

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

The Politics of Dating Apps

Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China

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INTRODUCTION: DATING APPS HAVE POLITICS, TOO

Two months ago, I saw two of my female friends swiping with their fingers on their phones and uploading their selfies. I thought it was very interesting because on apps like QQ and WeChat many people do not use their real photos. I am not interested in people who do not post real photos because you cannot tell what they look like or how old they are. But on this app, the photos look real, and people mention their hobbies and interests. My female friends told me that their friend had found a boyfriend through this app. Well, I thought, it is fun to upload photos, so I downloaded the app.

This was Nancy recalling why she first downloaded Tantan—a major dating app in China—onto her mobile phone.¹ When we first met in October 2016, mobile dating apps have already become a global phenomenon. In English-speaking countries, Tinder and Grindr are popular dating apps for straight users and queer male users, respectively. However, China has its own dating app ecology, the same as its other internet services. Momo, founded in 2011, is now the most widely used dating app among heterosexual Chinese. By the end of 2017, it had nearly 100 million active monthly users (“Guanyu Momo,” 2019). Tantan, launched in 2014, was reported in early 2018 to have over 20 million active monthly users (“A Guy Who Grew Up in Stockholm’s Suburbs,” 2018).² For queer men, Blued and Aloha are the market leaders, while Rela, Lesdo, and Lespark are popular among queer women in China.

In this book, I argue that these apps—with their unique market positioning, color tone, and interface design—are not merely software running on mobile phones. They are portals that transport people from their mundane physical environment to an exciting virtual world full of relational possibilities. At the same time, dating apps are sites of power dynamics, impacted by the heteronormativity and patriarchy infused throughout Chinese society.

Admittedly, Chinese dating apps are a challenge to describe as a coherent genre because companies are constantly expanding and diversifying their features. However, there are five main features shared by most Chinese apps that, as I later argue, have specific affordances that constitute the “networked sexual publics” I explore in this book. The first commonly found feature is the “people nearby” feature, resembling the classic Grindr interface. An array of profiles is arranged in ascending order of distance using geolocation data, and any user can send messages to people nearby. The second feature is the “swiping” feature pioneered by Tinder. Users are presented with a series of photographs of others, one at a time. If they are interested in someone whose photograph pops up on their screen, they swipe right across that person’s photograph to signal interest. Users can talk to each other only if both parties express an interest in each other. In Western apps, the “people nearby” feature and the “swiping” feature are generally mutually exclusive; however, some Chinese apps offer both. Third, there is the “groups nearby” feature where groups of various topics are created by users. This is akin to web-based forums, the only difference being that the members of the groups are physically nearby. The fourth feature is similar to the “status updates” function of Facebook that broadcasts a message or picture to network connections or people nearby. Finally, the “live streaming” feature appears in most Chinese dating apps. Users can sign up as a live streamer and broadcast live video content to anyone.³ This feature is a profit center for apps such as Momo and Blued (Deng, 2018; Edmunds, 2017; S. Wang, 2019a, 2019b). Viewers can purchase digital gifts from the apps and send these gifts to their favorite live streamers. The apps take a share of the gifts’ monetary value and distribute the remainder to the streamers.⁴

Single and in her late twenties, having had only two previous romantic relationships, Nancy was extremely enthusiastic to find her Mr. Right. She said,

On WeChat, there is the “people nearby” feature that I can use to meet someone that I don’t know. But many people do not put up their photos. . . . I prefer using Tantan to make friends. Although many Tantan users are not there for friends, but for, you know, I can at least upload my photos there and get a few “likes.” (*Researcher: How many matches do you have so far?*) More than a hundred.

The millions of Chinese like Nancy who use these apps have specific ways of referring to them. In China, these apps are known as *jiaoyou chengshi* 交友程式 (friend-making apps) or *jiaoyou ruanjian* 交友软件 (friend-making software). The term *yuehui chengshi* 约会程式, which is a direct translation of “dating apps,” is not often used. *Yuehui* 约会 consists of the words *yue* (to arrange; to make a reservation) and *hui* (meeting) and therefore refers to a date. For readers who are familiar with the Chinese dating app culture, the term *yuepao shenqi* 约炮神器 will be most familiar. *Yuepao* 约炮, which consists of the words *yue* and *pao* (cannon), is a neologism for “hooking up,” using *pao* to hint at the phallus. On apps such as Momo and Blueo, users might send a one-word message, *yue?* 约? (meet?), to solicit hookups.⁵ *Shenqi* 神器, consisting of *shen* (god) and *qi* (tool), stands for “a powerful tool” or “a magical tool.” Therefore, the phrase *yuepao shenqi* means “a magical tool for hookups.” The phrase’s origin is hard to date, but it was popularized in a viral video made in 2012 by Michael Stephen Kai Sui, an American actor who speaks fluent Chinese.⁶

Researchers conducting some of the earliest studies alternately referred to these apps as “social apps,” “hookup apps,” “location-aware dating apps,” and “geosocial networking apps” (e.g., Albury & Byron, 2016; Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; T. Liu, 2016; Rice et al., 2012). For simplicity, in this book I use the linguistic shorthand *dating apps* to refer to this genre of communication technology. However, as I describe later, these apps do not market themselves solely as dating apps, nor do the users of these apps use them only for locating romantic partners. For these reasons, although I employ the term *dating apps* to refer to a shared genre of mobile software, this book has a more expansive perspective on how users interpret and use these apps for more than just dating. Returning to

my conversation with Nancy, she had no intention to *yuepao* on Tantan. In fact, she thought the app could protect her from unsolicited sexual requests and allow her to look at handsome men. She said,

