging subjectivity of tongqi requires an exploration of its underpinning power technologies. I use Foucault’s three power technologies of objectification: “dividing practices”, “scientific classification”, and “subjection”, as well as his “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 2020). The former legitimises the “normal” by contrasting it with the “abnormal”; enacts social exclusion via scientific knowledge; and makes individuals become subjects of social norms. The later refers to how one actively makes oneself a subject. In short, I will investigate both the power relations and the subject. I aim to trace the practice of power that demarcates the territory of “normal Chinese marital relationship” and the process by which tongqi make sense and make peace of their own marriages in relation to “normal” and “abnormal”.

Meanwhile, a social identity is not just a product of intersecting systems of power and knowledge but a vivid subject that resists, rejects, absorbs, and interacts with power relations (Abu-Lughod, 1990). James Scott’s “public/hidden transcript” is applied to understand the

invention of the tongqi identity. His concept sheds light on understanding resistance and subjectivity in less privileged social groups (Scott, 1990).

This chapter aims to present that the emerging tongqi identity that embodies public transcripts is perceived as beneficial to both the subordinate (women) and the dominant (the Chinese party-state). I argue that the “invention” of the tongqi subject is made possible because it legitimises Chinese women’s efforts to *de-normalize* their marital sufferings via the outlet of state-endorsed homophobia, while concealing the operation of heterosexual and patriarchal institutions through which women are oppressed. I will look into how Chinese tongqi engage with modern discourse of homosexuality to inject repellent agency into the tongqi identity against traditional gender roles. In the essence, I present that the rise of the “tongqi issue” in public debates and academic studies in China is an outcome of the negotiation between the Chinese party-state and Chinese women.

The Tongqi phenomenon: Born in Public Transcripts from *Above* and *Below*

Zhang was a 28-year-old college-educated interior designer living in a medium-sized city in China. She met her husband through match-making at the age of 25, an age appropriate for a woman to marry in the eyes of her parents. Her husband was a college-educated white-collar worker in a private insurance company from the same city. During the eight months for which they dated, Zhang remembered that they were happy, communicative, and “normal”. A match between them was perceived, as their family backgrounds belonged to the same social strata. Thus, once they decided to get married, the decision was approved quickly by their parents and appraised positively by their friends.

However, Zhang’s relationship with her husband took a sharp turn on their wedding night, during which her husband turned his back on her and slept at the far opposite end of the bed. Ever since the wedding, her husband was always neglective towards her, both emotionally and sexually. He refused to talk to her unless she raised her voice. He moved to a single study room and slept there every night for two months until she begged him to move back to their main bedroom.

I could feel that something was “not normal” (*bu duijin*) about my marriage. But I did not know why it was not normal.... My father-in-law

told me this is the way marriage is. He taught me to have a child for his son, my husband, then my marriage would be alright.... Then I asked people around me and they told me the same. The value of marriage in my hometown is like that.

Following the advice of the seniors in the house, Zhang quit her job and focused entirely on saving her marriage by conceiving a child during one of the very few times they had intercourse. Unfortunately, Zhang's marriage was not saved, as her husband remained frigid and noncommunicative. Zhang continued to make efforts until she became convinced that her husband was gay, following which she initiated divorce. She had a hard time returning to the workforce and making a living on her own while taking care of her daughter. As a result, in the divorce settlement, she had to yield full custody of her daughter to her husband's family, and was still grieving every day for her failed marriage and loss of child custody when I interviewed her.

The dichotomy found between these tongqi women's subjective experiences, and the surrounding societal interpretations of these feelings is a recurring tension in this study. In my interviews, "not normal" is a recurring theme commented by tongqi on their marital lives, often accompanied with deep confusion. These women frequently use the term "not normal" to articulate their sense of disjuncture between the socially endorsed image of a "normal" family and their own contrasting realities. On the one hand, husbands who exhibit aggression, abuse, or apathy inflict great emotional or physical harm upon their wives, leading these women to recognise such treatment as abnormal. On the other hand, within the confines of the traditional patriarchal family structure, these very behaviours are often dismissed as the "the way it is", in which "rigid hegemonic masculinity" and its associated aggression towards women are regarded as commonplace, further entrenching intimate partner violence within Chinese marital relations (Wang et al., 2019, p. 94). Within this divide, the distress and experiences of abuse endured by Chinese married women are trivialised to the extent that they are insignificant to the "harmony" of the family.

The normalisation of abrasive or frigid marriage in Zhang's story is not a single case in tongqi marriages, nor in the larger Chinese marital context. Tang's team observed how many tongqi suffer from secondary damage from their parents and in-laws because the seniors often normalise the husbands' homosexual affairs as "temporary impulses", and even blame the

women for “making” their husbands gay by being bad wives (Tang et al., 2020, p. 20). Zheng’s research also illustrates that domestic physical abuse perpetrated by Chinese husbands, in general, is often normalised by labelling female victims as possessing a “harsh mouth” or “strong mouth” (Zheng, 2022, p. 92) – indicative of disobedience and thus seen as naturalising male violence premised on these women’s departure from Chinese normative femininity.

However, in Zhang’s narrative, self-identifying as a tongqi, she actively tried to de-normalise her marital sufferings, in which her tears and sweat, numerous sleepless nights, and even suicidal thoughts were dismissed by those surrounding her as the norm. As the abuse and apathy from her husband escalated, Zhang began to question and resist such normalisation, which drove her to investigate her husband’s sexual history, behaviours and manners, fashion choices, circles of friends, and correspondence with other males. All these efforts led to her self-identification of tongqi and later active participation in the tongqi community. In essence, Zhang’s tongqi identity is founded on her resistance to the expected role of a compliant wife and the pervasive gender script of an “abusive husband and tolerant wife”.

her tongqi identity is premised on Zhang’s defiance against normative gender role of a dutiful wife and the normative gender script of “abusive husband and tolerant wife”. Considering the Foucauldian duet that domination and resistance are always intrinsically linked (Foucault, 1982), it is not surprising to find that the tongqi identity is multifaceted form of agency that navigates the intricacy of domestic oppression and resistance.

In a modernising China, tongqi are hardly the only female group that resist dominant gender norms in marriage. What distinguishes tongqi, allowing their grievances to become a widely acknowledged and state-tolerated national outcry? My study finds that there are two pronounced party-state public transcripts that tongqi adopt and adapt to their cause: harmonious family and homophobia. Each works interactively with the other underpinned by the heteronormative framework of the modern Chinese society, mutually reinforcing their synergetic influence in the production of tongqi.

Firstly, tongqi's adoption of the “harmonious family” ideal serves as a nuanced self-defence mechanism in their resistance, where performing the “tolerant wife” role to safeguard family unity paradoxically allows them to subtly assert agency in ending their marriages. The

concept of a “harmonious family” is a construct that has existed since Maoist ideology, springing from traditional Confucian familial ethics and perpetuated in post-socialist administrations. With the rapid market reform and the turmoil of restructuring female-male intimate relationship, the party-state launched a political campaign that aimed to sustain stable and proper marital order within the “traditional family ethics” (Xiao, 2014). To maintain a society filled with “harmonious families”, the current president Xi’s administration adheres to the traditional gender norm, embracing an idealized image of domesticated femininity as the “virtuous wife and good mother” (Hooper, 1998). In this model, “the stability of the household, headed by a patriarch, rests on the shoulders of this virtuous wife and good mother” (Hird, 2017, p. 2).

Tongqi in my study uniformly declared their dedication to fulfil to the ideal “dutiful wife” gender role to sustain family harmony, even though most had divorced or were divorcing their husbands. By maintaining this stance, the tongqi subject appears non-threatening to the hierarchical gender script that the party-state mandates to sustain social stability. To illustrate this, Zhang, in her quest to justify her divorce decision, stressed her efforts to uphold her marriage by performing the idealised femininity:

I kept looking for what was wrong with me. I tried to improve myself and to give in to his demands.... I could not be more of a virtuous wife and good mother for my marriage.

In Chinese society, where the ideal of being a “virtuous wife and good mother” is highly prevalent, women who, like Zhang, sought to break up their marriages often feel the need to exhibit an amplified dedication to their prescribed gender roles. As Scott notes, those in a weaker position who choose to resist the very norms that subjugate them often wear a much thicker mask of conformity (Scott, 1990). Unanimously, all tongqi I interviewed, to varying degrees, displayed great tolerance over their husband’s mistreatment, enduring considerable frustration and pain in pursuit of maintaining a “harmonious family”.

Such endurance, I argue, is practiced by tongqi women at their “psyche and appearance” (Butler, 2020, p. 24). Tongqi’s conformity to the “dutiful wife” role, in Butlerian language of gender parody, is a complex dance between their internal desires and the external portrayal of those desires regarding manage perceptions and avoid the social sanctions. Zhang, aiming to challenge and eventually escape her distressful marriage, first demonstrated loyalty to her

family elders to avoid their accusations, and then portrayed a compliant image to outsiders, like me, who might judge her choice to divorce by her perception.

While the adherence of Zhang and many other tongqi to normative gender roles protected them from societal backlash as they contemplated leaving their marriages, it simultaneously confined them, demanding that their actions consistently meet societal expectations. This exemplifies the complex power dynamics in tongqi's marriages. By not openly resisting, the absence of explicit action by the subordinates often leads individuals to act against their own interests (Scott, 1990).

Second, homophobia is another public transcript embedded in the inventing of tongqi. Officially decriminalized in 1997 and de-pathologized in 2001 by the party-state, homosexuality in China has been oppressed under the policy of “silent words and reticent tolerance” (Liu and Ding, 2005, p. 33), enacting an “implicit” form of homophobia that circulates at the civil level. In other words, when the scientific language of criminology and pathology stopped being deployed to stigmatise homosexuality for certain political purposes, the “task” of stigmatisation then rested on the cultural customs and morality.

The opinions on homosexuality by most tongqi I interviewed, including Zhang, coincided with the party-state's ambiguous and veiled homophobic attitude:

Homosexuality horrifies me. This phenomenon is horrifying, to humans, to human reproduction. From “ancient” (*gu*) to “contemporary” (*jin*), it has always been the union of one man and one woman. I did not know homosexuality well, but now I do. I'm scared of it. But if I meet one in my life circle, I mean if I see two men or two women fall in love, I can actually handle it. I mean, I don't have problem with it [homosexuality] as long as my husband is not one of them.

The overall hostile sentiment towards homophobia by tongqi in my study resonates with a recent study by Ke Zhang and colleagues. They gathered 3,476 user comments on the Chinese tongqi online forums of “homo-wives” and found overwhelming anti-gay discourses in aspects of moral corruption (marriage fraud), sexual perversion, HIV risks, effeminateness, and misogyny (Zhang et al., 2022b). This open-to-everyone “homo-wives” forum on *Baidu*,

the largest search engine in China, was also a main source from which tongqi in my study acquired information regarding homosexuality and their “abnormal” marriages.

Tongqi’s hostility towards homosexuality is the product of the state’s subtle promotion of homophobia. Meanwhile, the anti-gay narratives that arise within the tongqi community, like that of the “marriage fraudster”, play into the hands of the state’s objectives, reinforcing its homophobic policies at a civil level. Essentially, the anti-gay-husband narratives told by the tongqi community inadvertently align and bolster the state’s agenda in marginalizing and demonizing homosexuality. The “marriage fraud” discourse in the tongqi community will be discussed in detail in the chapters on *Tongqi’s Resistance* and *Married Tongzhi*.

James Scott used the term “public transcript” as “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (Scott, 1990, p. 2). The “tongqi” label is a public transcript. The tongqi identity and its public narrative, consisting of a victim wife and an evil gay husband, is made possible and visible in contemporary China because it is, at least in pretence, in line with the party-state’s official discourses on harmonious family and de-politicised homophobia. Women in China are aware, more or less, of the discursive constraints, or the boundaries of the public transcript at the everyday and state level, within which their complaints, petitions, and advocacies are permitted.

This public transcript serves dual purposes. For the tongqi, it offers a new narrative to sense-make their marital dissatisfaction, allowing them to rebel against their personal circumstances. On the other hand, it fits snugly into the party-state’s larger narrative, which seeks to reinforce a society rooted in patriarchal norms and compulsory heterosexuality. This dual purpose is a manifestation of Scott’s assertion that both parties, despite their seemingly contradictory positions, may “tacitly conspire in misrepresentation” (Scott, 1990, p. 2).

For tongqi, to demonstrate conformity to public transcript is not an act of cowardice, but a ingenious manoeuvre to carve out a covert space for rebellion. As Scott reminds that while the subordinates pay lip service to dominant social ideologies, they also put on their own “hidden transcripts” when the dominant embodiments are considered absent (Scott, 1990). How do Chinese women speak of their marriage when the power shareholders are believed to be out of sight? The next section will map the picture of how tongqi interact with each other in a more private setting where I witnessed “offstage” tongqi subjectivities.

The Hidden Transcript: Tongqi's Subversive Subjectivity

By definition, the hidden transcript represents discourse – gesture, speech, practices – that is ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power.... The hidden transcript of subordinate groups, in turn, reacts back to the public transcript by engendering a subculture and by opposing its own variant form of social domination against that of the dominant.

James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, P 27

On a hot summer day in Shanghai, I got a chance to interview four tongqi face-to-face on invitation by Chan, an influential leader activist across tongqi communities. Working on a survey of tongqi and HIV risks in China, funded by the local Shanghai government and the WHO, Chan managed to mobilise many tongqi to travel to Shanghai from surrounding cities. I was lucky to be invited as a “knowledgeable overseas PhD researcher” and had the chance to match digital avatars in online chat groups with actual faces: Chan, Lan, Ying, and Zhi.

The interviews took place in a tiny hotel room, one by one. All of the participants agreed to be interviewed in the others' presence, so that they could learn from other tongqi's experience. The energy was high in the room, because the younger tongqi had just learnt from the senior tongqi Zhi (48 years old), whose husband was a gold-collar worker in a management position in a sizable company, how she had “tamed” him into an obedient husband by leveraging his *Wechat* chat history, which confirmed his same-sex promiscuity and homosexual identity. The energy of “triumph” was very encouraging and uplifting for the other tongqi, who were in deep struggles of marital negotiation with their in-laws, child custody, distribution of marital assets and divorce litigations. At the last note of the last interview, the women in the whole room felt relieved, and invited me to join them for a celebrative dinner. The uplifting energy continued to the dinner table in a local restaurant, where these women felt more comfortable sharing information with me that they did not want to disclose in a stuffy hotel room.

“Off the table, we give each of our husbands a nickname”, said Chan, “My husband's nickname is ‘anal fistula gay’ (*ganglou ji*) because he had anorectal disease. Lan's husband is named ‘limp gay’ (*quetui ji*) because he has a handicapped leg. For Ying's husband, his

nickname is ‘gerontophile gay’ (*lianlao ji*), because he likes much older men.” As she finished the list, the whole table burst into laughter, and I played along. Chan and the rest of the women assured me that they only used these terms unofficially, behind closed doors, off the table, and within the tongqi circle.

Calling one’s husband by various derogatory terms is a blatant rebellion against the idealised femininity of “virtuous wife and good mother”. When tongqi believe that they are not under the observation of the power shareholder, when they are situated in a trustworthy sisterhood, the “hidden transcript” emerges, embodying tongqi’s resistance and subversion in the form of ridicule and mockery, which largely revolve around their husbands’ homosexuality. In fact, the term used consistently by the majority of tongqi in referring to their husbands is “*jilao*”, a derogatory term used to address Chinese homosexual men, like “faggot” before it was reclaimed by queer groups in the West. Ridicule as a “decentralised weapon” is widely used in gender battles at the level of everyday life in civil societies (Ferree, 2004). For tongqi, to group together and ridicule their husbands’ “sexual perversion” effectively neutralises the authoritativeness of male-dominance and husband-dominance inscribed in the domestic gender norm. Thus, when the “deviant” male homosexuality collides with the superior masculinity, in the eyes of tongqi, the halo of naturalised male superiority is undercut, alongside women’s ideological constraints that deter them from transgressing gender boundaries.

This hidden transcript shows that the tongqi identity makes it possible for some Chinese women to get a taste of the privilege of performing heterosexual: a privilege that is mostly enjoyed by male groups yet barely accessible to women in most social circumstances (Ryder, 1991). My study found that the shame and fear borne by many tongqi for being perceived as “trouble-making wives” or as divorced “second-hand goods” (*ershou huo*) were neutralised once they had relocated their subjectivity from the power matrix of patriarchal conjugality to the one of hetero-homosexuality, in which they are “biologically-determined” to be superior to their gay husbands.

What have tongqi been through in marriage so that they have the need to resist? The next section presents the varied struggles that tongqi face when their perceived “abnormal” marriage reality fails to meet their marriage expectations.

The Voice of Tongqi: The “Abnormality” in Post-Socialist China

In the post-socialist era, or more precisely, post-Tiananmen-Square, the socio-political logic of “stability maintenance” (*weiwen*) becomes the overriding political principle, within which maintaining “family harmony” becomes one of the essential ideological pillars to support the socio-political status quo (Benney, 2016; Engebretsen, 2017; Peng and Fei, 2013; Sekiguchi, 2010). Departing from a total socialist regime, the continuation of “normal Chinese families” faces tremendous threat in the face of historical tides of modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation.

Zhang described to me about her vision of a “normal” marriage: “I was looking forward to having a family, to just “living a life” (*guo ri zi*), independently of my parents’ family. I’m sad now when I’m talking about this. I wanted a family, a child of my own. I wanted to plan my life and education, take care of my parents.... Then, I wanted to have a house, a mortgage, and a car. I wanted to have a son and a daughter before the age of thirty. I thought my life would be good, without too many hardships.” However, Zhang’s dissatisfaction with her loveless marriage suggests that she seeks a fulfilling conjugal relationship that extends beyond mere materialistic and practical considerations.

The new love-sex-monogamy triad (discussed in the chapter *Contextualising Tongqi*) signifies an idealised normality of post-socialist Chinese marriage. The “abnormal”, however, shows diverging patterns in its deviation from the ideal template. Following Foucault’s “dividing practices” (Foucault, 1982), the particular technology of power through which a subject is constructed in opposition to its otherness, the tongqi subject emerges as the contrast against the normal “harmonious family” that is complicated and disrupted by male homosexuality in varied ways.

Intertwined Love and Sex: Post-Socialist Signifiers that Define “Normal” Marriages

In post-socialist China, the language of “love” (Panm, 2015; Santos, 2017; Zhang, 2022) remains a central ideology around which women’s multiple subjectivities are structured. Chinese love is now closely associated with sexual intimacy beyond reproductive purposes

(Panm, 2015). Intersecting indigenous and modern “love”, Chinese conjugal love is interpreted on a case-by-case basis.

When previous studies on tongqi often claimed “lovelessness” as factual in tongqi’s marriages (Liu, 2015, 2020; Tang and Liu, 2017; Tsang, 2021), I first wondered what this modern lexicon of “love” actually means in tongqi’s everyday lives, and how male homosexuality complicates love and sex in post-socialist marital relations. Then, through my interviews, I realised that the key notion that tongqi repetitively stressed in their narrations was NOT the sentiment of love, but emotional abuse framed as the lack of love, as well as the male homosexuality that confirmed this lovelessness. Zhang, for example, repeatedly asked her husband if he loved her, only to receive vague responses. But what kind of marital interactive dynamics drove Zhang to constantly seek his verbal affirmation on love?

As Zhang explained, her husband turned from being “polite and kind” to “frigid and distant” overnight:

I asked him, what was the problem with our marriage. He was either silent or evaded the question by saying he was tired. Every night, he stayed on the sofa, playing with his mobile phone all night long.... Every time I tried to hold his hand, he just threw off my hand and avoided being touched by me.... I asked him why he always neglected me: the only response he said was “you go figure it out”

Zhang’s *loveless* life meant that she was shunned and neglected: in sum, she suffered a total withdrawal of any verbal communication or sexual interactions. These behaviours constitute a specific yet pervasive form of domestic abuse in marriages – “cold violence” (*leng baoli*) – a manipulative mental torture deployed to subjugate women into subservience in marriage (Tam et al., 2016). In fact, cold violence is found to be prevalent in Chinese marriages. A recent report by the All China Women’s Federation (2014, cited in Leggett, 2017) shows that 39% of Chinese women aged 18 to 49 years old had experienced domestic violence by their husbands. In a previous tongqi study, Yuanyuan Wang’s team argued that “cold violence was a result of being a tongqi”, and noted that “how cold violence is experienced by tongqi wives remain unknown” (Wang et al., 2020, p. 5).

My study found that tongqi's cold violence went beyond the interpersonal: it was a structural oppression. Like Zhang, many tongqi in my study used "lack of love" to refer to their husbands' verbal abuse and conjugal avoidance. The etyma of "love" (*ai*) in the term "loveless" (*buai*) in tongqi's narration reveals an ideological dichotomy of love/loveless. This is a cross-axis dichotomy in which "love" is situated in neutral conjugal intimacy, whereas "lovelessness" denotes not the absence of love, but domestic abuse, through emotional avoidance and sexual deprivation. In this dichotomy, the etyma "love" repetitively shifts the focus of tongqi's marital hardship from power abuse to conjugal intimacy. Consequently, the husband's passive aggression is individualised and trivialised, and thus escapes potential social and legal interventions.

In my study, tongqi largely believed that "cold violence" had a pronounced association with incompatibility in sexual orientations. For instance, Zhang complained:

A homosexual man can never grow any "love" (*aiyi*) towards me. If I lived with a normal man, we could have cultivated love together. But my husband treats me only with "rationality" (*lixing*). He suppresses his [homosexual] nature when making contact with me. This is horrible.

The "love feeling", in Zhang's words, is a human emotion generated between two opposite-sexed heterosexuals, as it can be "cultivated" with a "normal" heterosexual man over time in the setup of cohabitation. Here, differing from the passionate and erotic "love at first sight", love in China refers to an emotional bond that can be extracted and developed from acted companionship, caring and support, a series of performative (Butler, 2006) activities that render certain emotions feelable. As Hochschild suggested, love is felt based on the "cultural dictionaries" that define which feelings are felt and which are not (Hochschild, 2003). In Zhang's narrative, next to the dichotomous construct of love/emotional abuse, another dyad is revealed: rationality/emotions, in which the latter is only considered possible in the institution of heterosexuality – one of the "cultural dictionaries" that makes the feelings of love tangible.

While being abused and feeling loveless, tongqi also experience secondary marginalisation by the social normalisation of "cold violence" in marriage. As shown earlier in this chapter, Zhang's husband's emotional and sexual apathy was normalised by her parents, in-laws, friends, and the "value of marriage", which directed her to tolerate them as a dutiful wife.

Thus, Zhang's troubling "abnormal" reality was produced between her own subjective feelings of shame, rejection, and confusion, and the social environment that discredited her negative sentiments.

When cross-examining "cold violence" within the broader context of Chinese marriages, it becomes evident that this form of "loveless" abuse exhibits a more evident gender pattern than any correlation with social class or compatibility based on sexual orientation. Natural as it may sound, the notion of love and its emotion-producing activities are the means by which women's bodies and agencies are appropriated (Jackson, 2013). In her literature reviews, Leggett found that "cold violence is perpetrated predominantly by educated middle-class men" among the "educated and wealthy families" in China (Leggett, 2017, p. 5), as it is a more insidious form of abuse than violence. However, Sun's recent qualitative research showed that rural migrant women also suffer greatly from "cold violence" due to their husbands' evasive manner and withdrawal of communications (Sun, 2023). Combining these findings, the prevalence of loveless or "cold violence" abuse in Chinese marriages shows a gender pattern: Chinese women, irrespective of their social standing or their husbands' sexuality, are more susceptible to becoming victims of "cold violence".

In Zhang's story, what triggered her to stop tolerating such "cold violence" was her husband's homosexuality. Zhang firmly believed that heterosexuality can eventually cultivate "love" over time to clear out "cold violence". This belief reveals how this gender-based abuse is normalised through heterosexuality, which encourages women to tolerate domestic abuse in the guise of their own emotional fulfilment – love. The husband's sexual orientation disrupts the traditional gender narrative of a "normal" heterosexual marriage, causing a rupture in the belief system that subjugates women to normalise the abuse. As a result, tongqi like Zhang may find a pathway to renegotiate the established gender norms, in a manner different from women in "normal" marriages who do not have this specific form of leverage.

The belief of biologically-determined sexuality is powerful. Zhang's tolerance would have continued if she had not become convinced that her husband was gay. This was a turning point for Zhang, as she found a way to sense-make her husband's abusive words and behaviours by ascribing his cold violence to his "nature" [homosexuality]. Unexpectedly, Zhang was empowered by the discovery of his "nature" and her tongqi identity. Zhang finally

chose a divorce to free herself from her wifely duties in a “normal” gender script, which was first violated by her husband through his homosexuality.

Conditional Normalcy: Medically Diagnosed Erectile Dysfunction

In my study, the ways in which love and sex are intertwined in marriage varied. Many tongqi in sexless marriages, if not all, find themselves torn between their personal frustration at the lack of sexual intercourse and their duty to maintain marital harmony. They strive to make sense of their marital frigidity by attributing it to either their husbands’ homosexuality or impotence. These two are opposing signifiers that determine whether sexlessness fits into the domain of “abnormal” or “normal”. Depending on which category they believe their situation falls into, these women may arrive at vastly different understandings of their own identities and make different marriage decisions.

Growing up in a traditional family, Yang, a 27-year-old entrepreneur in the clothing business, had a sexless marriage for a year and half. Yang and her husband dated briefly for six months and had pre-marital sex occasionally, which led to Yang’s unplanned pregnancy. Yang wanted to date for longer, but she had to marry quickly to save the “face” of her family. However, as soon as they had a marriage certificate, Yang’s husband stopped having sex with her or even touching her. He made excuses of work stress, and later relocated to other cities periodically to avoid sleeping at home. Yang felt miserable: she was handling her pregnancy, housework, and later childcare all on her own, while losing her stable income as a shop owner due to full-time motherly duties. Yang spent many nights feeling depressed due to her loveless and sexless marriage: “My marriage was doomed to fail. Men can generate love ONLY from sex”.

An important reason why Yang endured her low-quality marriage was that she believed her husband’s claims about his sexual impotency: “He told me that he had ‘erectile dysfunction’ (*yang wei*). He said I was so pretty, yet he could not get an erection with me. I was convinced that he was sexually interested in me but he just physically could not get it up. I was so naïve that I believed him”.

Like Yang, the majority of tongqi I interviewed would have remained married if their husbands’ “unusual behaviours” had resulted from physiological erectile dysfunction instead

of homosexuality. My finding echoes Everett Yuehong Zhang's study, which discussed the prevalence of Chinese women's complaints yet tolerance of sexless marriage due to male impotence. Zhang surveyed Chinese female college students regarding the question "What should you do if your male sexual partner becomes impotent?", and 89% of respondents indicated that they would cooperate with their husbands to cure impotence while seeking alternative (non-penile) ways to make love (E. Y. Zhang, 2015). For married women, the majority of respondents in Zhang's research also decided to remain married for varied reasons, such as lack of consciousness of sexual desire, high priority of other qualities in marriage, and seeking sexual pleasure in non-phallogocentric ways (E. Y. Zhang, 2015).

In tongqi's marriages, however, men's homosexuality disrupts their wives' tolerance of male impotency. For instance, Yang's tolerance of her sexless marriage ceased when she found her husband's hotel check-in record with another man. Once she realised that her husband was gay, she wanted a divorce as quickly as possible, regardless of financial security and reputational concerns:

I told my husband that *wo ren le* [I would yield to my fate] if he had erectile dysfunction. If a doctor announced that he had this illness, I would have stuck with him.... But homosexual [men] cannot develop good feelings with heterosexual [women]. Friendship is the best they can have. This mix [a homosexual and heterosexual] would do harm to each other and to the next generation.

Yang's narrative makes evident the ways in which a male body is categorised into the realms of "abnormal" or "defective yet still normal" respectively in post-socialist Chinese husbandhood via scientific discourse. Through the reality of a flaccid penis in contact with a female body, a "normal" husband can be produced through the scientific discipline of endocrinology or urology, or his "abnormal-ness" can be produced instead via the scientific language of psychology or psychiatry. The former is the "fate" of most Chinese women like Yang, who would still honour their marriage vow to provide care and support to their "ill" spouse, whereas the latter indicates the unresolvable conflict between their normality and their husbands' homosexuality. In Foucault's view, the reality of "deviance" is constructed with the aid of modern scientific disciplines, and these disciplines present new forms of knowledge that appear neutral or objective, yet the knowledge produced is employed to practice power (Foucault, 1980, p. 27):

Power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.

Here, the scientifically-constructed knowledge, patriarchal relations, and feminine subjectivity are bound together to produce an “abnormal” male body in the gendered role of husband, consequently rendering his relational and affiliated half – the wife – an anomaly. Such anomaly is a co-production by the party-state’s public transcript, which anchors harmonious family onto familial duties and “harmonious sex” that secures the nation’s reproduction (Evans, 1995; Sigley, 2001), and by the women themselves when they consciously feel “lacking” as women, as wives, and as desiring beings. It also embodies the exercise of Chinese women’s sexual agency, opposing the “fate” of a sexless marriage that generations of Chinese “dutiful” wives normalised as their gender-based destined misfortune. Yang’s story, and its narrative on the phallus-centred desire in a female body, will be continued in the next chapter, which discusses how sexual deprivation is enacted as a form of domestic abuse in tongqi’s marriages.

Problematising the “Normal”: Heterosexual Imaginary

The synonymisation between cold violence, sexual avoidance, and lovelessness by tongqi reveals another underlying logic of their marital struggle: the normalisation of domestic abuse via romanticised heterosexuality. In Zhang’s case, her discontent with her homosexual husband’s abusive behaviours actually spurred her longing for a “normal” heterosexual relationship with a “normal” man. Thus, the heterosexual matrix, in which Zhang’s marital sacrifice, her filial manner towards her patriarchal seniors, and her subservient role towards her male spouse were enacted, stayed on the sacred pedestal unquestioned. Chrys Ingraham (Ingraham, 2008, p. 13) explained the concept of “heterosexual imaginary”, which conceals how the organising institution of heterosexuality structures gender:

It is a belief system that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being. At the same time this romantic view prevents us from seeing how institutionalised heterosexuality actually works to organise gender while preserving racial, class, and sexual hierarchies as well.... Through the use

of the heterosexual imaginary, we hold up the institution of heterosexuality as timeless, devoid of historical variation, and as “just the way it is” while creating social practices that reinforce the illusion that as long as this is “the way it is” all will be right in the world.

As well as the romantic aspect, the phallus-oriented aspect of heterosexuality also structures the gender binary in intimate relationships, binding bodily erotic desires to divide the husband’s sexual passive aggression into “tolerable” and “intolerable”. The desire of many tongqi like Yang, wanting to be sexed, is situated not only in their libido but more importantly in the web of sexual, marital, and patriarchal relations to their husband. The penis is charged with the functional destiny of carrying out heterosexual intercourse (McMillan, 2014), which is the nucleus of the institution of heterosexuality.

The tongqi subject is invented, needed, and substantialised for the “heterosexual imaginary” to operate in the rapidly changing and modernising Chinese society. A Chinese wife who regrets quitting her job and having children for the sake of love and marriage is just a normal woman, an ordinary female body infused with naturalised femininities of domesticity, as long as her husband is a “normal” heterosexual man. Only when the husband is believed to be homosexual can a wife’s voice be valued and grown into a national phenomenon to the extent that its power relations allow. As Foucault noted, pessimistically, that “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1978, p. 95), the emergence of tongqi, binding their personal feelings of loveless and sexless, facilitates the state’s agenda to maintain the heterosexuality-based “harmonious family”, as well as the state’s effort to continue stigmatising homosexuality as a perversion, if not pathologically, then morally. Zhang’s belief that love can be cultivated ONLY with a heterosexual man, and Ying’s notion that love can be generated ONLY from heterosexual intercourse, render the institution of heterosexual marriage untouchable in relation to their life struggles.

In post-socialist China, tongqi and their gay husbands emerge as the convenient “other”, the deviants, the defects in opposition to the heterosexual ideal. As a result, the conjugal union between a “normal” man and a woman remains harmonious, natural, instinctual, and independent of any woman’s gender-based ordeal in the marriage institution in China.

Homosexual Infidelity: The “Promiscuous” and “High-HIV-Risk” Husband

While homosexuality disrupts marriage via the socio-cultural bundle of love and sex, it has a more intricate relationship with the legally-binding system of monogamy. The extent to which same-sex marital affairs constitute infidelity in modern Chinese monogamy is a complex issue. Lacking visibility in official discourses on homosexuality (Liu and Ding, 2005), Chinese women, along with the public, have a hard time grasping what homosexuality means in cross-sex conjugality. Consequently, tongqi exhibit varied attitudes towards homosexual affairs, and individual tongqi often display conflicting and changeable views on the matter. Lan, for instance, was caught between the indigenous tolerant view on homoeroticism and the modern notion of homosexuality.

Lan was a 36-year-old tongqi, who was born in a rural area and later moved to a suburb in Shanghai. Raised in a traditional family, she followed traditional matrimonial practices. Married twice, both of her marriages were arranged by relatives, and she was “married off” by her parents to her husbands’ households in patrilocal custom. In each instance, her natal family received a sizable bride price. When she married her second husband, she quit her clerk job in her hometown and moved to the city of Shanghai. Lan had a good married life with her second husband. Although he was shorter than her and was not good-looking, he was generous to her financially and made her feel very secure. At the time when I met her, Lan had just joined a tongqi chatroom, because she had discovered her husband’s love messages with another man on his phone. Lan told me how she was relieved at first when she found out that her husband had had an affair with a man:

I thought *tongxinglian* [homosexuality] was a good thing. I thought [for him] liking men was so much better than liking women. If he cheated with a *xiaosan* [female mistress], I would have to go fight her, to deal with other affairs. [What affairs?] Affairs like children. His [illegitimate] children might come to take my marital assets. That was my first thought, genuinely.... Until now, I still don’t know much about *tongxinglian* [homosexuality]. I don’t think it’s a good thing; nor is it a big thing to marriage.

The indigenous and traditional view on Chinese same-sex attraction among men does not intervene in conjugality because male homoeroticism has no way of disrupting the power

relations and gender order in a traditional patriarchal family, in which women's access to household assets and family status is secured by the power ladder of generation via reproduction (Zuo, 2009). Building on McMahon's notion of the "aftermath of Chinese polygamies" (McMahon, 2009), Taiwanese scholar Naifei Ding noted that the modern institution of marriage is imagined and developed, in resistance to the "shadows" of polygamy and concubinage in Sinophone societies (Ding, 2010). Modern Chinese womanhood, in Ding's view, is constructed through the process from a "respectable girl" to the "primary wife", always actively or subconsciously battling against the emergence of any potential female mistress in a monogamous relationship. In Lan's narrative, in her initial thoughts, same-sex extramarital affairs raise significantly fewer complications than cross-sex ones, because Lan's status as the only wife in a traditional family structure would not be threatened by a "male mistress" (*nan xiaosan*) or by out-of-wedlock children.

In contrast to Lan, who had a rural background and traditional family values, the majority of tongqi in my study expressed the opposite attitude toward same-sex extramarital affairs, finding them less tolerable in two aspects: sexual promiscuity and HIV risks. Unlike Lan, these women were mostly urban-born or raised and held white-collar jobs in large cities. Tongqi Ying, who typified the majority of tongqi I interviewed, considered same-sex infidelity to be more infuriating than heterosexual infidelity.

Ying, a 40-year-old civil servant, found out that her husband was romantically involved with another man via text messages and tape recordings after being married for fifteen years, followed by a quick divorce with no hesitation. According to Ying's memory, she and her husband had felt mutual affection at first sight. After dating for a year, they got married and had a son. Their married life was "normal", said Ying – "he was not romantic, but he looked after me well." She complained occasionally to him about his coldness like a "stone" sexually and suspected that he was having affairs with other women. Living in doubt and suspicion, Ying felt anxious about her marriage almost every day for over ten years, trying to find evidence of his infidelity on his phone, and in notebooks and work trip records. "My husband acted just like a normal man", Ying recalled, until she found his lengthy love messages to another man on his phone.

Realising his homosexuality, Ying did not hesitate to divorce her husband. Ying was determined to end her marriage, and she ridiculed tongqi who did not divorce as “cowards”. She explained to me what male homosexuality meant to her in terms of sexual morality:

Homosexual [men] are selfish and “sexually promiscuous” (*lanjiao*)
Homosexual men have many sex partners. From what I have discovered, my husband had promiscuous sex with multiple men at a time! As far as I’ve known, he did not practice safe sex....

Ying’s view represents the majority of tongqi in my study – they experienced heightened anxiety over male infidelity. Lan’s and Ying’s responses to their husbands’ same-sex affairs are quite different. Traditional women like Lan feel less threatened by “male mistresses” and maintain their status as the “primary wife” in the marriage. In contrast, urban women like Ying, who hold more stringent expectations regarding their spouses’ sexual morality, often equate homosexuality with sexual promiscuity and moral corruption. This difference in responses can be traced back to broader cultural attitudes in modern China, which systematically constructs male homosexuality as a form of intolerable promiscuity, a “dangerous” sexuality that disrupts social stability and traditional family values (Kong, 2012; Zheng, 2015), and thus a state and interpersonal hazard. In the tongqi online forum, male homosexuality is equated to sexual promiscuity via its association with anal penetration, prostitution, public sex in parks and toilets, and incest (Zhang et al., 2022b).

In addition to promiscuity, HIV is another dominant influence that reduces tongqi’s tolerance of homosexuality. In post-socialist China, homosexuality is associated with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections in official propaganda (Coleman and Chou, 2013; Kong, 2012). State propaganda such as “AIDS is the curse on homosexuals” and “Cherish your life and stay away from homosexuals” have achieved great popularity in the mainstream media (Cao and Lu, 2014).

Tongqi in my study not only referred to male homosexuality as a means of “transmitting HIV”, but also regarded HIV as a manifestation of homosexuality. Meng, a 33-year-old civil servant in a small city, cancelled her wedding with her fiancé because his premarital health check showed that he was HIV positive. She found out on the Chinese internet that “HIV is the factual proof of homosexuality”, despite her fiancé’s denial of his gay identity. There is

evidently a relationship between homosexuality and HIV in constructing the tongqi phenomenon.

Tongqi, as wives to gay men, have been associated with a “high HIV risk” population, both by the party-state and within public discourse (Choi et al., 2004; Chow et al., 2011, 2013). A recent tongqi study by Wenjing Liu quotes a tongqi’s online post, stating that “the suspicion of catching venereal diseases” is “the most stigmatized and fearful aspect of being a tongqi” (Liu, 2020, p. 54). This anxiety was well reflected in my study, as all 32 tongqi I interviewed had taken HIV tests after discovering their husbands’ homosexuality, although no one had tested positive. Tongqi who remained married often took regular HIV tests in local clinics affiliated with the state-controlled Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCs). As well as anxiety, tongqi also suffered from the social discrimination associated with HIV. One tongqi, Jun, told me that people in rural areas may gossip about male homoeroticism, but they were not the ones who discriminated against tongqi. It was the medical staff who did so: “The ones with medical knowledge discriminate us the most. My friend who is also a tongqi went to get an HIV test in a local CDC. As soon as the nurse knew she was a tongqi, she distanced herself and put on additional layers of gloves to do the test.”

In these cases, the authority of sciences is integral in forming tongqi’s identity and subjectivity. As Foucault noted, the medical professions easily secure prestige by engaging “scientific” discourse to gain the power to define reality and “truth” (Foucault, 1982). In modern China, the language of science has been deployed as “disciplinary power” to produce the “correct knowledge” of human sexuality in the school curriculum, which binds biological nature, social morality, and sexual perversion (HIV and STIs) in the name of the national project of “sexual civilisation” (Aresu, 2009). As a result, tongqi who are deeply emmeshed in the state-owned educational and work system have more power to assert themselves and negotiate their identities, yet they are also more vulnerable to the effects of this power structure.

While existing research indicates that the tongqi population may be at higher risk for HIV infection due to their husbands’ homosexual activities (Choi et al., 2004; Chow et al., 2013; Tsang, 2021), the contrast between tongqi and wives of heterosexual HIV-positive men remains unclear. There is no collective identity that encompasses wives of heterosexual HIV-positive men, making it difficult to discern whether they are unwittingly included in the

tongqi category like Meng. Moreover, the discrimination faced by tongqi associated with HIV indicates that tongqi's victimhood is beyond marital relations: it is a social and systematic injustice that intertwines with broader cultural, legal, and medical contexts in post-socialist China.

The Atypical Tongqi: My husband is Gay, but I am Not a Tongqi

Contrary to the mainstream tongqi's story, happily-married Liu, whom I interviewed, presents a unique case. Liu identified herself as an "outsider" in the existing tongqi communities, and consequently sought to talk to me about her conflicting thoughts on her tongqi identity and married life.

Liu, a 32-year-old administrator in the finance industry in a top tier city, had a seven-year marriage with her husband that she described as "happy", "joyful", and "soul-connecting". Despite their socio-economic differences and family disapproval, she defended their relationship before her parents, calling this "the bravest and brightest decision she ever made". Liu's marriage was better than normal: even Liu herself stressed to me that her high-quality happy marriage was an exception, even among the "normal" heterosexual couples she knew of.

After being happily married for seven years, Liu accidentally discovered her husband's use of a local gay-dating application and multiple same-sex affairs. Upon confrontation, her husband defended himself as bisexual. Liu was then caught in deep distress and indecision, and turned online for answers: "What does it mean if your husband is gay?". However, the tongqi stories she read online only deepened her confusion, because she had always been happy in her marriage. All these loveless, sexless, and abusive experiences did not resonate with her at all. "I'm in a state of utter confusion. Am I a tongqi now or not?" Liu puzzled.

"We have so much to talk about every single night. I like to tuck my feet into his hands so that he warms my feet at night.... Please do not doubt me. We have been happy, and I can feel he genuinely loves me", Liu reiterated tearfully. It appeared as if she felt compelled to prove their love, potentially in anticipation of scepticism stemming from my role as a tongqi

researcher. According to Liu, her husband was a dutiful father and an exemplary husband who always prioritised her contentment and well-being in their marriage.

Moreover, toward the end of our interview, Liu confided in me an “unconventional” perspective on sexual relationships that she had not dared to share with other tongqi:

Initially, I was uncertain if I could trust you. I was worried that you would judge me as emotional. However, now I see that you are quite open-minded, so I feel comfortable sharing this with you. I am, in fact, quite accepting and liberal. Physical infidelity does not particularly distress me. I regard it as a basic human need. What matters to me is the spiritual and emotional connection I share with my husband. I am hesitant to share this view with a therapist for fear of being judged as crazy. But I know that I am a rational thinker and mentally stable.

Ultimately, Liu chose to focus on the connection she shared with her husband as individuals, disregarding their sexual orientations. She did not wish to participate in any tongqi communities. She did not see any value or tangible benefits in talking to other tongqi because she did not speak their “language” of female victimhood in marriage.

In the social project of inventing tongqi, Liu’s story complicates the tongqi subjectivity: firstly, tongqi identity is not a uniform or homogenous concept, and not all tongqi are abused or living miserable marital lives. For instance, Jingshu Zhu’s study presents an atypical tongqi who enjoys an “incomplete” yet happy marriage, in which she and her gay husband happily go shopping and Karaoke together, and even watch gay porn together at home (Zhu, 2017). Yao Zhou and her team, in their tongqi research, noted that two of the fourteen tongqi interviewed had rebuilt conjugal trust and support after their husbands came out via prolonged dedication and active communication (Zhou et al., 2022). Tiantian Zheng also interviewed many tongzhi wives, and these women were actively sustaining their marriages because they regarded male homosexuality as a transient behaviour that can be overlooked for the prolonged duration of marriage (Zheng, 2015).

It is noteworthy that, while both resisting the tongqi identity and tolerating male same-sex infidelity, Liu and Lan ended up on opposite sides in relation to the tongqi community. The urban-born Liu actively disassociated herself from the tongqi identity and community, as she

anchored her lived experience in her own subjective feelings. The rural-born Lan, on the other hand, was assimilated into the tongqi community, as she blamed herself for her “ignorance” on the “danger” of male homosexuality, subsequently seeking a divorce and monetary compensation from her husband. The hegemony of the divorce imperative in tongqi due to class disparity will be discussed further in the chapter *Decision to Leave*.

The pressures faced by Liu and Lan to reject male infidelity within the tongqi community stand in stark contrast to the broader socio-cultural gender norms in post-socialist China, where male extramarital affairs are largely accepted (Jeffreys, 2010; Zhang et al., 2012). The tongqi identity produces a reverse gender script between husband and wife against the normative marital relations, consisting of a tolerant wife and a sexually active husband by “nature”.

This new script is a double-edged sword, with both empowering and limiting aspects. It offers an alternative narrative for tongqi like Zhang, Yang and Ying. They felt domestically mistreated and resisted their gender role of dutiful wives who were expected to grin and bear their sufferings for the sake of preserving an image of a “harmonious family”. On the other hand, it leads to the essentialisation of tongqi experiences, reducing them to mere female victimhood, rendering tongqi like Liu and Lan alienated or misrepresented. In Jingshu Zhu’s study, tongqi who discussed their unconventional yet working conjugality with a gay husband were immediately regarded as “weirdos” (Zhu, 2017). After all, the tongqi identity, born in the public transcript serving state-endorsed homophobia and female subversion of domestic gender relations, loses its appeal among Chinese wives of gay men who hold NO homophobic views or have NO intention to challenge their marital gender roles and dynamics.

Is *Tong (gay)* a necessity in the phenomenon of *Tongqi (gay man’s wife)*?

I’m a *tongqi* because I live like a tongqi, regardless of his sexual orientation.

sZhang, 28-year-old interior designer, divorced

From the above narratives, one might have noticed an epistemic gap between tongqi's identification of their husbands' homosexual identity and these husbands' own self-identification. To what extent does *tong* (homosexuality) matter in the constitution of the *tong (homosexuality)-qi (wife)* subject and popularisation of the *tongqi* phenomenon in China? The answer to this very question might not be as significant as expected. For tongqi in my study, the factual proof of their husbands' homosexuality as a biologically-determined identity or as a "deviant" same-sex behaviour was not a necessity to institute their tongqi identity. While significant, it appears to be less decisive than one might expect.

Zhang exemplifies a segment of tongqi who lack concrete evidence of their husband's homosexuality, a situation that applies to half of the tongqi interviewees in my study. Unlike Zhang, many tongqi without definitive proof show a dynamic and indecisive connection to their tongqi identity, despite nearly all being actively involved in tongqi group activities for legal help, emotional support, advice-seeking, and female-to-female friendship.

Among them, Zhang appears to be very adamant embracing the tongqi identity. After suffering within a loveless and sexless marriage, Zhang discovered tongqi stories online that helped her to make sense of her own distressing marriage, which everyone else in her life considered normal. As Zhang said, her husband's homosexual identity was insignificant. Her tongqi identity was constructed revolving around her own subjective experience because she "lived like a tongqi". Meanwhile, Yang represents a tongqi who denies bisexuality or fluid sexuality. When Yang discovered her husband's hotel record with multiple men, she also discovered his association with other women. "Regardless of the men or women he slept with", Yang said, "he did not sleep [have sex] with me.... To me he is homosexual, and he is very promiscuous". In contrast, Liu, whose husband was confirmed to have homosexual affairs, distanced herself from the victim-laden label of "tongqi" because she considered her marriage to have always been happy.

These stories reveal that the self-identification of tongqi operates on two levels: first, the identification of a husband's homosexuality by tongqi is a complex process that often depends on each of the tongqi's interpretation rather than concrete proof; second, the identity of being a tongqi is closely tied to their negative marital sufferings in contrast to an idealised heterosexual marriage, in addition to the revelation of their husbands' homosexual behaviours.

Unlike other studies where tongqi have clear-cut proof of homosexuality by disclosure (Tsang, 2021), or which have bypassed what homosexuality means for tongqi (Cheng, 2016; Song et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2020), my research indicates that the notion of male homosexuality does play a significant role, but it is not the decisive factor in women's identification as tongqi. Nearly half of the tongqi I interviewed (out of a total of 32) had not discovered any definitive evidence of their husbands' homosexual activities. The remainder identified various indicators, from undeniable proof such as explicit chat histories with other men, to subtler signs like effeminate manners, preference for pink clothing, a casual photo with a male friend from high school, or a lack of any female friendships, which many tongqi considered indicative of homosexuality. Ultimately, my research indicates that tongqi identity is largely shaped by these women's personal interpretations of their marital sufferings, encompassing their desires and fears, rather than being solely determined by their husbands' sexual orientation.

Moreover, my study may introduce a debate – whether male homosexuality serves as a convenient canvas onto which Chinese women's marital dissatisfaction is projected. The complexities of these women's struggles suggest that many other Chinese wives, who may be dealing with sexless relationships, infidelity, or HIV-risk marriages, might find themselves subsumed into the broader social category of tongqi (discussed in the following chapter *Conjugal Sex*). The invention of the “tongqi” identity may indicate a broader spectrum of marital abuses and struggles of Chinese women suffer, with the husband's potential homosexuality acting as a symbol of the crisis of hegemonic heterosexual marriage, as well as a strict criterion for one's self-identification of tongqi.

In this sense, the invention of tongqi refers to Chinese women who actively define themselves as wives of homosexual men, rather than mere rely on any verification of their husbands' homosexuality. Consequently, in the context of the tongqi phenomenon, the concept of homosexuality may have a more significant impact on tongqi's conscious resistance rather than their experiences of marital suffering. It is Foucault's “technologies of the self”, or the specific practices of one's intentional efforts to align oneself with societal norms (Foucault, 2020), that collude with external social factors in completing the inventing of tongqi. Through this lens, tongqi's self-identification embodies the “technology of the

self” – a deliberate approach by which these Chinese married women situationally interpret their subjective reality in negotiation with male homosexuality.

In resistance, the subjects often do not target the “chief enemy”, but rather the “immediate enemy”, because subjects tend to “criticize instances of power that are the closest to them” (Foucault, 1982, p. 780). For tongqi, male homosexuality can be considered a “convenient enemy” rather than an “immediate enemy”. This is because the concept of male homosexuality is rendered vague and undefined by party-state politics, allowing tongqi women to interpret male sexuality in ways that align with their interests for domestic resistance. In a sense, male homosexuality is deployed as a medium through which Chinese married women undertake indirect negotiation with the society and state, striving for an alternative gender narrative of marriage that subverts its oppressive predecessor. The vast and vague idea of male homosexuality bears an enormous capacity for imaginations of any non-heterosexual, non-masculine, non-husbandhood, or queer signifiers in Chinese male bodies. This broad interpretation thereby undercuts male superiority in traditional husband-wife relations, empowering tongqi women to illuminate their marital struggles in a manner that does not appear to threaten the established gender hierarchy directly.

Conclusion

In her book *Love and Sexuality of the Chinese Women* (Li, 2009), Chinese sociologist Yinhe Li documented in detail how well-educated married women in the post-Mao era first complained about and later trivialised their marital sufferings, such as marital rape, emotional abuse, domestic violence, and male infidelity. In the early 2000s, the social stigma, financial loss, and childcare burden borne by women who chose to disrupt or even to end a marriage was unimaginable. Twenty years later, Chinese women’s resistance towards their unsatisfying marriages is embodied in the tongqi subjectivity and its nation-side phenomenon.

This chapter has elucidated how the interplay of the post-socialist state agenda and women’s marital resistance contributes to the formulation of the tongqi identity in contemporary China. My research shows that the tongqi identity is collaboratively constructed by Chinese women, who challenge traditional gender norms surrounding their marital suffering, and the state,

which aims to uphold the dominance of heterosexual, patriarchal marriages in the post-socialist era. The party-state's unwavering agenda to sustain family stability plays a pivotal role in the perpetuation of gender-specific marital roles. Against this backdrop, Chinese women have begun to articulate their marital discontent in innovative ways: they skilfully invent a public transcript of "tongqi" to produce an alternative and subversive gender script between wife and husband, which appears non-threatening to the spectating power holders in the patriarchal framework. They thereby engage in what Michel Foucault would term as "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1982), actively renegotiating their marital struggles and restructuring their marital gender dynamics.

This chapter has laid the epistemic foundation for a nuanced understanding of the tongqi identity. Firstly, it delineates an epistemic gap between "tongqi" and "wives to gay men" in post-socialist China. "Tongqi" refers to a multifaceted identity through which Chinese wives self-identify to renegotiate their gender roles and norms, whereas the descriptive "wives to gay men" does not inherently convey any sense of female agency. If these two concepts were conflated in studying tongqi, this might create the risk of objectifying tongqi as merely passive subjects of their husbands' sexuality, rather than as individuals with their own agency, feelings, and complexity.

Secondly, this chapter broadens the analysis beyond the exclusive causation between tongqi's marital struggles and their husbands' homosexuality. It delves into the wider Chinese societal context that shapes tongqi's gender-influenced marital challenges. Contrary to the assertion made by Yuanyuan Wang and colleagues that "cold violence was a result of being a tongqi" (Wang et al., 2020, p. 5), my research finds that tongqi identity and the associated marital issues are deeply rooted in the conventional gender role system and the expectations surrounding marriage in a post-socialist setting. The homosexuality of the husband, I argue, is one of many emerging social indicators reflecting the challenge to the traditional, duty-bound patriarchal marriage by the evolving expectations of Chinese married women. These women, self-identifying tongqi, are actively and consciously reimagining and redefining what constitutes a fulfilling marriage in an increasingly open and modernising China.

Thirdly, it emphasises the female agency of resistance within the tongqi subject, a dimension frequently overshadowed or underestimated in previous research. More importantly, this study reveals the intertwined resistance and suffering lived by tongqi. This complexity stems

not only from recognising their husbands' homosexuality, but also from the deep-rooted institutional frameworks such as hierarchical gender norms and emerging marital expectations. The chapter shows how the prevalent narrative of "innocent tongqi and gay husband" has been tactically reinforced and disseminated by tongqi women rationalise their marital expectations for happiness, self-fulfilment, and abuse-free conjugality in a post-socialist society within social acceptance.

At the end of this chapter, it is worth returning to the main question: in the social phenomenon of inventing tongqi, who becomes tongqi? Who needs tongqi to be invented? To me, tongqi should not be reduced to merely "wives of homosexual men". Tongqi is a collective and multifaceted female identity premised on the interlocked female resistant agency and victimhood; it is a group of women who resist marital distress via the de-normalisation of domestic abuse or conjugal apathy that has been naturalised by political and cultural ideologies in the hetero-patriarchal framework in China. Tongqi, therefore, can be seen as a poignant illustration within the larger tapestry of married women's marital struggles in China.

In the next chapter, I will turn the intellectual lens to the most highlighted controversy in tongqi's marriage: sexual deprivation as a form of domestic abuse. This will shed light on how gender interplays with sexuality in shaping tongqi's marriages.

Chapter 6. Conjugal sex: How the Sexual “Lacking” Produces Domestic Abuse

This chapter aims to address the “abnormal” sexlessness in tongqi’s marriages. When “love” is metaphysically interpretive, and extra-marital affairs are largely practiced by Chinese heterosexual men (Jeffreys, 2010; Y. Zhang, 2010), sex (intercourse), or precisely speaking its absence, becomes the decisive marker that makes a Chinese wife a “tongqi”.

Following the determinative constituents of sex (intercourse) in tongqi marriage, this chapter sets out as a sociological investigation, moving beyond previous studies that primarily focused on HIV risks in public health research (Choi et al., 2004; Chow et al., 2013; Hong et al., 2009) or conjugal harmony in family therapy (Bozett, 1982; Kays et al., 2014; Shi et al., 2020). This chapter provides an in-depth sociological examination of the intercourse-absent gender relations that produce abused subjects and experiences in tongqi’s marriages.

The abusive experience found in tongqi’s sexless marriages is documented in previous tongqi studies in terms of its detrimental and traumatising effect on women’s mental health and overall living quality (Song et al., 2022; Tsang, 2021). It differs from many other visibly enforcing forms of domination: for instance, Chinese wives suffer from legalised marital rape within the Chinese legal framework (Chan, 2009; Parish et al., 2007a) and physical abuse with disturbing social and legal tolerance (Su et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2006; Zheng, 2022). Thus, in this chapter, the central question is: How does gender interplay with sexuality, specifically heterosexuality, in producing abusive experiences for tongqi in their sexless marriages?

Previous research on tongqi has shown extensively the negative impact of the husband’s homosexual affairs and homosexual orientation onto their wives’ mental and physical health [ref]. building on these existing scholarship, This chapter aims to fill the knowledge gap on how tongqi’s husband’s performance of heterosexuality and familial gender roles, two understudied factors in tongqi studies, significantly contribute to tongqi’s marital sufferings. When weaving heterosexuality and masculinity in the Chinese marital context, conjugal intercourse emerges as a critical battleground in which a Chinese man’s husbandhood is enacted and sustained.

My research finds that sexual deprivation – a specific type of sexless interaction – constitutes a form of domestic abuse in post-socialist Chinese marriage. This insidious and understudied form of abuse is exposed in/through the tongqi phenomenon. I argue that tongqi’s marital struggles related to sexuality mainly arise from heterosexualised gender relations, rather than the clash between the couple’s sexualities, as suggested by previous tongqi studies (Song et al., 2022; Tang and Liu, 2017; Tsang, 2021).

Today, Chinese women have largely embraced the post-socialist notion of gender identities and desire (Peng, 2021; Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2022). Sexual desire is no longer regarded as an enemy to the nation’s revival in Mao’s regime, but a positive pursuit in realising one’s capacity as a modern subject in post-socialist China (Zhang, 2007). Meanwhile, post-socialist desire goes beyond the sexual and physical to encompass the sociological. Lisa Rofel noted its productive nature: “Desire in China is about public narratives and the novel grounds they constructed for knowing and speaking about a post-socialist reality” (Rofel, 2007, p. 22).

Manifested in everyday life, throughout my interviews, tongqi used the terms “sex” (*xing*), “sexual relations” (*xing guanxi*), and “conjugal sex” (*fuqi shenghuo*) interchangeably, indicating a predominant focus on the sexual aspect of their conjugal integrity. The emphasis on conjugal sex by tongqi women aligns with the broader socio-political perspectives, in which the party-state propagated the idea of “harmonious sex” as integral to a good marriage (Evans, 1997). This linguistic pattern highlights the close interplay of female sexuality, heterosexuality, and marital gender relations in post-socialist Chinese marriage.

While sexuality is historically and culturally diverse in form (Foucault, 1978), “proper” Chinese female sexuality does not “exist in itself outside the context of the heterosexual relationship” (Evans, 1995, p. 374). Contrary to violence-based forms of sexual abuse, this chapter uncovers a more insidious and systematic oppression, termed “abuse via sexuality”, stemming from the deeply ingrained gender norms and relations within institutionalized heterosexuality in post-socialist China. Such practices lead to sexual deprivation, a ghostly form of “lacking” that produces women’s abusive reality from within. This violence-free form of abuse is manifested through the internalised practices of self-discipline, self-regulation, and self-subjugation, as articulated by Foucault’s self-disciplining “biopolitics” of

“technologies of the self” (Foucault, 2020), and Byung-Chul Han’s self-optimising “psychopolitics” (Han, 2017).

Within the context of post-socialist China, the study employs Foucault’s and Han’s notions of self-governing power alongside Ingraham’s “heterosexual imaginary”, which regards gender as “the asymmetrical stratification of the sexes in relation to the historically varying institutions of patriarchal heterosexuality” (Ingraham, 1994, p. 204). These frameworks collectively illuminate the complex interplay of gender, sexuality, and power that gives rise to the unique experience of abuse faced by tongqi, revealing a multifaceted and deeply embedded form of gender-based oppression.

Sexual Deprivation: Indirect and Systematic Abuse via Sexuality

In the context of Chinese tongqi’s marriages, sexless-ness is not a neutral statement of a type of conjugal interaction. Rather, sexual deprivation, a form of emotional and sexual maltreatment distinct from conventional force-driven sexual coercion, emerges as a unique issue. Sensationalist headlines such as *The Tongqi Life under the Media's Investigation: 60-year-old Remains Virgin* (Zheng, 2013) or *A Monologue of A Tongqi: My Gay Husband Has Never Seen Me Naked* (Zhao, 2016), persistently frame tongqi’s victimhood around their sexual frustration. This perspective is perpetuated by academic studies that align tongqi’s suffering with specifically the lack of sexual intercourse. Recent research indicates the pervasiveness of absent sexual intercourse in tongqi’s marriages and its traumatic impact on these women’s living quality (Liu and Tang, 2014; Liu, 2020; Song et al., 2022). More specifically, the quantitative study conducted by Li’s team, involving 144 tongqi, revealed that 62.0% felt distressed due to the absence of sexual intercourse in their marriages (Li et al., 2017).

Despite this societal shift towards openness and acceptance of sexual desire, sexual disharmony remained a significant concern among the tongqi participants in this study. Of the 32 tongqi participants, 25 described their sex lives as “abnormal”, citing issues such as their husbands’ physiological erectile difficulties, premature ejaculation, long-term rejection of sexual advances, sleeping in separate beds or rooms, and even relocating to different cities to avoid cohabitation. These issues, either starting from the wedding night or developing over

time, particularly after the birth of the first child, have proven a persistent pattern in my study. Meanwhile, five tongqi, the minority, described their conjugal sex as normal, with characteristics such as regularity, frequency, and occasional enjoyment. The remaining two provided ambiguous responses, such as “I do not know what [sexual] harmony means” or “Sex is crucial, but I can live without it”. No distinct class, education, or urban-rural characteristics emerged in these varying attitudes towards sex in my study, as my tongqi cohort had limitations, consisting predominantly of urban residents educated to above college-degree level.

Insomnia: Sexual Deprivation Produces Troubling Subjects

In my research, a vivid manifestation of the abusive reality of tongqi’s sexual deprivation resided in the pervasive symptom of insomnia. Among my tongqi interviewees, insomnia was a recurring symptom that sexless tongqi developed over the years of frigid conjugality, which in some cases escalated to suicidal ideation. Although Zheng’s study on Chinese tongzhi lives suggested that tongzhi bear more mental health risks of emotional and psychological trauma than their wives (Zheng, 2015), another recent study on tongqi contradicts this argument, finding that tongqi had a higher rate of suicidal ideation of 61.2%, almost 10 times higher than the rate for all adults in China (Wu et al., 2018).

Mao, a 37-year-old tongqi, reported severe insomnia extending over two to three years. This insomnia was associated with the distressing experience of having separate bedrooms, beginning from her wedding night. This arrangement, at the insistence of her husband, left Mao in a state of perpetual confusion and despair. This extreme psychological distress led to self-harm and suicidal thoughts, exacerbated by the societal stigma associated with divorce.

The narrative of Jia, a 32-year-old tongqi participant, highlighted her recurrent nightmares featuring her husband. “Night after night, I am persecuted, vilified, deceived, and betrayed by him in my dreams,” Jia confessed amidst her tearful disclosures. “I count myself fortunate for not having a child. The last circumstance I would wish is to introduce a child into a family such as mine ... After my marriage with my gay husband, my trust in others, and particularly in men, has been irrevocably shattered.”

Yun, a 40-year-old participant in my tongqi study, endured sleepless nights that offered her a private sanctuary for her pent-up grief. “Throughout my marriage, I battled chronic, severe insomnia, barely catching a wink of sleep most nights. I dared not shed tears during the daytime, given the presence of my child and my professional responsibilities: hence, the solitude of night-time, with the windows and doors securely shut, was my only recourse for expressing my sorrow. The agony was unbearable. Each summer, I would sit awake, witnessing the transition from day to night and struggling with insomnia. There was an instance when I ventured to the riverbank of the Fen River in Shanxi Province. I stood there, gazing into the seemingly infinite flow of water beneath, pondering how and when others might discover my disappearance.”

Jo, the 27-year-old tongqi, experienced medically-diagnosed insomnia attributed to the absence of sexual intercourse in her marriage. Jo reported frequent insomnia and multiple psychological trauma due to prolonged sexual dissatisfaction: “I often find myself embroiled in this state, grappling with sleepless nights, irritability, and occasional emotional instability. This is detrimental to both my physical and mental wellbeing.”

These stories show that tongqi’s sexual deprivation surpasses the absence of heterosexual intercourse. It encompasses a wider spectrum of sociological elements, ranging from the confusion of sexual avoidance to suppression of female sexuality, aggression by the husband, and beyond. These individual and interpersonal experiences, woven into the fabric of everyday life, ultimately culminate in a hostile, abusive marital environment for many tongqi, where their sexual desires are simultaneously produced and stigmatised.

This prevalence of insomnia among tongqi suggests that despite conscious efforts to conform to societal gender and sexual norms, their bodies unconsciously resist, expressing their distress through sleeplessness. The ceaselessly vigilant body of a tongqi silently communicates distress, affirming the symbiotic relationship between the physical and psychological, as articulated by Foucault’s biopolitics (Foucault, 1982). The embodied manifestation of insomnia provides a critical lens into the troubling mental condition of Chinese tongqi – a state that may prove challenging to discern through conscious dialogue and ostensible observation.

Drawing a parallel with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where sleep deprivation is used as a method of population control, the issue of sleeplessness among Chinese tongqi reflects new technologies of power operating internally. The next section will show everyday subtle yet effective abuses premised on the gender binary and normative sexuality.

Everyday Subtle Male Aggression and Tongqi's Renegotiation

Slut-Shaming: Excessive Female Desire

My study found that sexually deprived tongqi often suffered from slut-shaming, a common form of verbal abuse by the husband to evade conjugal sex. Slut-shaming effectively subjects Chinese women to self-guilt and self-shame for possessing what is often deemed "excessive" sexual desire in a female. This strategy is particularly potent within the socio-cultural context of Chinese society, where gender expectations and cultural norms hold substantial influence over individual agency and respectability, especially pertaining to women's sexuality (Chiang, 2018; Xiao et al., 2011).

For instance, Jia, a 32-year-old tongqi working in a state-owned enterprise in urban China, was shamed repetitively by her husband over her excessive and immoral sexuality in their marriage. Born in a second-tier city in a prosperous province of China, Jia's life unfolded in her hometown – she pursued her education, embarked on her career, and ultimately married there. At the age of 31, when Jia was contentedly settled in a secure job at a prominent state-owned enterprise, her parents initiated a flurry of matchmaking endeavours. Eventually, she met her would-be husband, a self-disciplined individual working for the same company. When they decided to get married, premarital sex was the natural course. When Jia and her husband went on a trip together, Jia felt frustrated when she discovered that her husband could not have an erection properly. Initially, Jia suspected that her husband suffered from erectile dysfunction, given his consistent difficulty in maintaining an erection. Despite feeling frustrated, Jia was determined to endure her sexless marriage and continue to be a dutiful wife.

Jia's enduring attitude changed when she stumbled upon evidence that her husband had a long-term boyfriend. The trail of clues began with an unexpected find of a "sex kit" that her

husband had hidden at home. The box of condoms, lubricants, aphrodisiacs, and various sex toys were all labelled with a brand that specifically sponsored gay pornography. Her husband soon admitted that he had been in a relationship with his male lover since long before he met Jia. Driven by her confusion on the notion of homosexuality, Jia searched the internet for more information, leading her to several tongqi communities. Joining Chan's tongqi group, Jia discovered that her husband's shaming language was a common pattern in tongqi's marriages:

It's a widespread strategy used by gay Chinese men against us, the tongqi. Whenever we show any signs of [sexual] desire, our gay husbands berate us. My husband labels me as libidinous ("*jike*") or slutty ("*fangdang*"). He even called me a whore ("*ji*") when I tried to fix our conjugal [sex] life. He never uses any curse words on me, but instead he uses these very humiliating terms on my sex drives to manipulate me and control me!

Jia's narrative demonstrates the prevalence of the shaming of "excessive" female sexuality as a means for the husband to stigmatise his wife's sexual desires to avoid sexual connection in tongqi's marriages. Many other tongqi in my study also suffered from similar shaming, via different terms like "*yindang*" (slutty) and "*xingyu wangsheng*" (horny); however, they all served the same purpose: to inflict guilt, judgement, and loathing onto these women's sexual desires, and succeeded in tongqi groups.

Renegotiating with slut-shaming, most tongqi in my study adopted self-regulation and self-justification as coping mechanisms. These women, while rejecting their husbands' verbal assault on their sexual drives, implicitly accepted the shaming of women perceived as overly libidinous. For example, Jia responded to her husband's criticisms by highlighting her infrequent sexual advances, saying, "I did not even initiate sex very often with my husband." Such enduring verbal and physical repression of their sexuality has contributed to widespread psychological distress among tongqi, manifesting as anxiety, depression, and insomnia.

As Scott noted, when power exerts a menacing influence, subordinates often employ a thicker mask of conformity to resist (Scott, 1990). Facing direct accusation of sexual immorality, tongqi feel greater pressure to conform and perform the proper female sexuality. Jieyu Liu discussed the concept of "respectability" in post-socialist China, which moralises women's sexual desire by linking it with their social status and acceptance (Liu, 2017, p. 40). In order

to gain respectability, conjugally and socially, tongqi are driven by the disciplinary power from within to first inspect and then correct their behaviours, rather than questioning the social norms.

These stories show that tongqi easily sink into a vicious cycle of self-inspecting and self-improving, as the “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 2020), through which they internalise the societal shame on female sexuality to achieve family harmony. In other words, to avoid being shamed by their husbands and wider social circles, tongqi engage in everyday performative sexual modesty, an embodiment of their “attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behaviour” (Foucault, 2020, p. 27). Such mechanism is effective to enact gender binary and hierarchy in sexual relations. In this normative heterosexuality, heterosexual erotic desire “creates the sexuality of male supremacy” via organising around “eroticised [male] dominance and [female] submission” (Jeffreys, 1996, p. 76). In the Chinese context, the “passive” and “weak” female sexuality is naturalised to meet the “spontaneous” and “active” sexual urge of the male (Evans, 2002). Combining sexuality and gender, slut-shaming becomes an easy practice to abuse wives for their sexual activeness.

One example to show the overriding effectiveness of slut-shaming is Chan’s story. Chan, a 38-year-old seasoned university lecturer, encountered profound humiliation when discussing her desire for sexual intimacy in her marriage to a younger, less-educated husband who was economically reliant on her. When she voiced her sexual needs, to evade sexual intercourse, his retort was to brand her “slutty” (“*fangdang*”), a term laden with moral judgement, which left her feeling shamed and speechless. Despite her superior education and financial independence, Chan found herself disempowered, unable to refute her husband’s stigmatising allegations without violating her sexuality-tied respectability. Chan’s experience starkly illustrates that the hierarchical gender script plays an important role in internally suppressing tongqi’s sexual agency in Chinese modern marriages. It reveals that gender-based oppression, in many cases, eclipses factors such as class, wealth, age, and education in fostering domestic abuse against tongqi women.

Sexual morality, pivotal in shaping tongqi identity, acts as a double-edged sword in their struggle and affliction. Tongqi wield sexual morality to hold their husbands to account for “homosexual promiscuity” and “sexual deviation”. Yet, they also internalise it, conforming to idealised standards of female sexuality through self-regulation and suppression, to avoid

confrontation and critique. This internalisation, even without physical violence, coerces tongqi into undermining their sexual autonomy, entrenching their passive role, and perpetuating their subjugation within the hierarchical gender script of Chinese matrimony.

Body-Inferiorising: Never Desirable Enough

Juxtaposed to shaming women's sexual desire, my study found that the husbands attacking their wives' sexual desirability, or body-inferiorisation, is another potent practice to produce tongqi's abusive experience. This practice makes tongqi question their own sexual "value" rather than their husbands' avoidant sexual attitude. In post-socialist China, women's sexual appeal is increasingly tied to their self-worth based on the market logics. This provides a growing arsenal of misogynistic languages, attacking women within the lexicon of traditional gender respectability as well as new vocabularies stemming from commoditisation and sexualisation of femininity.

Firstly, the concept of "sexual health" within medical science is often leveraged by husbands to critique tongqi's sexual desirability, weaponising health science against their bodies. The "medicalisation of sex" since modern China, as scholar Pei and her colleagues concludes (Pei et al., 2007), has been enacted to prescribe and validate appropriate female sexuality using medical terminology, reinforcing gender-biased sexual morality against women. Meng, a 34-year-old self-employed tongqi, was verbally insulted by her husband, who accused her of having an "unpleasant" and "pungent" smell in her private area, accusing her of catching a "gynaecological inflammation" (*fuke yanzheng*) as a result of sexual promiscuity. Meng did not realise that this was his tactic to evade sex for years, until repeated assurances from her gynaecologist confirmed the absence of any such condition.

Second, the critique of tongqi's physical appearance, set against the youthful, slender, and alluring female ideal of the post-socialist era (Hooper, 1998), as a potent narrative husbands use to disparage their wives' sexual desirability. Zhao, a 30-year-old tutor, was body-shamed by her husband for being "fat and out of shape". Chan, a 38-year-old teacher, was repeatedly denied sex by her younger husband, who age-shamed her using the derogatory Chinese term "old maid" (*lao nvren*). These verbal assaults directly led to prolonged depression and self-contempt for both women.

Lastly, the husband's effort to belittle can be entirely fabricated, as long as it serves the purpose of rendering the wife sexually undesirable. Shi, a 43-year-old PhD candidate, was humiliated for "having an unpleasant body odour" that her husband could not describe whenever he pushed her away to avoid any physical contact in the bedroom.

Local scholar Changhui Song, in his tongqi study, also noted that sexually-deprived tongqi commonly suffer from shaming of their attractiveness by their husbands, and subsequently from self-shaming. One 41-year-old tongqi became extremely insecure about her physique as her husband blamed her for being "not beautiful," "not having a good figure", "not feminine enough" and so on (Song et al., 2022, p. 7). Framing it as psychological manipulation, Song did not define this type of male aggression as a form of domestic abuse. However, I argue, taking on the WHO's definition (World Health Organization, 2012) on the subset of emotional abuse under domestic abuse,¹ that such male aggression towards tongqi – both slut-shaming and body-inferiorising – leads to their reduced sexual agency and self-worth. This non-violent yet manipulative practice constitutes a nuanced form of domestic abuse.

Similar to slut-shaming, body-inferiorising is both a punitive power exerted by the husband onto the wife, and a productive power that operates internally within these women. In contemporary China, the exemplar womanhood of a mediocre-looking dutiful wife is perceived to be outdated (Schneider, 2014), and gradually replaced by the "flower vase" trophy wife whose overwhelming sexuality becomes the new standard of modern wifhood (Evans, 2002; Hooper, 1998). In this new paradigm of wifhood, the symbolic capital of a woman's appearance is leveraged, inextricably tying her value to her aesthetics. It constitutes an internalised pressure, an abusive power from within, to adhere to societal norms, producing a constant tension within women who strive to align their appearance with these socially constructed ideals.

Between De-sexualisation and Re-sexualisation

In my research, all tongqi who suffer from sexual deprivation grapple with a tormenting dilemma: they must constantly calibrate between modest sexual expression, to maintain

¹ Emotional (psychological) abuse, such as insults, belittling, constant humiliation, intimidation (e.g. destroying things), threats of harm, threats to take away children.

respectability, and enhanced sexual allure, to foster marital harmony. Such oscillation between desexualisation and resexualisation breeds enduring mental distress, contributing to the fabric of their abusive marital existence.

De-sexualisation is targeted at women's sexual desire and agency, and they experience abuse mainly via the pressure to conform to traditional gender norms. To maintain gender respectability, Chinese women who subscribe to heterosexual norms should abstain from discussing sex (Mann, 2011). This imposed shame leads to situational silence, which in turn generates camouflage and acquiescence. Consequently, many tongqi find themselves at a disadvantage in marital power relations, in which their sexuality and its abusive reality are discursively erased, rendering the abusive husband invisible.

At the level of verbal expression, tongqi's self-monitoring of their sex language is meticulous and skilful. During my interviews, the majority of tongqi did not pronounce the Chinese word "sex" (*xing*) in a three-hour interview, echoing the findings on Chinese women's euphemisms for "sex" almost two decades ago (Farrer, 2002). Moreover, tongqi in my research showed a consensus in finding it difficult to talk about the topic of sex with almost anyone in their lives, as the disciplinary power apparatus of *shame* operates omnipresently to inhibit women's sexual expression, even just verbally.

However, tongqi's self-repression of their sexual desire is never fully internalised. When the offline context prohibits women from talking about sexuality, online tongqi communities become the "safe space", or the terrain of "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1990), where they can engage in these otherwise socially prohibited discussions. On the internet-savvy context of post-socialist China, the societal exclusion of women's sexual expression paradoxically leads to its virtual inclusion. In any tongqi online forum, such as *Tieba*, *Sina Weibo*, or *Douban*, there are numerous stories shared by tongqi regarding their sexual desire, frustration, confusion, and proposed solutions. As noted in Wenjing Liu's study, the cyber community is indispensable to the construction of the tongqi subject and their solidarity (Liu, 2020), as one of few legitimate outlets through which women can openly discuss their sex lives.

One extreme case of self-desexualisation is tongqi Zuo. Zuo, a 45-year-old professional in the media industry, reached out to me as she was contemplating a divorce. Her 22-year marriage, to her first love and partner was perceived to be successful, with a comfortable lifestyle and

respect in their community. Despite maintaining an ideal family image, Zuo felt a recurring instinct that something was off, manifested in their frigid physical interactions. The wake-up call came when she received a call from a high-end brothel known for male-to-male services, confirming her long-standing doubts. Amidst the appearance of a harmonious marriage, she felt continuously sexually frustrated and emotionally hurt due to a lack of sexual intercourse and any conjugal physical intimacy.

Zuo suffered no verbal or physical abuse towards her sexuality from her husband, except for “reflective flinches” when she touched him, even accidentally. In fact, Zuo’s husband was dutiful, warm, and kind to her, while he continued visiting male-to-male brothels because of his “deep, innate, and demon-like” homosexual desire. To avoid sliding into the stigmatised “divorced woman” and to honour their good conjugal “feelings” (*ganqing*), Zuo decided to sustain her marriage. To cope with the perpetual “lack” of sexual intercourse, Zuo self-initiated a lifestyle regimen to diminish and eventually eradicate her sexual desire:

I have been purposely trivialising and downplaying the importance of sex in my life. I do more exercise and sports, and I converted to vegetarianism ten years ago. [What is the role of diet in your sex life?] Being a vegetarian means I can achieve inner peace, and I can rid myself of dysphoria and my libido. I have been self-regulating the “unsettling” energy in my body.

Although her husband’s homosexual affairs disrupted the heterosexual script of their gender relations, Zuo still complied with heterosexual norms, internalising female fidelity and chastity. The *tongqi* identity in Zuo’s case is an embodiment of a desexualised female identity tailored to her unique marital situation.

Such performance has its consequences. Zuo, caught between her longing for conjugal sexual intimacy and self-conforming to de-sexualisation, often felt a sense of desperation, agitation, and depression. Although her emotional insecurity and mental health issues had intensified over the years, Zuo did not seriously consider divorce until the recent emergence of the “*tongqi* phenomenon,” a public discourse that offers a compelling justification for women to divorce their gay husbands. At the time of our interview, Zuo was re-evaluating her “grin and bear it” stance on her marriage and was consulting lawyers for divorce options.