Because [Tantan] has a list of preselected keywords, for example, *yuepao*, the system will remind you to report [harassment]. That is to say, I think the original intention of this app's design is good; it is not meant to make chaos. There are still regulations [from the administrator]. . . . I am a person who judges others based on their face. Because if you don't understand someone's mind, you definitely start with their appearance. If their appearance is okay, then I will want to know more about them. . . . When my female friends looked at the app, they kept saying, "He is so handsome." I thought, "Wow, it is true. There are many good-looking men on this app."

The way Nancy described Tantan implies that the app has empowered her by allowing her to report sexual harassment. From Nancy's perspective, Tantan reverses the conventional pattern of male gaze where men are the subject and women are the object (Mulvey, 1975). She could look at and learn more about potential partners without the constant burden of sexual requests.

I met Nancy again in September 2018 for a cup of coffee. Having communicated with her on and off via WeChat for around two years since we first met, I decided to disclose my sexual orientation to her. I casually mentioned making a plan with my boyfriend. On hearing about my boyfriend, she swallowed her food, looked me in the eye, and said, "I think I like women, too." I was shocked by her coming out because in our first interview in 2016 she identified as straight. Further, after the first interview, she told me she had a date with a man she had met on Tantan, and sometimes she asked me how dating in the United States differed from that in China. I had never expected her to come out to me as a queer woman. She said that she recently started questioning her sexuality because she had not been interested in men for a year. She also said that because there was a very visible LGBTQ culture in her hometown, she was open to the idea that she might be a bisexual woman. We then talked about the popular apps queer women in China were using, and I encouraged her to try some of these to experiment with her sexuality.

Nancy's experience is one of the many stories this book documents and analyzes. Dating apps are a new platform for personal relationships,

and it is worthwhile to examine how relationships are shaped and reconfigured by this emerging technology. However, this book takes a critical perspective to expand our understanding of the opportunities and challenges dating apps have presented for their users. What does a “dating app” mean for a person like Nancy, who is coming to understand herself as a bisexual woman? How do these apps help their users, straight or queer, female or male, cohere new forms of publics?

In this introductory chapter, I lay an epistemological, theoretical, and methodological foundation for the book. First, I argue for a need to examine dating apps from a critical perspective. To justify this perspective, I introduce three sets of interrelated literature that have informed my research and thinking. I also provide a brief account of my research process and highlight some key ethical issues in researching sensitive topics like sexuality (a detailed reflection is included in the appendix). Finally, I provide an overview of the chapters in this book, describing how a critical perspective helps us understand dating apps in the context of straight and queer Chinese.

TWO TRADITIONS OF DATING APP RESEARCH

Dating app studies have burgeoned since the early 2010s. Drawing on theories and approaches from the social scientific tradition, researchers have explored various issues related to interpersonal processes, such as motivations, uses, self-presentation, relational development, and risks.⁷ These lines of inquiry are paramount. People do develop interpersonal relationships, whether romantic or sexual, long-term or short-term, involved or casual. In my earlier work, I called the form of intimacy that is facilitated by dating apps “networked intimacy” (L. S. Chan, 2018a). My concept is similar to “mobile intimacy” (Hjorth & Arnold, 2013), “mediated intimacy” (Attwood, Hakim, & Winch, 2017), and “virtual intimacy” (McGlotten, 2013) but highlights the networked nature of the extensive connectivity supported by dating apps.⁸ Networked intimacy, as I have argued, has a built-in ambivalence where the relational goals people state on their dating app’s profile may not always correspond to what they actually want or eventually get, a well-curated profile is necessary but may not be taken seriously, and extensive connectivity to a

large pool of potential partners can be both a blessing and a curse. The everyday personal use of dating apps indeed provides fruitful material for social scientific research.

However, since that point I have become increasingly concerned with the relationships between dating apps and power in the context of Chinese society. As second-wave feminism reminds us, “the personal is political.”⁹ That is, there is always a political dimension underlying personal relationships, where personal issues are never insulated from powerful social forces, and vice versa.¹⁰ By *political*, I do not mean the narrow sense of electoral politics or civic engagement. Rather, I mean the constant struggle for and distribution and maintenance of power in society. Politics, therefore, is a power relationship. Taking this broader conceptualization of politics—as Kate Millett did in her groundbreaking work *Sexual Politics* (1978)—I use the phrase *gender and queer politics* to refer to how traditional gender roles and heteronormativity entangled in patriarchy have contributed to the unequal treatment of women and queer people in society. This critical tradition is what this book is built on.

This view of power is consistent with Michel Foucault’s (1978) observation that “relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter” (p. 94). Drawing on Foucault, I consider intimacy as just such a site of power struggles. For this reason, throughout this book I regard dating apps not just as technological artifacts but also as a lens to reveal power relationships. As Langdon Winner (1980) notes, technological artifacts have politics. Some technologies create order in our world that favors certain people while disadvantaging others. Other technologies require a specific set of social conditions for their proper operation. Whether creating new social relationships or reproducing existing cultural conventions, technologies do political work in society.