Re-sexualisation is on the opposite side to de-sexualisation on the spectrum of how tongqi self-correct their sexuality. Unlike de-sexualisation, which targets women's "innate" sexual desire, re-sexualisation targets specifically women's exterior appearance. In coping with the insults to their looks, most tongqi in my study adopted multiple methods to enhance their sexual attractiveness. Lin, a 30-year-old tongqi, was relentlessly refused sex and prude-shamed by her gay husband, who claimed that "she was not sexually experienced enough to be enticing in bed". Lin felt guilty of the accusation, because she had always adhered to the gender norms of female innocence and chastity. To improve her sexless marriage, Lin decided to learn the "conjugal sex knowledge" on the internet that she had never had a chance to acquire in real life and believed that improving her sexual performance in the bedroom could increase her sexual appeal and, in turn, rekindle her stagnant marriage. Some tongqi, like Mao, tried to change their physical appearance through the act of consumption, purchasing sexy lingerie to erotise their bodies – a popular practice among the tongqi in my research. Other common practices for re-sexualising or hypersexualising the body included using cosmetic products, postpartum weight loss, and performing Kegel exercises.

Building on Foucault's "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 2020), Byung-Chul Han's "entrepreneur of the self" (Han, 2017) provided a more nuanced explanation for how tongqi are driven by the desire to self-optimize as a better alternative in re-fashioning their sexual desirability, particularly in the context of neoliberal society. This practice, Han argued, is a more efficient kind of power practices, through which they subjugate themselves to "... internal limitations and self-constraints, which are taking the form of compulsive achievement and optimisation" (Han, 2017, p. 11).

Driven by the "entrepreneur of the self" (Han, 2017), in the absence of physical forces, tongqi change their sexual image or behaviours with an internalised male gaze. The purpose is not to conform to normative gender but to optimize their sexual competitiveness in a market-driven post-reform China. Sandra Lee Bartky theorises that the internalised "male gaze" resides in females who are disciplined to please: "In the regime of institutionalised heterosexuality woman must make herself 'object and prey' for the man... Thus, the disciplinary project of femininity is a 'setup': it requires such radical and extensive measures of bodily transformation that a woman is destined in some degree to fail" (Bartky, 1997, p. 101).

The situation of tongqi illustrates a more profound socio-cultural predicament that Chinese women face. In the post-socialist era, they find themselves ensnared in a complex web of sexual expectations that manifest both outwardly and inwardly. This entrapment produces an ultimate objectification of women through two distinct but interrelated processes: re-sexualisation, which focuses on the perpetual enhancement of women's external physical appearance, and de-sexualisation, targeting the denial and hollowing of women's inner libido and sexual agency. Overall, they co-produce a perfect hollowed-out "flower vase". Yet, tongqi are the women who find their lived experience in this process abnormal and unjust, as they often show resilience to question and to resist (tongqi's resistance techniques are discussed in more detail in the next chapter: *Tongqi's Resistance*).

The Complex Roles Homosexuality Plays in Tongqi's Sexual Deprivation

Previous research on tongqi has predominantly studied their marital hardships in the context of sexual deprivation through the lens of their husbands' homosexuality [F]. Many scholarship has underscored the correlation between husbands' homosexual orientation and sexual avoidance, directly resulting marital sufferings to tongqi women (Liu and Tang, 2014; Song et al., 2022; Tang and Liu, 2014). However, this chapter contends that such a focus overlooks the intertwined influences of gender norms and the hegemonic institution of heterosexuality, which are equally instrumental in shaping tongqi's sexual and emotional distress. It is essential to acknowledge that gender and heterosexuality, particularly the latter, are often obscured by the presence of homosexuality in analyses of tongqi. They are not only wives to gay men but also individuals navigating societal roles as women and as agents in heterosexually structured matrimones.

Central to my argument is the role of male homosexuality in redirecting the tongqi's scrutiny away from their perceived sexual deficiency to their husbands' sexual orientation. This shift in focus enables tongqi women to reclaim autonomy and to critically evaluate the submissive gender roles they have been conditioned to perform within their marriages. The revelation of the husband's homosexuality, by sexually-deprived tongqi, reframes the narrative around the discord in their sexual relations, alleviating the wives of unfounded self-blame.

Jia's experience exemplifies this transition. After confirming her husband's homosexual identity via his confession, Jia's chronic and traumatising inner guilt over her "flawed" femininities was lifted, due to the "*force majeure*" of his homosexuality:

Since the wedding, he kept finding faults in me, saying that I was not attractive. So I lost my confidence. I always felt that I was not doing well enough. I also constantly tried to change and improve myself to ease the relationship between us. But when I found out about this, I suddenly realised that the problem with our marriage was not with me. For example, last July, his boyfriend came back from abroad, and he found various excuses, lied to me that sleeping with the air conditioner on would cause a cold and illness, and then forcibly slept in separate rooms. In fact, he just wanted to video chat with his boyfriend. I used to think that I was too sensitive and not good enough. After discovering this, I no longer believe his lies and accusations towards me.

Another example is Lin. After she had given birth to their son, 30-year-old white-collar worker Lin was accused of being "sexually unattractive" and was rejected for any sexual interactions by her husband. Like many other tongqi, Lin felt responsible for her sexless marriage, and therefore embarked on a self-corrective project to hypersexualise her body via changing her appearance and learning "sex knowledge" online. Lin's self-blaming and self-correction efforts gradually eased when she discovered nude pictures of her husband with other men:

After giving birth to a child, we completely stopped having a sex life... I asked him why he was so indifferent to me. Having no sex life always made me look for reasons in myself, feeling like I had made mistakes. He always said that I lacked attractiveness. I believed him at that time because I had no sexual experience before him. Later, I gradually learned [sexual] skills online and tried my best to make an effort for our marital sex life.

Later I found too many pornographic photos of gay men, including him... After learning about homosexuality, I gradually accepted the reality. He is not bisexual; he is the kind of gay man who is repulsed by and picky about women, and there is nothing I can improve sexually to change that.

The accounts of Jia and Lin exemplify those tongqi who had definitive proof of their husbands' homosexuality. However, many others in my study, approximately one third of them, reached a crucial point of self-liberation from marital guilt based on a personal conviction, without any tangible evidence on their spouse's homosexual orientation. Zhang, the 28-year-old interior designer whose account is explored in Chapter 5, *Inventing Tongqi*, liberated herself from the shame and guilt of marital strife and proceeded to divorce her husband, without any proof of his sexual orientation. Her assertion, "I'm a tongqi because I live like a tongqi, irrespective of his sexual orientation", signifies resistance not specifically to a homosexual spouse but to the oppressive dynamics of what is conventionally considered a "normal" Chinese marriage – psychological abuse via both sexual deprivation and emotional avoidance by the husband. Zhang's resistance, while nominally directed at a presumed homosexual husband, was fundamentally a challenge to the male-dominated structure of traditional Chinese marriages. These relationships, often marked by abusive treatment of women, are nevertheless institutionalised and normalised by the deeply ingrained patriarchal and heteronormative ethics that continue to configure modern Chinese conjugality.

Numerous times, tongqi in my research collectively expressed a strong message of "if he were heterosexual, there would still be hope" or "when he is homosexual, it is a dead end". The "dead end" does not necessarily refer to the dissolution of a marriage, but mostly refers to the status quo of their marriage becoming a permanent state of stagnation. This hopelessness stems from the "conviction" that homosexuality, perceived as an "innate" sexual identity, cannot be changed or negotiated, hence foreclosing the possibility of any future progression in their marriage. This prevailing dichotomy of immutability of sexual orientation in tongqi phenomenon reflects the societal weight given to heteronormativity in Chinese marriage, in which homosexuality is viewed not only as an "deviant" sexual identity but as a definitive barrier to cross-sex marital fulfilment. Consequently, the husband's homosexuality, either substantiated or supposed, becomes a catalyst for many tongqi to confront, resist, or escape their long-endured marital suffering.

The emergence of male homosexuality within a marriage does not spontaneously make a woman "tongqi". As Goffman notes, individuals are not simply passive receivers of societal expectations and norms; instead, they negotiate, resist, and sometimes transform these influences (Goffman, 1978). On the one hand, the discourse on sexuality prevalent within

tongqi communities, as presented above, tends to be essentialist, monolithic, and determinist. This positivist perception of sexuality encapsulates the political and official discourse of sexuality that has been dominant since the inception of communist China. On the other hand, my study finds that this discourse is an outcome also reinforced by tongqi in their quest to understand and resist their marital circumstances. This form of resistance, among many others, will be further dissected in the forthcoming chapter on *Tongqi's Resistance*.

Homosexuality, in this light, plays a dual role in the tongqi phenomenon. It is both a specific attribute that cause sexual deprivation that many tongqi suffer due to incompatible sexual orientations, as well as a symbolic marker of resistance by tongqi women against their passive sexual role and restrictive gender norms entrenched in traditional Chinese marriage. It is relatively straightforward to comprehend why tongqi with concrete evidence of their husbands' homosexuality, such as Jia and Lin, link their experiences of domestic abuse and sexual deprivation directly to their husbands' sexual orientation. However, for tongqi like Zhang, who associate their suffering with a presumed homosexuality without proof, the reasoning appears more opaque.

In cases like Zhang's, I argue that the supposed homosexuality of these tongqi's husbands acts as a metaphor for broader marital dissatisfaction. A feminist analysis should consider multiple aspects which collectively produce women's subordination. My study posits that male homosexuality, the phantasmagoric "devil" that wrecks "normal" sexual relations in Chinese marriages, serves to inadvertently expose and disrupts the idealised "heterosexual imaginary" (Ingraham, 1994), which is also responsible many tongqi's marital distress. This "heterosexual imaginary", [quote] which has not been sufficiently explored in tongqi research, insidiously perpetuates a romanticised heterosexual power imbalance between husband and wife, pressuring tongqi to adhere to submissive gender roles in their marital relationships.

The narratives of Jia and Lin echo the prevalent explanation of the tongqi phenomenon, which blames tongqi women's marital sufferings entirely on male homosexuality. Thus, homosexuality inadvertently reinforces "heterosexual imaginary" (Ingraham, 1994) by serving as a convenient scapegoat for any marital abuses, so that idealised heterosexuality perpetuates the myth of heterosexuality as the default, unproblematic norm. For example, the verbal aggression faced by Jia and Lin when initiating sex from their husbands is attributed

exclusively to their homosexual “deviation”, while the parallel issues of toxic masculinity and entrenched male dominance within the traditional Chinese marital framework remain unexamined. Moreover, other tongqi like Zhang, whose experiences of domestic abuse might be inaccurately recast from issues rooted in gender-based oppression to their husbands’ supposed sexual orientation, become obscured. This misattribution effectively renders other struggles invisible, as the underlying gender issues and heteronormativity are masked by the focus on homosexuality.

Interrogating Heterosexuality in Tongqi’s Sexual Deprivation

After exploring the complex role that the notion of homosexuality plays in contributing to the tongqi’s sexual deprivation, the discussion now turns to heterosexuality, a social institution that is often overlooked but significantly impacts tongqi’s marital sufferings. Within the context of tongqi marriages, it is posited that the heterosexual marriage bed, described as “a scene of confusion and deception rather than of conjugal bliss” (Jackson, 1999, p. 42), becomes the critical arena. This heterosexual framework not only enables husbands to exert male aggression in response to the absence of conjugal sex but also pressures tongqi wives into embodying objectified and interiorised femininity, thereby participating in their own subjugation. Thus, the focus of the analysis here shifts from the subjects’ individual experiences to the overarching power structures that frame these interactions.

Male Aggression: Husbands are Pressured to Justify the “Lack” of Conjugal Sex

After revealing sexual deprivation as a form of emotional abuse in tongqi’s marriage, one ontological curiosity then arises: What compels the husband to aggressively justify the absence of sexual engagement with his wife? In Gilles Deleuze, in his critique of the capitalism-driven market economy, contends that “lack is created, planned, and organised in and through social production” (Deleuze, 1984, p. 27), by external forces, rather than emanating from an inherent absence. Applying this framework to the context of sexually-deprived marriages in contemporary China, it is worth to inquire into the external factors that construct the absence of conjugal sex. Specifically, one must examine what societal mechanisms stigmatise this absence as “abnormal” or necessitate justification. In my research, it becomes evident that this constructed “lack” is also necessitated by the institution

of heterosexuality, not only just by homosexuality. Such compulsory heterosexuality, upheld by the prevailing gender duties in marriage, the dominance-based masculinity in Chinese society, inflicts shame to Chinese husbands who fail to perform sexual intercourse in conjugality. These factors collectively influence the conjugal interactions within cross-sex Chinese marriages, transforming the experiences of sexless marriages of many tongqi into environments rife with aggression and abuse.

In post-socialist China, Chinese men, regardless of whether they are heterosexual or homosexual, are under stringent social scrutiny to perform as heterosexual via sexuality. For instance, modern Chinese men suffer from collective anxiety about the proper “penis size” (Zhang, 2018) and “the impotence epidemic” (E. Y. Zhang, 2015) that holds heterosexual potency to account for a man’s proper masculinity. To evade being marginalised as abnormal, Chinese men who do not engage in sexual acts with women, for varied reasons, are compelled to pay lip service to the façade of “normal” heterosexuality.

The differential impact of sexless marriages reveals a pronounced gender disparity. While Chinese men experience psychological frustration in the case of sexual impotence, their wives are likely to bear a disproportionate burden of suffering in varied forms of domestic abuse. Previous tongqi and tongzhi studies have extensively revealed how married tongzhi exercised their male dominance over their wives within the framework of patriarchal gender hierarchy. For instance, Changhui Song, in his Chinese tongzhi study, finds most married tongzhi actively engage in same-sex affairs while admiring their wives’ submissive gender qualities such as “docile”, “traditional”, and “shy, quiet and introverted” in their sexually challenged marriages (Song et al., 2023, p. 1208). Other research indicates that many husbands of tongqi engage in emotional abuse to deflect suspicions about their heterosexuality. Some husbands resort to “cold violence”, repeatedly refusing intimate advances from their wives without offering proper explanations (Tang et al., 2020). Others attack their wives’ femininity by stating that they are “not beautiful enough” or “not feminine enough” as a way to avoid sexual intimacy (Song et al., 2022, p. 7). My research builds on these findings, highlighting that asserting dominance, whether confrontational or manipulative, serves as a prevalent and convenient tactic for the husband’s to justify their sexual “lacking” in tongqi’s marriages.

Meanwhile, such male dominance is also observed among heterosexual husbands who takes shames over sexual impotence and vent their frustration on their wives via brutal violence. In a study on male impotence in post-socialist China, Everett Yuehong Zhang noted how Chinese heterosexual men with impotency often resort to verbal abuse and physical violence towards their wives to normalise the lack (E. Y. Zhang, 2015). One informant in this research, Mr Gan, a heterosexual businessman who frequently engaged in paid sex, lost his sexual potency for a while. During this time, he beat his wife whenever he felt sexually frustrated, until she turned “black and blue”, and she never reported him.

The phenomenon of sexual avoidance stemming from a husband’s homosexual orientation undeniably contributes to the prevalence of sexless marriages among tongqi. Yet, it is the interplay with heteronormative pressures, that mandate men to engage in penetrative sex, and the pervasive dualism of dominant/submissive gender roles that escalates a potentially neutral state of marital sexlessness into a situation rife with male aggression. As Jia, Lin, and Zhang all suffered severe emotional abuse and verbal assault every time their husbands blamed them for failing to be “sexual appealing”. This misattribution, rooted in sexualised gender expectations placed upon female bodies in modern China, ensures that it is the wife who disproportionately endures the psychological fallout from the absence of sexual intimacy.

Building on previous tongqi research anchored in biologically-determined sexuality and gender, my analysis of the linkage between sexual deprivation and male homosexuality in tongqi marriages takes a divergent constructionist stance at a pivotal juncture. Rather than attributing this abuse solely to “innate” homosexuality, I argue that such abuse could not have been produced at such large scale without the collusion of compulsory heterosexuality and gender hierarchy in Chinese marital ethics. On the one hand, it is the societal pressure for these homosexual husbands to perform heterosexuality via sexual intercourse that made them desperate to justify their sexual lack. On the other hand, it is the gender hierarchy that naturalises male aggression towards their wives, continually placing women in a subordinate position via the naturalised desire for the male/phallus (Ebert, 1988). In the Chinese social context, conjugal relations have always been regarded as familial matters (Zheng, 2022), and are therefore largely isolated in the inner quarter from the legal and social framework. Thus, husbands’ frustration over dis-performing normative heterosexual desire can be easily channelled to their wives via asserting dominance, within cultural and legal tolerance.

Male dominance is not only asserted, but also internalised to operate at its best capacity, as power is a diffused mechanism that is practised at capillary level internally (Foucault, 1982). The narrative of tongqi in this chapter exemplifies how the conventional gender norm of female sexual modesty and the neoliberal norm of sexual desirability reproduce male dominance internally. This self-imposed obligation among women to maintain male authority and sexual self-esteem is discussed in Suwei Xiao's book (Xiao, 2020), especially among middle-class Chinese men who face a crisis of masculinity due to their inability to fulfil the financial expectations in the market-reformed China. Subsequently, in intimate relationships, Chinese women are guided to revive the traditional gender norms of caring and subservience to attend the shattered self-esteem many Chinese men experience when they fail to achieve "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) via wealth and status.

Desire and Femininity

In my study, the narratives of the tongqi revealed a deep intertwining of self-worth, femininity, and heterosexual desire. Everyday heterosexuality, as illuminated by Jackson, is not simply about sex, but also encompasses many mundane aspects of marital gender division and expectations through which heterosexual coupledness persists as the normative ideal (Jackson, 1999, p. 26). My study finds that tongqi's longing for sexual desire is not only rooted in biological, but also in the societal expectations surrounding the central role of heterosexual intercourse in constructing Chinese women's "worthy" and "respectable" femininity.

In her 22-year sexless marriage, Zuo's sexual requests were repeatedly refused by her husband. Zuo questioned her womanhood in immense guilt and insecurity as she failed to be sexually desired.

It hurts my ego when my husband rejected me [sexually]. I read that homosexual men are very impatient with women. They are very agitated or irresponsible when they are next to a woman. They have numerous ways to evade sex with their wives. This kind of acts damages women. It makes me always doubt myself as a woman. The biggest hit to me in my sexless marriage is that by no means I can make an effort to improve my marriage,

because there's always a lack in me. I can never fulfil my husband's sexual needs as a woman because he likes men.

Similarly, in Mao's sexless story, the continuous denial of her sexual requests by her husband also made her feel that her womanhood was denied:

On my wedding night, my husband left me alone and slept in a separate room... He told me that all men did not sleep with women after they got married. 'Who feed the fish after the fish is hooked?' I felt so wronged as a woman. I was his wife – why would a man not touch his own wife?

The lack of conjugal sex transpires to be more than just a disharmony of conjugal relations, but a root, a fuel, a catalyst for tongqi's existential crisis as females who struggle to conform to conflicting femininities before and after marriage. Both Zuo and Mao described themselves as "good girls" for trying to keep their virginity before their weddings, aligning with the Confucianism-based gender norm that requires women to preserve their "female chastity" for their future husbands (Evans, 1997; Mann, 1991). After marriage, Zuo and Mao felt tremendous insecurities over their femininities when their husbands did not want their "saved" sexuality.

As sexuality is performatively constructed (Butler, 1988), no one escapes from the peril of relentless imitation of heterosexuality. Chinese individuals all struggle to perform heterosexual, including homosexual men (Zheng, 2015), heterosexual men (E. Y. Zhang, 2015), lesbians (Engebretsen, 2017), and of course heterosexual women, who are often overlooked in examining compulsory heterosexuality. Tongqi, self-identified heterosexual women, embody this performance. To appear as "normal" post-socialist subjects, they are also pressured to imitate idealised feminine traits linked to heterosexuality – rendering female subjectivity a product of standardisation, sexualisation, and objectification. Zuo's and Mao's experiences embody this: their husbands' sexual reticence served as a powerful signal that they had failed to evoke desire and therefore had failed as women, and they subsequently sank into depression and anxiety. These accounts by tongqi revealed that the crux of their self-doubt about their femininity did not lie in their husbands' homosexuality *per se*, but in the larger system of heterosexuality, which defines women as "what turns men on" (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 531). Within this context, conjugal sexual relationships often become arenas where women's insecurities about their female subjectivity are perpetually engendered

and manipulated as their selfhood depends on the repetitive accreditation of penetrative intercourse by the penis of one's legal spouse.

Moreover, in a post-socialist context, Chinese women are not only expected to be sexually desirable; they are also encouraged to desire, sexually, and only heterosexually. Today, Chinese individuals are encouraged to perceive themselves as autonomous and self-determining agents for their own personal interests and pleasure. Sexual desire, like other forms of desire, is seen as an expression of individual freedom and autonomy (Rofel, 2007). Echoing Rofel's finding, tongqi in my research exhibited a consensus that sex is important, not limited to conjugal stability and familial reproduction, but also to fulfil their individualistic desires.

Meanwhile, the increasing awareness of tongqi victimhood also contributes to stigmatising married women with no sex life. In Chinese media, sensationalist headlines, such as *The Tongqi Life under the Media's Investigation: 60-year-old Remains Virgin* (Zheng, 2013) or *A Monologue of A Tongqi: My Gay Husband Has Never Seen Me Naked* (Zhao, 2016), implicitly criticise the absence of sexual relations and victimise women in sexless marriages. These questionable headlines not only amplify the plight of tongqi, but also set a societal expectation that equates marital success and femininity with sexual activity.

I observed two disciplines around which self-serving sexual desires were produced: bodily pleasure and health. Sexual pleasure was mostly desired by the tongqi I interviewed, at different magnitudes. Thirty-year-old tongqi Zhao believed that conjugal sex brings "smiles" to her face, while 36-year-old tongqi Hua viewed "sexual needs" (*shengli xuqiu*) as crucial to her happiness and said that she felt "gloomy" without sex. Forty-year-old Ying emphasised to me that she got married at an early age so that she could have conjugal sex regularly to make her body happy. Healthwise, more than half of my tongqi interviewees believed that the male energy of "yang" is essential to supplement the female's "yin" to achieve physical health through regular intercourse. The 43-year-old tongqi Shi was concerned about how her sexless life caused her "over-aging" (*lao de kuai*). The 27-year-old tongqi Yang believed that regular conjugal sex reduced the risk of cervical cancer, whilst irregular conjugal sex was harmful to her ovaries.

In contrast to these tongqi, most Chinese wives interviewed by local sociologist Li Yinhe in 2006 described the natural degeneration of their sexual desire due to their husbands' verbal and physical assault, "monstrous-like" sex manner, or erectile dysfunction (Li, 2009). At that time, the absence of sexual urges in women was perceived as the norm, leading these women to tolerate, and even expect, a decline in conjugal sex. The findings of Li Yinhe align with scholarship at similar historical windows, which has uncovered high rates of women's unwanted marital sex, often involving physical force, and a prevalence of emotional and sexual abuse by husbands within marriages (Parish et al., 2007a; Zhao et al., 2006). This was less than twenty years ago. Back then, the mechanisms of desire-driven market logics and the emerging stigmatisation of sexless femininity had not yet fully mobilised Chinese women's sexuality into a state of "wanting", so that there was not enough cultural soil to produce collective defiance of female sexual repression like tongqi.

The abuse via sexual deprivation in the tongqi phenomenon reveals the deeply entrenched heterosexual manipulation that deploys female sexuality at its core. Tongqi are bewildered subjects produced in a time-space of tension, trapped between competing gender expectations. Female sexuality in neoliberal China, in multi-dimensional heterosexual logics, is vilified situationally for either not being sufficiently dolled up on the outside or not prudish enough internally.

As Bartky notes, in the regime of institutionalised heterosexuality, a female is "the inmate of Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance" revolving around her sexuality (Bartky, 1997, p. 107). Within this prison of gazing, simultaneously, Chinese women in the neoliberalised context have been transitioning into "the entrepreneur of its own self" (Han, 2017, p. 11), pursuing their idealised sexual desire for self-realisation. Synergising both concepts, Chinese tongqi, or Chinese women in sexual deprivation in general, are inmates of Panopticon who, paradoxically, are infused with the desire for a prison break. Consequently, tongqi, a multi-dimensional troubling subject, is created, as heterosexual norms (compulsory) regulate their behaviours and heterosexual desire (erotic) propels their defiance. In the case of sexual deprivation, female sexuality becomes a battleground for domination and resistance, rather than a domain of self-expression and empowerment.

Intercourse and Phallus-Centrism

In my study, the narratives of the tongqi indicate that phallus-centric intercourse prevails as a hegemonic understanding of conjugal sex. Marriage has been regarded, if not as the only legitimate, then as the optimal locale for heterosexual intercourse since communist China (Evans, 1997). The interplay between phallus-centric intercourse and marital roles is the key to understanding the confrontational yet interdependent sexual relations in tongqi's marriage.

Yang, a 27-year-old entrepreneur introduced in the previous chapter, *Inventing Tongqi*, always felt that her married life was "abnormal", as her husband continually refused to sleep in the same bed as her. When explaining what she meant by "abnormal", Yang's initial response pointed to her husband's inability to maintain an erection with her:

One night, he kissed me. I naively believed that he had become "normal". I asked him, "Are you going to sleep with [have sex] me?" I felt a flicker of happiness, believing that we wouldn't need to seek medical help for his erectile dysfunction. But still, his body showed no response. He then proposed, "Can I help you with my hand?" I burst into tears... I felt so aggrieved. Despite being an attractive woman, my husband would rather masturbate than be intimate with me.

Moreover, for tongqi in my research, the medical aids that "artificially" create an erection on a male body violate the naturalness of heterosexual sex, resulting in their husbands being perceived as non-normal, non-manly, or even synonymously gay. The discovery of medical aids by tongqi in their husbands' secret stash at home, such as Chinese herbal medicine "*di huang*" pill (a local recipe believed to strengthen the "*yang*" energy), the Western medicine Viagra, and the imported sex-enhancer called Rush Poppers, is regarded by tongqi as circumstantial proof of their husbands' homosexuality, although these drugs, in both local and Western medical contexts, are largely used to enhance men's performance in heterosexual intercourse. A 43-year-old PhD researcher, Shi, was appalled by her husband's confession that he used Viagra in their long sexless marriage:

He once quarrelled with me and questioned why sex was so important to me. He said, "Do you know, I've taken Viagra twice, and I can see that you really enjoy it!" At that moment, I had a sudden realization: if he had to

pretend to have sex with me by using drugs, then he was a man without sexual ability, which meant he wasn't really a man! What I have with him is not a marriage!

In my study, all tongqi recounted their sexual experiences based on a unanimous definition of sex/intercourse – the penetrative sex of an erect penis into a vagina, with no expression of any other imagined cross-sex sexual acts at all. The stories of Yang and Shi offer a perspective that allows us to apply feminist scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon's argument, that “what is sexual is what gives a man an erection” (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 325), to understand why tongqi seemingly cooperated in their own sexual deprivation. Within their sexless marriages, tongqi were often subjected to a hegemonic heterosexual narrative, in which the husband's erectile cause and response became a measure of their conjugal intimacy, and by extension, the “normalcy” of their relationship.

In Yang's and Shi's stories, their husbands showed different attitudes towards renegotiating their sexual relationships. Yang's husband, in order to pleasure her, proposed an alternative form of sex by using his hand. In contrast, Shi's husband used the fact that he took Viagra to get an erection with her to shame her excessive sexual needs and inadequate sexual appeal. In both cases, the husbands' perceived “failure” to have an erection or an “natural” erection highlights the dominant phallus-centric conception of tongqi's sexless marriages. In spite of offering sexual pleasure via alternative or aided measures, the absence of an erection – a symbol and the only symbol of male sexual desire – left tongqi feeling aggrieved.

The phallogentric hegemony is integral to the production of tongqi's abusive marriages. It makes women's sexuality dependent on male genitals and peripheral to erotic experience: a heterosexual relation through which “the institutionalised superiority of men” is “carried over into the bedroom” (Jackson, 1999, p. 42).

Conclusion

In their tongqi study on intimate partner violence, Weizi Wu's team identified that tongqi suffered from significantly higher suicidal ideation, 61.2% in the 178 tongqi surveyed, mainly from "spiritual violence" rather than physical abuse (Wu et al., 2018, p. 12). My findings align with Wu's in terms of tongqi's high prevalence of emotional abuse. However, my study differs, as Wu focused on the interactional abuse between the couple, whereas my study emphasises the social factors that enable a form of domestic abuse devoid of any physical violence, namely sexual deprivation.

This chapter has delineated fundamental differences between a "sexually-deprived marriage" and a "sexless marriage". In the former, male dominance exerted by the husband and female subordination internalised by the wife converge to form a potent disciplinary power that subjects the tongqi women to domestic abuse. The latter, a sexless marriage, implies a neutral and consensual model of conjugality that sexual activity is simply not there, rather than lacking. Meanwhile, sexless marriage has been recognized as one of the viable models of marriage. For instance, a recent qualitative study found that 72% of Chinese who self-identified as asexual individuals experienced and longed for romantic attraction and relationships (Zheng and Su, 2018). Moreover, many Chinese individuals see asexual marriage with the opposite sex not just as a "cover-up", but as a real marriage when they form a familial kinship rather than a romantic relationship – a bond "better than friendship because siblings are closer" (Wong, 2015, p. 112).

Differing from sexless marriage, it is crucial to recognise the abusive nature of sexual deprivation to women. Applying Foucault's "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 2020), it is evident how sexual deprivation operates on the basis of disciplinary power abuse, rather than direct physical violence. While sexual assaults function on the principle of forceful "consent violation", sexual deprivation derives from the imbrication of external male aggression and internal self-subjugation due to the imbalanced gender relations in Chinese conjugality.

It is also important to note that: sexual deprivation as a characteristic that can be associated with tongqi but is not definitive of the group. From my interviews, it emerged that sexual deprivation is a specific factor leading many women in distressing situations to self-identify as tongqi. In other words, Chinese women in sexless but otherwise harmonious marriages, who do not endure emotional abuse by the husband, may not regard themselves as tongqi. In contrast, those who experience sexual deprivation coupled with the husband's emotional

mistreatment are more likely to self-identify as the tongqi. This indicates that the hegemonic heterosexual paradigm in modern China, premised on highly active male sexuality and romanticised heterosexuality, fails to provide valid accounts for the husband's sexual inactivity and the emotional abuse inflicted upon their wives. Thus, this prompts these women to attribute their marital suffering exclusively to the issue of male homosexuality.

In this chapter, I construct the notion of “sexual deprivation” as a non-violent yet erosive form of domestic abuse, which is specifically situated in the husband's assertion of male dominance over the wife's (de)sexualised obligations in post-socialist Chinese marriage. Homosexuality, which factors as an important trigger for many Chinese men to evade conjugal sex with their wives, could not effectively produce sexually deprived tongqi victims without its collusion with male domination. Here, I contend the conclusions of previous tongqi studies that ascribed tongqi's sexless struggles solely to the clash between the couple's sexualities (Song et al., 2022; Tang and Liu, 2017; Tsang, 2021). This perspective fails to account for the broader societal context that intersects gender and heteronormativity, where Chinese men benefit from gender privileges that allow them to assert dominance over their “subordinate” wives without facing consequences. Meanwhile, Chinese women are pressured to emulate a complex and self-conflicting ideal of female sexuality. Therefore, sexual deprivation in the tongqi community must be understood as a multifaceted issue that intersects with male homosexuality, gender hierarchy, and evolving sexual norms in the rapid wake of market reforms in China.

Regarding the impact of modern female gender norms to tongqi's sexual deprivation, I argue that sexual deprivation operates within the post-socialist interaction of heterosexualised “female sexual desirability” and patriarchalised “female sexual respectability”. These two conflicting gender norms on female sexuality produce a mental dilemma for tongqi. They often find themselves unfairly blamed for their failing marital sex lives, which compromises their own well-being. This finding contests the argument of “deinstitutionalization of marriage” (Davis and Friedman, 2014a), referring to the traditional Confucianism-based marriage structure as eroding, giving way to greater personal freedom in marital relationships. Tongqi's sexual struggles suggest a re-institutionalisation of marriage via the lens of the heterosexuality system in post-socialist China. This is a more insidious and seductive form of power that operates on fulfilling desires rather than enforcing Confucian obligations. In other words, it is not only the power of what an individual “should do”, but

also what one “wants to do”, that co-govern and co-produce the tongqi subject and their domestic abuse via sexuality.

Male homosexuality, established as a prominent yet indecisive factor in tongqi’s sexually-deprived marriage, is the metaphorical “phantom of the house”: it may or may not be there, but it is needed for its illusion, by both tongqi and the heteronormative marriage scene. In colluding a “public transcript” (Scott, 1990), a tongqi needs a “gay husband” so that she can ascend the power ladder as a “normal” heterosexual to disrupt the abusive marital relations, while heterosexuality needs an “othered”, “wicked”, and “abnormal” to allow it to perpetually occupy the sacred place on the pedestal of human sexuality and sexual relations. Thus, the tongqi identity and heterosexuality thrive in symbiosis: in a tongqi’s marriage, the woman’s subjugated gender identity is potentially offset by her heterosexual “normalcy”; through the tongqi phenomenon, heterosexuality conceals its operations and evades social scrutiny.

After presenting tongqi’s marital distress, the next chapter will delve into how tongqi renegotiate the prevailing gender norms to actively resist and even reverse the traditional gender script in Chinese marriages.

Chapter 7. Tongqi's Resistance: Overt Victims, Covert Rebels

This chapter delves into the resistance enacted by tongqi in responding to their marital struggles. In the chapter on *Inventing Tongqi*, I described the participant observation I conducted in the intimate confines of a hotel room and continued at a local restaurant, highlighting a group performance of subversive humour, strategic impression management, and rebellious name-calling of their husbands, all revolving around the tongqi identity. These actions, taken “off the table” and “behind closed doors”, embody the intertwined symbiotic subjectivities in the tongqi construct: victimhood and resistance.

In this chapter, grounded in tongqi women's agency and located in the post-socialist Chinese context, I aim to answer the question: “How do tongqi renegotiate their gender norms to engage everyday resistance?” I argue that tongqi women produce and manoeuvre a “sanitised” public transcript of “marriage fraud”, to secure a legitimate female victimhood in marital relations, in order to exercise their agency of resistance against domestic abuse and injustice. By tracing tongqi's victimhood-based and victimhood-masked resistance, this chapter reveals the oppressive and exploitative gender relations within which tongqi women are situated in the power system that intersects patriarchy, the market economy, and state-endorsed homophobia in post-socialist China.

Only recently have academic studies started to pay attention to tongqi's agency in resisting the status quo of their marriages and striving for better living conditions (Liu, 2020; Sun, 2020; Tang et al., 2020; Zhou, 2022). These qualitative studies illuminate how tongqi engage in responsive self-help agency in coping with marital abuse and HIV infection (Tsang, 2021), in reframing de-romanticised conjugal relations (Zhou et al., 2022), and in online advocacy for social support (Liu, 2020). The agency in previous studies is largely reflexive, manifested in tongqi's coping mechanisms or responsive actions towards their husbands' sexuality. No literature has addressed the subtle, strategic, and astute resistance of tongqi in their everyday marriage lives, whose agency is close intertwined with their victimhood.

Emerging literature on domestically abuse women has been deconstructing the dichotomy of their agency and victimhood. Scholars have proposed, in studying women's domestic experience, to understand agency as “relational – to others, to contextual structures, to own vulnerabilities and prior victimization” (Kreft and Schulz, 2022, p. 1), to bright lights to

nuances of more mundane form of resistance which are often overshadowed by large-scale political movements. This chapter intends to delve into tongqi's multifaceted resistant agency, which is deeply imbricated in its victimhood and vulnerability. The chapter aims to reveal tongqi women's varied rejection and reappropriation of the normative gender script to resist domestic abuse, imbalanced conjugal power relations, and unjust societal expectations. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to elucidate tongqi's indistinct awareness of gender-based oppression, which has been largely veiled underneath their mask of vulnerable wifehood.

“Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). This suggests that the tongqi subject is never merely a locale for the inscription of power. When the weak oppose the dominant, their resistance often takes a stealthy form, as “resistance [of the weak] can grow best when it is shielded from direct surveillance” (Scott, 1990, p. xii). This cloaked form of resistance is particularly prevalent in China, in which public protests are overtly characterised as illegal by the Chinese party-state (Veneti et al., 2016). For instance, in the public transcript, organised protests are stigmatised as illegal, violent riots that “destabilise” the social security in China, whereas the hidden transcript in the grassroot class renames “protest” as “taking a walk in a group” (*jiti sanbu*) to nominally de-politicise the action of protest and keep the hope for “gatherings” alive.

To counter the ubiquitous and insidious power in modern societies (Foucault, 1982), the subordinates often engage in “petty resistance”, or silent, individual-based and temporal acts in the “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott, 1985). The previous chapter, *Inventing Tongqi*, illustrated a landscape of tongqi's verbal defiance “offstage”. This chapter continues to apply James Scott's notion of the “hidden transcript” to explore tongqi's acts of everyday resistance.

Situated within the role-based Chinese gender system, individuals possess the agency to alter their gender behaviours and manners through the appropriation of societal gender expectations imposed upon their biologically-sexed bodies. This situation-based and audience-specific performance of various “gender masks” (Harris, 2004) is adopted by tongqi in formulating their hidden transcripts to resist marital oppression. In a rapidly-modernising China, multiple sets of gender expectations entail both multi-faceted systematic oppression and plural gender roles that Chinese women may be able to manoeuvre for their everyday resistance.

The employment of victimhood in women's resistance, despite its long-standing criticism by neoliberal feminism for depriving women of agency (Stringer, 2014), has pragmatic and protective merits for the weak. In the context of tongqi, these women in my research engaged in tactical use of the "victim mask" as a domestic female victim who "consciously parodies [her] gender identities as defined by the ruling discourse ... at different times in front of different audiences, with varied levels of internalization" (Harris, 2004, p. 24). By wearing different "gender masks" flexibly and selectively, tongqi may gain increased agency and a safer cultural "shield" to defy direct or indirect everyday abuse and domination, as they may meticulously perform a stereotyped female victimhood in their conformity to gender norms while covertly subverting marital gender relations away from the sight and scope of social sanctions.

"Marriage Fraud": Producing Legitimate Victimhood and Resistance

To address tongqi's resistance, one cannot bypass its underpinning narrative – "marriage fraud". Prior to joining the tongqi community, most women I interviewed were not aware of the "marriage fraud" discourse. Most of them just felt that their marriages were "abnormal" or "unsatisfactory". Once they entered the community, they were overwhelmed by methods that "diagnose homosexuality" and the ensuing fraudulent marital conducts by men.

Jo was a 27-year-old accountant. Her life post-marriage was characterised by daily tears, anxiety, and the stress of making her abrasive and sexless marriage work. After accidentally coming across similar stories in online tongqi communities, Jo began self-identifying as a tongqi victim of a marital scam, because the stories of these suffering wives resonated with her own tormenting marital experience, including verbal abuse and emotional and physical avoidance. From there, Jo changed her role from salvaging an abusive marriage to that of a "marriage fraud" victim seeking help and justice. When I interviewed Jo, she was seeking a psychologist to "diagnose" her husband's homosexuality and to consult other tongqi for marriage/divorce advice.

The "marriage fraud" discourse permeates all tongqi communities I've encountered. Its popularity is encapsulated in a widely-spread document drafted by a group of tongqi

to map out how they envision Chinese gay men's objectives, strategies, and disguises in conducting "marriage fraud" on innocent women. The table of contents of this lengthy document is presented below to illustrate "marriage fraud" in a nutshell.

How Do Gay Men Deceive Women into Marrying Them²

1. Why Do Gay Men Commit Marriage Fraud?
 - 1.1. Four Ways Gay Men Handle Marriage: Marriage Fraud, Formality Marriage, Non-Marriage, and Marriage in Other Countries
 - 1.2. Benefits of Marriage Fraud – Career Prospects
 - 1.3. Benefits of Marriage Fraud – Friends and Social Circles
 - 1.4. Benefits of Marriage Fraud – Parents
 - 1.5. Benefits of Marriage Fraud – Uterus and Heir
 - 1.6. Benefits of Marriage Fraud – Normal Lifestyle
 - 1.7. Benefits of Marriage Fraud – Senior Care by Wife and Children
 - 1.8. Downsides of Marriage Fraud – Shortcomings vs Benefits?
2. Preparation Before Conducting Marriage Fraud
 - 2.1. Target selection – Characteristics of an Ideal Target
 - 2.2. Target selection – What Kind of Women Are Gullible to Marriage Fraud?
 - 2.3. Tactics – How Gay Men Respond When a Woman Finds Them Abnormal
 - 2.4. Tactics – How Gay Men “Smuggle” a Boyfriend into Their Heterosexual Married Life
 - 2.5. Tactics – Performing a Perfect Lover and a Perfect Son-In-Law
 - 2.6. Tactics – How to Expel the Whistle Blowers around His Wife
 - 2.7. Tactics – Eight Perfect Excuses to Alleviate a Wife’s Suspicion
3. After Obtaining the Marriage License
 - 3.1. Strategic Decisions – A Divorce or Not?
 - 3.2. How to “Make a Baby” under the Circumstance of Impotency – Experiences Shared by Predecessors
 - 3.3. How to Handle the Wife’s Requests on Marital Sex
 - 3.4. How to Balance the Relationship Between One’s Wife and One’s Boyfriend

² The table of contents is extracted and translated from a webpage of the *Douban* forum, <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/21062282/>

- 3.5. How to Fabricate a Perfect Family Image?
 - 3.6. What to Do When the Wife Finds Out – Coming Out of the Closet or Not
 - 3.7. Five Issues after Coming Out
 - 3.8. Twenty Reasons to Explain When Coming Out
 - 3.9. Five Methods to Destress after Coming out
4. If the Wife Wants a Divorce
 - 4.1. Ten Tactics to Convince the Wife Not to Divorce
 - 4.2. How to Distribute Familial Assets
 - 4.3. How Win Child’s Custody
 - 4.4. How to Optimise the Man’s Interests in the Case of Divorce
 - 4.5. How to Provide the Evidence by Which the Wife is left with Nothing?
 - 4.6. How to Get Family Support to Reject Any Requests by the Wife
 - 4.7. What to Do with the “Child of a Gay Man”?
5. Conclusion: The Happy Life of Being a Once-Married Gay

In essence, “marriage fraud” is a moral verdict: it consists of an essentialist discursive dualism of a heterosexual female victim and a homosexual male villain in conjugality, in which the former is portrayed as the direct outcome of solely the latter. A Tongqi named Lin in my study confirmed the universality of this discourse perceived among tongqi: “In the tongqi community, we have a popular saying: ‘gay men who commit marriage fraud must all have the same mentor’”.

Previous tongqi studies have examined the “marriage fraud” discourse from different angles. The earliest tongqi studies by local scholars, sociologist Kuiyu Tang and his team, set the foundation to establish such discourse as the root cause of the emergence of tongqi, constructing tongqi’s victimhood as the direct result of Chinese gay men’s “marriage fraud” (Liu and Tang, 2014; Tang and Liu, 2014; Tang et al., 2020). Meanwhile, overseas-published papers began to develop tongqi’s agency and victimhood, premised on this foundation. Zhou and her team identified tongqi’s resilience as victims of “marriage fraud” by gay men by reframing unconventional conjugal and sexual relationships (Zhou et al., 2022). Wenjig Liu,

discovering tongqi's cyber-agency in their online resistant activities, called for public awareness of gay men committing "marriage fraud" (Liu, 2020). Moreover, both Eileen Tsang and Fung Kei Cheng's tongqi studies attempted to narrow down the definition of "marriage fraud" by arguing that the definition of fraud hinges on whether these women were informed of their husbands' homosexuality prior to marriage (Cheng, 2016; Tsang, 2021).

On top of these studies, I find Jingshu Zhu's tongqi research particularly enlightening. Zhu's research showed varied ways in which tongqi live their married lives with a gay husband and cautioned that the notion of being informed and knowledgeable, if "used as a decontextualized ethical yardstick for queer kinship, may obscure the racist and homophobic prejudices that exist both outside and inside queer communities" (Zhu, 2017, p. 1). Changhui Song and his team, who interviewed 34 tongzhi on their marriage decisions, also rejected the oversimplified discourse of "marriage fraud", as it denies the fluidity and flexibility in human sexuality and affection manifested in many tongzhi's marriages with their wives (Song et al., 2023).

Many previous studies on Chinese tongzhi (homosexual men) have exhibited the transformation local same-sex attracted men experienced since China's market reform and opening up in the 1980s. The widely observed shift in perception can be attributed to the impact of the global gay movement, amplified by the internet boom, which had led to the essentialisation and alphabetisation of what was once a fluid homoerotic culture in China (Chou, 2001; Coleman and Chou, 2013; Kong, 2012; Wei, 2007). Hence, same-sex behaviours were considered temporary and situational, but they have now come to be understood through new societal lenses - as inherent biological traits that clash with heteronormative expectations.

The tongzhi participants in this study, particularly those aged 35 and above who experienced the rise of the Chinese gay movement online in the early 2000s, resonates these findings. They shared a common lack of awareness about how their same-sex attractions might affect their conjugal relationships and the traditional patriarchal family configuration. The in-depth discussion on tongzhi's marital expectation and experience can be found in the last analytical chapter *Married Tongzhi*, which reveals diverse views on marriage, sexuality, and gender duties that may or may not hinges on a fixed homosexual identity.

Building on Zhu's and Song's arguments, I also challenge the prevailing "marriage fraud" that ascribes tongqi's sufferings solely to Chinese homosexual men or Chinese husband's same-sex attractions. However, in this chapter, my contention on its epistemic flaw rests in the Chinese gender system and tongqi's resistant agency, rather than the Chinese sexuality and normative heterosexuality (see more discussion on this topic in the chapter on *Married Tongzhi*). Rather than viewing tongqi merely as direct victims of "marriage fraud", my analysis acknowledges their complex and interwoven agency and resistance. This chapter aims to examine how the discourse of "marriage fraud" is actively constructed by tongqi as part of their negotiation with traditional marital roles, serving as a means to counteract domestic abuse and broader societal oppression.

"Marriage Fraud": A Reverse Gender Script in Contemporary Chinese Marriage

The "marriage fraud" accusation in fact reveals the symbiotic relationship between tongqi's victimhood and their resistant agency. This dynamic is reciprocal: the acknowledgment of their victimhood not only legitimises but also strengthens and shields the subtle forms of resistance employed by tongqi. This dynamic is particularly salient for married women resisting domestic abuse and oppression, as Chinese cultural norms have historically placed the onus of maintaining marital unity solely on women (Hird, 2017; Watson and Ebrey, 1991; Zheng, 2022). Any deviation from the expected submissive gender role is met with severe social censure. This tradition persists, both culturally and legally, within the enforcement of contemporary marriage laws in post-socialist China.

In the 1980s, post-reform China introduced "no-fault divorce" to Chinese Marriage Law, meaning that one spouse can obtain a divorce without proving the wrongdoings of the other (Palmer, 1995). However, contested Chinese divorces are compulsorily mediated on the basis of fault-divorce (Wang, 2013; Zhang, 2005), if not legally, then culturally. Thus, a publicly recognised victimhood, or the "party without fault" in the Chinese legal framework, serves as a critical enabler for effective resistance.

The operation of fault-divorce at cultural level in the patriarchal society of China is inevitably gender-biased. If a marriage goes wrong, the faulty party is naturalised to be the female – the wife. Scholar Tiantian Zheng refers to this as a Chinese patriarchal phenomenon of "wife-at-

fault” (Zheng, 2022): a practice that justifies domestic abuse towards women and dismisses their victimhood when the wives are perceived as violating their imagined femininities of submissiveness and obedience. In previous chapters, I also discussed how various forms of domestic oppression and abuse against the tongqi are normalised in patriarchal gender relations so that these women lack the discursive power to articulate or even sense-make their lived struggles.

Contrastingly, the “marriage fraud” discourse presents a significant departure from the normative “wife-blaming” narrative. The gender script of villain husband/victim wife in “marriage fraud” discourse fundamentally reverses the dominant gender script. In this discourse, the tongqi is established as the legitimate victim in marriage. The discourse invokes the biologically-determined homosexuality within the homophobic social context, firstly to exempt tongqi women from the gender obligation of being “virtuous” or “subservient” to endure a defective marriage; and secondly, to confer upon tongqi the legitimate victim identity in relation to a constructed sexual “perversion” to resist and even defy marital gender norms.

For instance, Zhang (whose story was discussed in the chapter *Inventing Tongqi*), a university-educated professional, stopped years of self-inflicted “wife-blaming” after she learnt of the “marriage fraud” discourse: “Once I learnt I was tongqi, my world collapsed, because I knew this [homosexuality] was not reversable. It was not my problem that my marriage was not working... I loved the wrong person. My ex-husband isn’t worthy of my love. He performed, he concealed, he had two faces – one in public and one in private – and he deceived me as if I were a fool. He is deeply closeted in the shadows and doesn’t dare to come out and live in the sunlight”.

As well as tongqi, many of the married tongzhi (homosexual men) I interviewed also internalised the “marriage fraud” discourse. Many of them intentionally assumed the “villain” role, producing a husband-at-fault narrative (see more in the chapter on *Married Tongzhi*). Divorced tongzhi Tang told me: “My ex-wife remarried two years after our divorce. Her new husband trusts her very much. [Our divorce] did not affect her much, because in our case [tongqi marriage], she is by no means the party-at-fault”.

Throughout this research, tongqi have demonstrated a keen gender awareness, particularly in accounting for their marital sufferings. Take Lin, a 30-year-old professional, who voiced a critical perspective on traditional marital roles: “Traditionally, women are expected to bear all sacrifices for the family’s sake, a practice that ultimately serves no benefit to women themselves.” Similar sentiment is also discussed in the previous Chapter *Conjugal Sex*, in which tongqi women felt unjust about the stigmatisation tied to their female sexuality as a means to emotional abuse by their husbands. Additionally, the “Marriage Fraud” document above further underscores tongqi’s recognition of how women’s reproductive labour is exploited within Chinese patriarchal marital framework. In essence, there is the acute gender consciousness found among tongqi women, who identify the structural oppression over them beyond individual relationships.

Why did the tongqi in my research, who were almost all highly-educated (university-degree and above) and urban professionals, ascribe structural gender oppression to an individual homosexual male? I do not want to engage with the Marxist theory of “false consciousness” to explain their perceptions and behaviour, as it falls into the deterministic epistemology of firstly ignoring tongqi’s agency and secondly taking the informant’s narrative at face value. Rather, I adopt De Certeau’s “tactics” and Scott’s “hidden transcript” to understand tongqi’s calibrated actions within their individual circumstance. Unlike “strategies”, which imply a sense of overarching control from a position of power, “tactics” refer to smaller, more immediate manoeuvres employed by individuals in quick response to their imminent situations (de Certeau, 1984). Tongqi’s formulation of the dualistic villain gay husband/victim wife spousal narrative is a “tactical resistance” and a small scale “hidden transcript”: this kind of resistance may not aim to overthrow the existing patriarchal power structures that oppress women but can nevertheless challenge and disrupt circumstantially the running of the gender script of “wife-blaming” in these women’s favour.

In this sense, the “marriage fraud” popularised in tongqi communities is what Scott calls the “sanitized, ambiguous and coded version of the hidden transcript [that] is always present in the public discourse of the subordinate groups” (Scott, 1990, p. 19). It has its merits in its instrumentality rather than in its factuality in favour of tongqi’s resistance to defy the traditional narrative of “wife-blaming”. At its core, the discourse serves as a tactical means for these women to navigate a gender system stacked against them. This public transcript, marked by the “victim” label, conceals the “hidden transcript” of tongqi’s rebellion. The

image of victimhood masks as a socially acceptable and non-threatening exterior, expanding these women's social agency as they leverage societal narratives to mitigate their loss.

Everyday Resistance: Between the Public and Hidden Transcripts

In line with numerous sociological findings, it is not surprising to find that the evident discrepancy between what tongqi say and how they behave. A legitimate victimhood is premised on the gender roles of “virtuous wife and good mother”. However, tongqi's hidden transcript in resisting the imbalanced marital gender relations shows gender performances that are contrary to the “virtuous”.

Tongqi's varied resistance and defiance have been captured in previous studies. Tongqi are never passive victims, but rather, conscious and tactical agents trying to redefine their gender roles and gender dynamics in marriage. Zhou's research finds that tongqi actively maintain their marriages, renegotiate non-normative marital relations beyond the hetero-homo binary, or divorce, given their individual social conditions (Zhou et al., 2022). Eileen Tsang noted that two HIV-positive tongqi refused to accept their fate, but actively formulated family support and sought professional advice (Tsang, 2021).

These forms of resistant agency of tongqi are investigated mainly within the patriarchal framework and within the inner quarters of the private domain. The following will focus on tongqi's resistance, which intentionally and tactically bonds with the public domain and social institutions that can be leveraged in tongqi's favour. I will showcase four performative resistances by tongqi in resisting marital oppression and abuse: shrew-parody in public, financial compensation for domestic labour, all-women community support, and termination of matrimony.

Dramaturgical Nao (Shrew-Parody): Aggression in Public

Tongqi are women of *kuming* (bitter lives). Many of them are so kind and beautiful, yet still trapped in marriage fraud. I admire women who start their lives with a clean break [divorce], or these who are brave enough to *nao* (make a noise), or even *naoda* (make a loud noise). They really fight for their rights. I feel angry. I feel bitter. I want to fight for my rights, too.

But I'm soft-hearted and I'm weak. I respect those women who show courage.

Jo, 27-year-old accountant, divorcing

Nao (making a noise) carries a significant stigma within the Chinese patriarchal system, functioning as a label to discipline those who dissent. Growing up as a Chinese girl, I personally witnessed and engaged in the articulation of this phrase as a gender- and generation-specific term used to silence only women and youngsters. “Stop *nao!*” is the catchphrase used by parents to scold their children or men to suppress women when the latter express any sign of opposition during cross-hierarchical interactions. The term can hardly be used the other way around by the subordinate group towards the dominant group, as its connotative authority lies only with those who situate at the upper level in the patriarchal power ladder.

In tongqi's resistance, *nao* constitutes a form of shrew-parody: a performative resistance of the socially recognised “gender masks” (Harris, 2004) of female victimhood. Under the umbrella of being the vulnerable and the weak, the irrational and the hysteric, *Nao* is found as an individual-based, aggressive yet tolerated form of direct confrontation against the husband by tongqi, albeit its blatant violation of the traditional gender norm of submissive femininity. To engage such performative resistance, tongqi must carefully choose sites and spectators for the legitimacy of public aggression towards their husbands. In my research, the resistant act of *nao* by tongqi involves two crucial public spaces: the husband's *danwei* (workplace) and the *xiaoqu* (neighbourhood) of his residence.

***Danwei* (Workplace)**

In the chapter on *Inventing Tongqi*, I presented the story of tongqi Zhi, who successfully subverted the male dominance at home via the “marriage fraud” discourse. Her husband turned from being aggressive and abusive to cooperative at home after she found his homoerotic chat history on his phone. Zhi was one of the very few interviewees who actually seized some decision-making power after this discovery. What propelled her husband's transition in attitude has to do with the particularity of his profession and work environment. Zhi explained how she chose to *nao* deliberately at his workplace to fight for her interests:

I never talked about this [his homosexual affair] at home. I always went to his *danwei* [work unit] on the 18th floor of the building, and argued with him right next to an open window, fighting, shouting, making a scene... I warned him that I could ruin him and his company. His big boss started his business, growing from a small company in a town to a big enterprise in a top-tier city. He did not dare to risk the chance to destroy his or his big boss's reputation and business.

Zhi's *nao* was the public exposure of her unsatisfactory marriage, ascribed to her husband's homosexuality. By deploying the villain/victim dualism in the "marriage fraud" tongqi discourse, Zhi intentionally assumed the victim mask of a tongqi while publicly exhibiting verbal aggression. Zhi's actions of voice-raising, attention-drawing, bluffing, and verbal confrontation when facing her husband violated the traditional gender norms, which expect a dutiful wife to be submissive. However, the tongqi victimhood encourages Zhi's transgressive actions, as her defiance is shielded by the legitimate "gender mask" (Harris, 2004) of the weak, the damaged, and the wronged female in a "marriage fraud".

Nevertheless, the success of Zhi's *nao* to seize decision-making power from her husband in marriage was circumstantial, almost entirely depending on her husband's occupational situation, which was deeply entrenched in an organised socialist system – *dan wei*. The shift in power dynamics towards Zhi's advantage was only contingent upon the potential exposure and subsequent repercussions of her husband's homosexual identity within a broader hetero-patriarchal structure, specifically the party-state. In reality, her husband's yield of power was not to Zhi but to the socialist work unit, to which his career, salary, social status, and pension were bound. The threat of "marriage fraud" served as an effective means for tongqi women like Zhi to draw the broader public power structure into their private disputes, mitigating their gender disadvantage in Chinese conjugality.

It is worth to note that the rest of the tongqi in my research, whose husbands worked in private enterprises that have been highly masculinised since the reform (Osburg, 2013), or were unemployed, had little leverage to show confrontational resistance at this explicit level. A common desperation among the tongqi interviewed was the lack of superiors, or the absence of them, to discipline their husbands' misconduct of "homosexual perversion". The sense of frustration was prevalent among the tongqi whose husbands were jobless, engaged in

private enterprise, or self-employed, as these tongqi women could not resort to a broader societal framework capable of intervening in their favour. Lin, a 30-year-old participant, shared her despair over her husband's unemployment status during their divorce negotiations. Following the reforms, the Chinese state's retreat in intervening personal affairs (Davis, 2014), along with the lack of legal protection for abused women (Su et al., 2022), has left the power dynamics for many tongqi entrenched in a traditional Chinese patriarchal framework. This system has long history and interest in constraining female agency, resulting most tongqi like Lin who failed to carry out or to success in their everyday resistance in unhappy or abusive marriages.

***Xiaoqu* (Neighbourhood)**

Another selective site for the resistance of *nao* by tongqi is the *xiaoqu* (neighbourhood). *Xiaoqu* refers to one's residential neighbourhood or a "collective space" that stems from the socialist legacy, in which an individual's life is exposed to the communist party's representation in the residents' committee at the state level (Jacoby and Cheng, 2020), and at the civil level, the collective governance of relatives, friends, and neighbours within an enclosed "society of acquaintances" (Fei et al., 1992). In other words, *xiaoqu* represents a hybrid locale where overlapping power relations of individualism, communist collectivism, and Confucian family-kinship interact, merge, and confront each other. Given its regulatory and disciplinary power in governing private life, this social locale becomes an ideal public space for tongqi's resistance in the space-transgressing form of *nao*.

Che was a 33-year-old teacher who discovered a homoerotic sex tape of her husband. This shocking discovery prompted her to consider divorce. However, she quickly realised the substantial financial and reputational risks associated with this decision. Her investment in their jointly owned retail business was untraceable and, moreover, she feared being stigmatised as a high HIV risk individual and the dishonour of becoming a "divorced woman" in the eyes of her family. Recognising that there was no way for her to recoup the emotional and financial investment she had made in her marriage, Che chose to express her anger by publicising her husband's homosexual identity. Che strategically chose the site of *xiaoqu* as the social space in which to exercise her resistant agency:

During my divorce, I simply couldn't make peace with it. I had been mistreated for years, by him and his mother! I needed somewhere to vent my grievances. So, I went to his workplace and informed his manager that he was gay. His manager didn't take any action.

After we separated, my husband moved back to his parents' place. So, I went to their neighbourhood and shouted. I shouted so loudly, screaming into the air that he was homosexual. I believe everyone in his neighbourhood heard me.

There were no substantial consequences at all for Che's husband and his family. For Che, and indeed for most of the *tongqi* I interviewed, such public displays of contempt and aggression towards their husbands functioned more as symbolic or therapeutic resistance than as difference-making acts. In the social and family-kin space of *xiaoqu*, her husband's reputation was the target of Che's overt verbal aggression, or more precisely, the collective honour of her husband's entire extended family, in which a male body, as the dominant party in husband-wife relations, is nonetheless governed by the older patriarchs who are obliged to safeguard the familial reputation as a monolithic entity of collective honour.

Nao, in the story of Che, was a tactical manoeuvre that engaged post-socialist and patriarchal disciplinary power. In perpetuating the party-state project of "harmonious society and family", *xiaoqu*, the enclosed residential estate, is designated to be the basic building-block of the political power for grassroots everyday governance (Bray, 2008). Subsequently, *tongqi*'s acts of *nao* in the political space of *xiaoqu*, such as shouting, screaming, and name-calling to vent their frustration and to defy patrilocal domination, constitute political resistance, which is tuned to engage social (collective family honour) and political authorities (residents' committee) into the *tongqi*'s side of the marital struggle.

The act of *nao* by Chinese women as a form of resistance was also seen beyond the familial relationship. In Liu's recent study, the everyday resistance of "public outbursts of emotion" by Chinese white-collar women was noted as a tolerated indirect power in the workplace in urban China (Liu, 2017). The unifying feature of these acts is their gendered nature, with such "emotional" and "hysterical" displays of aggression being tolerated and normalised based on the women's stereotyped biological sex – as females who are "naturally" weak at controlling their tempers. However, as Zhi and Che's narratives illustrate, they strategically

chose the site and the audience for their performances of stereotypically feminine, shrewish behaviour in order to leverage patriarchal power to punish their husbands.

Tongqi's acts of *nao* were theatrical, or dramaturgical in Goffman's term (Goffman, 1978), enacting both tongqi's perceived victimhood and their underlying resistance, while knowing that such public aggression would be tolerated. In this sense, victimhood provides an effective camouflage for tongqi's rebellion: to be a "victim" is to be acted upon, rather than acting; it implies weakness, powerlessness, and vulnerability. Yet, it is this very perception that can become a source of power in its own right. The repetitive acts of *nao* are indispensable in tongqi's subject-making, as Butler (1993, p. 95) noted:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject.

Drawing on Butler's performativity, tongqi's victimhood is not merely an imposed identity. Instead, it is leveraged as a means to act, resist, and challenge the status quo, imbricating into tongqi's complex and growing agency. By acting out their victimhood in pre-selected social locales, these women are not merely accepting their role as victims, but rather transforming their victimisation into a space for resistance. The catalyst of such transformation hinges largely on these women's intentional display of their socially-prescribed gendered traits – weakness, fragility, and vulnerability. This portrayal exemplifies Butler's notion of "gender parody", where tongqi blend unconventional femininity, marked by shrewdness, with the traditional attribute of vulnerability. In other words, tongqi's *nao* encapsulates the parody of women by women. Hence, they effectively evade societal scrutiny of their blatant defiance. Moreover, the performative act of *nao* is not just about resistance, but also about visibility. By acting out in public, these women force society to bear witness to their suffering. This visibility challenges societal denial and forces a public reckoning with the oppression they face.

Tongqi's shrew-parody resistance, protected by their victimhood, has its unique aspects regarding the notion of shame. In both Zhi's and Che's stories, voice-raising is a critical technique to harness the power of hearsay on sexual shame. Regarding one's sexual reputation in China, these tongqi women understood first-hand that "it is not what a woman

does but what people say she does that can ruin her” (Wolf, 1985, p. 112). Raising their voices as an effective non-violent way to draw attention disseminates the gossip of the husband’s “perverted” homosexuality to a wider audience in his work and living environment, potentially having a long-lasting impact that favours the wife’s status in marriage or divorce negotiations, or simply achieving the outcome of venting frustrations or exacting revenge.

Choosing *danwei* and *xiaoqu* for *nao* also reveals the limitations of these women’s resistant agency in the “inner quarter” with no spectators or the social pressure of collectivism. As Butler pointed out, the “deliberate exposure to power is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment” (Butler, 2016, p. 12). *Nao*, in the form of shrew-parody in selective social sites, serves precisely as a form of political resistance. Whether standing next to an open window on the 18th floor confronting a physically strong man or shouting out one’s husband’s homosexuality in public while self-inflicting public humiliation, these women’s resistance via vulnerability with physical and social risks highlights the aspect of the intertwined victimhood in *tongqi*’s resistant agency prior to and throughout their overt oppositional acts. *Tongqi* are resistant agents, yet their agency is limited and reduced, so one of their everyday resistances is carried out based on self-harm and wound-revealing.

Economic Resistance: Demanding Compensation

In my research, the overwhelming financial insecurity of *tongqi* was evident. This insecurity echoes with the larger social context of post-socialist China, where gender discrimination at work, privatisation of housing, the rise of consumerism, and soaring divorce rates subject married women to constant anxiety over the stability of their income, economic status, and home-ownership (Jacka, 2006; Liu, 2007; Osburg, 2013; H. Zhang, 2015). China now ranks 106th in the global gender gap rankings among 153 countries, slipping from 63rd position in 2006 (World Economic Forum, 2019). Moreover, Chinese married women experience a much larger gender wage gap than single women due to their overwhelming gender duties of unpaid labour at homes (Hughes and Maurer-Fazio, 2002).

My research found that *tongqi* engaged in a disguised form of economic resistance, which astutely employed state laws and market logics to renegotiate their gender roles and duties,

and to claim agency. I found that tongqi engaged in economic resistance primarily in two aspects: reclaiming the economic value of their unpaid domestic labour and materialising their physical and emotional sufferings in conjugal relations. In both forms of resistance, the discourse of “marriage fraud” served as a crucial tool. Through this, tongqi were able to transform their lived experiences of intangible loss and harm into tangible financial terms, thereby conferring economic value to their traditional gender roles and duties.

In “marriage fraud”, the key word “fraud” insinuates an economic and production relationship embedded in tongqi’s identity. In the table of contents for *How Do Gay Men Deceive Women into Marrying Them*, listed above, under the entry of *Benefits of a Marriage Fraud* for gay men, three of the six benefits these men harnessed from their wives were directly linked to economic value and gains: free uterus and heir, senior care provided by the wife, and improved career prospects. This is a discourse that binds market logics, normative heterosexuality, and traditional gender roles to produce a tongqi victimhood anchored in economic loss.

Many tongqi have questioned the exploitative nature in the gender-based division of domestic duties. For instance, one of the tongqi in my research, Jo, pointed out how her domestic duties were appropriated by her husband, but within the logic of “marriage fraud”: “My husband deceived me into marrying him as a cover, tricked me into having children for him, fooled me into providing care for his parents in their old age, and even manipulated me into being a free housekeeper for his home. He misled me into explaining the situation to his family, knowing full well that our marriage was all a deceitful façade.”

In all these complaints, Jo expressed a veiled awareness of a series of exploitations that were tethered to her gender as a woman. Her story serves as a microcosm of the systemic exploitation faced by wives, as captured by Engels: “the modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules” (Engels, 2010, p. 79). This gender binary production relation, or to use Walby’s term, “patriarchal mode of production” (Walby, 1989), exploits women’s unpaid productive and reproductive labour, as well as their emotional resources.

This exploitative production relation is by no means an exclusive phenomenon in tongqi's marriages. In fact, Chinese women with "double burdens" perform much more housework than their husbands, but do not gain substantial decision-making power in a resource-exchange model (Kan and He, 2018; Shu et al., 2013; Zhang, 2017; Zuo and Bian, 2001). Chinese wives' domestic contributions continue to be appropriated and naturalised by their gender roles. Shu's team's survey of 19,449 married individuals found that "gender values and institutional gender equality" remained the most salient determinants of imbalanced marital power and duty distribution in urban Chinese marriages (Shu et al., 2013, p. 912).

However, by deploying the discourse of "marriage fraud", tongqi subvert the gender script that has historically been naturalising Chinese women's unpaid domestic work. Tongqi are able to reframe the marriage institution as a sphere of production, where domestic duties are regarded as labour work attached to economic values. Many tongqi in my study unwittingly conveyed Marx's concept of "alienated labour" (Marx, 2022). For instance, Jo expressed her tongqi victimhood, associating it with her being estranged from the benefits of her domestic labour. Consequently, the resistant agency embodied in the tongqi's victimhood directly addresses the financial reimbursement for the economic disparity rooted in the patriarchal gender structure.

In addition to resisting their exploited gender duties, tongqi also seek to financially redress the intangible aspects of abuse, such as physical harm, emotional trauma, and reputational damage. This resistance is exemplified in the case of Mei. Mei agreed to be interviewed just one day after she had had an abortion. I was concerned about the timing of the interview, given her health condition, but Mei insisted that we proceed, as she needed "some distractions".

Mei, 29-year-old administrator in a hospital, endured a one-year abusive marriage. She and her husband had a normal dating relationship until they got married. During their honeymoon, her husband started to verbally abuse her. He cursed at her for her "history of whoreness" – having an ex-boyfriend. In the first month of marriage, he moved to the living room and rejected any communication. One night, when she tried to convince him to join her in bed, he slapped her, so she stopped her persuasions. Despite feeling traumatised, Mei tolerated her husband's abuse as a dutiful wife. Mei did not want to end up as a shameful "divorced woman". Despite discovering her husband's diary, which detailed his same-sex

affairs with multiple men, Mei initially chose to keep this revelation a secret. It was only during a heated argument, in which he cursed at her harshly, that she finally mentioned the diary. Her husband was furious, and he then demanded a divorce. After realising that he was determined to abandon her, Mei wanted financial compensation for the years of abuse she had suffered.

I told him how much he hurt me, but he still blamed me for everything. He demanded that I sign a divorce paper. I drafted one with compensation clauses. I stressed that I was still pregnant. To divorce me, he was liable to compensate my psychosocial and reputational damage. It was not really the money I was after. It was the matter of his attitude. He was the party-at-fault in our divorce.

Similar to domestic duties, Chinese women's intangible losses, such as emotional, physical, and reputational damage in marriage, are also normalised in the patriarchal gender role of "virtuous wife" that underlies dominance of males and submissiveness of females. However, both Jo's and Mei's stories show their rejection of this gender-based normalisation. They strove for a materialisation of their marital duties and intangible sufferings. This resistance serves not only to achieve economic gains for tongqi women but also as a symbolic act of asserting self-worth, dignity, and individual justice.

In what ways do tongqi renegotiate their gender norms in their economic resistance? My study found that tongqi manoeuvred the gender and market logics embedded in the 1980 Chinese Marriage Law in order to gain legitimacy of their economic claims. The 2001 revisions to the Chinese Marriage Law introduced a paradigm shift by tying marital misconducts to financial outcomes. This law, grounded in market economy ideologies, allows for financial compensation to be sought by the "party without fault" in cases where the marriage ends due to the misconduct of the "party-at-fault", such as bigamy, cohabitation with a third party, domestic violence, or maltreatment and desertion (Palmer, 2007). However, homosexuality is not included as a misconduct, because homosexuality is epistemically erased in Chinese official narratives under the state policy of "silent words and reticent tolerance" (Liu and Ding, 2005, p. 33).

Borrowing the legislative framework and market logics, tongqi's economic resistance embodies a "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1985): they pay lip service to the dominant gender

norm of women's unpaid labour in marriage yet covertly subvert it. During our interview, Mei felt compelled to clarify that her resistance were not financially driven, stating, "it was not really the money I was after," despite her subsequent actions suggesting the contrary. This reflects a broader trend among many tongqi in my research, who continue to experience significant cultural shame associated with women's pursuit of financial or material gain in a marketized state economy.

On the surface, tongqi claim material compensation for their marital sufferings from a "villain" gay husband, while performing compliance to the idealised heterosexual marital relations. However, in essence, tongqi defy the gender-based exploitive production relations and abusive dynamics in their marriages. They effectively transform the collective, large-scale political activism into individual and transactional economic solutions. Without engaging in overt confrontation or rebellion, tongqi utilise financial means to assert agency within a market-driven state capitalist society. By seeking compensation, they materialise the emotional, physical, and reputational harms they have endured, reframing these otherwise intangible injuries in economic terms – a language accepted by the post-socialist market-driven Chinese society in which they are situated.

Meanwhile, there are evident limitations in tongqi's economic resistance. The "party-at-fault" legislative framework shows characteristics of a patriarchal capitalism, which diminishes domestic abuses to mere economic transactions. Consequently, tongqi's resistance is inevitably embroidered in "profit and loss" logics, which simultaneously claim monetary retribution for personal trauma and social stigma, as well as commodify their suffered experience into tradable items. The "profit and loss" logics bear the notion of a *zero-sum game*, referring to a market logic in which the interests of the players are directly opposed, and there is no possibility of gaining from cooperation. This underlying notion of "marriage fraud" will be debunked in the chapter on *Married Tongzhi*.

Tongqi's marital struggles, as framed in direct relation to male homosexuality in the "marriage fraud" narrative, are situated within a grey area that falls outside of the state-recognized definitions of marital victimhood. As such, their self-constructed narratives of "marriage fraud" represent an attempt to appropriate both the official legal framework and market logic to voice their grievances and seek financial redress. Through this lens, tongqi's

economic resistance also represents an indirect response to the structural economic injustices faced by Chinese women both domestically and socially.

Collective Resistance: Tongqi's Sisterhood

The tongqi in this study demonstrate diverse modes of resistance, both individually and collectively. All-women solidarity is another form of resistance that was shown by the tongqi in my study. Scott (Scott, 1985, p. 33) reframes the subtle, yet unified, acts of opposition by the weak as collective resistance:

The argument to be developed here is that much of the politics of subordinate groups falls into the category of "everyday forms of resistance," that these activities should most definitely be considered political, that they do constitute a form of collective action, and that any account which ignores them is often ignoring the most vital means by which lower classes manifest their political interests.

Gender consciousness is the underlying pillar that forms tongqi's collective resistance. Many tongqi women in my study explicitly or inexplicitly revealed their gender consciousness as the underpinning cause of their marital struggles. While their revelations were mostly fragmentary, vague, and transient, Lin, a 30-year-old white-collar tongqi, articulated with great clarity her gender awareness regarding how not just tongqi, but also the larger social group of Chinese women, are subject to losses and risks due to their assigned gender roles in marriage:

Traditionally, women must make all the sacrifices for the family, otherwise the family could not be sustained. Only when the family is sustained can the husband relax and go out to make money. But this model does not do any good to women. You know, human beings have subconsciousness. We notice things. I always find this model of distribution of work is not reasonable. I could have been independent financially, but I was not able to, because the society did not support women to do so.... You see, the whole society discriminates against women.

Lin's conformity and resistance to her gender role as a self-sacrificing wife were practised between her "psyche and appearance" (Butler, 2020, p. 24), even though she used the term

“subconsciousness” to denote her awareness of the socio-cultural and economic injustice of gender oppression against women via the marriage institution. Moreover, female victims in marriage face serious obstacles when trying to access social support in China (Chan, 2009; McLaren, 2016; Su et al., 2022). In fact, social work scholar Fung Kei Cheng noted that for tongqi, the “only tenuous support comes from specific Internet forums” as there is no social organisation or government institution to provide help to them (Cheng, 2016, p. 4). In coping with and resisting such systematic injustice, my study has found that the tongqi identity is constructed on a strong collective resistance premised on female-to-female solidarity. Tongqi refer to their fellow members as “*jiemei*” (sisters), forming an imagined all-female kinship independent of the immediate control of patriarchal structures.

Beneath the “gender mask” of vulnerability, tongqi women have been carrying out an increasingly significant collective resistance against traditional gender roles and duties within patriarchal marital structures, with their efforts largely condoned by the public eye with sympathy. Recent studies have documented, if not meaningfully discussed, the burgeoning scale of political activism among tongqi, predominantly conducted online. This includes a variety of initiatives such as social media campaigns on platforms on Wechat and QQ, petitions and advocacy for the amendment of the 1980 Chinese Marriage Law to include protections for tongqi, partnerships with local women’s rights NGOs, and the organisation of offline events like gatherings and support groups (Cheng, 2016; Liu, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). My research further reveals that many tongqi groups are collaborating with international NGOs, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), to amplify their voices and garner global support and recognition for their cause.

The portrayal of tongqi as “marriage fraud” victims, by themselves and by the beholders, can render their collective political resistance less intimidating to the authorities within a patriarchal society, unlike other grassroots movements that have faced severe suppression for challenging political stability of the Chinese party-state. This intertwining of gender, political agency, and victimhood serves as a form of camouflage, safeguarding tongqi’s fledging resistance while simultaneously constraining its magnitude. Tongqi who unite online, not only to voice grievances about their gay husbands, but also to organise their activist agendas, effectively seek solace under the guise of victim support, thus cleverly masking their assertive defiance against the established legal and social institutions.

For instance, Zhi demonstrated a keen awareness of the collective power of the tongqi community and individualised it as a capable organisation and a direct deterrent against fraudulent husbands.

I warned my husband about the power of tongqi groups and how oblivious he was to our capabilities. In our tongqi groups, there are civil servants, lawyers, and many competent women. I believe that having such a robust organisation behind us serves as a significant deterrent to homosexual men who engage in marriage fraud to deceive innocent women. While an individual's strength may be limited, together, we can possess infinite strength.

Zhang, meanwhile, articulated a feminised vision of mutual aid within the tongqi community, based not on the meritocracy that Zhi discussed but on a more mutual understanding of women's gendered predicament and reciprocity:

After I started suspecting that my husband might be a homosexual, I did an online search and found out that there are 16 million tongqi in China. With so many of us, I hope that we could gather together; some could help others with childcare, or any other random help, and those who are able could provide some financial aid. I really wished that a social organization existed when I was helpless, but there was none.

Both Zhi and Zhang recognised the delicate balance between the weak individual womanhood and strong collective sisterhood. Victimhood, or more precisely female victimhood, is the indispensable adhesive that bonds tongqi together in an imagined all-women alliance and defiance. Whether individualised by Zhi or feminised by Zhang, tongqi's collective resistance against gender-based marital oppression and social injustice are framed as harmless and modest gestures.

Tongqi's collective resistance embodies what Gayatri Spivak coined as "strategic essentialism", or "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" by the oppressed (Spivak, 2012, p. 214). Combining de Certeau's "tactical resistance" (de Certeau, 1984), tongqi's constructed sisterhood can be seen as a tactically essentialist identity. The tactical identity of tongqi is made possible by centring on a shared

sense of female victimhood, the closest common adversary of the “villain gay husband”, and the urgent political desire for justice and change. By sharing these, tongqi temporarily put aside their differences of class, origins, and occupations, uniting under the banner of their shared experience of being tongqi to address their immediate life struggles.

However, strategic essentialism in tongqi’s collective resistance has its evident shortcoming: it “colludes” with state patriarchal-heterosexuality in terms of its segregation between tongqi and other Chinese women. As mentioned above, tongqi’s gender consciousness is transient and fragmented. Tongqi’s sisterhood demarcates female experience by the rigid experience of “having a homosexual husband”, excluding the marital struggles of Chinese women in “normal” marriages. Thus, tongqi’s collective resistance is both self-protective and self-subdued in its effect of making social changes. Most tongqi in my study shielded themselves from sharing their marital experience with the “others”, as tongqi Jia said: “The members in the tongqi group have all experienced what I endured. Each and every one of them understood how I felt. Women who have not gone through these things cannot relate. Women who are *wairen* [outsiders] do not understand tongqi’s marriages or what it is like to have a gay husband.”

This protective self-isolation morphs into a system of hetero/homosexuality that obscures general gender-based oppression by segmenting Chinese women’s marital experiences into discrete categories. It creates a fantasy land of a “peculiar tongqi experience” and marginalises “abnormal marriages” with male homosexuality as the boundary. This results in a subdued form of collective resistance that is situation-based, temporary, and contingent upon the spouse’s perceived sexuality. This temporary and situational form of resistance finds parallels in the broader socio-cultural context of Chinese society. Sisterhood, in Chinese patriarchal and patrilineal tradition, has long been “merely a temporary state of development in a woman’s life, or occasionally, an aberrant substitute for ‘normal’ heterosexual relationships” (Xiao, 2014, p. 89). In this respect, the transient and conditional nature of tongqi’s collective resistance aligns with and emerges from the broader patriarchal structure that disrupts and scatters Chinese sisterhood.

Transgressive Resistance: Bonding with the *Outer* Sphere

Taking women seriously and tracing gendered power relationships, a feminist curiosity has helped to expose how much of what has been labelled “private” is, in fact, thoroughly political. This feminist exposure has prompted some previously dismissive policymakers and international relations scholars to take more seriously the political effects of what goes on behind seemingly closed doors.