This book extends the insight that technologies have politics to help us understand the politics of dating apps. Dating apps may create an order that favors users of a certain gender and sexual orientation and discriminates against others. They may fit into an existing social order that is already biased against some people, or they may create a new order that resists the existing one. Accordingly, I also regard dating apps as

what Ara Wilson (2016) calls “the infrastructure of intimacy.” For Wilson, “infrastructure offers a useful category for illuminating how intimate relations are shaped by, and shape, materializations of power” (p. 263). For example, she argues that the design of public bathrooms is predicated on gender segregation, while telecommunications technologies such as the telephone break down spatial divisions. By conceiving dating apps as infrastructure, I shift my attention from a pure concern with personal relationships—the typical social science perspective on dating apps—to the negotiations, opposition, and subversion of power in intimate relationships.

NETWORKED SEXUAL PUBLICS

To capture the political dimension of the emerging dating app culture, I propose a new concept of networked sexual publics. *Publics* has always been a broad, unifying concept. Sonia Livingstone (2005) defines *publics* as a collection of people sharing “a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest” (p. 9). Because the word *publics* does not imply essentializing or homogenizing attributes, it can capture collective relationships that people imagine to be real. Larissa Hjorth and Michael Arnold (2013) point out that a public can be the “phenomenological reality” that a person can see, smell, hear, and touch. At the same time, publics are driven by the “existential imaginary” because a member can often only imagine someone else is sharing a common experience with them. In the context of this book, I believe gender dynamics and queer possibilities are driven by these mutually reinforcing tangible and imaginary qualities of publics.

While publics have always existed, they are increasingly connected by the global media and social networking sites. Scholars argue that networked publics came into being in the late twenty-first century with this technological shift. Mizuko Ito (2008) explains that the term “references a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media” (p. 2). Ito emphasizes that the notion of *publics* implies more engagement than *consumer* or *audience*. danah boyd (2011) further develops the

term *networked publics* to describe social groups driven by the rise of networked technologies such as Facebook. The affordances of social media—including persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability—have reconfigured public engagement, allowing members of the public to “gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes” and “connect with a world beyond their close friends and family” (p. 39).¹¹ I will shortly expand on the relationship of affordances to dating apps and the publics they bring into being. For now, I am merely drawing attention to how boyd uses the term *networked publics* to refer to both digital space and the collection of people it connects, expanding our understanding of publics.

However, some scholars argue that the metaphor of networks is inadequate in capturing the form of sociality facilitated by mobile media. Larissa Hjorth and Michael Arnold (2013) contend that a networked metaphor “privileges ramified dyadic relationships [and] fails to signify collectivity, emotional affect and a shared horizon” (p. 12). They further elaborate:

The network is also transient and shape-changing. . . . The central node may know the network, and nodes know connecting nodes, but the network is too dynamic and ephemeral to be present to itself as a common entity. There is therefore no sense of solidarity across the network, no sense of tradition, no common identity (in contrast to individual identities) and no common interests (in contrast to individual interests). (p. 133)

This image of network as painted by Hjorth and Arnold is partly true for dating apps. If we empirically analyze dating app cultures, we know that users use dating apps mainly to look for dyadic relationships. New users join and old users quit these apps all the time, which makes the networks of dating apps inherently transient. As a user and as the node of your own network, you know who you have connected to but may have no idea whether a person has spoken to another person. However, in contrast to Hjorth and Arnold, I believe that dating apps can provide a common identity or solidarity. In this book, I argue that because dating apps in China in general are built for a specific community—either straight men and women, queer men, or queer women—their existence is predicated on a common identity and shared history. To me, whether or not solidarity can be forged on dating apps is an empirical question rather than a conceptual debate. Therefore, I invoke the term *networked* in

the phrase *networked sexual publics* to highlight the primary architecture of dating apps, which is a web of dyadic connections that create and sustain intimacy. These connections are, in the words of Hjorth and Arnold, the “phenomenological reality” of most users.

There are conceptual similarities between my concept of networked sexual publics and the concept of digital intimate publics as formulated by Amy Shields Dobson, Brady Robards, and Nicolas Carah (2018). Commenting on a much broader phenomenon of public-facing lives on social media, Dobson and her colleagues think about “digital intimacy” as both social capital and labor. On the one hand, digital intimacy is about connections and relations that may convert into resources and mobility, acting as social capital. On the other hand, digital intimacy also builds various types of relationships that, through algorithms, produce data for social media companies, a process that requires labor. Likewise, dating apps, as I document in this book, allow users to make friends, locate partners, find business collaborators, and search for their communities. Using dating apps also requires crafting a profile, deciphering others’ messages, and handling malicious or negative responses. Shuaishuai Wang (2019a, 2019b) examined how dating app companies (in his case, Blued) monetize the performative labor of their live streamers. As with other conduits for digital intimacy, social capital and labor are built into dating apps. For this reason, as I discuss shortly, I treat power as a central concern of networked sexual publics.

The term *sexual publics* refers to a particular subset of publics. As Katherine Sender (2017) puts it, “sexual publics describes a loose affiliation of members who, for whatever brief or extended period, see themselves as part of a shared experience of mediated sexuality” (p. 75). In a space like a museum, even though viewers do not occupy the same space at the same time, being inside a museum allows viewers to imagine the existence of other viewers in the past and in the future. This points to the “existential imaginary” of the publics Hjorth and Arnold (2013) have discussed as an aspect that network-only definitions of *publics* neglect. In Sender’s analysis, the imagination is forged by the shared space of a sex museum. In this book, dating apps act as a foil for the imagination.

These insights help bolster my concept of *networked sexual publics* to refer both to the technological network of people like Nancy, who are

united by their shared position in the patriarchal and heteronormative world and connected by dating app technologies, *and* the space where a multiplicity of interpretations and relationships for the publics is possible. From this perspective, Nancy's experiences with dating apps are no longer banal. Selecting a romantic partner, looking at handsome men, acquiring social recognition by accumulating "likes," reporting men's sexual harassment, and possibly experimenting with her sexual orientation are important ways she grapples with her place in the networked sexual publics. Networked sexual publics are where women and men negotiate their power and sexual minorities strive for a place in the heteronormative world. They expose and reproduce systematic sexism and heteronormativity. Simultaneously, they create a digital environment for negotiation, subversion, and potentially backlash from, as I show in this book, straight men and the queer community itself. By looking at the experiences of dating app users, including female and male, straight and queer, this book documents and analyzes the struggles of networked sexual publics in China. In so doing, it broadly examines how dating apps serve as a tool for empowering women and queer people in the country.¹²

In the next few sections, I situate my research framework at the intersection of three theoretical traditions. The first body of literature examines how technology has always played a role in shaping gender relations and queer lives. The second explains why I foreground users' agency in their use of technology. Finally, I contextualize my study in the emerging scholarship on mobile cultures in Asia-Pacific.

TECHNOLOGY, GENDER, AND QUEER

Feminist scholars have long been concerned with the relationship between technology and gender politics. When Wendy Faulkner (2001) traces the development of technological concerns in feminism, she identifies three streams. First, what Faulkner calls "women in technology" concerns the inclusion of women in the technology industry through their earlier socialization into "machines" and the changes to workplace policies (such as setting up childcare). These measures have been advocated by liberal feminists. The second stream is "women and technology,"

which focuses on the use or the receiving end of technologies. Faulkner sees scholars in this stream examining the effect of technologies on women. For example, the proponents of cyberfeminism have been very optimistic about the liberating potential of the internet. They have been intrigued by how users can take up alternative identities, thereby breaking gender binaries and transforming conventional gender roles (Plant, 1997). However, these two streams of scholarship have often failed to consider the symbolic association between masculinity and technology, thereby neglecting one side of gender dynamics.

The third stream, "gender and technology," acknowledges the mutually constitutive nature of gender and technology. A particular framework from this stream is technofeminism, where "gender relations can be thought of as materialized in technology, and gendered identities and discourses as produced simultaneously with technologies" (Wajcman, 2007, p. 293). Instead of just considering women's issues, some scholars in this stream have concomitantly examined how technology and masculinities intertwine. For example, Ellen van Oost (2003) documents the development of Philips's razors. Philips's first razor in 1939 targeted both men and women. However, in the 1950s, the second generation of razors began differentiating between male and female users. Men were seen as technologically competent; therefore, the designs of the shavers revealed their internal technology and came with a lot of information and controls. In contrast, women were conceived of as technophobic. For this reason, female shavers were marketed not as electronic appliances but as cosmetic products. They came with one simple button and were assembled using a "click" rather than screws, which connote technology. In this case, the technology "not only reflected this gendering of technological competence, they too constructed and strengthened the prevailing gendering of technological competence" (p. 207). Analyzing the marketing of Philips's razors gave insight into how a specific technology became gendered.

Communication technologies have had a close relationship with queer possibilities and heteronormativity. Although the academic enterprise of queer science and technology studies has only gradually been formulated in the last decade or so (Landström, 2007; Mollidrem & Thakor, 2017), the significant research and commentary found in communication and

media studies since the 1990s have examined how the internet serves as a liberating space for queer people. Cyberspace, as imagined by science fiction writer William Gibson in his 1982 short story “Burning Chrome” (T. Jones, 2011), was a place where ideas can freely compete and flow. Queer people similarly use the internet as a cyberspace to share and access content because of its relatively low cost compared to traditional media. In particular, teenagers who are isolated socially and financially from urban queer culture use the internet to explore their sexuality (Campbell, 2004; Cassidy, 2018; Gross & Woods, 1999; Mowlabocus, 2010). Mary Gray (2009) documents how websites have become crucial ways queer youth living in rural America discover their sexual desires and search for belonging. As one of Gray’s informants said, “If I didn’t have access to computers, I don’t know what I would do” (p. 137). Andre Cavalcante (2019) argues that the nonexistence of a real-name policy on Tumblr and its reblog feature have allowed queer youth to explore their identity with privacy and anonymity. Accordingly, the internet has contributed to what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) call “queer world-making,” which is to transcend the “the logics of compulsory heteronormativities” (West, Frischherz, Panther, & Brophy, 2013, p. 56). In each of these examples, networked technologies have enabled queer youth to find others and build community.