(Enloe, 2004, p. 4)

The transgressive nature of tongqi’s resistance is evident: tongqi’s resistance always attempts to break through the gendered demarcation of the “inner” and “outer” spheres, and to bond with institutions and ideologies of the outer sphere. For marital struggles, the inner-outer division follows the Confucian canon of “*Jia Chou Bu Ke Wai Yang*” (Domestic shame should not be made public) (Gao, 1996), which reduces domestic abuse and oppression to merely “family affairs” that reside outside the reach of law enforcement and state intervention. Since the weak cannot escape the power dynamics imposed by the dominant (de Certeau, 1984), they must manoeuvre within the existing power framework and use available cultural resources within such a framework to make tactical moves. Thus, tongqi need to engage yet renegotiate with the inner-outer boundary to exploit the disciplinary power of the outer quarter, wherein tongqi evoke, engage, or “collude” with the party-state, capitalist logics, public opinion, and all-female imaginary kinship to challenge the hegemonic gender script within marriage.

This transgressive quality in tongqi’s resistance can be explained by the inner-outer spectrum of the moral script conceptualized by sociologist Jieyu Liu. Liu noted that post-socialist Chinese individuals enjoy more freedom as they move towards the inner pole from the outer pole, in which moral scripts are accentuated to impact their social acceptance (Liu, 2017). In tongqi’s resistance, male homosexuality, whether real or imagined, serves as an essential catalyst in tongqi’s efforts to bond with the outer sphere. Male homosexuality serves, in many ways, as a trigger for state and local cultural mechanisms to potentially impose deterrents or sanctions on Chinese husbands who mistreat their wives. When tongqi reveal their husbands’ homosexuality, they redirect public moral scrutiny towards their husbands’

behaviour. This tactic allows tongqi to leverage external societal pressures as a means to counteract oppression within the inter quarter.

In the chapter on *Inventing Tongqi*, I discussed how the tongqi subject and phenomenon is generated as a negotiated result between tongqi's marital resistance and the party-state's political agenda of socialist family harmony and homophobia. The boundary-transgressive nature of tongqi's resistance highlights that the predominant makeup of the overall negotiation lies on tongqi's agency, and that they deliberately navigate across the state's legal framework, socialistic homophobia, and the post-socialist marriage ideal for personal gains. Transgressing as low-profile female victims, tongqi's resistance is what Scott described as: "Everyday resistance makes no headlines... But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political and economic barrier reef of their own. There is rarely any dramatic confrontation... but it is a form of resistance none the less" (Scott, 1985, p. 29).

Meanwhile, tongqi's boundary-transcending resistance has its consequences. While the resistance by the weak, "since they lack their own space", cannot avoid "get[ting] along in a network of already established forces and representations" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 18), they are subsequently embroiled in established networks of power, and more importantly, they are more likely to have little awareness of such entanglement. For instance, tongqi's use of economic logic to combat domestic oppression and abuse positions them within capitalist consumerism, which paradoxically reinforces Chinese state patriarchal ideology (Meng and Huang, 2017). This makes tongqi both dissidents and complicit within these power dynamics. Consequently, tongqi's resistance mainly addresses immediate situations rather than preemptively altering the power structure. The tongqi I interviewed had not accrued actual power or elevate familial status, but merely managed to diminish their losses, injuries, and trauma. Despite their transgressive efforts, the tangible power domestically and socially remained elusive for these women.

Diagnosing Power: Why Resist as Tongqi?

The country does not recognise “homosexuality” (*tongxinglian*) as the party-at-fault. We can only protect our interests by means of threats.

Ying, 40-year-old civil servant, married.

Building on Foucault’s (1982) argument that “where there is power, there is resistance”, Lila Abu-Lughod suggested that resistance be used as a *diagnostic of power* to launch academic inquiries that “ask NOT about the status of resistance itself but about what the forms of resistance indicate about the forms of power that they are up against” (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 47). In this sense, any analysis of resistance will spontaneously shed light onto understanding how power relations operate and how subjects are enthralled in them. Tongqi is a newly invented collective victimhood and resistant agent in post-socialist China. In the effort to diagnose power by their resistance, I wondered what power dynamics Chinese women are imbricated in so that they choose to resist as tongqi. My study found that tongqi may be instrumentalised as the last resort for many women to resist domestic abuse and marital struggles in China.

In the case of domestic violence, one of the most visible forms of gender oppression at home, I asked many tongqi: “Why didn’t you seek help as a victim of domestic abuse?” Most tongqi responded with a sad look or a sigh, as if I had said something deeply ignorant. Although the Chinese Anti-Domestic Violence Law came into force on 1 March 2016, it is hardly implemented at local level. Moreover, the only two NGOs in China that specifically helped domestically abused women were closed in 2014 and 2016 (Zheng, 2022). Abused women in Chinese marriages have little access to any substantial help. For instance, tongqi Lan told me that her first ex-husband, who was a policeman working in a local precinct, violently hit her in his office on a regular basis. No one contested his brutality because of his profession and network in the local government. Another tongqi interviewee, Fu, was regularly physically abused by her husband, even when she was eight months pregnant. She called the police many times but they dismissed her complaints as “family affairs”. Fu told me that her tongqi identity was her last hope of resistance: “I tried to threaten him with his BlueD (gay dating app) chat history. It was my last resort. It worked for some tongqi, but unfortunately, not for me. My husband is the misogynist kind of gay. He hits me because he hates women.”

Compared to domestic violence, other much hidden forms of oppression and abuse against married women, such as sexual deprivation, imbalanced marital power relations, and exploitative domestic labour, still lack recognition or empowering narratives in post-socialist China. For instance, tongqi Zhang's story represents a typical trajectory of how the tongqi women I interviewed quickly reached and bonded with the tongqi community: she navigated a path from initial confusion ("Why is my husband often cold to me?"), to search on various online platforms like *Zhihu*, *Weibo*, and *Baidu* for information and solutions, and immediately found multiple tongqi online groups that were full of shared stories of various unsatisfactory marital relationship. Zhang found no other established community or identity regarding women's marital struggles that targeted her marital concerns of cold violence and sexual deprivation.

Chinese women's identification as tongqi, in many cases, emerged as either the only or the last resort of marital resistance. As feminist writer Audre Lorde articulated: "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde, 2012). In everyday resistance, tongqi defy diverse spokespersons and entities of systematic gender oppression, such as generational oppression in the natal family and by in-laws, gossip within the neighbourhood, and discrimination in the workplace, police and courts, which permeate all aspects of the everyday realities of tongqi's lives. There is a questionable correlation between male homosexuality and male aggression in tongqi's narratives. Yet, in this socio-cultural context, the correlation is not necessarily a "false consciousness"; it appears to be an intentional construct produced by tongqi's "true" consciousness of balancing their resistant agency and their concession to the societal constraints.

The varied yet collective narrative of the tongqi represents a broad, unofficial, grassroots political resistance. Tongqi embody a vivid political agency, which acknowledges the existing system's failures and aims to bypass it in pursuit of social justice. Hence, the political nature of tongqi's resistance is indubitable. This dispersed yet persistent tongqi resistance diagnoses the pervasiveness of "capillary power" (Foucault, 1982) of the market economy, normative heterosexuality, and state and familial patriarchy in contemporary China, which has been "intervening bodies and subjects in ways that are more insensible and insidious" (Butler, 2006, p. 6).

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to answer the question of how tongqi renegotiate their gender norms for resistance. Establishing tongqi as historical agents rather than victims, my study contradicts the popular notion that tongqi are merely the result of the act of “marriage fraud”. Instead, it argues that tongqi are the conscious producers of the discourse of “marriage fraud”: tongqi strategically construct a legitimate female victimhood that subverts the traditional “wife-blaming” gender norms. In doing so, it reveals the multifaceted identity of tongqi whose political agency, victimhood, gender, and everyday resistance are intricately interwoven. In this context, gender emerges as a pivotal element, or a protective shield, through which tongqi assert their agency, negotiate their identities, and engage everyday oppositional acts against the constraints of traditional marital expectations with minimal social repercussions.

While the “gender mask” of the tongqi identity, premised on vulnerability and fragility, serves the interest of many tongqi’s situational struggle. It is worth bringing Butler’s concern over the extent parodies can subvert the dominant power structure: “Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (Butler, 2006, p. 139). The tongqi’s resistance, although intensifying the reinforcing traditional femininity stereotypes centred on vulnerability and victimhood, serves to actively reshape the constructs of gender and power in the context of Chinese matrimony. This nuanced strategy enables tongqi to harness societal views of femininity to their advantage, synergising established ideas of female victimhood into a domain of effective and permissible resistance.

Building upon Zhu’s argument that research on tongqi is epistemically flawed when it assumes a fixed and openly declared sexuality of the husband (Zhu, 2017), this chapter has identified an additional epistemic limitation: the reduction of tongqi’s subjectivity to a mere consequence of their husbands’ homosexuality. Such an approach fails to recognise that the agency of tongqi has always interlaced with their victimhood. This narrow view risks, first, objectifying tongqi merely as the “other” to their male spouses; second, eclipsing tongqi’s active resistance under the passive guise of victimhood; and third, attributing the complex

socio-economic factors that inform tongqi women's marital experiences solely to individual-based homosexuality.

Entrenched in political agency and Chinese gender system, tongqi's resistance is multi-dimensional. They adeptly navigate the patriarchal narrative by embodying the stereotypical femininity of vulnerability and fragility. Concurrently, they tactically recalibrate traditional gender norms and dynamics, whether within the intimate scope of their individual marriage or more broadly within the societal scope anonymously on the internet. This includes leveraging inter-outer moral inversion, applying market logics, and harnessing a collective gender consciousness.

It is imperative to highlight that the enabling and growing agency of tongqi is also premised on these women's deployment of Chinese political and societal homophobia to their advantage, intentionally or intuitively enacting a recognised female victim as the direct result to a "social perversion". The adoption of the dualism of villain/victim, male/female, and husband/wife encapsulates Foucault's note that "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). In other words, to resist, tongqi women must resort to the established patriarchal structure which ordains binaries of gender and morality. By doing so, they can situationally circumvent the prevailing gender script of "wife-blaming", a discipline unjustly reducing women's agency in any failing marriages.

This chapter also argues that tongqi's collective and political resistance deserves greater recognition. China is a party-authoritarian state that criminalises women's organised protests against patriarchal oppression at the level of state patriarchy (Fincher, 2021), as well as penalising women's individual defiance against traditional gender norms at the level of familial patriarchy (Santos and Harrell, 2017; Watson and Ebrey, 1991). The sensational social phenomenon of tongqi in China, I argue, is the result of their deliberate or indeliberate feminisation of their oppositional stance against traditional gender script in Chinese marriage. The act of cloaking their resistance within a narrative of victimhood - by depoliticizing and adopting a feminized guise for their opposition - reveals tongqi's astute navigation within the power structures they are situated. This strategy underscores their resilience and ingenuity to adapt in confronting interpersonal and institutional challenges.

At the end of the chapter, I return to an intellectual curiosity that helps to de-particularise the tongqi subject: Do Chinese women in “normal” marriages resist domestic oppression and abuse? If they do, what are their resistant identities and voices? As I conclude this chapter, there has been no nation-wide collective female identity, community, or discourses in China that address direct male oppression in marriage, such as uxoricide, domestic violence, marital rape, and forced productive and reproductive labour. Recognising that the so-called “Chinese married woman” is not monolithic, I simply want to point out that the division between tongqi’s marital experience and that of general married women in China is not as significant as one might imagine. The division may predominantly rest on what women collectively are allowed to resist and what they are not, in China’s current patriarchal and normative heterosexual social landscape.

After discussing tongqi’s active agency in negotiating with their victimhood, the next chapter will focus on the production of the “divorce imperative” in tongqi communities. It will also explore the varied marital choices Chinese tongqi women make in response to this imperative.

Chapter 8. Decision to Leave: Fleeing Post-Socialist Marriage

After discussing tongqi's marital sufferings and resistance at home, this thesis has shown how the gender system produces domestic abuses and how tongqi renegotiate the normative gender script to achieve cloaked defiance. This chapter delves into the interplay of gender and class, exploring how these two sociological factors affect tongqi's divorce decisions. It also interrogates the hegemonisation of the "divorce imperative" within the tongqi phenomenon.

No existing research has been found to problematise the divorce agenda across tongqi communities. Existing literature primarily explains social factors that hinder tongqi from divorcing (Li et al., 2016; Tsang, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022), premised heavily on a heteronormative "given" that a heterosexual woman and a homosexual man are an "unnatural" pairing. This chapter seeks to fill this research gap by examining the production and circulation of tongqi's divorce imperative. In addition, it will explore the complexities and variations of tongqi divorce decisions within different socio-economic contexts, challenging the oversimplified narrative of "marital conflict" due to different sexual orientations.

Divorce is a common theme in the tongqi phenomenon. In my study, 24 out of the 32 tongqi participants either had divorced or were in the process of divorcing, with one exception being a widow. The primary question this chapter examines is: How does gender intersect with social class in influencing tongqi's decision to divorce or stay? While divorce is valorised as an effective solution for all tongqi's marital predicaments (Tsang, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022), I question the underlying class-blindness and heteronormativity in this divorce imperative. I argue that this imperative is predominantly shaped by the elite tongqi group to serve their classed interests and conjugal values, thereby overlooking the diversity and potential conflicting interests within the tongqi community.

This chapter seeks to analyse the divorce decisions of tongqi, considering multiple social axes instead of a homogeneous social category, using Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1994). Through the narratives of Li (a high-earning solicitor), Min (self-employed), and Meng (a stay-at-home mother), I will present, how tongqi in different socio-

economic situations, while facing gender-based oppression, generate their divorce desires and finalise their divorce decisions differently. By doing so, this chapter aims to debunk the monolithic identity of tongqi and the uniformity of tongqi women's collective interest.

A Rising Imperative: A Tongqi Must Divorce Her Gay Husband

In summer 2018, I recruited tongqi informants from arguably the two largest tongqi communities, led by a university lecturer, Chan, and a retired volunteer, Older Sister Memory. In both tongqi groups, I observed a shared divorce agenda, despite their clashing attitudes towards male homosexuality.

During my visit to Chan's tongqi group in a Shanghai hotel room, I noticed how the divorce imperative was imposed due to tongqi's strong aversion towards male homosexuality. The group I met consisted of Lan, a 36-year-old rural woman, and three other tongqi – Chan, Ying, and Zhi – who were all there to participate in a WHO-sponsored HIV survey. The latter three were trying to persuade Lan to divorce her husband, whom they believed to be gay based on evidence from his diary and text messages. Lan expressed confusion and doubts, not understanding how her husband could be gay if he was physically aroused by her. Her uncertainty was met with laughter from the group, accompanied by derogatory descriptions of gay men for their HIV risks and “heartlessness” to women. When Lan brought up her husband's generosity, the other women dismissed it as a mere tactic to keep her in the marriage. Later, when I had dinner with the group and talked individually with Lan, I noticed a significant shift in her stance towards seeking a divorce. Lan attributed this change in perspective to the “tough love” from her tongqi sisters.

A few months after meeting with Chan's group, I attended a PFLAG³ led by a respected tongqi known as “Older Sister Memory” who did social work in both tongqi and tongzhi communities. Memory's approach to divorce was much more subtle and gentle compared to Chan's. She held a tongzhi-friendly attitude and forbade derogatory insults towards married tongzhi in her tongqi community. Unlike Chan's traumatising marital experience with an eventually outed gay husband, Memory had an amicable marriage with her husband, who was

³ PFLAG China is an independent organization formed by LGBT individuals, their parents, friends and supporters to serve and support LGBT people.

a high-ranking government official. Therefore, in her social advocacy, Memory was careful not to expose her marriage details to protect his privacy. Rather, she was enthusiastic about facilitating connections between researchers, NGOs, and local tongzhi and tongqi communities. In the tongzhi-oriented PFLAG event, Memory was invited to give a keynote speech as a tongqi, calling for married tongzhi to divorce their wives for the sake of these women's freedom and happiness, as well as the legalisation of same-sex marriage to prevent more women from becoming tongqi.

These two field observations highlight the intersection of gender, sexuality, social stratification, and post-socialist political agendas that produces the divorce imperative in the tongqi phenomenon. This imperative is met with different responses by tongqi. In Zhou and her team's tongqi study, the younger generation of tongqi tended to divorce immediately after identifying their husbands as homosexual, holding a zero tolerance attitude towards domestic abuse and longing for romantic-love-based marriage (Zhou et al., 2022). This study highlights a historical transition of Chinese women's marriage expectations towards self-serving gratification, as well as a social stratification within the tongqi community, which shows diverse marriage decisions due to different social groups.

Three Divorce Stories

The key to post-socialist China's socio-economic transformation lies in cultivating individuals suited for the new societal relationships shaped by the market (Zhang and Ong, 2008). This section examines how the hegemonic divorce narrative is produced, intersecting gender and class. I will showcase the stories of three tongqi – Min, Meng, and Li – focusing how they renegotiated divorce, each representing a different social stratum. Tiantian Zheng researched tongzhi's diverse sexual practices and relations in different social classes, mainly demarcated via income and profession (Zheng, 2015).

In the post-socialist era, besides income, profession, education, and the rural/urban divide, Chinese women have one more nuanced gender-based social mobility due to the social trend of "housewifisation" (Hooper, 1998). This refers to a big post-socialist wave, since the market reform, in which female professionals or workers return home to become stay-at-home mothers for family stability. This downward social mobility intersects gender and class.

As a result, Chinese women are subject to more volatile phases in terms of earnings and financial status, and are therefore more dependent on their marriage for economic security. The following three tongqi's stories will show how tongqi actively renegotiate with the divorce imperative given their own social conditions.

Blue-Collar Min: Divorced Women Can Easily Support Themselves by Being Cashiers

Min, a 37-year-old white-collar employee in a state-owned enterprise, had divorced her husband and secured full custody of their daughter a year before I met her in Old Sister Memory's tongqi chat group. Compared to tongqi who were still grappling with divorce, Min recounted her story in a relatively composed manner.

Born in a rural area and graduating from a technical secondary school, Min migrated to the coastal city of *Dong Guan* to work in a state-owned enterprise. It was there that she met her ex-husband, who also originated from her home area. Trusting in their mutual cultural origin, at the age of 27, Min was anxious about becoming a shameful "leftover woman". Despite her doubts about their emotional and physical intimacy, Min hurried into marrying him: "He was never intimate with me; almost no kissing or touching during dates. But he was kind, gentle, and well-educated. Most importantly, he was my schoolmate from the same town. I saw him as marriage material."

Throughout their nine-year marriage, Min and her ex-husband frequently clashed over seemingly mundane issues, such as eldercare for their parents, interference from her mother-in-law, childcare, and financial matters. Following the birth of their daughter, Min transitioned to more flexible but less lucrative self-employment in e-commerce. For her, this sacrifice was an unavoidable commitment that a woman must make for her family and child.

Post-childbirth, Min's marital sex life began to decline to less than once a year. Nevertheless, Min did not voice any complaints over her sexless marriage while married: "He was my first [sex partner]. I didn't know what a 'harmonious [sex] life' was like. I just thought he was an introvert. I learned about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, understanding that sex and eating were basic human needs. But I didn't fully understand the theory until after my divorce."

The first desire to divorce emerged when Min discovered a message her ex-husband had posted in an online chat group “filled with pictures of male genitals”, stating “I am not impotent. I’m simply not interested in women. I am 0.5”. Bewildered by the numerical code, Min researched online and discovered that “0.5” is a term in the Chinese tongzhi culture, referring to a gay man who adopts versatile sexual roles. “I was devastated! The man who had been sleeping right next to me every day had suddenly become the strangest person in my life. For all these years, I believed I was the reason why we lacked intimacy. I thought maybe I was too assertive. But that moment of discovery was an eye-opener for me that the main problem in our marriage lay with him.”

Despite admitting his tongzhi identity, Min’s ex-husband tried to assure her about his marital commitment. Nevertheless, he never ceased his sexual affairs with men. On several occasions, he returned home late, reeking distinctively of lubricants. Min’s tolerance for his ongoing infidelities and lack of familial responsibility gradually waned amidst their constant arguments. “Financially, he was a dutiful husband. But there was no care, no love in marriage. He wouldn’t even comfort me verbally when I was ill,” Min shared with palpable sadness.

When asked about her divorce decision, Min concluded that there were two keys to a successful divorce: “Firstly, it’s your finance. Secondly, it’s your mind”. With a somewhat unsteady monthly income of 10,000 RMB (£1,096) from her self-employed e-commerce business, Min’s primary concern was not economic. She was mostly worried about the social stigma attached to a divorced woman and the anxiety of her “devaluation” in the marriage market due to aging:

In China, divorce is seen as a great shame, particularly damaging to women. A divorced woman can suffer from a tarnished reputation, particularly regarding her sexual morality. For instance, when I went through my divorce, I had to contend with rumours about my morality. I was gossiped about as a woman with promiscuous relationships...

Furthermore, in the remarriage market, it’s much harder for women to find a husband than for a man to find a wife. Good men seldom get divorced. They’re cherished and protected by their wives. But many good women end up divorcing their husbands due to infidelity, drug use, or gambling by the

husband. In addition, ageing is a problem for women. Chinese culture differs from Western culture in this aspect. Look at the French President or Wendi Deng Murdoch as contrasts. Women age quickly, and this affects their fertility and her waning beauty.

Carrying these fears of divorce, what solidified Min's decision to divorce was joining Memory's tongqi group:

Joining the tongqi chat group led by Old Sister Memory changed my life. The group inspired me to pursue my own happiness. There are many older tongqi in the group. From their experience, they advocated earlier rather than later divorce. "Our present lives are your future", they said: "Younger tongqi must be brave and strong. You must step out of the marriage." After hearing their stories, I was determined not to let my marriage decay into something like theirs. I didn't want to be contemplating and discussing divorce at the age of sixty. Before I joined the tongqi group, I wasn't entirely sure about divorce. But after becoming a member, I became positive about the divorce decision.

Min was one of the few tongqi I interviewed who had a smooth divorce, obtaining full custody of her daughter, equitable distribution of marital assets and property, and notably, monthly financial support of 2,500 RMB (£274) from her ex-husband for their daughter. The success of her divorce was predicated on their shared social circle, as Min and her ex-husband were from the same town. To "save face" for him and his family, her ex-husband was very accommodating to her divorce terms, as long as Min remained silent on his homosexuality.

Reflecting on her decision to divorce, Min expressed no regrets: "Why not divorce? Nowadays, women can easily support themselves, even just working as a cashier in a supermarket. Women should not hesitate when it comes to the decision to divorce. Gay men can never change. Living with a gay man is like living with a plant. No, it's worse!"

Min's story illustrates how the free market economy in China intertwines with class and gender, profoundly impacting her decision to divorce. Although Min was in the self-employed e-commerce business, her justification of economic independence involved a

vision of waged labour in the workforce. This reflects her self-position as a blue-collar worker in the working class in the Chinese economy. A primary gender consequence of China's market reform is the increased financial independence for women. Min confidently stated that a woman could even support herself by working as a cashier in a supermarket. This economic reality, bolstered by the free market, significantly impacts the calculus of the divorce decision among tongqi like Min, who had the qualifications and access to the labour force to earn wages for economic independence.

Affluent Li: I Have No Reason to Put Up With This Marriage

Li was one of the few tongqi in my research who did not participate in any tongqi groups. I was connected to her through Professor Beichuan Zhang, a local scholar in Chinese homosexuality studies, who had been actively engaged in social work to help tongqi.

When I reached out to Li, she had already been divorced from her gay husband for several years and had remarried. Being a high-income lawyer in a large firm in Beijing, Li's storytelling style was precise, compact, and clinical. Although I never met her in person, my audio interview with her reflected her educational, social, and wealth status well, especially when she stated, with a somewhat detached tone, "I'm financially independent. I never relied on him. The divorce did not affect me at all."

Her claim to be "financially independent" was a modest understatement. During her marriage, Li was the primary earner in her family, as well as in her ex-husband's extended household. In the divorce settlement, she left a flat, a luxury car, and nearly 500,000 RMB (£54,827) to her ex-husband, solely to expedite the divorce proceedings.

Li met her ex-husband in Beijing through a mutual friend. Li recalled her mate-selection criteria: "My family background was well-off. So, my parents and I didn't care about his social and financial conditions. I valued the quality of the person above all else". After a year of dating, Li believed he was a "good marriage material" for being "caring, honest, and good-tempered". Quickly, they got married, with blessings from both families.

“We had a normal married life, including our sex life.” In Li’s marriage, disagreements were rare. Housework was handled by a live-in maid, and financial and familial decisions were primarily made by Li. After their son was born, they bought a two-storey flat to provide enough space for their grandmothers to help with childcare in turns. “No impact” was the phrase Li repeatedly used when asked about the potential stressors that often occur in many marriages, such as housework, childcare, in-law relationships, and divorce. These potential issues had no negative impact on her life due to their affluent financial environment.

Li characterised her marriage as “ordinary” until she discovered her ex-husband’s hotel record with another man. “I just knew it was a man. My instinct told me so.” When Li confronted him about his homosexuality, he retorted with, “Only rich people entertain themselves with this [homosexual sex]”, reinforcing her belief in his homosexuality, because he linked homosexuality with affluence, not perversion.

After seeking advice from renowned local homosexuality scholar Professor Zhang Beichuan, Li was convinced that her husband was gay. Quickly and strategically, Li exfiltrated from her marriage:

The moment I discovered he was gay, I immediately thought of divorce. There was no hesitation, no second thoughts. I’m a rational person. Divorce was the only solution to deal with his homosexuality. Divorce was the best way to mitigate potential losses... I could never cohabit with a gay man. Our marriage was an utter fabrication, our feelings were deceptive. He didn’t love me, and I had no reason to put up with such a sham marriage.

While Li was unafraid of the divorce, she faced obstacles when she initiated the process. Her ex-husband refused the divorce, threatened to disrupt her workplace, physically abused their son, blackmailed her using their child’s custody, and even physically assaulted her in front of their families. Although Li involved the police, they offered no help, considering domestic abuse as a “family affair”. Upon her second attempt, the court granted Li her divorce, and she eventually found freedom from her troubled marriage. At the time of the interview, Li was happily remarried and had another son.

At the end of our interview, Li acknowledged that her experience was an exception rather than the norm among tongqi: “In the tongqi community, I’m the outlier. Few people manage

to resolve their issues quickly and limit the harm of a divorce. I was able to do it because I was financially independent and secure.”

In Li’s marriage, from her mate selection to her divorce decision, she was not bound by the financial pressures or expectations that might limit the choices of those in a lower socioeconomic class. Even Li’s decision not to join any tongqi group was class-based: unlike Min, Li did not need to be empowered by a social group to support and encourage her decision. Once aware of her husband’s homosexuality, Li’s decisiveness in seeking a divorce showcased both her economic autonomy and her refusal to adhere to traditional gender norms that demand female submission. The gender-based social stigma about which Min worried was also neutralised by her economic privilege in the post-socialist Chinese society that follows predominantly the logic of money (Osburg, 2013).

Stay-at-Home Meng: I Must be Sure of My Options Before I Divorce

Meng, a 34-year-old stay-at-home mother from the southern Chinese mega-city of Shenzhen, had an unusual story as a tongqi: she married her gay husband twice. As a tongqi who gave her gay husband a second chance, Meng found it hard to fit into any tongqi community, particularly Chan’s *Wechat* tongqi group, in which married tongqi were critically shamed and judged.

Born in a small, rural town, Meng had spent her life distancing herself from her familial roots. “My family background was not ideal”, Meng lamented, “My father indulged in eating, drinking, gambling, and prostitution (*chi he piao du*), while my mother’s life revolved around him. We kept chickens that laid eggs daily, which my mother saved solely for my father. Even if he came home past midnight, my mother would get out of bed and cook these eggs for him. She is what the internet now calls a ‘female slave’ to men.”

Meng, in search of independence, moved solo to the vibrant city of Shenzhen at the age of 18. Despite dropping out of high school, her hard work and strategic approach led her from assembly-line work to office administration and eventually to a role as a merchandising specialist. Along with her professional ascent, she held elevated expectations for her partner, valuing “good manners and decent education” over wealth. Meeting her future husband via a

matchmaking radio show, she was attracted to his collegiate education and foreign trade profession. After a year of dating, an unexpected pregnancy led to a marriage proposal.

It happened all too quickly. Meng wanted to fight for her independence, seeking to end both the relationship and her pregnancy. However, her rebellion was strongly opposed by her parents and relatives because a woman with a pre-marital abortion history would disgrace the entire family.

Severe morning sickness forced Meng to leave her job and become a full-time housewife. As she had anticipated, her marriage was strife-ridden, with frequent arguments over her unemployment, childcare, the her mother-in-law moving in, and his insufficient income – common issues for many couples. However, the catalyst for her first divorce was the discovery of his extramarital affair with a man, evident from the chat history on his computer. Meng sobbed:

Ever since I confronted him with the chat history, we stopped talking to each other: we were in a state of cold war. One day, he left for a hotel rendezvous with that man again. I knew because I saw him leave home with lubricant and condoms. He felt no remorse or shame. He even argued and fought with me. At that moment, I knew I couldn't remain in this marriage any longer.

At the time of our interview, Meng and her husband lived separately, although they had legally “remarried” for the sake of their daughter’s school enrolment, which is bound to the Chinese household registration system. Their relationship status was difficult to define. Meng could not bear the thought of a “promiscuous” gay husband, but her unemployed status made a second divorce financially unfeasible. Meng sought advice and help in Chan’s tongqi chat group but struggled to find the help and support she needed. Moreover, she felt marginalised in the group due to her lack of urgency to divorce.

I joined the tongqi group founded by Chan, but I didn't find any tangible help. The group's advice confused me. As soon as a new member joined, the immediate reaction of the group was to urge her to divorce. To me, divorce is a potential end goal, not a compulsory course of action. Each marriage needs to be considered individually. I don't believe I would be

better off without my homosexual husband. I need to be certain about my own future before a divorce.

Meng's assessment of her situation was based on her natal family, age, earning potential and social support. None of these factors could be easily dismissed by the tongqi group's advocacy for "courage" and "independence". Meng had a daughter to raise, and she did not have a stable job, savings, property ownership, or support from her natal family. It was impossible for Meng to identify with the prevailing pro-divorce sentiment in the tongqi community. Consequently, she gradually became marginalised into a quiet member. She now mostly observed conversations in the group, playing the role of a "submariner" (a netizen who silently observes an online social group).

Meng's perspective on divorce contrasts with Min's and Li's experiences in her pragmatic stance on marriage. Her unemployed status and privileged educational background made her more financially vulnerable, thus leading to her rejection of the divorce imperative and marginalisation in tongqi community support.

Divorce: A Gendered and Classed Decision

Before I delve into tongqi's divorce as a gendered and classed decision, I will briefly discuss the impact of the social stigma towards divorced women on tongqi's divorce decisions. The "shameful" label of "divorced woman" is a prevalent deterrent to stop women from divorcing in China (Cao et al., 2023). However, my research indicates that the "shame" associated with being a divorced tongqi can be mitigated. As explored in the earlier chapters, by subscribing to the victim/villain gender script within "marriage fraud", several tongqi were able to absolve themselves of such shame. For instance, Min elucidated this, stating:

If a man divorces due to his mistresses, others may view him as *you* "successful" (*benshi*) for having multiple wives; if a man divorces due to his sexual orientation, people will only ridicule him for "disgracing his ancestors" (*youru zuzong*)! In our case, it is my husband who would lose face for himself and his family [for being gay]!

Therefore, my study does not find that social stigma is a greater deterrent to tongqi than to other Chinese women in “normal” marriages when they consider their divorce options. The following investigation of the social factors in tongqi’s divorce focuses specifically on economic status, marital gender roles, attitudes towards sexuality, and the divorce court.

Education and Homophobia

In the divorce imperative, my study discerns two primary motives that engender the tongqi’s divorce desire: aversion to male homosexuality and pursuit of personal happiness. These two motivations both show class characteristics in post-socialist China that produce the desire for divorce among tongqi at different magnitudes.

Firstly, the aversion towards homosexuality shows a classed attitude among tongqi. Tongqi’s homophobic attitude was first discussed in the chapter on *Inventing Tongqi*, in which Chan and her members referred to their husbands’ homosexuality using various derogatory terms associated with pathology and perversions. These homophobic remarks are prevalent across tongqi platforms (Zhang et al., 2022b) and are a great force that drives tongqi to flee from their gay husbands. However, they are received differently by tongqi with different social backgrounds.

Previous literature on Chinese homosexuality suggests that higher-educated, modern, and global individuals tend to have more tolerant views on homosexuality, due to their increased awareness (Cao et al., 2010; Xie and Peng, 2018). In contrast to this popular perception, my study shows that tongqi in the elite social class, referring to urban residents with higher educational and professional backgrounds, tend to hold more hostile attitudes towards male homosexuality. On the other hand, the lower-educated and rural-born tongqi have greater tolerance due to their fluid notion of indigenous homoeroticism.

The affluent tongqi Li and middle-class tongqi Min told me they felt disgusted by the presence of a gay man in their homes. Li’s aversion toward homosexuality rested mainly in its “severe health risks”. She confessed to me that she had developed an HIV phobia after discovering her ex-husband’s homosexuality, leading to excessive HIV tests, accompanied by chronic paranoia and anxiety. Li told me about a recent scare she had suffered: “I went to an acupuncture clinic. After the treatment, I found that the practitioner sanitised the reused

needles only with alcohol. I panicked. I rushed for another HIV test right after. This is an aftermath I continue to suffer from my previous marriage.” Differing from Li, Min’s aversion primarily relates to her perception of homosexuality as a “perversion”, or in her own words, a “non-men, non-women species” (*bunan bunv*) that she did not want to live with.

The aversion towards homosexuality also produces a desire for divorce through the mother-child relationship. Historically, Chinese women endured unhappy marriages to maintain a “complete” family for their children (Hung, 2022; Xiao, 2014). However, the stigmatization of homosexual men as “perverts” or “HIV hazards” amplifies tongqi’s drive for divorce, prioritising its perceived negative impact on the child’s physical health and social reputation. For instance, Li swiftly separated from her husband, deemed an “HIV hazard”, while Min feared societal ridicule towards her daughter for having a “gay father”. This indicates that when tongqi perceive homosexuality as a corrupting influence on the child, they exhibit a determined desire for divorce.

Conversely, Meng, who was born in a rural area and had dropped out from high school, showed a neutral stance towards homosexuality, which seemed to have minimal influence on her divorce decision. Meng regarded homosexuality as a “defect” of gender misallocation, which led to her great sympathy towards Chinese tongzhi. Her tolerant and fluid view on sexuality faced censure in the tongqi group: “Two days ago, I said in the group that I believed in bisexuality and I was attacked by the other tongqi. They accused me of finding excuses for homosexual men and of acquitting gay men’s marriage fraud”. Being rejected by the tongqi group, Meng’s subsequent decision to divorce was based more on her personal circumstances than on the group’s influence.

Meng’s experience embodies how the indigenous view on sexuality is rejected and overpowered by its modern construct. In modern China, the language of science has been deployed to produce the “correct knowledge” of human sexuality in the school curriculum. It binds social morality, homosexuality and biology (HIV and STIs) in the name of “sexual civilisation” (Aresu, 2009). The indigenous notion of a fluid homoeroticism (Dikötter, 1995; Hirsch, 1992) loses its credibility in explaining “human natures” confronting the authority of science. Thus, well-educated urban-based tongqi like Li and Min (university educated and above) are more susceptible to fixed and stigmatised attitudes of male homosexuality, which translates to a strong drive for divorce.

The reasons why my finding contradicts previous research on higher tolerance toward homosexuality by higher educated individuals in China (Cao et al., 2010; Xie and Peng, 2018) may rest on two aspects. Firstly, many of the higher-educated tongqi in my research tended to conceal their homophobic attitudes to maintain a modern, progressive, and minority-friendly image. This performative tolerance may be a factor influencing previous studies. For instance, when I asked directly “How do you feel about homosexuality?”, lawyer Li and university lecturer Chan replied that they “did not mind homosexuality” and definitely “did not discriminate against sexual minorities”. However, Li’s HIV phobia and Chan’s derogatory ridicule of her husband’s homosexual identity showed that their professed acceptance of homosexuality was superficial. Goffman posited that individuals always engage in a kind of “performance” during their social interactions for varied reasons, such as impression management (Goffman, 1978). I found that highly-educated tongqi’s performance on homosexuality tolerance was driven by both their own societal stratum and their desires to be perceived by me as open-minded. In my field work, I was perceived as a researcher from a “more advanced” Western academic institution. Their nominal tolerance might stem from anxiety about being criticised by an overseas researcher who is likely to hold progressive values on sexuality.

Secondly, in contrast to university students answering a survey, tongqi are individuals who have close proximity to homosexual men. Li and Min clearly expressed the mental disturbance they felt when seeing and spending time under the same roof as a gay man every day. When it comes to their personal experiences and intimate relationships, deep-seated biases and prejudices came to the forefront. The intensity of a tongqi’s homophobic attitude appears to correlate with the strength of her divorce desire. Both Li’s and Min’s narratives highlight how their aversion to homosexuality reinforced their intent to divorce, whilst Meng’s tolerant view shifted the focus of her marriage decision from homosexuality to other aspects of her life, including economic security, mutual support, and childcare.

My study contends the argument made by Tsang regarding how lower-educated women do not divorce due to their concerns about child custody and financial dependence upon their husband (Tsang, 2021). I argue that low-educated tongqi tend to have more fluid and tolerant views on homosexuality, which leads their marriage decisions to be influenced more by practical concerns and less by their husbands’ sexual identity. Their perception of homosexuality might be less framed by societal prejudices and more by their direct

experiences and the dynamics of their relationships. Thus, rather than a simple cause-and-effect relationship between education level and divorce decisions, the intersection of personal experiences, socio-economic factors, and perceptions of homosexuality create a more nuanced picture of the divorce decisions among tongqi.

Economic Independence and Personal Happiness

The second discourse shaping the tongqi's desire for divorce is the pursuit of personal happiness, a signature neoliberal discourse in post-socialist China. This pursuit was a unanimous notion among all tongqi I interviewed. However, my study found that how each tongqi enforced such pursuit was stratified primarily by their economic status. As Feminist scholar Adrienne Rich pointed out, the economic position (Rich, 1980) is one of the fundamentals on which women's resistance to marriage is made possible in modern societies.

All the tongqi in my study, including Li, Min, and Meng, identified with this pursuit of individual happiness, particularly in the context of heterosexual intimacy. Li complained about the lack of passion emotionally and sexually in her previous marriage. Min expressed her frustration about the absent "men-women love and pleasure" (*nan huan nv ai*) in her marriage. Meng gave credit to her husband for "trying to be a dutiful husband" yet felt miserable in a marriage that lacked mutual care or affection. These stories suggest that these women's current marriages failed to meet their happiness expectations, and the belief that life without such marriage would significantly improve. This perception both challenges traditional patriarchal norms binding Chinese femininity to marital roles and inverts them, implying that a marriage should cater to a woman's needs, not vice versa.

The rise of the pursuit of happiness captures the changing sociocultural landscape in post-socialist China, in which the traditional duty-driven Chinese femininity is criticised while its pleasure-driven counterpart is valorised. In the tongqi phenomenon, the traditionally esteemed "virtuous wife" is often perceived as a regressive gender stigma. It has to do with the age demographic that makes up the majority of tongqi in online communities: the internet-savvy generation since 2000. This reverse stigma criticises women who overly commit to their marriages and valorises those who break their marital shackles – a popular notion developed by Chinese cyber-feminism (Xue and Rose, 2022). Meng, for instance, disapproved of the husband-centric femininity of her mother, whom she labelled as a "*nvnu*"

(female slave) to her husband. Min also subtly criticised tongqi who refrained from divorcing and credited her divorce decision to modern female qualities such as “independence” and “bravery”. Li also expressed the same criticism toward women who did not “dare” to divorce due to their “backward” femininity. However, she was aware of her economic and social privilege, as she also expressed sympathy for women who did not have the financial and social resources to live happily and independently without a marriage.

While the pursuit of happiness unites tongqi’s desire to divorce, they are simultaneously stratified by their disparate economic circumstances, which give rise to individual fears of divorce. Most of the tongqi I interviewed belonged to the middle class, meaning that their primary economic security derived from their employment opportunities.

Li, an affluent lawyer in a management position in a private law firm, displayed no fear of divorce, crediting her wealth accumulation: “I’m a financially independent woman. I do not rely on my husband. A divorce does not affect my life at all.” Min associated her determination to divorce with her employability in the job market: “Why not divorce? Women can easily support themselves, even just being a cashier.” However, Meng, despite her unwillingness to repeat her mother’s life pattern as a “female slave”, expressed serious fears and doubts about her income sources if she sought a divorce: “I’ve missed the best timing [youth] to divorce. I do not have much savings, nor a house or a car.... Now, I can only make money by send marketing messages for ‘cross-border shopping’ (*daigou*) on *Wechat*. I’m old. No way can I compete with young girls for entry-level office jobs in the job market.”

These stories show that the finance-related fear of divorce among tongqi is tied to their participation in the workforce in post-reform China. Whether they are high-income professionals like Li, or part-time employees in a small business like Min, their employability in the paid labour market acts as a mitigating force against their fear of divorce. Tsang’s study of tongqi revealed that educated tongqi generally opted for divorce, while less educated ones chose to stay married (Tsang, 2021). Adding to Tsang’s finding on education, my study shows that tongqi’s employability in the paid labour market is also a decisive factor impacting the fear (low employability) and desire (high employability) in their divorce decisions. This finding resonates with the broader social context in post-reform China, where

women's increased participation in the labour force has led to greater economic independence, making divorce more feasible for women (Xie, 2013).

Motherhood Penalty and Divorce Freedom

In tongqi's financial insecurities, there is a gender aspect intertwined with class struggle –the motherhood penalty. The motherhood penalty here refers specifically to the impact of motherly responsibilities on a woman's economic condition in a market economy, which is a new form of gender discrimination faced by Chinese women in post-reform China. Chao Shen's study, drawing from national surveys conducted from 1989 to 2015, found that childbirth and childcare had a great negative impact on Chinese women's wages, and the severity of this impact continues to increase (Shen, 2022). The motherhood penalty is not unique to the tongqi social group but has been well-documented among Chinese women in urban, market-oriented areas since the 1990s (Yu and Xie, 2018; Zhao, 2018).

When it comes to motherhood and freedom to divorce, as demonstrated above, tongqi in my study differed from the general population of Chinese women. Well-educated middle-class tongqi were eager to divorce so that their children could be free from a stigmatised "gay father". Thus, what primarily deters tongqi with a child from divorcing is not the traditional gender norm of a "good mother", but their impaired earning potential.

The stories of Li, Min, and Meng present varying experiences of modern Chinese motherhood in the context of divorce fear produced by motherhood penalty. The degree of its impact is stratified by individual economic and social conditions. Li, who had a live-in housemaid attending to household chores and childcare, did not express any trepidation associated with divorce concerning her maternal responsibilities. Randall Collins's team argued that in a socially stratified society, labour specialization such as childcare allows women of higher classes to delegate these tasks to others, freeing themselves from these duties (Collins et al., 1993). Li's situation offers a clear representation of how class can effectively override some of the gendered challenges associated with motherhood. The hiring of a live-in housemaid, a luxury afforded by her affluent class position, demonstrates how the constraints of the motherhood penalty can be circumvented with financial resources. This class advantage permitted Li to sidestep the traditional gendered responsibilities of

caregiving, suggesting that higher socioeconomic status can provide women with a buffer against certain gendered expectations.

The cases of Min and Meng are more intricate, as their individual circumstances intertwined employability and motherhood within the context of extended families. A common occurrence in China is grandparents taking up childcare responsibilities for their adult children (Chen et al., 2000). Consequently, the financial impact of the motherhood penalty varies according to the specific dynamics in cross-generational relationships. For instance, Min, who relocated to her hometown, where her birth family resided, could leave her child under her parents' care and envisage paid work opportunities, such as a job as a cashier or other vacancies. This advantage of good ties with the natal family mitigated the negative impact of the motherhood penalty, thus increasing her employability and economic stability. Tiantian Zheng documented how abused wives can resort to the strong support of their natal family to intimidate their aggressive husbands and expand their agency in marriage (Zheng, 2022).

However, Meng, who aspired to distance herself from her servile mother and her abusive father, did not enjoy the same financial or familial privileges as Li or Min, which would have liberated her from the care of her daughter. In her own words, Meng asked, “How do I guarantee my work productivity? How do I find work with flexibility? If I became ill one day, who could handle the school affairs for my daughter [if I had a divorce]? Can I ask for leave from work? How do I balance a job and my daughter as a single mother?”

While her gendered role as a mother imposed certain responsibilities on her, her less-privileged class position severely limited her options post-divorce. The absence of familial and social support, compounded by her class constraints, amplified the motherhood penalty she faced. Meng's concerns about balancing work and motherhood without any support starkly emphasise the intersection of class and gender: her gender dictated her primary role as a caregiver, while her class status deprived her of the resources and support to manage this role effectively after divorce.

In my study, Meng represents the *tongqi* who suffers from a specific post-socialist form of mother penalty – “housewifisation” (Hooper, 1998). This is a social trend referring to the total return from the workforce to the domestic “virtuous wife and good mother” since the

reform era (Fengxian, 2012; Hooper, 1998; Sekiguchi, 2010). In the past four decades, female participation in China's workforce has continued to drop, from 90.5% in 1990 to 61% in 2022 (World Bank, 2022). This decline in urban China is closely associated with marital and reproductive decisions (Ma et al., 2011). For instance, Meng had a well-paid job and a rising career in a factory; yet she quit her job to prioritise her marriage harmony. Many tongqi women like Meng were embroiled in this social trend, which is a gender-specific downward social mobility. The study lead by Zhou also documented how tongqi suffered from financial struggles in divorce decision-making due to their return from job market to domestic duties. One tongqi interviewee, who used to work in the financial stock market, quit her job and lost her income because her mother-in-law said working on a computer was bad for conceiving a baby (Zhou et al., 2022).

Beyond the tongqi group, Chinese women in "normal" heterosexual marriages also suffer from the gendered social injustice of the motherhood penalty and its implication of housewifisation. Fang and Walker's in-depth interviews with 59 Chinese "full-time wives" revealed the gender-based collective anxiety among unemployed wives, who "face considerable psychological pressure" about their marriage stability because their life quality would seriously decline if their husbands were to divorce them (Fang and Walker, 2015, p. 18). On this slippery slope, many Chinese wives, tongqi included, who once secured economic independence, returned to being dependent on their husbands, making them vulnerable to post-divorce economic risks. This social injustice is deeply rooted in gendered marital structures that prioritise traditional roles for women at the expense of their financial independence and psychological well-being.

Gender in the Chinese Divorce Court

Across all classes and backgrounds, my study found that the Chinese marriage law and its divorce court structurally perpetuate legal injustice against tongqi women. This structural inequity, irrespective of social strata, operates through the organization of gender, imposing official state power to restrict divorces and informal gender-biased financial settlements that expose divorced women to post-divorce living vulnerability.

The Chinese divorce court's entrenched practice of rejecting initial divorce applications, especially from female plaintiffs, has amplified since the 2000s (Michelson, 2019). Most of the tongqi in my study had suffered material losses, such as financial loss, property division, and career regression, as well as non-material losses, such as reputational damage, physical abuse, and psychological trauma in the divorce court/arbitration. For instance, despite her affluent economic status and profession as a lawyer, Li failed to secure approval for her divorce petition at her first attempt. She recalls, "The judge sympathised with me for marrying a gay man but didn't approve my divorce the first time. Only on the second attempt was it approved promptly." Due to the drawn-out divorce proceedings, Li was subjected to physical abuse from her ex-husband and endured mental stress when he intimidated her by threatening to physically harm their son. Ultimately, she acquiesced to his financial and property demands to expedite the divorce but remained unwavering concerning the custody of their son.

Scholar Ke Li's recent research provides a systematic analysis of how the Chinese divorce court uses state legal power to reject divorces and deploys "agenda-setting" power to pressure female plaintiffs into retracting divorce petitions to uphold the state's vision of familial and political stability, thereby reinforcing inequalities that oppress women (Li, 2022). The mechanisms of denial, delay, and pressured withdrawal utilised by the Chinese divorce court to curb divorces were prevalent among my tongqi interviewees who sought a divorce. In 2021, two years after my field work, the Chinese party-state enacted a new law instituting a "cooling-off period" (Davidson, 2021), mandating couples who mutually seek a divorce to wait for 30 days before formalising it, thereby further impeding the dissolution of marriages. Post-2021, tongqi seeking divorce would encounter heightened challenges in the Chinese legal system to formally terminate their marital ties.

In addition to the common practice of denying divorce requests, gender-biased financial settlements form another major barrier to women seeking divorce in post-socialist China. The existing legal system does not provide a robust or consistent alimony or child support system following a divorce, heightening women's anxieties surrounding divorce. Fieldwork conducted by Ke Li and Xin He has highlighted instances where local divorce court judges made rulings favouring husbands in terms of marital property and child custody, to facilitate dispute resolution and safeguard political stability (He, 2022; Li, 2022).

Tongqi like Meng, who “return home” from paid employment, face substantial socio-economic vulnerabilities when contemplating a divorce. The post-socialist systems perpetuate the “patriarchal mode of production” (Walby, 1989), which negates the economic value of women’s domestic labour, thus increasing their dependency on marriage. Meng expressed her concern about a fair divorce and her post-divorce life quality:

He now agrees to pay childcare expenses for our daughter every month, and we share her educational and medical expenditure. But I do not know how long I can trust him on this. If he meets someone he likes, who can guarantee the enforcement of his monthly payment? In China, this type of agreement has no use. He can easily hide all his assets and the court could not do anything about it. I would end up without a penny.

In responding to legal injustice, many tongqi develop a collective political awareness, which is to change the Chinese marriage law to redress legal injustice against tongqi. Most of the tongqi I interviewed proposed to add “homosexuality” to this existing framework of “party-at-fault”. In Chinese marriage law, the “innocent party” can seek financial compensation if the marriage ends due to blameworthy conduct of the “party-at-fault”, such as bigamy, cohabitation with a third party, domestic violence, or maltreatment and desertion (Palmer, 2007). Homosexuality is not recognised in the existing legal framework, thus leaving tongqi no legal grounds for a favourable position in settlements, including financial compensation, asset distribution, and child custody. Min, Li, Meng, and many other tongqi expressed their frustration regarding the lack of legal recognition and protection for victims of “marriage fraud”. Some tongqi, like Chan, called for criminalisation of “marriage fraud” to deter future fraudsters. Yet, without accessible channels to launch political protests in a party-authoritarian state, tongqi can only resort to mild, indirect, and de-politicised ways to call for change. Actively bonding with international organisations like the WHO, participating in tongqi studies for academic intervention in law- and policy-making, and forging a collective identity and voice online for visibility are very common measures that tongqi take to make a difference.

What tongqi do not know is that the “party-at-fault”, at law enforcement level, has little binding force in Chinese divorce settlements. Xin He’s study on Chinese divorce revealed the individual-based and varied interpretation by local judges on “fault” in a divorce (He, 2022). The fault-based divorce by law moves towards a “no-fault rule” at the level of

implementation, overlooking the gender-based oppression women suffer at home and in the workplace (He, 2022). Ke Li also noted how “domestic violence”, a recognised faulty conduct in Chinese marriage law, has been masked as mutual aggression framed by phrases like “fighting” (*dajia*) or “bickering” (*chaojia*) by legal workers to discredit and dismiss female plaintiffs in divorce courts (Li, 2015, p. 169). To what extent might adding homosexuality to the list of “faults” help tongqi’s marital struggles and divorce hardships? Without addressing the gender-based discrimination embedded in Chinese marriage law-making and enforcement, it is doubtful that this addition would provide the justice and reparation that tongqi seek. It is not merely the inclusion of homosexuality as a fault that is at the crux of the issue, but rather, the broader socio-legal context in post-socialist China, which consistently marginalizes women and their rights in the marriage institution.

In a legal system that offers them limited protection, some tongqi opt to leverage the social concept of “face” (honour) to secure a fair divorce settlement, bypassing the legal system. For instance, Min was one of the few tongqi in my research who had managed to secure satisfactory divorce outcomes in terms of asset division and child custody by utilizing the overlapping social network she shared with her husband. She cleverly navigated the “shame” associated with male homosexuality in the local culture of “face” to secure a fairer divorce. Min and her husband were schoolmates, and she explained the shift of their power dynamics:

He was scared. Why? We had many mutual friends in the same social circle. Going to court would not deter him because the law offers little protection to tongqi. He had no fear of the law, but he did fear our overlapping social circles, including friends, family in his hometown, and people at work. They would all look down on him and his “eight generations of ancestors” (*zuzong badai*) if he were exposed [as homosexual].

The stories of Li, Min, and Meng collectively illustrate their shared desire and stratified fear of divorce, which manifested diverse patterns based on their social strata. This raises a question: when tongqi renegotiate their marriage/divorce decisions and desires in varied ways, how does “divorce” grow into the dominant narrative within tongqi communities? The next section addresses the hegemony due to social class within tongqi social groups.

The Tongqi Phenomenon: Carving out Divorce Agency for Chinese Wives

While addressing the limitations faced by tongqi in divorces, it is important to acknowledge their resistant agency in their divorce desires and actions. In previous tongqi studies, divorce was discussed only as a means of these women's salvation from domestic abuse rather than a form of defiance (Cheng, 2016; Tsang, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). My research found that the divorce initiative in the tongqi phenomenon is a non-cooperative form of resistance. This resistance is premised on their intentional discontinuation of the normative gender duty as a diligent wife and subverting the patriarchal doctrine that “women must be faithful to one's husband unto death” (*cong yi er zhong*).

While the post-socialist responsibility to sustain a “harmonious family” is shouldered by women (Guo, 2010), Chinese wives are obliged to mindfully adhere to the passive femininity in response to any marital dissatisfaction or even abuse. This gender norm signifies the biopolitical control that operates via the extraction of *continuous conscious inaction* in female bodies. This kind of passiveness is, in fact, nothing passive but requires enormous emotional and physical labour that involves everyday self-control of anger and self-surveillance of surrender. By choosing divorce, these women not only reject their prescribed role as dutiful wives but also disrupt the gender norm of “conscious inaction.”

Tongqi are not the only female social group resisting domestic oppression through divorce. Divorce is an evident act of resistance for women in the Global South in oppressive patriarchal marital relationships (Chant and McIlwaine, 2015). Nor are tongqi the only female social group resisting through divorce in China. The soaring divorce rates in the post-reform era, mostly initiated by women, align with the Chinese cyber-feminist agenda to subvert patriarchy by rejecting the marriage institution (Xue and Rose, 2022).

My study has found that the tongqi identity, as illustrated in previous chapter *Tongqi's Resistance*, may become a useful discursive instrument for Chinese wives to engage in tactical and dramaturgical resistance. For instance, Che, a 33-year-old teacher, endured long-term avoidant conjugality. Che never considered a divorce until she discovered homosexual sex tapes involving her husband on his mobile phone. After careful consideration, she decided to end her six-year relationship with her husband, as she could not tolerate his sexual promiscuity and moral corruption.

Che expressed her rejection against the patriarchal norm of *de facto* polygyny that is pervasive in post-reform China (Ding, 2010; Osburg, 2013; Zhou, 2019). The expected tolerance of their husbands' extramarital affairs by Chinese wives (Hwang, 1998) was contested by Che and many other tongqi I interviewed. Che made it very explicit: "I saw his homosexual sex tapes. He had casual sex. He cheated. He betrayed me! I cannot be married to a man who is 'sexually loose' (*xing suiyi*) and unethical."

Che's decision to divorce was not easy. In marital resistance, the object of defiance is not always the spouse. In post-socialist China, marriage and divorce decisions still largely involve parental input (Riley, 1994; Yan, 2003). The filial-piety-based parental authority has a significant influence on adult children's divorce decisions, as parents may push their children to tolerate abusive marriages for the sake of the family's "face" (Xiao, 2014). As expected, Che's parents strongly discouraged her divorce motion.

Yet, Che deployed a resistant strategy revolving around her tongqi victimhood, leveraging its perceived association with high HIV risks (Chow et al., 2011, 2013). Che continued to pursue her divorce agenda by overtly conforming to the gender role of a tolerant wife and an obedient daughter, yet redirecting her parents' focus from her marital role onto her husband's homosexuality:

I confided in my parents that he was homosexual. I kept sending them information about male homosexuality. After researching on *Baidu* (Chinese search engine), my father told me that he didn't want me to be with my husband anymore. It was very likely that my dad eventually understood the risks associated with HIV and male homosexuality.

With her parents' help and her possession of her husband's same-sex videos, Che eventually had a quick and peaceful divorce. For Che, her divorce represented a victory in achieving the desired outcome: ending her marriage and gaining her parents' support peacefully. It is evident that Che rejected the traditional gender role of a tolerant wife expected to accept male infidelity. However, she tactically employed the public discourse of stigmatised homosexuality to pathologise her husband's affairs in her interactions with her parents, particularly emphasising the medical and social risks with remaining in a marital union with her husband. In doing so, Che engaged what Scott names a *false compliance*, the strategy by

the subordinate of “acting as if they were deluded, the powerless are in a position to conduct a guerrilla war of resistance without incurring the full retribution visited upon outright rebellion” (Scott, 1990, p. 9).

Moreover, it is important to note the consciousness and deliberation by tongqi like Che in their tactical conformity while navigating divorces in the patriarchal familial system. As Harris noted, “individuals are capable of making deliberate choices about which gender mask to wear and can use these masks to navigate social structures and power relations” (Harris, 2004). In Che’s divorce resistance, the “gender mask” of submissiveness is “understood by everyone to be a form of dissimulation” in that situation and “not mistaken for the actor’s ‘real’ sentiments” (Scott, 1990, p. 3).

Nevertheless, Che’s victory was a rare case among the tongqi I interviewed. The disparity between Che’s successful divorce and the prolonged, agonising divorce processes endured by most tongqi I interviewed shows the veiled complexities of a class-stratified agenda: that women’s divorce agency is not a uniform, one-size-fits-all phenomenon.

Internal Hierarchy among tongqi: Why is divorce the dominant narrative?

My research found that tongqi with higher social status wielded greater influence in setting the divorce agenda, portraying it as the “norm” for all tongqi, even though this stance may not align with the interests of less privileged women. Scholars Wu and Dong highlighted a class hierarchy within the broader online discourse surrounding divorce among Chinese women. They noted that this emerging collective, which advocates for women’s departure from marriage, establishes its presence “by heightening meritocracy and women’s earned spots in the class hierarchy, [which] oftentimes displays a class-based attitude” (Wu and Dong, 2019, p. 483). Resonating with the same marriage-departing agenda, tongqi’s divorce imperative is also found to be class-oblivious, resulting from the asymmetric power relations in education, social prestige, and urban-rural disparity, yet disguised by the knowledge gap on homosexuality.

Defining the emergent “elite femininities” in China is complex. However, recurring themes such as urbanisation, education, income, and profession are consistently observed among

Chinese women who actively resist and depart marriage. As indicated by previous research, a well-educated, non-agricultural professional female is more likely to divorce, with urban women having a 48 percent higher divorce rate than rural women (Zeng et al., 2002). This trend is evident among educated urban professional women, including “left-over ladies” who delay marriage (Fincher, 2016), unmarried single mothers advocating for reproductive autonomy (Liu, 2021), and those embracing Western-influenced “power femininity” prioritising self-empowerment (Chen, 2016). Collectively, they shape a compelling femininity narrative centred on “modernity” and “independence”, alongside a capacity and desire to resist or exit the Chinese marriage system.

In the chapter on *Inventing Tongqi*, I presented the story of Lan, focusing on her tolerant and fluid view on homosexuality. Here I will present how she was assimilated into the tongqi’s divorce imperative. Lan was a 36-year-old rural-born woman who was unemployed at the time I met her. In the city of Shanghai, it was difficult for Lan to make a decent income, as she only had a vocational school diploma and little work experience. Lan’s family married her off to her first husband at the very young age of 19. During their eight-year marriage, her husband physically abused her, causing hospitalisation many times. Lan struggled to divorce, as her parents did not allow her to do so, fearing that it would bring disgrace to her family. Eventually, Lan could not bear the violence anymore and ran away from her hometown, finally getting a divorce. But she could not return to her hometown to see her parents because she had to hide her divorce from everyone there, to prevent her family from “losing face”. She also had a younger brother at home, and her parents were going to leave all their property to him. There was nothing her natal family could do to help her. After running away to Shanghai, Lan met her current, second husband. Although he was shorter than her and limped, he was, in her words, “considerate” (*shang xin*) to her. At least he was willing to provide her with a home and take good care of her life. “If only he wasn’t gay, he would be worthy of spending the rest of my life with”, Lan told me, regretfully.

Lan hesitated to divorce, as this would put her personal finance and security at risk. However, she was eventually talked into divorcing her husband by the rest of the tongqi, who urged her to be “brave” and “independent”. Lan self-criticised her “ignorance” about homosexuality and explained her change of attitude towards her divorce decision:

I did not know much about “homosexuality” (*tongqixinglian*). I did not think it was a big deal; nor was it a big deal to our marriage.... I found a tongqi forum – *tieba*, and later found Chan’s tongqi group. I realised that homosexuality was something serious. Homosexual men would eventually become cold-violent, and they have HIV and gonorrhoea... Also, I learnt that homosexuals were “perverts” (*biantai*), they perform “anal sex” (*baoju*) and “oral sex” (*koujiao*). I did not understand any of these before.... Now I think I want to divorce my husband.”

The self-confessed “ignorance” among some tongqi, such as Lan, typically arises from their less privileged social backgrounds, which often relegates them to the lower echelons of the social hierarchy within tongqi culture. This knowledge hierarchy is created by disparities in social class, with tongqi like Chan and Ying, who possessed university diplomas and urban employment, exercising the knowledge/power (Foucault, 1982) to define (homo)sexuality and its impact on marriage. This in turn casts indigenous beliefs about (homo)sexuality and its impact on conjugality in an inferior light. As a result, grassroots tongqi may either assimilate into mainstream tongqi, as seen with Lan, or face marginalisation, under the collective imperative that “you need to be brave to divorce”, irrespective of their individual class struggles.

The dominance of the divorce imperative by the elite class in the tongqi phenomenon is further evidenced by individuals such as Li. Often, the influence of a tongqi stems from her socio-economic background as well as her leadership role within a tongqi group. For example, Chan and Old Sister Memory naturally commanded respect from members of their respective tongqi groups due to their leadership positions. Li, however, wielded power in shaping the narrative around the necessity of divorce solely because of her privileged socio-economic status. Despite not being part of any tongqi groups, Li was invited to share her successful divorce story at tongqi events by local scholar Zhang Beichuan. According to Li, “Professor Zhang appreciates my clear-minded approach towards my marriage. He invites me to tongqi events to deliver speeches to encourage others to leave their marriages.” Li’s divorce, which had “no impact” on her life quality, positioned her as a “role model tongqi” for others to emulate. This underscores how prestigious social groups, including local scholars and high-earning professionals, hold the power to establish and disseminate the notion of divorce as a universal and class-blind priority within tongqi communities.

The specific locale of the divorce imperative among tongqi also holds significance, particularly on the internet, which largely hosts tongqi activities and promotes a seemingly uniform narrative on the necessity of divorce. The internet in China, predominantly an urban-youth phenomenon (Liu, 2010), naturally enables younger urban dwellers to dominate narratives rooted in their lived experiences. The majority of the tongqi that I encountered via online communities were young, professional women under 40 in urban areas. It was difficult to find or interview older tongqi, such as Old Sister Memory. The only tongqi over the age of 55 whom I managed to interview was a woman named Yu from Shanghai. Our interview was conducted in person at her home due to her limited online activity, which significantly curbed her engagement in shaping marital narratives in tongqi communities.

The anonymity provided by online tongqi chat groups erases the distinct social identities related to wealth and class. Instead, everyone communicates under the shared, fictitious identity of tongqi, whose interests are assumed to align with every individual in the group. Upon entering online forums such as the *Tieba* forum, *WeChat* chatrooms, or *Weibo* social media platforms, each tongqi assumes an avatar and an alias. Conversations typically revolve around their husbands' sexuality and marital experiences, obscuring the diversity of each tongqi's individual background. Meng complained, "All the tongqi I met in the chat group are obsessed with talking about homosexuality, demonising it. How can this help me? ...In the chat group, the immediate group response to a new member is to encourage her to divorce." This illustrates how the digital space can amplify a singular hegemonic narrative, overshadowing the myriad of personal experiences. This hegemony, while fostering unity, also deters tongqi like Meng from seeking advice and understanding, leaving them isolated in a social space meant for support.

In post-socialist China, where "desiring subjects" strive to maximise their personal sexual and material desires (Osburg, 2013; Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2022), the hegemonisation of divorce imperatives within tongqi groups surfaces as a historically inevitable outcome. It lays bare a hierarchical relationship between the autonomy of modern femininity, blossoming within the market economy, and the domesticity of traditional femininity, anchored in the Confucian family-kin system. Financially able tongqi, like Li and Min, praised those opting for divorce, whilst criticising those who resisted as lacking "independence" and "bravery". In contrast, financially insecure tongqi, such as Meng and Lan, wrestled with self-doubt and

self-blame as they internalised the dominant discourse advocating divorce, a narrative that frequently clashed with their individual interests. Hence, the tongqi phenomenon sheds light on issues surrounding class and gender in contemporary China. While the market economy champions autonomy and independence, it also deepens the divide between Chinese women who can afford to prioritise personal desires and those who remain tethered to traditional obligations.

In the context of escalating divorce rates in post-reform China (Hung, 2022), the tongqi phenomenon embodies a novel aspect of modern Chinese femininity, one that complicates the relationship between womanhood and the institution of marriage. Facing the ideals of bravery and independence, will tongqi disengage from marriage entirely? The following section aims to explore a finding from my research, suggesting that while tongqi may temporarily or situationally distance themselves from the system of marriage, they often find themselves entangled more deeply within the system of heterosexuality.

Finding the Next Heterosexual Lover

While tongqi demonstrate varying levels of desire to exit their marriages, my study found that they overwhelmingly endorse the system of heterosexuality. The intolerance of a homosexual husband further entrenches tongqi's engagement with the normative heterosexual system, particularly driven by their sexual and emotional desires. Numerous divorced or divorcing tongqi in my research projected their aspirations for a happier life onto a subsequent "normal" and "real" heterosexual relationship. As Min explained to me: "I knew of homosexuality, but I thought it was only something on TV. I never imagined that I would meet a gay man in real life...Now, I can't help but compare and contrast the 'abnormal' moments in my previous marriage with my current relationship, just to protect myself from another 'marriage fraud'."

Min's post-divorce narrative is consistent with those of most research participants in my study: they displayed a marked enthusiasm to confirm the "heterosexuality" of prospective male partners, thus ensuring the "wholesomeness" of future relationships. Tongqi in my research employed two primary methods to affirm the heterosexuality of their prospective partners: gauging their sexual proficiency and their feminine behaviours. Min, along with

many other tongqi, regarded the man's sexual competency as a method to "diagnose" his heterosexuality. Min recounted how she appraised her date via heterosexual intercourse, stating, "With my current date, I had it [sex] with him on our fourth or fifth date. I want to clarify that I am not promiscuous; I had to do this [sex] to know this man's sexual orientation due to my traumatic past. I'm still scared. I do not want to repeat what I had been through... It was marriage to living in an icehouse."

In this instance, Min transgressed the traditional gender norm of female chastity in China in her quest for a sense of security and normality produced by the system of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980). Yet, this violation of the traditional gender moral script functions to restrict these women in the web of heterosexuality rather than liberate their sexuality. Numerous tongqi, like Min, deliberately embed themselves deeper into the system of heterosexuality sexually, performing excessive heterosexual intercourse not for their own benefits, but out of fear and trauma. As a result, the phallogentric model of sex remains a central conflict in tongqi struggles, producing a perpetual sense of "lack" in women and the need to be "completed" in a "normal" heterosexually relationship.

Meanwhile, many tongqi, once they re-enter the dating market, endeavour to discern a man's heterosexuality by his association with femininity. In China, gay men are often stigmatised for exhibiting feminine traits in their speech and actions (Zheng, 2015). Correspondingly, tongqi in my research tended to scrutinise a man's sexual "normality" by evaluating his fashion choices – such as a preference for "pink shirts or tight trousers", the "soft and brisk" timbre of his voice, the way he walks (which may suggest whether he is the penetratee in gay sex), or if he ever uses the feminine hand gesture – "*lanhua zhi*" – referring to bending the middle finger to create an orchid shape, as seen in traditional Chinese opera. When asked about how to discern the "1" (penetrator) in a gay relationship, most tongqi were caught tongue-tied, as if they had never considered this sexual role in the gay community, resulting from the stereotypical image perpetuated in Chinese media, which predominantly portray feminine-acting gay men. From the perspective of self-identified heterosexual tongqi, masculinity and homosexuality are in perpetual conflict, such that the presence of one negates the other. As Min said, once her ex-husband was revealed to be gay, he was no longer considered a man. This lack of masculinity alarms tongqi, as it undermines the expectation of a "normal" heterosexuality based on sex and sexual differences.

Tongqi in my research saw hegemonic masculinity as a prerequisite for establishing a “normal” heterosexual marriage, even if it involved toxic traits. Li expressed dissatisfaction with her ex-husband’s good temperament and practice of safe sex, saying: “He never argued with me. Real couples argue and fight. He was different from other men. I felt it when we were dating...He always used a condom during sex. Retrospectively, now I see it as his way of suggesting we could have an open marriage. It was not something a real man would do.” The absence of traditionally masculine traits in Li’s ex-husband, such as being aggressive, domineering, unhygienic, and ill-tempered, ironically undermined his suitability as a “normal” husband. In a heterosexual system that operates on dual gender scripts, it must have been the toxic masculinity that made Li, a tongqi from an elite social stratum, feel desired and loved, effectively naturalising the passive and subordinate role women are often expected to occupy in heterosexual courtship (Leonard, 1980, p. 262).

In contrast, not all tongqi place traditional masculinities on a pedestal; nor do they all valorise traditional heterosexual conjugality. Meng, a less privileged rural-born tongqi, was one of the very few tongqi who challenged orthodox Chinese masculinity and its relation to heterosexual marriage. Meng expressed her aversion towards heterosexual rather than homosexual men: “I might have an innate repulsion against ‘straight men’ (*zhinan*). They are not hygienic. They spit in public. They smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and gamble. They practice ‘male chauvinism’ (*dananzi zhuyi*) and expect women to do all the housework. Moreover, ‘straight men’ (*zhinan*) always bluntly express their physical interest in you.” Meng’s previous abusive experiences in a male-dominated patriarchal family made her more sceptical about the idealised heterosexual marriage, which posits traditional masculinity as indispensable for a happy conjugal union. Caught between the care she received from her homosexual husband and her desire for a loving husband predicated on a man’s heterosexuality, Meng felt disoriented by the divorce imperative inherent in her tongqi identity: “He is homosexual but has fewer character flaws than I do because his natal family is much better than mine... I do not know if my life will improve after divorcing him. I’ve been searching for help and answer about my marriage, but I have found none.”

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the divorce imperative within the tongqi community. It examined the interplay between gender, class inequality, and economic disparities in shaping these decisions. The findings suggest that the choices tongqi women make about divorce are more significantly influenced by their gender, socio-economic status, and values relating to sexuality than by sexual compatibility with their husbands.

Taking intersectionality as both a methodology and a concept, my research has found that tongqi, situated at multiple social intersections, cannot simply be understood by examining each identity in isolation. A previous study by Tsang argued that Chinese tongqi with low education and financial instability faced greater constraints to divorce (Tsang, 2021). My finding complicates Tsang's finding in two regards.

Firstly, tongqi's divorce decisions in my research, echoing Tsang's findings, were largely shaped by their socio-economic standing. However, this had a complex interplay with gender. While factors such as education, economic independence, and natal family support undeniably shape the options available to tongqi in divorce decisions, gender-based societal expectations add another layer of complexity. Specifically, the gendered roles assigned to these women, such as maternal responsibilities and gender discrimination in the Chinese divorce court, impose structural gender oppression that transcends socio-economic standings, manifesting in varying degrees of impact.

Secondly, although socio-economic factors play a significant role in tongqi's decisions about divorce, these women's views on homosexuality, shaped partially by their social class, also exert considerable influence. Interestingly, my study revealed that higher-educated tongqi are more susceptible to state-endorsed stigmatisation of homosexuality and adhere more closely to normative heterosexuality. In contrast, rural-born and less-educated tongqi are influenced by local, more tolerant perspectives on sexuality. This openness towards fluid sexuality allows lower-class tongqi to place greater emphasis on individual feelings, conjugal interactions, and practical concerns, rather than compatibility in sexual orientation, when contemplating what constitutes a working marriage.

Upon closer examination of how the imperative for divorce is produced, it becomes evident that this directive is largely driven by a privileged subset of tongqi and is often presented as a one-size-fits-all solution. This approach may place economically disadvantaged tongqi at

higher risk, as it primarily serves the interests of those in higher social classes. The dominance of elite femininity is not unique to the tongqi community. A recent study by Wu and Dong critiqued the focus on women's "choice", "empowerment", and "voice" in improving their lives, while remaining indifferent to class-based economic disparities (Wu and Dong, 2019).

This chapter went on to scrutinise heterosexuality, as the compulsory and normative force that shapes tongqi's divorce decisions. Compartmentalising the marital trauma within their husbands' perceived homosexuality, tongqi find themselves even more tightly entwined with a utopian and romanticised vision of heterosexual marriage that they never attained. Tongqi's deliberate efforts to validate a prospective partner's heterosexuality are influenced by society's deeply entrenched heterosexual norms and beliefs. These beliefs continue to naturalise and romanticise aggressive and toxic masculinity via heterosexual relationships. The heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham, 1994) – the process of romanticising cross-sex relationships to obscure the oppressive dynamics of the system of heterosexuality – operates at its full capacity within the Chinese tongqi phenomenon. It remains one of the dominant ideologies through which gender-biased social order is maintained in post-socialist Chinese society, where "capitalist and patriarchal social arrangements are in a continual state of crisis management" (Ingraham, 1994, p. 207).

From chapters 5-8, the four analytical chapters have taken tongqi's narrative as the main perspective for the accounts of their marriage experience. The next chapter will change the lens from tongqi to married tongzhi, discussing how tongzhi renegotiate their sexual and marital struggles in the context of the tongqi phenomenon in China.

Chapter 9. Revisiting the “Marriage Fraud” Discourse with Married Tongzhi

The previous four analytical chapters illuminated tongqi’s marital struggles via the wives’ perspective. This chapter shifts the intellectual lens to the side of the husbands – the married tongzhi group. It investigates the underlying discourse of “marriage fraud” that constitutes the tongqi identity with tongzhi’s varied accounts of their sexual experiences and marriage values.

When I met Wei, a 25-year-old dedicated volunteer in numerous local tongzhi communities, he had been invited to share his marriage and divorce story both online and offline as a keynote speaker, with the objective of educating Chinese tongzhi about the harm and immorality of marrying women. Wei’s frank narrative about his marital experience was widely disseminated within various tongzhi communities. The issue of a gay man marrying a woman has always been an unspoken concern in tongzhi communities. Wei approached me and volunteered to participate in my research as part of his continuous efforts to enlighten fellow tongzhi contemplating surrendering to familial pressure to marry women:

In the Northern Chapter of PFLAG⁴, I was the first married and subsequently divorced tongzhi to openly share my marital experience. People now label my marriage a “marriage fraud”. I understand. But I take pride in it. I was once a troubled tongzhi seeking help. Now, I am in a position to share my experiences and offer assistance. I am emphatically against tongzhi marrying women. It is an act of “moral corruption” (*bu didao*). Being a tongzhi and marrying a woman? That is moral corruption! A tongzhi should never make a woman a tongqi!

From Wei’s confession and through my field research with 35 Chinese married tongzhi, I picked up two points: firstly, many Chinese tongzhi like Wei regard a marriage between a gay man and a woman as unethical, especially the younger generation residing in urban areas, or those who, regardless of their age, engage actively in local or online “gay circles” (Song et al., 2021); secondly, there are many more Chinese tongzhi who presumably hold the opposite

⁴ PFLAG China, founded in 2008, is an NGO formed by LGBT individuals and their parents, friends, and supporters to serve and support LGBT people.

attitude towards cross-sex marriage, either supporting or condoning it, so that tongzhi like Wei are rendered as the minority who largely remain silent about their disapproval of such marital union.

Substantial research indicates that most Chinese tongzhi enter heterosexual marriages due to various factors, such as filial piety, the pressures of heteronormative societal norms, and the management of stigma (Chou, 2001; Liu, 2013; Ren et al., 2019; Steward et al., 2013; Zheng, 2015). Historically, a degree of compatibility existed between homosexuality and heterosexual marriage in imperial China, as a product of more tolerant views on homoeroticism as a fluid and natural facet of human behaviour (Dikötter, 1995; Hinsch, 1992). However, scholars such as Zheng (2015) and Chiang (2018, 2010) delineated the historical trajectory from republican to post-socialist China, demonstrating how indigenous homoeroticism has been systematically and “scientifically” essentialised and pathologised into a biologically-determined sexual identity and socially disruptive deviance. As a consequence, while most Chinese tongzhi still marry women today, this once-tolerated conjugality has been marginalized and recast as “defective”, “fraudulent”, and “sham” marriage – a discourse popular in the post-socialist tongqi phenomenon.

In the era of the tongqi phenomenon, a time when the mainstream Chinese population no longer tolerates homosexuality in cross-sex marriages and condemns harshly tongzhi who have ever got married (Tsang, 2021; Zhu, 2017), this chapter aims to address the following question: How do tongzhi’s sexual experience and marriage expectations interplay with tongqi’s marital struggles? Or in other words, to what extent does this discourse hold merit, and where does it fall short in encapsulating the intricate and varied experiences in a tongqi-tongzhi conjugal relationship?

Guided by the insights of Chang’s “compressed modernity” (Chang, 2010, p. 444) and Crenshaw’s intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994), I maintain the critical standpoint that the tongzhi identity should not be regarded as monolithic. By examining the lived experiences of married tongzhi, I suggest that the “marriage fraud” discourse is fundamentally problematic in its animosity towards homosexuality, its failure to accurately capture the realities of tongzhi–tongqi marriage, and its reductionist approach to the multifaceted and mutable nature of Chinese sexuality and gender.

In this chapter, the narratives of three married tongzhi will be unravelled to provide a panoramic view of the diverse gender dynamics within Chinese tongzhi marriages that problematise the prevailing “marriage fraud” discourse. Each presents a distinct lens on Chinese conjugality and sexuality, shaped by their unique social backgrounds. Wei, a 25-year-old divorced tongzhi, embodies the younger generation of tongzhi who adopt a Westernized conception of fixed gay identity, encapsulated by the ethos that they are “born this way”. Tang, a 42-year-old divorced tongzhi, provides insight into the experiences of middle-aged men who navigate both local and global sexual norms amid China’s rapid post-socialist transformation. Lastly, the story of Feng, a 37-year-old married tongzhi, illuminates the significance that many Chinese men place on gender-based familial obligations, prioritising them over sexual relationship. Collectively, these varied experiences challenge many assumptions about Chinese sexuality and gender that underpin the “marriage fraud” allegations.

The Interplay of the Tongqi Phenomenon and Tongzhi Culture in China

Through my research, I have observed that the Chinese “tongqi” and “tongzhi” communities, deeply rooted in cyberspace due to the constraints of political censorship, have reciprocally influenced each other in sculpting the gender scripts that are prevalent in contemporary Chinese marriages.