For these reasons, the rise of dating apps in the last decade has radically changed how queer people connect with each other. The location awareness and the dominance of visuals of these apps have promoted physical encounters and embodiment. Dating apps’ subversive potential reside in their ability to facilitate same-sex intimacies, which are not completely socially acceptable throughout the world or are, in many countries, still illegal. And although scholars have agreed that the internet has helped queer people form or seek their communities, they have been less certain of whether dating apps such as Grindr—which is often reduced to facilitating sexual encounters—can do the same. On dating apps, users meet strangers who are physically nearby but mostly exist as individuals. Sam Miles (2018) points out that “the potential for these strangers to become social or sexual partners, and in turn more significantly representative of community . . . remains under-theorized” (p. 8). By infusing the literature on dating with concepts about publics and politics, I counter

this tendency to regard every encounter on dating apps as simply related to interpersonal communication leading to sex.

The liberating potential of the internet and dating apps has also created moral panic. Since the 1990s, governments have begun controlling the circulation of sexual images on the internet under the banner of “protecting the children” (Gross & Woods, 1999). This rhetoric has remained strong in the 2010s, exemplified by Tumblr’s banning of all adult content in December 2018, claiming it had “a responsibility to consider that impact across different age groups, demographics, cultures, and mindsets” (D’Onofrio, 2018, para. 5). Commentators argue that this ban is detrimental to the LGBTQ communities (Reynolds, 2018). In addition, dating apps have been blamed for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases both in China and Western countries (Brait, 2015; “Chinese Gay Dating App Blued Halts Registration,” 2019; Parry, 2015). This accusation, because it was not welcomed by app companies, has prompted the industry to integrate safe-sex promotional messages and testing notifications into their apps (Kraus, 2018). Examining queer politics requires the simultaneous consideration of users’ practices, state regulations, and commercial practices.

Scholarship above has shown that technology, in various ways, shapes gender and queer politics. However, I have presented two separate threads of research—one engaging with technology and gender and another dealing with technology and queerness. While there is a burgeoning subfield of queer feminist science studies (see Cipolla, Gupta, Rubin, & Willey, 2017), there is a dearth of theoretical orientations and empirical studies that simultaneously address gender *and* sexuality in relation to technologies such as digital media. This should not be a surprise because scholars often orient themselves to either feminist studies or queer studies, which has resulted in an inescapable tension. When tracing a genealogy of queer feminism, Mimi Marinucci (2010) observes a history of tension between the two. In canonical feminist literature, lesbianism, gay male drag performance, and transgenderism are criticized or neglected. Similarly, women’s experiences are often downplayed in queer studies. The abyss between feminist and queer scholarships is also widened when my field of communication departmentalizes subject interests. For instance, the International Communication Association has created a distinction

between the Feminist Scholarship division and the LGBTQ Studies Interest Group. A lack of a coherent theoretical framework that unifies the discussion across gender and queer issues in relation to dating apps or digital media at large is a natural result of the historical tension Marinucci identifies. Clearly, exploring the role of dating apps, as an emerging communication technology, involves investigating power dynamics related to both gender and sexual orientation. For this reason, I intend my concept of networked sexual publics to be a conscious intervention to bring these worlds together.

INTERPRETATIONS, AFFORDANCES, AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Among the various theoretical concepts I rely on in this book, the dual concepts of interpretation and affordances are key to understanding the relationships between dating apps and gender and queer politics. The word *interpretation* refers to the way people assign meanings to things and events. For example, a folding chair can be interpreted as a support for one's body weight or as a weapon. I draw my understanding of interpretation from the social construction of technology (SCOT) literature. SCOT is concerned primarily with how social forces drive technological development (Baym, 2010). Treating technological development as a series of variations and selections, an analysis based on SCOT identifies the social groups that are relevant to a technological artifact, like designers, retailers, regulators, and investors (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). Because these groups have distinct types and degrees of political, social, and economic power, they define the artifact's problems differently. The availability of disparate ways to define these problems is referred to as *interpretive flexibility*. Various interpretations compete, and the winning interpretation drives the development of the artifact.

Interpretive flexibility explains how people use a technology in a way that its designer did not intend (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003). For example, a child may use a plastic bucket as a helmet. Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch (1996) show how in the early 1900s, automobiles in rural America were interpreted as engines to drive grinders, saws, and washing machines—not purely for transportation. In their words, “this flexibility

was not at the design stage. New meanings are being given to the car by the new emerging social group of users" (p. 777). Car dealers that noticed this unintended use by farmers sold kits that could turn a car into a power source. The automobile manufacturer Ford later banned these kits, demonstrating the unequal power dynamics where companies can exert control on users through the artifact and laws.

The concept of *affordance* moves us closer to a concern with technological agency by simultaneously considering users' interpretations and the materiality of the technology. The term was coined by James Gibson (1979) to describe "the complementarity of the animal and the environment" (p. 127). Affordances are not simply the features of an environment but the interactions between such features and the animals within the environment. When an animal in a field sees a cave, it interprets the cave as a place for shelter, not as a rock-based structure with an empty inner space. The cave affords sheltering for an animal.¹³ The concept was successively introduced to the sociology of technology as a "third way between the (constructivist) emphasis on the shaping power of human agency and the (realist) emphasis on the constraining power of technical capacities" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444). Ian Hutchby agrees that "environments or artefacts have affordances which enable the particular activity while others do not" (p. 448). Yet "these affordances *constrain the ways that they can possibly be 'written' or 'read'*" (p. 447, emphasis in original). That is, affordances both enable and constrain users' actions and interpretations.¹⁴ The affordance of support of a folding chair enables us to recognize and sit on it. The materiality of it also, according to Hutchby, limits our interpretation of the utility of such an object: a folding chair can never be interpreted as a flying machine.