The tongqi subject has become an increasingly highlighted topic in the Chinese gay rights movements. The image of the tongqi as a victim of “gay marriage fraud” has gained considerable traction within local tongzhi events. At the annual gathering of PFLAG, the most expansive LGBT community in China, a keynote address was allocated to Sister Memory, a preeminent tongqi advocate. The purpose of her speech was to underscore the potential harm borne by women when tongzhi men opt for heterosexual marriages. Additionally, Wei, the abovementioned tongzhi, had been recurrently invited to various tongzhi events in different regions of China to underline the potential perils and hazards a gay man might go through himself and inflict upon his wife.

On the internet, particularly on *Baidu*, China's premier search engine, a query containing keywords such as “tongzhi” or “*tongxinglian*” (homosexuality) typically unveils harrowing

accounts of tongqi women confined to unloving and oppressive marriages. As early as 2015, a digitised version of a confidential report on the lives of Chinese tongzhi that was broadly disseminated online stressed the legal and social injustices encountered by the tongqi population. According to this report, “Due to the absence of legal recognition of *tongxinglian* (homosexuality) within the Chinese legislative context, tongqi are often met with silence from the divorce courts when asserting their rights in relation to co-habitation, marital assets, child custody, visitation rights, [and] adoption, among other things” (Gao, 2015, p. 71). Thus, in the digitised and urbanised social milieu of post-reform China, it is virtually impossible to ignore the impact of the tongqi controversy on the life experiences of local tongzhi, particularly regarding gender structures within their heterosexual marriages. The tongqi phenomenon, and particularly its prevailing “marriage fraud” discourse, is becoming a key component in the formation of the contemporary Chinese tongzhi’s identity and morality.

Meanwhile, the participation of tongzhi within tongqi communities has been equally pervasive, acting as insider “consultants” assisting in discerning the “gayness” of many tongqi’s husbands. Within each of the tongqi chat groups I observed in my fieldwork, it was customary to enlist at least one tongzhi volunteer, invited by the group’s organiser, to provide “consultation” on male homosexuality for tongqi members. For example, Lan, a 31-year-old doctoral candidate in law and a tongqi, shared that her tongqi community was home to numerous “upstanding” tongzhi volunteers who aided in identifying signs of homosexuality amongst tongqi’s husbands, using their photographs, chat history, fashion choices, hand gestures, voice tones, and everyday marital interactions.

As Lan commented, “There are two types of tongzhi; the commendable ones who do not deceive women, and those who do. The commendable ones help us recognise the deception within our marriages, allowing us to liberate ourselves”. This involvement of tongzhi is not limited to individual volunteers actively participating across multiple tongqi groups. Eminent local scholars specialising in male homosexuality, such as Professor Zhang Beichuan, have also engaged extensively in both online and offline tongqi events. These experts aid in providing a nuanced understanding of homosexuality that is perceived as authoritative. For instance, Min, a 37-year-old self-employed tongqi, Zhang, a 28-year-old interior designer, and Li, a 40-year-old lawyer, all confided to me how Professor Zhang Beichuan had enlightened them in comprehending the “nature” and “patterns” of male homosexuality and its “detrimental” impact on a heterosexual marriage.

To sum up, this research illuminates the complex interplay between tongzhi's lived realities and tongqi's "marriage fraud" discourse in post-socialist China. As shown above, the mutual infiltration of the essentialised sexual identity discourse in tongzhi communities and the victimised "tongqi" subject in tongqi communities have reinforced the dominant heteronormative narrative that posits an "inherent" incompatibility between homosexual and heterosexual marriage.

Wei: No tongzhi should marry a woman. It is inherently wrong!

Wei, a 25-year-old blue-collar worker in the cosmetics and hairdressing industry, migrated from a rural area to a touristy urban coastal city, mirroring the journey of millions of Chinese migrant workers. Drawn to the city's potential for personal freedom and its distance from his conservative family, Wei found urban life a sanctuary where he could be "truly be himself" in terms of embracing his homosexual identity. Originating from a rural area, Wei was confronted with matrimonial pressure from a young age:

I left my hometown midway through high school, initially moving to Suzhou, then to Lian Yungang. The pressures of dating and early marriage prompted me to do so. Rural and city dynamics are fundamentally different. In my village, it's customary for boys and girls to marry around the ages of 18 or 19. Despite being technically illegal as per China's laws, these early marriages are widespread in rural areas. A couple simply cohabits and has children, who are then registered in the household.

Bearing this pressure, Wei left home early to evade parental expectations. Unexpectedly, Wei met his ex-wife on a long-distance coach. Both of them worked in the same city, so they spontaneously connected as friends. They talked very well on the coach, so Wei kept in touch with her online to sustain their friendship.

Once Wei's parents became aware that he had a female friend with whom he interacted online, they began to press him to marry her, with the pressure primarily exerted by Wei's mother, who handled domestic affairs. Their primary tactic was to berate and undermine Wei's "tiaojian" (personal condition and marriageability), rather than depict a positive vision of marital life. Wei confided to me: "My mother warned that without swift action, I'd fail to find a wife. Approaching 24, with no university degree or military service to my credit, I was

deemed to lack the means to secure a high-paying or stable job, and hence, was considered unattractive on the marriage market. Therefore, I needed to quickly find a girl to ensure myself a wife.”

Wei, under the fear of becoming a lifelong single man, initiated a romantic relationship with the shy girl he had met. Despite conforming to conventional dating activities like dining out, going to the cinema, and travelling, they did not engage in pre-marital sex. Wei had been conscious of his identity as a “tongzhi” since adolescence, having only felt romantic and sexual attraction towards males. Therefore, engaging in sexual activities with his girlfriend was out of the question. Wei admitted to me that he often manipulated her into believing his justifications by citing his family’s conservatism and commitment to chastity before marriage: “We kissed and hugged, but always stopped at sex [intercourse]. Luckily, she bought what I said about being conservative. She really respected what I did. I have to admit that I said many things to “coax” (*hong*) her into believing me. Now, I think retrospectively, these were mostly just lies.”

Their marriage, marked by a lack of sexual intimacy, lasted only a month. The initial discomfort from their wedding night lingered, as Wei strategically avoided any physical intimacy during the day and evaded sharing the same room with his new bride. Consequently, his wife moved back to her parents’ home, marking the end of their brief marriage.

“Do you love me?” Wei’s wife asked him within the first week of marriage, and Wei did not know what to say to her. However, he shared his confusion and struggle in our interview:

I knew my marriage was a total mistake. But I thought I could do it. Ever since I was a child, I had longed for a family life in which I could be intimate with a spouse. When I got married, I knew I was tongzhi, but I did not know two men can make a family. No one in my life was involved in a gay marriage. So I thought, if marrying woman was the only way to form a family, so be it.

When confronted by his wife seeking physical intimacy, the stark realities of Wei’s situation became apparent. Their altercation marked the beginning of a contentious divorce process, mired in complex negotiations over the bride price and familial disputes, both privately and in court.

Six months into the divorce process, Wei's wife sought answer to their failed marriage. Riddled with guilt and shame, Wei disclosed his homosexuality: "I told her I was *tongxinglian* (homosexual), in tears. I told her I had never slept with any women and I hated myself for hurting her." His confession provoked an unexpected empathetic response from her. Although she agreed to relinquish the bride price of 88,000 rmb (£9,650), Wei insisted that she keep it as a form of compensation, acutely aware of the societal stigma she bore as a divorced woman. Wei said with regret: "Divorce is a huge dishonour she must bear as a woman. I feel terribly sorry."

Parallel to his divorce proceedings, Wei came out to his family and started publicly advocating against heterosexual marriage within the tongzhi community. He believed that sharing his personal narrative could inspire other tongzhi to "be themselves" and "step away from heterosexual marriage".

Wei's staunch resistance to marriage in defiance of his parents' wishes presents a marked contrast to the pervasive "marriage fraud" discourse that vilifies tongzhi individuals for their perceived deceitful intent to marry. Previous research on tongzhi has identified filial piety, rather than social discrimination, as the principal source of their anxiety (Bie and Tang, 2016; Choi and Luo, 2016; Steward et al., 2013). Interestingly, Wei's case introduces a new perspective: viewing the act of marrying women as morally untenable due to its potential harm to women, as opposed to merely an encroachment on his homosexual liberty.

Condemning such marriages as "morally corrupt" (*bu didao*), Wei asserted that the younger generation of tongzhi (born in the 1990s onwards) commonly exhibits a dismissive attitude towards their married or divorced peers. In my study, the tongzhi I interviewed shared the sentiment that there is a noticeable divide within the tongzhi community, signalling the emergence of a "hierarchical tongzhiness" paradigm. On one side of the divide, tongzhi resist heterosexual marriage, often praised as a stance of defiance against societal norms. Conversely, those who opt for marriage are often stigmatised for their perceived moral failings. This "hierarchical queerness" within the tongzhi community indicates the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies emphasising self-responsibility, personal freedom, and the pursuit of individual happiness (Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2022).

This finding diverges significantly from Zheng's work, which illustrates a self-imposed divide within the tongzhi community, segregating "normal" tongzhi – who succeed in marrying women to appear heteronormative – from the "abnormal" individuals who fail to secure a heterosexual matrimony (Zheng, 2015, p. 157). With Zhou's exploration of stratified and hierarchical queer cultures in post-socialist China as the backdrop (Zhou, 2022), my finding extends current literature by highlighting the resistance towards marriage within the "out and proud" strand of tongzhi culture.

Importantly, this resistance undermines the "marriage fraud" allegation, as it demonstrates that many tongzhi individuals, like Wei, are pressured into heterosexual marriages rather than willingly orchestrating them.

Tang: I realised I was tongzhi so I did what a man should do – divorced my wife

Following my request for an interview, I met with Tang, a divorced tongzhi, at a Starbucks in central Shanghai. It was a sunny afternoon and Tang arrived with a hurried air. A middle-aged, robust, medium-height man in business casual attire with a briefcase, he seamlessly blended with the contemporary business environment of the global chain café. When I proposed treating him to a coffee, he courteously declined, displaying a chivalrous aspect of modern Chinese manhood, stating: "I have Starbucks vouchers. Allow me to get the coffee for you. I wouldn't dream of having a young lady like yourself pay for my drinks."

Tang, a 42-year-old financial salesman, was my first interviewee who had been a married tongzhi. In 1998, at the age of 24, after retiring from the army, Tang met his ex-wife, who was a nurse of the same age. Their parents introduced them and they both considered each other "suitable" marriage prospects. During their courtship, like most couples, they kissed, embraced, enjoyed romantic dates, and visited each other's parents for meals. After a year of dating, the parents from both sides urged them to marry. They complied naturally, as they both believed that "everyone gets married" in their early twenties.

For the first three years of his marriage, Tang led a modest and content life, during which he and his wife established a stable livelihood and welcomed a daughter. His same-sex desires

never compromised his marital happiness, as he never encountered individuals or situations that led to same-sex romantic or sexual experiences.

From his teenage years and throughout his military service, Tang had an explicit awareness of his attraction to men. Yet, he did not connect his preferences to a particular sexual identity; nor did he consider the prospect of not marrying a woman. This paradigm shifted dramatically in 2001, when the rise of the internet facilitated a surge of information on the “born and proud to be gay” movement from Western sources. Tang quickly assimilated this knowledge, believing that his affection towards men signified a gay identity. In alignment with the “gay pride” and “out and proud” identity movements, Tang began to question his eligibility for a heterosexual marriage.

It was the year 2000 when I fully understood my sexual orientation – tongzhi. It was crazy back in the 2000s when the internet was free of censorship. There were explosive materials on homosexuality, such as online tongzhi champions, forum, nudes, and other crazy things. It was almost like I learnt about who I was overnight. I began to question my marriage, but back then I decided to keep being married, because my marriage was good.

The year 2001 represented a significant deteriorating point in Tang’s marriage. His newly-developed sexual identity created a question mark in his perception of marriage and his sense of self. Compounding this was the rapid decline in his marital quality, precipitated by the arrival of his parents-in-law. Amid grappling with the implications of his emerging homosexual identity, Tang faced the pressing challenge of cohabiting with his in-laws, whom Tang and his wife had decided to offer improved living conditions in their own home because the heating system in their residence was inadequate. However, regular disagreements ensued between Tang and his in-laws concerning their granddaughter’s upbringing. This discord with his in-laws eventually seeped into his marital relationship, generating day-to-day tension with his wife. Tang desired a nuclear family structure yet was incapable of achieving independence from his in-laws. As with many dual-income Chinese couples, he and his wife relied on the grandparents for childcare due to the scarcity of public maternity services. By the seventh year of their marriage, weary from the constant conflicts with his wife and in-laws, Tang left his home in northern China and relocated to Shanghai.

In Shanghai, Tang met his same-sex partner via an online tongzhi forum, a relationship that served as the decisive factor in his decision to pursue a divorce:

The first time we met as “internet friends offline” (*mianji*), I knew he was the one. It felt so natural to hold his hand, briefly. We didn’t even talk about being tongzhi or not. We just started walking together and talking about things we liked.... If not for him, for the love I found, I would not have divorced my wife.

In retrospect, Tang maintained that he had had a successful marriage. Prior to the arrival of his in-laws, he and his wife had shared family finances and housework equally and communicated well. Tang acknowledged that his proposal for divorce, devoid of any reference to his homosexuality, was not convincing. From an external viewpoint, their marital quality surpassed that of many heterosexual couples. His wife was committed to their family and kind to his parents. Tang himself was a considerate and dependable husband. In his ultimate confession to his ex-wife, he deliberately underscored his homosexuality in conflict with their marriage to gain her agreement on the divorce:

As I raised the topic of divorce to her, she asked me, with a surprisingly tranquil tone, whether I had found someone else. I said yes. Her question indicated her readiness for this. We lay side by side on our bed and talked all night long. I did not lie to her. I told her I did not love her and I had a history [of homosexuality]. This history of mine will always be there, hurting both of us. Thus, our marriage must end now.

During the divorce proceedings, Tang relinquished all marital assets and full ownership of their house to his wife and daughter and conceded custody of their child. Ultimately, Tang shared an update on his ex-wife’s life post-divorce, with a tone of relief: “Two years after our divorce, my ex-wife remarried. Her new husband has been very kind to her. Our breakup did not adversely affect her life significantly, as in our situation, she was not the ‘at fault’ party in the divorce.”

Distinct from Wei, Tang did not face familial coercion to wed. Instead, he aspired to a “normal” family life – essentially a heterosexual, duty-bound union – due to a perceived lack of alternate life trajectories. Tang’s evolution toward a defined homosexual identity and

affection-centric partnership symbolises the intertwined evolution of the emerging tongzhi identity and Chinese conjugality in rapidly-transforming post-socialist China.

Tang's narrative highlights the "de-traditionalisation" of Chinese same-sex identity and its implications for traditional conjugality following the 1990s' "gay awareness" surge (Chou, 2001; Wei, 2007). His journey reflects a transition from rural to urban landscapes, in which the traditional tolerance of homosexuality in heterosexual marriage is significantly diminished (Coleman and Chou, 2013; Van de Werff, 2010), leading to changes in Chinese family structures and domestic gender dynamics.

Tang's transformative experience reflects a trend found among married tongzhi in my study, particularly those aged over 35, who also started to experience conflict between their tongzhi identity and marital obligations amidst the rise of internet-based "gay awareness" in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The evolution from duty-bound heterosexual husbands to tongzhi individuals favouring affection-based same-sex relationships can be aptly situated within the context of Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. These individuals do not merely shift from heterosexuality to homosexuality, but rather constantly navigate diverse roles within their unique socio-cultural and historical milieus. This continual recalibration of sexual, emotional, and familial roles among tongzhi people critically challenges the prevailing "marriage fraud" discourse. This narrative tends to simplify nuanced realities into distinct binaries such as "love or not", "heterosexual or homosexual", and "dutiful husband or deceptive villain". It compartmentalises individuals' emotions, sexuality, and gender into parallel, disconnected realms – a representation that starkly contradicts authentic lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989).

Feng: A Chinese man's top priority is to pay his duties

Feng, a 37-year-old entrepreneur with his own start-up, sat for our interview during a unique phase of his life, immediately following his resignation from a state-owned enterprise. His willingness to discuss his experience as a married gay man might not have been possible had he continued working within a state corporation. As Zheng (2015, p. 100) noted, Chinese

tongzhi who hold high-ranking management positions or work within government-sponsored entities are rarely visible in either academia or popular media. Their same-sex attraction potentially exposes them to slander, defamation, social sanctions, and a loss of their status, career, and family. Only upon leaving his *danwei* (communist work unit), did Feng, who remained married, consent to an interview.

Feng had been married for 12 years, since the age of 25, and had a 10-year-old son. Feng detailed the marriage customs in his place of birth: “In my hometown, a rural village in China, you’re expected to marry around the age of 23. The legal age for a man to marry in China is 22. If you don’t have a date to marry by 23, you become the talk of the village”. After a series of matchmaking efforts by his parents and relatives, he eventually met his wife. Among all the women he encountered, Feng chose his wife because she was the “least wrong option” to be a dutiful wife.

At the time of his marriage, Feng had a vague understanding of his same-sex attraction, which did not interfere with his marital arrangement. What he explicitly resisted, however, was the institution of marriage: “I didn’t want to marry anyone, irrespective of their gender. But the environment I was in didn’t allow me to think twice. The gender of my spouse didn’t matter to me back then. I just did not want to enter marriage.”

However, Feng’s disposition towards resisting marriage altered after his marriage, or more precisely, after the birth of his son. He described his wife as “diligent”, given her unwavering commitment as a dutiful daughter to his parents, a nurturing mother, and a supportive, understanding wife. Unlike many other married tongzhi who sought to escape their marriages, Feng chose to willingly maintain his marriage for as long as he could, as his gender identity took precedence over his sexual identity.

A Chinese man’s top life priority is to fulfil his duties: to be a filial son, a responsible father, and a committed husband. We all have desires, but there are varying priorities. Duties come first; desires are secondary. I have no intention or motivation to disrupt my marriage. In fact, precisely because she is such a devoted wife and because of my own wrongdoings [sexually], I strive to fulfil my duties towards her.

Feng's feelings of guilt were tied to his sexual performance – not to his same-sex affairs but to his avoidance of his sexual duty to his wife, due to his “instinctual aversion” to her as a woman. Feng and his wife had been living in separate rooms for five years.

Understandably, she finds it odd that I've avoided physical intimacy with her since the birth of our son. I disclosed to her many years ago that I was a tongzhi and she continued to live as we always had. She attempted to initiate intimacy several times, but I declined each time. In recent years, more information about tongqi and tongzhi has been available on the internet. She's been reading these stories and now understands that homosexuality cannot be altered. As a result, she ceased her efforts in the bedroom. She has actually confided in me that, compared to all the tragic tongqi marriage stories she's read, our marriage seems the most normal.

Before and after his marriage, Feng partook in multiple sexual encounters with different men. However, he only revealed his homosexual identity to his wife, while choosing to withhold information about his series of extramarital affairs. Feng justified his decision to conceal this information by pointing to the desire to maintain a dispute-free and harmonious marriage:

Confessing the affairs wouldn't be beneficial, would it? As long as I fulfil my duties as a good husband and father within my marriage, my wife will always be understanding and supportive. After all, my wife is a well-educated, refined woman. Unlike the more tumultuous reactions of some tongqi observed on the internet, she would never engage in heated disputes or arguments with her husband. My wife is rational and well-cultured.

Towards the end of the interview, Feng sincerely expressed that he had done “everything he could” for his wife. Carrying the guilt of his same-sex extramarital affairs and the lack of sexual intimacy in his marriage, Feng nonetheless believed that he had been a dutiful husband: “My wife does not perceive our marriage as being negative either. The tongqi stories she has read online paint far worse scenarios, involving domestic abuse, physical violence, and HIV risks. When comparing our situation to these traumatic tongqi experiences, I believe my wife is content with what we have.”

Feng's narrative, although uncommon in my research sample, mirrors the reality of a significant portion of tongzhi who continue to marry women in China (Xing, 2012). Like

Tang, Feng also navigated the transformation from a commitment to heterosexual marriage, despite same-sex attraction, to a self-understanding as a tongzhi within such a marriage. However, Feng took a different path, renegotiating his homoerotic desires within the boundaries of his marital roles and duties. This concurs with other research findings that indicate that a large number of Chinese tongzhi maintain clandestine same-sex relationships while remaining in their marriages (Choi and Luo, 2016; Coleman and Chou, 2013; Zheng, 2015).

Recent research indicates that Chinese tongzhi frequently correlate their overall life satisfaction with positive marital relationships with their wives (Shao et al., 2022). Additionally, there is a significant decrease in anxiety symptoms among tongzhi in heterosexual marriages (Yang et al., 2020). These findings suggest an internalised conviction in the natural and desirable progression towards heterosexual marriage in Chinese tongzhi culture.

In contrast to Tiantian's note on the "split self" in tongzhi, where their primary anxiety revolves around "passing as heterosexual" (Zheng, 2015, p. 153) in daily performances, Feng's most significant concern was less about his sexuality and more about his perceived inability to fulfil his familial duties, which were potentially impeded by his homoerotic tendencies. Situating his selfhood and manhood primarily within the context of gender-based familial roles, Feng had managed to construct a "unified self", balancing his predominant role as a husband and his secondary same-sex desires. This finding underscores the importance of viewing tongzhi's life trajectories and self-perceptions through a nuanced lens that extends beyond their sexual identities, to incorporate their prioritisation of traditional gender roles within the societal and familial context.

Feng's narrative also offers insight into a variant of the tongqi experience, deviating from the mainstream representation of the "betrayed and miserable" tongqi in Chinese society. According to Feng, his wife, having researched the subject, chose not to identify as a tongqi, as she did not endure the typical hardships associated with being a tongqi, such as risks of HIV transmission, domestic violence, or emotional abuse. While the lack of sexual intimacy – a significant source of distress often highlighted in tongqi discourses – was present in Feng's marriage, his wife did not deem it as the most important element in assessing their situation. Despite her dissatisfaction with their sexless relationship, Feng's wife decided to

stay married to him after he revealed his homosexuality, finding satisfaction in other aspects of their marital life. These narratives, from the perspectives of both tongzhi and his wife, elucidate the diverse experiences and responses of tongqi women when confronted with their husbands' same-sex identities and affairs, shaped by their unique marital and life circumstances.

Cross-Examining the “Marriage Fraud” Discourse

In the earlier chapter on *Tongqi's Resistance*, I explored the prevalent “marriage fraud” discourse that had originated within the Chinese tongqi phenomenon. This narrative primarily revolves around a moral accusation: homosexual men deliberately concealing their sexual orientation and manipulating unknowing heterosexual women into matrimony for their personal gains. Within this discourse, the binary construct of the villainous husband and the victimised wife forms the core of the supposedly immoral and potentially illegal act of “fraud”.

However, beneath this dualism, several gender and sexual ideologies are at work, bolstering such dichotomous claim of power dynamics: the zero-sum game logic in conjugality, essentialised sexuality, the gay/husband conflict, and the exacerbated male dominance within marital relationships. I will dissect these four foundational ideologies in the subsequent sections of this analysis. My research finds that the lived experiences of tongzhi I interviewed either challenge or complicate these assertions that construct the “marriage fraud” discourse.

Zero-Sum Game in the “Marriage Fraud” Discourse

My research has revealed a complex and multi-layered reality when juxtaposing the lived experiences of tongqi and tongzhi within the context of the “marriage fraud” discourse. Specifically, the application of the economic zero-sum logic within this discourse – where one party's gains are predicated solely upon equivalent losses of the other party, thereby ensuring that the overall net benefit remains static – is challenged by the testimonies of married tongzhi in my research. As illustrated in the chapter on *Tongqi's Resistance*, Jo, a 27-year-old tongqi, employed this market logic of the zero-sum game in her allegation of her

husband's "marriage fraud", wherein her husband's "gaining" of her domestic and reproductive labour simultaneously rendered her the "losing" party in the marriage:

Homosexual [men] do not love women. Their marriages are all lies. They are coaxed into marrying them, bearing children for them, doing senior care for their parents, saving face for their entire family, and being the maid in the house.

Jo's application of the zero-sum game principle to her situation mirrors the market logic applied to personal relationships, a prevalent social phenomenon since post-reform China (Osburg, 2013; Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2022). Her accusation of exploitation and loss implies the economic logic of quid-pro-quo within modern Chinese intimate relationships that constitutes the "marriage fraud" discourse.

However, the stories of Wei, Tang, and Feng complicate the market logic by offering a multi-layered and alternative narrative to rebut the loss-or-win relationship between a husband and a wife. For instance, in Feng's marriage, he did indeed gain the familial and social benefits alleged by many tongqi. However, these gains did not translate to losses to his wife: rather, his wife also benefited from his performance of familial duty in a traditional "complimentary" gender script in their conjugal relationship:

When I married my wife, it truly wasn't a "fraud". At that time, I really didn't know – there weren't any social organizations that could have informed me.

[After I came out] My relationship with my wife is still very harmonious. We are raising our son together. She takes good care of my parents. Chinese people must not be selfish; I absolutely cannot accept not fulfilling my family responsibilities. A good family needs full engagement of a father and a good marriage needs the husband to put efforts into relationship maintenance. Chinese culture emphasises responsibility. Since I'm married, I should treat my wife well.

Feng recounted that his familial devotion to his wife was well received, as she did not identify her marital experience with the tongqi accounts she read online: "She has actually confided in me that, compared to all the tragic tongqi marriage stories she's read, our

marriage seems the most normal”. Compensating for his perceived inability to meet his wife’s emotional and sexual needs, Feng offered additional financial security by ensuring that all their marital assets, including housing and cars, were registered under her name. Beyond the financial domain, Feng also actively participated in domestic chores. He assumed most of the household responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, primarily due to the convenience of his workplace’s proximity to their home.

Feng’s marital journey unveils two intertwined dynamics that interrogate the zero-sum supposition embedded in the “marriage fraud” discourse. Firstly, Feng’s perceived “gain” was his ability to uphold a semblance of a harmonious Chinese family – a condition from which his wife also derived benefits, by having a “normal” familial and marital life. Conversely, Feng’s “loss” is encapsulated in his duty to perform an “excess” of familial responsibilities, encompassing both financial and labour contributions towards his wife. This facilitated his wife’s *de facto* ascendancy to the position of head of the household within their marital relationship. Collectively, these dual realities fundamentally challenge the assertion that gains and losses within a tongzhi–tongqi marital union necessarily operate on a zero-sum gender principle.

The experiences of Wei and Tang also challenge the zero-sum gender principle in distinctive ways. Wei divorced his wife within a year of marrying her. His wife was initially furious over his sudden “abandonment” yet quickly felt sympathetic towards him once he revealed his tongzhi identity. Upon divorce, Wei relinquished his full bride price and revealed his sexuality to absolve his wife from blame in their failed marriage. At the time of our interview, Wei and his ex-wife maintained a strong friendship. Tang, meanwhile, had a harmonious eight-year marriage before meeting a same-sex lover. Post-divorce, he relinquished all marital assets and full custody of their daughter to his wife, and they continued to have a positive “familial” (*qinren*) relationship. This complex web of power in which Feng, Wei, and Tang operated effectively contests the zero-sum notion in the “marriage fraud” discourse, showing that gains and losses are not mutually exclusive but can coexist within the dynamic power dynamics of Chinese conjugal relationships.

Indeed, Feng’s double life between his heterosexual marriage and homosexual affairs, common among tongzhi men in post-socialist China (Cui, 2022; Song et al., 2021; Zheng, 2015), substantiates the claim that “a husband’s gain translates to a wife’s loss” in the

“marriage fraud” discourse. Male infidelity causes significant psychological distress for tongqi wives (Li et al., 2016, 2021; Tsang, 2021), as showcased in previous chapters. However, this male infidelity, portrayed as unique to the tongzhi community, is common in broader Chinese society, where men’s extramarital affairs are culturally tolerated (Chang, 1999; Osburg, 2013; Zhang, 2010). Local scholar Suwei Xiao identified the widespread “second wife” phenomenon in post-reform China. According to Xiao, middle- or upper-middle-class men consider the ideal romantic setup for a Chinese man to include a “high-quality” (*gao suzhi*) wife and a “face-earning” (*nade chushou*) mistress (Xiao, 2020, p. 156). This cultural acceptance of male infidelity and societal expectation for women to endure it intensifies the stress on all Chinese wives, including tongqi.

Feng’s lack of emotional and sexual intimacy for his wife led to guilt – an embodiment of Foucauldian self-policing (Foucault, 1982) via internalisation of social norms of monogamy and heteronormativity – driving him to relinquish some family decision-making power. Contrary to the traditional gender norms, Feng and his wife built a marriage towards the egalitarian model. Despite his affairs, Feng compensated his wife through financial security and fulfilling housework duties. This approach yielded mutual marital satisfaction, eased Feng’s guilt, and subsequently further facilitated his involvement in more extramarital affairs. Essentially, Feng’s dual heterosexual and homosexual lives coexisted, mutually sustaining and reinforcing each other.

Nevertheless, the zero-sum game logic in the “marriage fraud” discourse has its merits: it sheds light on the plight of Chinese wives within the patriarchal marriage institution, where a “dominant husband and tolerant wife” model prevails. Yet, projecting these everyday struggles onto the backdrop of male homosexuality in current tongqi discourse could distort the actual gender dynamics at play.

Tongzhi: Plural, Transforming, and Mosaic Sexual Identities

Another fundamental logic of the “marriage fraud” allegation resides in the husband’s homosexuality, which many tongqi perceive as the root cause of all marital issues due to its moral “corruption”, sexual “deviance”, and perceived “immutability”. As discussed in earlier chapters, the “marriage fraud” discourse reproaches not only the husband’s homosexual

identity and same-sex affairs, but also his intentional concealment of his “innate” and “biological” homosexuality prior to and throughout the matrimonial commitment. When asked about the meaning of her husband's gay identity, Ying responded angrily: “It means utter deceit from the beginning of our relationship. Our marriage is just a sham because he knew he was gay before we got married.”

However, the tongzhi participants in my study displayed a variety of complex, mosaic, and at times conflicting personal experiences in their understanding and expression of their same-sex desires, contradictory to the production of a “biological gay husband” in the “marriage fraud”.

According to local queer scholar Wei Wei, Chinese gay men from diverse backgrounds – including varying social statuses, educational levels, and geographic origins – have started to uniformly adopt the term “tongzhi” to represent their sexual identity since the 1990s (Wei, 2007). Yet, this seemingly homogeneous label belies the nuanced and varied interpretations that each self-identified “tongzhi” holds towards his own sexuality. International scholar Rofel also highlighted the accelerated construction of a fixed sexual identity grounded in homoerotic actions across varying social strata in China since the 1990s in her fieldwork (Rofel, 2007).

Within my 31 tongzhi interviewees, a myriad of labels were used to identify their own sexuality. Feng and Wei, like the majority of my interviewees, adopted the popular term “tongzhi”, a primarily Chinese homosexual identity label, reappropriated from the communist term “comrade” since the early 2000s (Coleman and Chou, 2013). Tang, on the other hand, referred to himself using the official Chinese term “gay” (*tongxinglian*) with a prefix “total” (*wanquan*), implying his rejection of being perceived as bisexual. Some men preferred the borrowed use of the English term “gay”, either due to their exposure to foreign language education, or to extensive experience with the internet. Others used more ambiguous terms like “same-sex” (*tongxing*) and “double-sex” (*shuangxing*) to describe their homoerotic encounters, without the need for a fixed sexual identity. One interviewee, a 37-year-old worker in manufacturing, simply expressed that he was in love with both his wife and his male lover, expressing no interest in the “perplexing” notions like “tongxinglian” or “tongzhi” that could further complicate his already busy life. These varied self-identifications illuminate the diversity and complexity of male homosexuality in China, opposing the

monolithic image of the “villain gay husband”. Such multiplicity coincides with Zhou’s recent study on the “plural queer personhoods” among Chinese same-sex attracted individuals (Zhou, 2022)

In the multifaceted landscape of Chinese homosexualities, Tang’s story elucidates the dynamic and intricate manifestations of same-sex behaviours within a single individual. Originally from a small village in rural China, Tang’s teenage memories were painted with homoerotic behaviours such “boys touching each other’s genitals by the river in public”, which were never frowned upon, as traditional Chinese ideologies around sexuality have always been fluid (Hinsch, 1992). Growing up in rural China, Tang’s notion on same-sex attraction was always vague, fluid, and even natural:

In fact, when I was 15, I had a very vague affection towards my first female classmate. But as I grew older and served in the military, I realised that I also had such feelings for boys. Even after I got married, I didn’t have the notion of homosexuality; I never thought that I couldn’t marry a woman. Of course, I knew that I liked boys, but I thought that boys liking boys was a “commonality” (*gongxing*) shared by all. After all, no one ever openly talked about this [homoeroticism] being unacceptable.

Tang’s development of the conflict between his tongzhi identity and his husband role began to crystallise in two key moments: in 2000, when he learned about the concept of tongzhi on the internet, and in 2006, when he moved to Shanghai. In 2000, the internet, largely uncensored, exposed him to rich information about Western-influenced homosexuality, including online tongzhi champions, dating forums, and explicit images. It felt as though he understood his identity overnight, prompting him to question his marriage. In 2006, upon moving to Shanghai, he had his first homosexual experience after joining a local tongzhi group. He soon met his boyfriend and, after experiencing genuine love and intimacy, he began questioning his suitability in his marriage.

In contrast to the accusation of “marriage fraud” which holds tongzhi accountable for the premeditated concealment of their “biological” or “genetic” homosexual traits, Tang’s narrative provides a mosaic of the multiplicity of male sexual identities in one individual, as well as the metamorphosis of these identities across time and space within the rapidly changing context of modern Chinese society. According to Foucault, Tang’s oscillation

between sexualities opposes the notion of sexuality as a “natural given”, instead showcasing to it as a “historical construct” (Foucault, 1982). Raised in an indigenous Chinese sexuality culture that perceives human sexual behaviours as fluid and transitory, Tang expressed his receptiveness and adaptability during his transition:

In 2001, I got access to the internet. It was dial-up internet. I discovered a new world. It seemed like I understood overnight that I was called a “homosexual” (*tongxinglian*). I had no hesitation, no pain, no struggle. I accepted what I saw and learnt. At that time, I started thinking that I should live once in the lifestyle of a homosexual. Some people may struggle, but I'm like a bowl of water – I accept everything that comes in life.

The story of Tang contests the accusation of the “marriage fraud” discourse, in which a “fraud” is premised on the act of deception of one’s “true” and “fixed” homosexuality. However, Tang’s shifting and conflating sexualities over time and across social locales contest that an immutably determined homosexual identity is ascribed to husbands by this discourse. Tang’s dynamic experience in changing sexualities is not a singled-out phenomenon but was a common pattern in my interviewees, especially those rural-to-urban migrants or internet users who had been exposed to kaleidoscopic sex and sexuality cultures, resulting in them oscillating between sexual and marital self-identification and disidentification.

In this regard, it is evident that the “marriage fraud” accusation is problematic in its presumption of a precursory homosexuality that is needed to constitute an imaginary clash between male sexuality and heterosexual conjugality. Yet, any identity is performatively constituted by the expressions, actions, and their repetitions that are reduced to its results (Butler, 2006). The “marriage fraud” discourse in regard to its essentialised inborn homosexuality transpires to be inevitably positivist, homophobic, and fictive. Moreover, such discourse simplifies the complexities of the ever-evolving sexual, marital, and living experiences at different life stages of individuals, imposes universalisation of the Western sexual identity culture to Chinese same-sex customs, and reinforces the essentialist homo-hetero dualism that was originally obscure in Chinese local homoerotic culture.

The Gay/Husband Conflict: Love vs Duty

Challenging the “marriage fraud” contention of inherent incompatibility between a gay identity and the role of a husband, most married or divorced tongzhi in my study grappled with an ongoing tension in harmonising these two roles. Distinct from prior tongzhi studies that underscored conflict stemming from male sexuality, this section situates the conflict within a “compressed” (Chang, 2014) Chinese matrimonial system, where there exists a constant tension between Western-influenced romanticized conjugality and native duty-bound familial relationships.

Historically, “same-sex eroticism could co-exist with marriage without conflict” in traditional China (Chou, 2001, p. 31). Homosexuality was usually treated as one kind of individual sexual indulgence thrown together with all other extramarital sex. These kinds of sex were undesirable because they did not lead to legitimate procreation within marriage (Dikotter, 1995). If the obligation to continue the family line was fulfilled, marriage and extramarital homosexual relationships could coexist without much contradiction (Chou, 2000).

Numerous studies have sought to understand why Chinese tongzhi marry, conforming themselves with heteronormative national desires and traditional doctrines of filial piety (Cui, 2022; Gong and Liu, 2022; Song et al., 2023; Zheng, 2015). Yet, considering the historical tolerance for married homoerotic men and the fluid identity of tongzhi, the question of “why tongzhi stop marrying women” is also worth exploring. My research indicates that the tolerance between marital and homosexual roles in post-socialist China has been disrupted, in a change prompted not only by the emergence of tongzhi gay identities in the 1990s (Coleman and Chou, 2013; Wei, 2007), but also by a shift in tongzhi’s perception of conjugal relations, transitioning from familial duty to a pursuit of neoliberal desires.

In examining the intersectionality of gay identity and marital roles in modern China, the experiences of Wei, Tang, and Feng manifest three distinct trajectories of this conflict within post-socialist conjugal relationships. Feng, a middle-aged man, did not perceive a conflict, as he prioritised familial duties, relegating homoeroticism to a “recreational desire”. Conversely, Tang, also middle-aged, underwent a substantial shift, redefining his marital and sexual roles, spurred by his yearning for an intimate, passionate love. Wei, a younger tongzhi, has consistently believed in the gay/husband conflict despite his attempt to develop an intimate

relationship in heterosexual marriage. These narratives, along with the rest of my tongzhi interviewees, showcase a spectrum of perspectives among married tongzhi, characterized by fluctuating, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory views on homosexuality and conjugal imaginations.

Tang's story reveals a shift from accepting to rejecting the dual role of tongzhi and husband. He attributed this change to the emotional fulfilment he found in a romantic relationship with a same-sex partner:

Kissing someone you like tastes sweet. On the contrary, kissing someone you do not like is just slimy and even gross. I love my ex-wife as a family member, but I never liked kissing her.... I asked for a divorce a couple of months after I met my male lover in Shanghai, because I learnt what it is truly like to kiss and have sex with someone romantically. I miss him, very much, every day, just as the romantic movies and books describe what romantic love is. Being with someone I both like and love – this is the life I want to live.

Compared to Tang's gradual transformation, Wei's story reveals a continuous struggle between his yearning for romantic love and his decision to adhere to traditional marital roles.

When I chose to get married, I knew I was wrong. But at that time, I thought, if men can get married and have children, why can't I? You know, gay people also yearn for family and marriage. I had my own fairy tales when I was a child. Every time I read gay novels in which two boys have their own intimate family space, I yearned for that kind of life. I read many "man-man love" (*nannan ai*) novels on the internet. I want to live together with another person, go to work, come back from work, anyone can cook – how happy that would be.

Wei, Tang, and many of the other tongzhi in my study demonstrated a mounting trajectory, either gradual or rapid, in which their profound longing for romantic love surpassed their adherence to duty-based matrimony. This suggests that the conflict between the roles of being gay and a husband is a post-socialist construct rather than a universally internalised assumption as implicated in the "marriage fraud" discourse.

My study shows that the influence of tongzhi identity on Chinese conjugal relations transcends sexual orientations, challenging traditional Chinese marital norms primarily rooted in familial duties (Wolf, 1984) and companionate love (Davis and Friedman, 2014b; Pimentel, 2000). Instead, it embraces a form of love that is driven by passion and eroticism. Local sexuality scholar Zhang Beichuan's advocacy for the term "homosexual love" (*tongxing ai*) over "homosexual" (*tongxing lian*) exemplifies this shift (Zhou, 2022). Recent studies have affirmed the increased desire for intimacy and passionate love within the Chinese gay community, especially until the age of 30 (Jia, 2022). This trend is further evidenced by the active use of online Q&A platforms by Chinese tongzhi, seeking advice on romantic love and commitment (Zhao et al., 2022).

This contemporary conception of love, which is gaining popularity in the Chinese tongzhi community, has led to a re-evaluation of marital roles within the Chinese marriage system. Romantic love, intertwined with eroticism, becomes a self-realisation project for the "entrepreneurial self" (Han, 2017) in a neoliberal China, operating on the logics of self-improvement rather than self-normalisation, immersed in the anxiety that "there is always something better out there", driving tongzhi to solidify their bond with their sexual identity, and subsequently contributing to the gay/husband conflict.

Furthermore, to reinforce the contention that the gay/husband conflict is a product of post-socialist heteronormative constructs, Zhu's tongqi study provides valuable insights. An intriguing case is presented by a tongqi, who, despite being married to a tongzhi husband for 22 years, enjoyed an "incomplete" happy marriage marked by an "unqueer" kinship, in which they happily go shopping and to Karaoke together, and even watch gay porn together at home (Zhu, 2017). Zhu's research highlights the diversity in how Chinese individuals interpret and navigate their marital relations, also contesting the universality of the gay/husband role conflict.

In essence, the perception of the gay/husband conflict as a "given" in the "marriage fraud" discourse emerges as a post-socialist construct underpinned by post-socialist desires for sexuality and romantic love. Thus, I argue that the dominant "marriage fraud" accusation can be seen as a misapplication of the modern romanticised conjugality onto Chinese indigenous marital relations, which actually narrows down the non-binary queer space for diverse practices of conjugality.

Waning Male Power

In analysing the power dynamics between the “villainous gay husband” and the “victimised tongqi wife” within the “marriage fraud” discourse, my research has uncovered its multidimensional nature. On the one hand, married tongzhi in my study often upheld masculine dominance, as seen in heterosexual marriages. On the other hand, their internalisation of conflicts arising from the discordance between their sexual identity and societal expectations sometimes led them to assume the culpable role in marital disputes or divorces. This self-incrimination ties into the Chinese notion of a legally and traditionally established “party-at-fault”, often defaulted to women (Zheng, 2022), thereby causing tongzhi to cede numerous traditional male privileges to their tongqi wives.

The guilt displayed by married tongzhi towards their wives mirrors findings from North America and Israel, where gay men often assuage their guilt through financial contributions or affection (Büntzly, 1993; Miller, 1979; Zack and Ben-Ari, 2019). Chinese men, who traditionally enjoyed the freedom to engage in same-sex or cross-sex extramarital relationships (Baber, 1934; Watson and Ebrey, 1991), also experience shame and guilt about marital infidelity and make attempts to compensate their wives in the post-socialist era (Chang, 1999; Fung et al., 2009). A prevalent approach, particularly among wealthy Chinese men, involves placating wives and mistresses, and reducing guilt, through financial means (Osburg, 2013; Xiao, 2020).

In my study, it became evident that the primary method for married tongzhi to manage guilt was similar to that of heterosexual men, involving the surrender of financial power and resources to their wives. However, a unique guilt management strategy was identified among tongzhi in my study – the disclosure of their tongzhi identity to protect their wives’ reputation.

In the case of financial power, Feng, a 37-year-old businessman who maintained a heterosexual marriage, shared how he had transferred financial and decision-making power to his wife:

I let her make decisions for our family, particularly with regard to our finances. The cars and properties we purchased are all registered under her name. I entrust her with the management of our family assets. To be honest, I have no idea about our total assets because she is always in charge. As I am unable to satisfy her emotionally and sexually, I feel it's necessary to provide her with a sense of security through finances.

Tang and Wei, who had divorced their wives, compensated them financially in distinct ways. Tang, who had been married for eight years, relinquished all marital assets to his wife upon divorce, suggesting that this was due to his concurrent long-term same-sex relationship. In his words, he deserved to “leave the marriage without taking any belongings” (*jing shen chu hu*) because he was the “party-at-fault”. Wei, after a one-year marriage, chose not to reclaim the bride price of 88,000 RMB (£10,450) his family had given, despite his wife's willingness to return it, citing potential reputational damage.

Financial compensation forms a key behaviour among married tongzhi, easing their guilt towards their wives. This observation aligns with the overwhelming “money logic” (Osburg, 2013; Xiao, 2020; Zhang, 2022) in the post-socialist context of China, where intimate relationships operate towards economic power and market logics. In my study, many guilt-ridden tongzhi, harbouring internalised conflicts, endeavoured to preserve marital equilibrium using these logics.

My study shows that guilt over same-sex affairs among my tongzhi interviewees was more pronounced than among heterosexual men. Of the 31 tongzhi I interviewed, 27 displayed varying degrees of guilt towards their wives due to their homosexuality, with half providing some degree of financial compensation, or other compensative gestures on child custody, housework division, and relationships with in-laws. This differs from Xiao's findings, where all heterosexual men in her research reached a consensus that “Chinese men should not bear guilt over affairs as long as they perform familial duties” (Xiao, 2020, p. 155).

However, a researcher should not take the interviewee's words at face value or take the interviewer's role in the discourse as infallible (Potter and Hepburn, 2005). The financial compensation by married tongzhi not only stems from self-guilt, but also from fear of the societal repercussions of being exposed as gay. For example, in the previous chapter on

Resistance, tongqi Zhi leveraged the threat of exposing her husband's gay identity to secure financial and decision-making power in her family. Tang, appearing as an exemplary husband, mentioned that he had initially left all marital assets to his wife in exchange for her "silence" on his tongzhi identity. In short, tongzhi's internal guilt, arising from self-policing (Foucault, 1982), coupled with external heteronormative pressures, collectively results in the relinquishment of assets, decision-making, and negotiation power in some cases. This dynamic consequently leads to diminished male authority within their marital relationships compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

This phenomenon complicates the monolithic portrayal of power dynamics in the "marriage fraud" discourse. When gender and sexuality intersect within tongqi-tongzhi marriages, imbalanced gender relations are captured. However, this imbalance results in a manifestation of diminished male power. Internalising and conforming to heteronormative values can lead to the erosion of tongzhi men's male privilege, thereby weakening their overall power within the marital relationship.

Moreover, in my research, a unique commonality emerged in how married tongzhi handled their marital guilt: they would deliberately perform their homosexual identity to their family and acquaintances, publicly assuming the role of the guilty party during a divorce, thereby absolving their wives from gender-based social discriminations such as being labelled as a misbehaving wife or a disgraced divorcée. For example, Tang came out to his parents, his parents-in-law, and his daughter to absolve his ex-wife of the blame in their divorce.

She [ex-wife] is an excellent wife, utterly devoted. She always treated me with respect. She went to great lengths to maintain my reputation in public, so I felt compelled to reciprocate. I admitted to everyone, including my daughter when she reached secondary school, so she knows that her mother isn't to blame for our divorce.

Wei, in an attempt to ensure that his ex-wife retained all of the bride price in their divorce, admitted his tongzhi identity to his parents to take the "party-at-fault" for his divorce:

She told my sister, who in turn informed my parents [about my tongzhi identity]. I resisted admitting for a while but eventually confessed to my parents. Now they are aware of the true reason behind my divorce, and

thus, they neither pressurise me nor hold grudges against my ex-wife. This aids me in fulfilling the promise I made to her when we divorced, ensuring she keeps all the dowry my parents offered when we got married. She is an exceptional woman and a dear friend. To this day, she keeps my tongzhi identity a secret from her parents and takes the blame for our divorce upon herself.

In efforts to uphold their wives' interests, Tang and Wei strategically managed their social stigma by revealing their own "spoiled identities" – a tactic that allows an individual to dictate their identity narrative (Goffman, 1978). It is fascinating to note how Tang and Wei concurrently discarded their "gender mask" (Harris, 2004) as heterosexual husbands and adopted a new one as homosexual husbands in order to protect their wives. This paradoxical act encapsulates a protective, responsible, and sophisticated form of Chinese masculinity that is heavily desired in heterosexual relationships, yet is expressed through the performance of homosexuality – which ironically in Chinese culture is often associated with femininity (Zhang et al., 2022a; Zheng, 2015).

Yet, these performances are not without costs. The "coming out" process exposes tongzhi men to a heteronormative context wherein homosexuality, as a "discrediting" attribute, could elicit pressure, scrutiny, and even sanctions. Thus, the "coming out" experience diminishes the male power of married tongzhi not only within their marriages but also in broader "outer spheres" where stricter social and moral regulations apply (Liu, 2017).

To summarise, the compensatory actions of married tongzhi towards their wives challenge the oversimplified subject of the "exploitative villain gay husband" portrayed in the "marriage fraud" discourse. While these reparative actions, prompted by self-inflicted guilt, vary depending on the individual moral compass of each tongzhi, they nonetheless complicate the prevailing "marriage fraud" narrative by embodying diverse portrayals of gay husbands who are in a weakened male power position in hetero-homo marital relationships.

It is crucial, however, to clarify that critiquing the "marriage fraud" discourse does not negate the genuine struggles faced by tongqi within their marriages. Previous chapters of my thesis have sought to illuminate the physical, psychological, and sexual adversities endured by many tongqi within a framework of unequal gender dynamics and systemic social injustices

in the marriage system. The emphasis of this section, conversely, is to demonstrate that the “marriage fraud” discourse, with its undue focus on male homosexuality, fails to adequately address the intricate power dynamics navigated by tongqi within their marriages. As such, it falls short of offering pathways for the improvement of tongqi’s quality of life.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the question of how the experience of tongzhi intersects with the “marriage fraud” discourse, which is the predominant narrative *inventing* the tongqi subject. My study has found that, in debunking the underlying pillars of zero-sum game logic, essentialised gay identity, “innate” gay/husband conflict, and exacerbated male power abuse, the “marriage fraud” notion is problematic in its oversimplified, Western-centric, and homophobic ideological pillars.

Firstly, Chinese tongzhi showcase a complex landscape of reconciliation between marital roles and sexual identities. Emmeshed in traditional expectations and emerging ideologies, Chinese homosexuality shows an inherent plurality and contradictory nature. Each tongzhi individual exhibits a diverse range of self-identifications, which fluctuate and oscillate in response to societal expectations, personal desires, and familial obligations. This is in stark contrast to the oversimplified “deceiver” and “villain” identity that the “marriage fraud” discourse imposes.

Secondly, Chinese tongzhi reflect a conflation and contradiction of indigenous and global views on homosexuality and conjugality, which are entangled in parent-son relations, gender-role kinship, and duty-based matrimony. The “marriage fraud” discourse is Western-centric in the way it operationalises an ideal of conjugality that is deeply rooted in Western romantic narratives premised on mutual erotic and romantic affection, while rigidly enforcing Western fixed homosexual identity onto Chinese tongzhi’s domestic lives, homogenising the complexities and nuances inherent in their experiences.

Thirdly, my study has found that the “marriage fraud” discourse fundamentally exhibits homophobic tendencies. The previous chapter on *Divorce* has shed light on many tongqi’s aversion towards homosexuality. The “marriage fraud” discourse subjugates homosexuality,

scapegoating it as the core catalyst for Chinese wives' domestic suffering. This discourse operates within a zero-sum framework, where tongqi's hardships within their heterosexual marriages are attributed exclusively to their husbands' homosexuality. This chapter continues the overarching endeavour of the thesis to de-particularise the experience of "tongqi" in its exclusive relationship to male homosexuality.

The prevailing "marriage fraud" discourse not only falls short in encapsulating the complexities of lived experiences but also inadvertently obstructs efforts to alleviate the struggles experienced by tongqi within their marital circumstances. One of the purposes of this thesis is to find out the impact of the tongqi identity to women's resistance at home. Previous chapters illustrated how the label can help women to challenge the dominant gender norm. However, this chapter shows that the tongqi identity also has a negative impact on women's resistance. The simplified dichotomy of villain/victim embedded in the tongqi identity diminishes the opportunity for both tongqi and tongzhi, two marginalised groups grappling with significant societal and familial pressure, to cultivate mutual empathy or forge alliances.

Chapter 10. A Feminist Study on Post-Socialist Chinese Marriage

This thesis has explored the emergence of the “tongqi” identity and examined the struggles and challenges faced by these women within their marriages in post-socialist China. With an extensive focus on tongqi’s subjectivity, the research uncovers their role as active agents of resistance. The robust voice and actions by tongqi have challenged the stereotypical notions of victimhood, passivity, and subservience, which are often associated with wives in Chinese patriarchal marriages. Specifically, the study reveals how tongqi refuse to accept the normalisation of domestic oppression and abuse against women. It also sheds light on the ways tongqi ingeniously craft and employ a subversive gender script at home, public spaces, and divorce courts to manoeuvre through the gendered limitations imposed by a patriarchal and heteronormative post-socialist Chinese society.

In previous tongqi research, the tongqi identity has primarily served as a conduit to highlight the deprived rights of Chinese tongzhi, diverting the focus from these women’s marital distress towards Chinese gay rights. Through a feminist perspective, this study seeks to recalibrate this focus, concluding that gender - along with sexuality and class - significantly shapes tongqi women’s self-perceptions and the difficulties they encounter in their marriages. In Chapters 5 to 8, the thesis delves into various gendered challenges tongqi women face, such as the marital gender hierarchy, double-standard gender duties, social stigma on female sexuality, and gender-biased legal systems, exploring how tongqi navigate and often resist these marital and societal pressures. Chapter 9 then addresses the perceived divide between tongqi and tongzhi communities, advocating for a collective approach to resistance among these two marginalized groups.

By centring the focus on gender rather than alphabetization of sexual identities, this thesis enriches the understanding of the interplay between gender and power relations in marital contexts across Sinophone societies. Furthermore, it marks a significant contribution to feminist studies by elucidating the daily strategies married women employ for resistance and asserting agency within the domestic sphere, particularly in the following aspects.

Re-framing Tongqi Through a Gendered Lens

This thesis fundamentally reframes the conversation surrounding “tongqi” women in post-socialist China. It moves the narrative from a focus on male homosexuality to a more profound exploration of gender as the pivotal factor that influences a woman’s identification with the tongqi identity and the construction of abusive realities within marital life. It challenges the prevailing notion, rooted in heteronormative perception of sexuality and conjugality, that tongqi’s marital distress are merely conflicts of fixed sexual orientations. Instead, it exposes how these prevailing interpretations obscure the underlying, systemic gender oppression ingrained in patriarchal marital frameworks, which significantly impacts the quality of life for tongqi women through daily marital interactions.

Existing research classifies the marriages of tongqi women within narrow categories as either *mis-aligned-orientation marriages* (Li et al., 2016, 2021; Liu and Tang, 2014) or *mixed-orientation marriages* (Hernandez et al., 2011; Shao et al., 2022; Song et al., 2023; Wolkomir, 2009). This thesis challenges these classifications as overly simplistic and restrictive, arguing that they reduce the dynamic and multifaceted experiences of tongqi to merely issues of sexual orientation. They bypass the nuanced ways in which gender, intersecting class and sexuality, plays a decisive role in the marital experiences of tongqi women. This thesis calls for a more multifaceted and contextualised theoretical framework to capture the complexities and cultural nuances in Chinese tongqi’s marriages.

As sociologist Jo VanEvery iterated: “Feminist theories of heterosexuality are firmly located in a political process of contesting (or reinforcing) the hegemony of a particular construction of ‘women’” (VanEvery, 1996, p. 53). Building on this notion, this thesis reconceptualizes the “tongqi” identity as emerging from the collective experiences of Chinese married women who resist the status quo within their matrimonial contexts, shaped within the evolving socio-cultural landscape of a progressive, post-socialist China. In essence, Chinese married women might resonate with the tongqi identity primarily depending on whether their own lived marital experiences conform to or differ from the established narratives surrounding tongqi. Thus, the concept of tongqi serves as a process of subjective identification, heavily influenced by these women’s gender-based lived reality rather than merely by their spouse’s homosexual identity or same-sex behaviours.

The discourse of “marriage fraud” is also redefined. While this narrative portrays tongqi as innocent victims as a direct result of deceitful homosexual husbands, such a portrayal misses the larger gender dynamics at play. This thesis introduces a nuanced perspective, suggesting that the concept of “marriage fraud” is not merely a consequence of actions by homosexual husbands but also a deliberate gender strategy employed by tongqi. This strategy by tongqi serves as a means to create a subverted gender script that legitimises women’s resistance against domestic abuse and societal oppression. Thus, “marriage fraud” and the identity of “tongqi” are symbiotically linked: they mutually reinforce and sustain one another, with each notion playing a critical role in the production and circulation of the other.

The study reveals numerous instances where Chinese married women actively adopt the tongqi identity and levy the “marriage fraud” accusation against their husbands, even in the total absence of concrete evidence of their husbands’ same-sex behaviours. Respecting these women’s agency, this thesis rejects the perception that the “marriage fraud” narrative is a result of their “false consciousness”. Rather, it proposes that women may deliberately deploy the narrative’s explicit homophobic undertone as a strategic tool to challenge male dominance within marital dynamics and to counter the misogynistic custom of “wife-blaming” in a broken conjugality that is widespread in Chinese matrimonial culture.

Acknowledging the active yet frequently disregarded agency of tongqi, this study regards the emergence of the tongqi phenomenon as the negotiated outcome between Chinese women’s resistance against traditional gender script within marriage and the party-state’s political commitment to maintaining patriarchal and heterosexual marital stability. Consequently, this thesis calls for a renewed scholarly focus on the intricate relationship between gender and heterosexuality, both in the specific context of tongqi and within the broader framework of Chinese marital gender relations.

This thesis proposes a methodological reorientation in understanding Chinese tongqi. It suggests re-evaluating the data generation traditionally used to study tongqi experiences. Rather than centring sexual orientation as the primary factor of analysis, it encourages researchers to also consider variables rooted in Chinese gender-roles system, including gender differences, family expectations, and marital customs. Such an expanded focus is posited to offer a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the marital experiences and identities of tongqi women.

Multi-layered Gender Norms and Tongqi's Resistance in Post-Socialist China

Growing up in the post-reform era, young Chinese women now have higher expectations towards marriage in addition to pragmatic concerns: they expect the triad of emotional intimacy, sexual fulfilment, and spousal loyalty in marriage as a result of their rising economic independence in the post-reform labour market. However, this transformative aspiration often conflicts with the traditional gender roles and norms embedded in the Chinese marital system. Despite their newfound financial autonomy, many women feel pressured to adhere to the traditional gender ideal of “virtuous wife”, often leading to self-sacrificial behaviours, such as tolerating male aggression or giving up their economic independence. Within this context, tongqi women often question the imbalanced gender duties in marriage. However, their resistance is situation-bound, as it occurs within perceived “fraudulent” marriages where the traditional gender script of male dominance and female submissiveness is destabilised by the husband’s “deviant” homosexuality.

In this study, sexual deprivation emerges as a subtle yet damaging form of abuse, distinct from overt physical violence, that affects tongqi’s physical and mental well-being in their marriages. This phenomenon is intricately tied to these women’s navigation of multiple sets of traditional and modern gender norms. On one hand, tongqi have absorbed the post-reform era’s sexualised ideals of femininity, which place sexual desirability and activity in a central position within a harmonious marriage. On the other hand, they are also bound by patriarchal traditions that valorise domesticated and passive female sexuality. The persistent refusal of sexual intimacy by their husbands significantly undermines tongqi women’s self-esteem and overall well-being. This study enriches the sociological understanding of domestic abuse by positing that sexual deprivation constitutes a subtle yet impactful form of emotional abuse against married women. It manipulates both traditional and contemporary gender norms on female sexuality to diminish the sense of self-worth and sexual autonomy of Chinese women within marital settings. This insight fills the knowledge gap in the previous research by Yuanyuan Wang’s team, which observed the prevalence of non-physical abuse in tongqi marriages but conceded that “how cold violence is experienced by tongqi wives remain unknown” (Wang et al., 2020, p. 5).

When sexually-deprived marriage translates to domestic abuse of women, this phenomenon reflects a historical shift in China toward the sexualisation of the role of “wife”. Sexual deprivation is not a problem confined solely to tongqi marriages; it is also prevalent in sexless marriages caused by issues like erectile dysfunction, as explored in the chapter on *Conjugal Sex*, where similar patterns of mistreatment towards wives are observed. Unlike older generations, where the primary function of marital sex was reproduction, the post-socialist era has seen the sexualisation and commodification of women extend from the public market economy into the domestic sphere. Nowadays, Chinese wives face heightened expectations to fulfil sexual desires alongside their traditional family responsibilities. This intensified sexualisation within conjugality, evident in tongqi’s marriages, stems not from the husband’s sexual demands but from the women’s internalisation of prevailing consumerist and market-oriented female sexuality. Consequently, Chinese women in post-reform marital landscape is dominated by a male-centric erotic gaze, fuelled both by external societal pressures and internal acceptance.

While discussing tongqi’s suffering, feminist research must be cautious about the epistemic limitations of victimology, as they “tend to create the false impression that women have only been victims” and overlook the empirical facts that “women have always resisted male domination” (Harding, 2004, p. 5). This study acknowledges the capacity of tongqi to adeptly navigate various networks of power, positioning themselves within intersections that may offer circumstantial advantages.

This thesis has shown that tongqi, commonly depicted as vulnerable victims, show strategic resistance, contesting the normative gender script in contemporary Chinese marriages. Tongqi’s resistance is both subversive and adaptive, aligning with larger institutional frameworks such as party-state ideology, market economics, and legal systems. For example, they leverage state-sanctioned homophobia to gain social support and sympathy. Moreover, they advocate for amendments to marriage laws to include “homosexuality” as a basis for marital fault, thus aiming for more advantageous financial settlements in divorces. Employing dramaturgy in their resistance, tongqi deftly overturn the prevailing gender norm of “wife-blaming”, while cloaking their defiance under a mask of vulnerability to mitigate immediate backlashes. As such, tongqi’s resistance challenges the binary narrative of victimhood and agency, offering new insights into the complex relationship between women’s oppression and resistance in the gender-role-based Chinese marriage system.

The empirical findings of this study further underscore tongqi's complex role as both epistemic disruptors and strategic agents. Contrary to existing literature which suggests that tongqi suffer greater domestic abuse and oppression compared to wives in "normal" marriages (Tsang, 2021; Wu et al., 2018), this thesis posits a different dynamic. As discussed in the two chapters on *Tongqi's Resistance* and *Married Tongzhi*, my findings indicate a weakened male power and a contextually enhanced, though still limited, female power in tongqi's marriage/divorce renegotiations. By redirecting domestically marital discord towards the socially stigmatised male homosexuality, tongqi may secure specific advantages that are not commonly available to other Chinese married women in troubled marriages. While these advantages are not without limitations, they act as catalysts for subversion, potentially amplifying the tongqi's agency, such as stigma reduction, social sympathy, advantageous divorce negotiations, and enhanced decision-making power if one chooses to remain married.

The tongqi identity, while recognising its resilient resistance, has its evident constraints. Tongqi's resistance, leveraging on stereotyped vulnerable femininity and stigmatised male homosexuality, is inevitably "colluding" with the party-state's propagation of ideologies on familial patriarchy, normative heterosexuality, and binary gender roles. This collective ideological framework perpetuates a state of insecurity and inferiority for Chinese women in marriage, rendering them "the inmate[s] of Panopticon" – subjects committed to continuous self-surveillance in intimate relationships (Bartky, 1997, p. 107).

The Multiplicities of Tongqi Experiences and their External Alliances

This thesis also explores the tongqi's plural subjectivities with an intersectional lens that considers the interplay of gender, sexuality, and social class. It has presented that tongqi do not experience marriage, gender roles, or social expectations as a unified group. This complexity is evidenced in tongqi's varied responses to the prevalent "divorce imperative" within the tongqi phenomenon. This thesis provides two key empirical findings on tongqi's pluralities: hegemony within tongqi, and an unexpected interplay between class and tolerance on homosexuality.

This thesis identifies a form of class-based hegemony within the tongqi social group. The narratives surrounding what constitutes a “normal” marriage and the push for divorce are largely influenced by Chinese women who are internet-savvy, well-educated, and financially stable. These women shape the prevailing discourse on marital struggles and solutions in a manner that aligns with their own demographic advantages. For example, urban professionals with secure incomes often criticise rural, stay-at-home mothers for not divorcing their gay husbands, labelling them as “backward” and “cowardly”. Meanwhile, less privileged tongqi face the compounded challenges of difficult living conditions and the stigmas newly attributed to them, resulting in their marginalisation within tongqi communities. Therefore, while this thesis acknowledges the merits of the tongqi identity in facilitating marital resistance among Chinese women, it also highlights the need for greater scrutiny of how this resistance may exploit women from less privileged backgrounds. This internal hegemony not only perpetuates existing systems of gender oppression at the grassroots level, but also indicates the rise of a new form of hegemonic femininity within the post-reform Chinese gender landscape. This emerging hegemonic femininity embodies traits such as economic independence, social status, and individual freedom, reflecting the permeating influence of post-reform neoliberal ideologies on gender reconstruction in post-socialist China.

Another intriguing discovery related to the internal stratification among tongqi is that women from lower social strata are more inclined to remain in their marriages. This tendency is not solely due to their more constrained economic circumstances but is also influenced by their indigenous notion of fluid homoeroticism. Therefore, their marriage decisions are less influenced by societal stigmatisation of male homosexuality or peer pressure from the tongqi community, but more by practical considerations and day-to-day conjugal interactions. This contrasts with tongqi from higher social classes, who are more influenced by normative heterosexuality and stigmatised homosexuality, particularly those who have stayed in the modernised educational institutions and urbanised settings for a long time. My finding contends the argument made by Tsang regarding how lower-educated women do not divorce due to their concerns about child custody and financial dependence upon their husbands (Tsang, 2021). This finding sheds light on how essentialist and Western-influenced notions of conjugality and sexuality can obscure local and culturally specific interpretations of marriage, thereby leading to an incomplete understanding of marital dynamics among tongqi in China.

The tongqi identity not only has varied influences within tongqi communities, but also has a complex relationship with potential external alliances. On the positive side, this study has shown that the tongqi narrative sporadically brings gender consciousness to the surface by questioning binary gender roles. This “guerrilla-like” resistance aligns with the emerging feminist discourse – the “non-cooperative strand” in Chinese feminism (Wu and Dong, 2019) – which advocates for a total departure from patriarchal marriage. Thus, this work sets the stage for future scholarly exploration into the interplay between tongqi’s resistance and the broader post-socialist Chinese feminism (Wu and Dong, 2019; Xue and Rose, 2022). On the downside, the tongqi identity is closely intertwined with systemic homophobia. This creates an inherent tension between the tongqi wife and her (perceived) homosexual husband. Such tension inadvertently affects the relationships between marginalised groups like tongqi and tongzhi, leading to internal conflicts and opposition rather than unity or collaboration among these communities.

Future Tongqi Research

In June 2023, as I was writing this conclusion chapter, a stimulating cross-border conversation unfolded on China’s social media platform, *Weibo*, featuring Japanese feminist sociologist Chizuko Ueno and Chinese sexuality sociologist Li Yinhe. Central to this conversation was a specific feminist discussion on women’s relationship with patriarchal marriage. Responding to the “non-cooperative” Chinese feminist, who had described patriarchal marriage as a “women-oppressive machine”, Ueno left a remark on women’s panoramic blight: “[In a patriarchal society] Women entering into marriage become deplorable, while those leaving marriage become a social diaspora”. This comment echoed Chinese writer Lu Xun’s earlier reflection in 1923 on the fate of Nora from *A Doll’s House* after she leaves her marriage, suggesting that a woman escaping the cage of marriage, only to face all-round socio-economic oppression in Chinese society, is inevitably pushed towards either prostitution or a humiliating return.

In today’s China, as Charlie Yi Zhang notes, the Chinese party-state continues to exploit established dichotomies of gender, class, sexuality, and ethno-race to facilitate China’s economic transition (Zhang, 2022). This socio-political climate fosters the continuous emergence of “abnormal” female subjects who question and challenge the hegemonic

Chinese marital model, and who are subjugated to marginalisation, such as tongqi and “leftover” women (Fincher, 2016).

Against this backdrop, this feminist research puts forward three recommendations for future study. Firstly, this thesis has made a deliberate effort to demystify tongqi as unique female subjects whose marital struggles are drastically different from those faced by other Chinese wives. It has presented a broad spectrum of experiences of women who self-identify as tongqi, some of whom experience domestic abuse, sexual deprivation, and marital dissatisfaction, and some whose husbands are perceived to be impotent, homosexual, bisexual, unfaithful, and misogynist. The category of tongqi is diverse and, importantly, conflated, as it encompasses a range of sexual and conjugal relations that deviate from the idealised triad of love-sex-monogamy. This thesis calls for future research to consider the epistemological divide between “self-identified tongqi” and “wives married to gay men”, examining the shared gender-specific socio-cultural factors that influence the marital challenges of both tongqi women and their counterparts in broader post-socialist Chinese society.

Second, future research needs to be cautious about the simplistic narrative of “villain gay husband vs victim tongqi wife”. This framing tends to oversimplify the complex gender power dynamics at play and tongqi’s active agency in their marriages. Instead, researchers may expand their focus towards the entrenched dynamics of gender-role kinship within the Chinese context that continually affect these women. This more nuanced approach would facilitate a deeper understanding of the dynamic and complex challenges tongqi face in their marriages, without reducing them to simplistic solutions that either stigmatise male homosexuality or advocate for gay marriage as the “cure” for women’s oppression and abuse.

Thirdly, if feminist researchers aspire to envisage a marriage system that does not perpetuate gender oppression, it is crucial to challenge the prevailing perception of “marriage and the family as the embodiment of heterosexuality” (VanEvery, 1996, p. 53). The under-examined issue of institutionalised heterosexuality could offer a vital perspective for the analysis of marital relations in post-socialist China. This is particularly relevant as Chinese families increasingly adopt nuclear structures and as gender roles become increasingly heterosexualised. The subtle interplay between gender and heterosexuality may wield more influence than blatantly oppressive structures in the modern era. It functions as a form of

“capillary power” (Foucault, 1982), serving to romanticise and eroticise binary gender roles. Therefore, feminist inquiries into Chinese marriage systems should aim to unpack these nuanced mechanisms that perpetuate gender oppression.

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Appendix

1. Table of Participants Characteristics – Tongqi

Participant Number	Age	Education	Profession	Spouse's Age	Spouse's Education	Spouse's Profession	Marital Status	Children
1	59	N/A	Shop Owner	58	N/A	Shop Owner	Widow	Son
2	27	Bachelor's	Educator	26	College degree	Educator	Divorced	N/A
3	45	N/A	Housewife	53	N/A	Management	Separated	Son
4	48	College diploma	Retail	50	Bachelor's	White-Collar	Married	Daughter
5	34	Bachelor's	Civil Servant	34	Bachelor's	IT Expert	Married	N/A
6	38	Bachelor's	University Lecturer	26	Secondary Vocational	Unemployed	Divorced	Daughter
7	36	College diploma	Housewife	37	College degree	Retail	Divorced	N/A
8	40	Bachelor's	Civil Servant	49	Master's	Engineer	Divorced	Son
9	40	Bachelor's	Teacher	44	Bachelor's	Engineer	Divorced	Daughter
10	31	PhD Candidate	Lawyer	38	PhD	Professor	Divorced	Daughter
11	40	Bachelor's	Lawyer	44	College degree	Salesman	Divorced	Son
12	32	College diploma	Administrator	32	Bachelor's	Administrator	Divorcing	N/A
13	45	Bachelor's	Media Worker	50	College degree	Media Worker	Married	Son
14	37	Secondary Vocational	Housewife	39	Bachelor's	N/A	Divorced	Daughter
15	30	Bachelor's	Administrator	40	Bachelor's	Retired Soldier	Divorcing	Son

16	28	College diploma	Interior Designer	30	Bachelor's	Insurance	Divorced	Daughter
17	52	Secondary	Housekeeper	57	College degree	Medical Doctor	Divorced	Son
18	30	Bachelor's	Administrator	34	Bachelor's	Engineer	Divorced	1 son, 1 girl
19	27	Bachelor's	Medical Doctor	27	Bachelor's	Medicine Professional	Divorcing	Daughter
20	28	Bachelor's	Accountant	33	Master's	Civil Servant	Separated	N/A
21	34	Secondary	Housewife	35	College degree	Foreign Trade	Separated	Daughter
22	27	Bachelor's	Fashion Retailer	35	Secondary Vocational	Contractor	Divorced	Daughter
23	30	Bachelor's	Teacher	31	Bachelor's	Repair Engineer	Married	Son
24	33	College diploma	Teacher	33	College degree	Teacher	Divorced	N/A
25	29	Bachelor's	Medicine Professional	31	Master's	Medicine Professional	Divorcing	N/A
26	43	PhD Candidate	Entrepreneur	41	PhD	Professor	Divorcing	Daughter
27	36	Bachelor's	Housewife	37	Bachelor's	Architect	Married	2 sons
28	27	Bachelor's	Accountant	31	College degree	Designer	Divorced	N/A
29	37	Bachelor's	Medical Doctor	37	Secondary Vocational	Salesman	Divorced	2 daughters
30	33	Bachelor's	Civil Servant	30	Bachelor's	Bank	Separated	N/A
31	32	Bachelor's	Administrator	39	Bachelor's	Salesman	Married	Daughter
32	24	Bachelor's	Accountant	30	Bachelor's	N/A	Divorcing	N/A

2. Table of Participants Characteristics - Tongzhi

Participant Number	Age	Self-Identification	Education	Profession	Spouse's Age	Spouse's Education	Spouse's Profession	Marital Status	Children
1	42	Gay	Secondary	Finance	42	Secondary Vocational	Nurse	Divorced	Daughter
2	38	Bisexual or homosexual	Bachelor's	Administrator	37	Bachelor's	University Lecturer	Divorced	Son
3	40	Gay	Bachelor's	Office clerk	39	Secondary Vocational	Office clerk	Married	Daughter
4	49	Men-liking	Secondary	White Collar	42	Secondary	Retail	Divorced	N/A
5	51	Homosexual	Secondary	Security	49	Elementary	Housewife	Divorced	Son
6	50+	Gay	Bachelor	Administrator	N/A	N/A	Housewife	Divorced	N/A
7	31	Gay	Secondary	Retail	38	Secondary	Housewife	Divorced	Daughter
8	34	Tongzhi	Bachelor	Administrator	32	Bachelor's	Administrator	Divorced	Son
9	39	Gay	Bachelor	Human Resource	35	Bachelor's	Foreign Trade	Divorced	Son
10	39	Tongzhi	College diploma	Physician	36	Secondary Vocational	Teacher	Divorced	N/A
11	37	Gay	Secondary Vocational	Administrator	36	Secondary	Fashion retail	Married	Son
12	29	Tongzhi/Gay	Secondary Vocational	Internet Financing	28	Secondary	Housewife	Divorced	N/A
13	60	Tongzhi	Secondary	Farmer	62	Elementary	Farmer	Separated	3 Sons
14	50	Tongzhi/Gay	Bachelor's	Education and Art	50	Bachelor's	Teacher	Divorced	Son

15	53	Tongzhi/Gay	Bachelor's	Education and Art	48	College Diploma	Civil Servant	Divorced	Daughter
16	47	Gay/Tongzhi	Master's	Teacher	44	Secondary	Engineer	Divorced	N/A
17	52	Gay	Bachelor's	Administrator	48	Bachelor's	Administrator	Married	Son
18	37	N/A	Secondary	Manufacturing	35	Secondary	Sales	Married	Son
19	48	Gay	Secondary	Administrator	49	Secondary	Financing	Married	1 son, 2 girls
20	25	Gay	Secondary	Healthcare	25	Secondary	Cashier	Divorced	N/A
21	35	Gay	Secondary	Shop Owner	37	Secondary	Shop Owner	Married	Son
22	46	Gay who likes men and women	Master's	Trade	43	College Diploma	Office clerk	Divorced	Daughter
23	45	Tongzhi	Secondary	Administrator	43	Secondary	QC Specialist	Married	Son
24	28	Same-sex attracted	Secondary	Food & Beverage	23	Secondary	Freelancer	Divorced	N/A
25	53	Bisexual or homosexual	Bachelor's	Teacher	50	Bachelor's	Office clerk	Married	2 girls
26	38	Gay/Tongzhi	Bachelor's	Teacher	38	Secondary	Retail	Divorced	1 son, 1 daughter
27	42	Tongzhi	Secondary	Shop Owner	40	Secondary	Retail	Divorced	Son
28	30	Tongzhi	Secondary	Maintenance	27	Secondary	Unemployed	Undecided	Daughter
29	43	Tongzhi	Secondary	Automobile	40	Secondary	Shop Owner	Divorced	1son, 1daughter
30	59	Tongzhi	Bachelor's	Teacher	58	Secondary Vocational	Physician	Widower	Daughter
31	32	Tongzhi	Bachelor's	Book Editor	38	Master's	Book Editor	Divorced	N/A

3. Consent Form - Research Degree Thesis (PhD Research)⁵

Nina Sun, Doctoral Thesis

Centre for Gender Studies

SOAS, University of London

Project Title: Beyond the Binary of Victimhood and Agency: An Exploration of Gender Dynamics in Tongqi's Marriages in Post-Socialist China

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate familial relationships in the Shanghai area of China, focusing primarily on the conjugal relationship between husbands and wives. Specifically, the study aims to explore the marriage expectations and day-to-day realities experienced by married couples with diverse sexual identities/orientations, with a focus on understanding the roles and interactions defined by gender within these tongqi-tongzhi marriages.

Research Procedures

I will arrange a one-on-one interview with you in an environment where you feel safe and comfortable, whether that be online or in person. The interview will entail a discussion with me where you will share your perspectives and experiences on marriage. The main subjects of our conversation will include your expectations for your marital relationship and your daily interactions with your spouse. Only if you provide your consent, the interview could be audio-recorded for the purpose of this research. I am the sole person responsible for gathering data in this study.

Risks and Discomforts

In the course of discussing your personal experiences and potentially revisiting challenging moments in your marital life, you may encounter emotional discomfort or anxiety either during or after the interview. Please note that you have the right to decline to answer any particular question and can opt to withdraw your participation in the study at any time.

Benefits

As a participant in this study, you may not receive immediate benefits. However, your contributions will serve to address existing research gaps concerning marginalised social groups and their marital relationships in contemporary China. Additionally, the study's findings could potentially influence legislative and policy considerations in areas related to the protection of minority groups, as well as marriage and family dynamics.

Duration

The research interview is expected to last about one hour. With your consent, additional interviews may be scheduled.

⁵ This is a translated version. The original form used in my fieldwork is in Chinese.

Confidentiality Statement

To safeguard your confidentiality, I will talk all the following measures to prevent the disclosure of your personal information:

- Anonymise all personal data: In any published research findings, I will present information in a manner that ensures that research participants cannot be identified.
- Securely store all collected information on my own devices.
- Encrypt all research files using password protection.
- Share NO collected data or audio recordings with any third parties.
- Engage in NO discussion on participants' personal information and experience with anyone else.

Inquiries

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact me or my doctoral advisor at the following:

Researcher: Nina Sun
 +86 15221235261 (China)
 +44 07522354255 (UK)
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Doctoral Advisor: Dr Jieyu Liu
 +44 (0)20 7898 4899 (UK)
jieyu.liu@soas.ac.uk

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point - whether before, during, or after the interview. During the interview, you can refuse to answer any questions you do not want to. If you agree to participate in this study and agree with the above information, please sign below and indicate the date.

Informed Consent Acknowledgement

I (the participant) confirm my agreement to participate in Nina Sun's doctoral research project. I have been informed of the relevant details, and I consent / do not consent to be recorded during the interview. I understand that the recording will only be used to ensure accurate transcription of the interview content. Nina Sun will be the only individual with access to the recording.

Participant Signature: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

I (the researcher) reiterate my adherence to all commitments stated in this consent form.

Researcher Signature: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Please keep a copy of this consent form for future reference.