To examine the role of communication technologies in our behaviors and social change, media researchers have also turned to affordances (Baym, 2010; Neff, Jordan, McVeigh-Schultz, & Gillespie, 2012). In the process, some have clarified what constitutes an affordance. For instance, Peter Nagy and Gina Neff (2015) reconceptualize affordances as a combination of (1) the materiality of an object, which refers to the object's features; (2) the mediated experience of the object, which includes the users' expectations and knowledge of how the object can possibly be used; and (3) the emotional states of the users, which influence how

they perceive the features of the object and perform actions. This tripartite model foregrounds neither the object nor the users. The second and the third components suggest that affordances are highly individualized because each user can have a unique experience of an object and experience different emotions. Sandra Evans, Katy Pearce, Jessica Vitak, and Jeffrey Treem (2017) argue that affordances are not the features of an object and that unlike features which are either present or absent, affordances exist on a continuum. Further, they suggest that affordances should not be mistaken for the consequences of using an object. They insist that “an affordance can be associated with *multiple* outcomes” (p. 40, emphasis in original).

Communication scholars, including myself, have conceived typologies to describe the affordances of communication technologies. Andrew Schrock (2015) suggests four communicative affordances of mobile media—portability, availability, locatability, and multimodality. Jessica Fox and Bree McEwan (2017) consider ten types of affordances of communication channels—accessibility, bandwidth, social presence, privacy, network association, personalization, persistence, editability, conversation control, and anonymity. In my earlier research, I proposed five affordances of dating apps (L. S. Chan, 2017b):

1. **Mobility:** With dating apps, users have access to numerous potential partners anywhere and at any time. This is similar to Schrock’s (2015) idea of *portability*. This affordance is fundamental to any mobile media that rely on wireless connections.
2. **Proximity:** The global positioning system built into our smartphones enables users to look for others who are physically nearby. Such system also affords what Schrock (2015) calls *locatability*. People can coordinate with each other or monitor others’ location with the assistance of the system. Proximity seems to be particularly important to dating apps because other communication technologies such as mobile phones or videoconferencing place a heavier emphasis on social presence (Fox & McEwan, 2017) than physical presence.
3. **Immediacy:** Dating app users can meet each other quickly. Immediacy is closely related to *proximity*. In some dating app user communities, users are expected to meet up quickly (Licoppe, Rivière, & Morel, 2016).

4. Authenticity: Using data from other social media platforms, some dating apps verify users' information. Some apps reveal how many friends two users have in common. This affordance, however, negates anonymity (Fox & McEwan, 2017).
5. Visibility: Most dating apps provide a dominant screen space for users' photographs. Users are expected to upload an attractive "profile pic." Other apps allow users to input detailed written information.¹⁵

Although the concept of affordance has been developed in multiple fields, a core tenet has endured: neither technological features nor interpretations alone determine how the technology can be used and what consequences it may have. Affordance captures this contingency resulting from people's subjective perceptions of a technology based on its objective features. Throughout this book, I emphasize the agency of app users, who actively and creatively make use of the various affordances of dating apps for a variety of practices. Because users occupy different positions in the patriarchal and heteronormative structure, their interpretations of dating apps also differ. In this book, affordance is an idea that illuminates the agency of users in their particular social positions as they use dating apps while retaining my overarching concern with power.

MOBILE CULTURES IN ASIA-PACIFIC

The third and last theoretical tradition that anchors this book comes from the emerging scholarship on mobile cultures in Asia-Pacific. Interest in lively, multifaceted mobile cultures in non-Western contexts has grown since the early 2000s. For instance, the anthology *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia* (Berry, Martin, & Yue, 2003) represents one of the earliest scholarly engagements in this area. The central debate that this collection of essays explores is how the globalization of sexual cultures has contributed to a homogenized or a heterogenized sexual landscape in Asia-Pacific. It is homogenized because the circulation of Western gay culture through mass media, commodity, and tourism has at times permeated into Asian queer communities. It is heterogenized because the very same mechanism that allows Western or American gay culture to enter into Asia has opened up multiple paths where, in the words of

Ann Cvetkovich and Douglas Kellner (1997), “local forces and situations mediate the global, inflecting global forces to diverse ends and conditions and producing unique configurations for thoughts and action in the contemporary world” (p. 2).

This issue is recently taken up in *Mobile Media and Social Intimacies in Asia: Reconfiguring Local Ties and Enacting Global Relationships* (Cabañes & Uy-Tioco, 2020), an edited volume that examines the way ubiquitous mobile technologies have configured intimate relationships and coins the term *glocal intimacies*. The volume contends that globalization is not a one-way homogenization and that strong local sociocultural power dynamics remain. When writing this book, I continued responding to this still-unfolding challenge.

Although Berry et al.’s *Mobile Cultures* was published nearly two decades ago, there are at least two lessons to be learned from this anthology. First, when conducting research in non-Western contexts, it is crucial to historicize the development of digital media. For example, the emergence of the queer communities in the United States and Western Europe predates the widespread use of the internet. However, in Asia, the chronological order is reversed because queer communities have largely been suppressed socially and politically (Berry & Martin, 2003). This difference suggests that theoretical insights about the role of the internet in the development of queer communities may not be able to translate well across geographical contexts. Second, a thorough understanding of the local language and culture is a prerequisite for nuanced, insightful analysis. For instance, *lazi* 拉子 used in Taiwanese online bulletin board is a transliteration of the English term *lesbian*; it is also the nickname for a character in a local popular novel in the region about lesbian relationships (Berry & Martin, 2003). Therefore, when the term *lazi* is used online, what is articulated is not just an appropriation of Western ideal of lesbians but also a reference to the local queer culture. An outsider not well versed in the cultural meanings of certain phrases and symbols might miss the full meaning of communication.

I place my attention on China in this book because the entire Asia-Pacific region is not monolithic. For example, Larissa Hjorth (2008) investigates the culture surrounding mobile phones in four different Asia-Pacific locations. She proposes the notion of “cartographies of personalization”

to depict how women in these four locations have domesticated mobile phones. In Japan, short novels written for mobile phone viewing were dominated by female writers and readers. In South Korea, women gave opinions on what ringtones and wallpapers their male partner should use on their phone as a way to show to the world that their male partner already had a girlfriend. In Hong Kong, Hjorth notes that mobile media provide a platform for nostalgia on an individual level. In Australia, in mobile media she finds “postal presence”—the sense of copresence created by embedding one’s photograph in a text message. In this multisited study, mobile phones become a lens through which we can look into the cultural processes underlying everyday life. The growing literature on mobile cultures in Asia-Pacific underscores the need to place mobile technologies in the region’s broader environments. At this point, I think it is crucial to contextualize the rise of dating apps in China.

RISE OF DATING APPS IN CHINA

In the specific context of China, I consider dating apps as a “lash-up” (Molotch, 2003) of two analytically distinct but interrelated transformations—one primarily social, another economic. The social refers to the transformation of intimacy. Anthony Giddens (1992) observes the rise of the pure relationship model, replacing the procreation-driven model of intimacy in Western countries. A similar phenomenon has taken place in modern China. Because traditional Chinese culture did not have the concept of *ai* 爱 (love), love was not prioritized in traditional marriage (Cheung, 1999). Instead, marriage was determined by one’s parents (Fei, 1939). The founding of modern China in 1949 brought a change in courtship and marriage practices. In cities during the Maoist period, men and women were assigned to work in *danwei* 单位 (work units). Under the planned economy system, the *danwei* was both an economic and a social organization. *Danwei* leadership actively intervened in personal affairs, including matching couples and mediating marital conflicts (J. Liu, 2007). The rarity of switching *danwei* also meant that people had a very limited pool of potential spouses.

With the decollectivization of *danwei* during China’s economic reform, the state stopped organizing matching activities (Zhang & Sun,

2014). Living within these rapidly changing parameters for intimate life, the younger generation in China developed new dating practices. Unlike members of the previous generation, who rarely had more than one dating relationship before marriage, the younger generation saw their dating partners not necessarily as their future wives or husbands (Farrer, 2002). Without the pressure from their *danwei*, queer people could possibly get away from the norm of heterosexual marriage (D. Wong, 2015). Lisa Rofel (2007) suggests that market reform in urban areas during post-Mao China has unleashed desires that were suppressed in the Maoist era, constituting the new “desiring subjects.” This social change has provided a context for the popularity of dating platforms.

The economic transformation refers to the economic reform initiated in 1978. With the opening up of the economy and various industries, increasingly more Chinese enterprises have adopted a profit-driven model. There are both a general economic consideration and a specific political economy underlying the development of Chinese dating apps. On the general ground, online dating and marriage-matching services face a challenge in retaining their customers because customers will not return after finding a lifelong partner through their services (Fiore & Donath, 2004; Wen, 2015). Therefore, mobile dating apps have to incorporate various features to attract new users and keep their existing users (Fiore & Donath, 2004). This explains why all major Chinese dating apps have a live streaming feature that turns these apps into an entertainment portal.

On the specific ground, China has its own internet ecology. Part of the reason for this is that the Communist Party of China has banned Western internet services such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook from operating in the country. The ban has created a void for local services like Baidu, Weibo, and Renren (Fuchs, 2016). So far China has not officially forbidden Western dating apps such as OkCupid or Grindr in the country. However, because these Western apps are not offered in Chinese, they are not appealing to the locals. This has created a market niche for local dating app services. Chinese dating app companies learn from existing dating and social networking apps in other countries and create designs that are suitable to their Chinese market. For example, Tantan is based on Tinder’s swiping style; Blued functions similarly to Grindr and Jack’d. Further, dating apps in China are heavily regulated by the Chinese government.

In March 2015, the National Office Against Pornographic and Illegal Publications fined Momo CNY60,000 (~USD8,600) and ordered it to remove group chats with explicit sexual discussions (see T. Liu, 2016). Zank, once a popular dating app for gay men, was shut down by the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission in April 2017 for its live streaming of pornographic content. Rela was also temporarily taken off the shelves in 2017, allegedly because of its involvement in an organized protest for marriage equality in Shanghai. In April 2019, the government also took down Tantan for a couple of months because of its pornographic content. These complex relationships between Chinese dating apps, their Western counterparts, and the state have created a unique background for Chinese dating app culture.

Although the depiction above is derived from the Chinese context, these transformations are by no means unique to China. Similar transformations of intimacy and of dating technologies have occurred in other countries and cultures.¹⁶ In the concluding chapter of the book, I revisit the notion of networked sexual publics and illustrate how this concept is useful in understanding the global emergence of dating app cultures.

RESEARCHING THE EXPERIENCES OF DATING APP USERS IN GUANGZHOU, SOUTHERN CHINA

Most of the evidence in this book comes from in-depth interviews I conducted in 2016 and 2018 with sixty-nine dating app users during two separate field trips to Guangzhou, a major city in southern China. Below, I briefly describe the location of my field trips, my informants, my interview protocol, and my analytical procedure. The appendix elaborates on the recruitment and interview processes and presents detailed information on each informant.

Recent research in China related to gender and sexuality has mostly been conducted in Beijing or Shanghai (e.g., Farrer, 2002; Kam, 2013; Pei, 2013; Wallis, 2015). Only a couple of studies have included Guangzhou in their multisited fieldwork (see Bao, 2018; Kong, 2011). Because I am reaching beyond Beijing and Shanghai, cities which non-Chinese readers may be more familiar with, some background information about Guangzhou may help put my informants' experiences in context. As the capital

of Guangdong province, Guangzhou had around fifteen million permanent residents in 2018, among which approximately 62 percent were *hukou* 户口 (household register) holders and 38 percent were migrants. Guangzhou is the third largest city in China in terms of population after Shanghai and Beijing (Guangdong Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Over 98 percent of the city's Chinese residents identified as Han Chinese (Xing, 2011). Economically, the city is building strategic hubs for international shipping, aviation, and technology. Its regional gross domestic product reached CNY1,961 billion (~USD283 million) in 2016, an increase of 8.2 percent from the previous year, which was higher than the national average of 6.7 percent ("Guangzhou changzhu renkou 广州常驻人口," 2017). It is not difficult to find global luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and Hermès and Western fine-dining restaurants in the city, particularly in Tianhe district. Culturally, Guangzhou is the origin of the Lingnan culture with its unique dialectic (Cantonese),¹⁷ art (such as Cantonese opera), and food culture (such as dim sum).

The city is close to Shenzhen, one of the first special economic zones to open to marketization and foreign investment during the 1980s. It is also close to Hong Kong, where I was born and raised. Hong Kong is a former British colony, from which many Western ideas have been introduced into China. Historically, since the Qing dynasty several important social reformers have come from Guangdong province, including Zheng Guanying, Kang Youwei, and Sun Yat-sen (Song, 2016). Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that Guangzhou has always been open to new ideas and cultures. Internet penetration rate of Guangdong province was 74.0 percent in 2016, much higher than the national average of 53.2 percent (China Internet Network Information Center, 2017). According to Guangdong Communication Administration (2019), as at November 2019, for every 100 people in Guangzhou, there were 147.0 mobile phones. Specifically, in the city of Guangzhou, there were 32.3 million mobile phone users, among whom 29.3 million were using 3G/4G connection.

Guangzhou is a relatively international city for China. It has retained its historical, Lingnan way of living and is actively incorporating Western consumerism. In the neighborhood where I stayed during my second field trip, there was a take-away dim sum store run by an old Chinese

woman next door to a juice store whose owners were two young Caucasian men from California. I could easily get a CNY20 (~USD3) lunch set with a bowl of congee and a rice noodle roll and a CNY60 (~USD9) gelato. People mainly speak Cantonese and Putonghua, but in Tianhe district, English can be used in commercial entities.

Of the sixty-nine informants, nineteen identified themselves as straight women, fifteen as queer women, sixteen as straight men, and nineteen as queer men.¹⁸ Table 1.1 summarizes the demographic information of my informants at the time of their interview.

The criteria for becoming an interview informant in this study were as follows: being eighteen years old or older, living in Guangzhou, having never worked at companies that run dating apps or dating websites, and logging onto dating apps at least several times a month.¹⁹ Because I wanted to recruit users from different backgrounds, I implemented multiple methods and modified my methods along the way. I recruited my informants through dating apps (Aloha, Blued, Momo, and Tantan) by using a “researcher’s profile” that clearly identified me as a researcher and explicitly stated the purpose of my research. I also attended a public lecture on women’s sexuality, and with assistance from the lecture’s organizer and the speaker, I handed out leaflets to the audience. In addition,

Table 1.1 A summary of the informants’ demographics ($n = 69$)

Sexual orientation and gender	Age range	Relationship status
Straight women ($n = 19$)	21–38 ^a	Single: 12 Dating: 2 Married: 3 Other: 2
Straight men ($n = 16$)	19–37	Single: 8 Dating: 5 Married: 3
Queer men ($n = 19$)	19–28	Single: 14 Dating: 3 Other: 2
Queer women ($n = 15$)	18–34	Single: 6 Dating: 9

Note: a. One informant declined to disclose her age. She appeared to be in her forties.

I contacted two LGBTQ organizations in Guangzhou, which helped me reach out to their members and volunteers. Finally, some informants invited their friends to participate in the study.

The interviews took between forty-five minutes to two hours and were conducted in Putonghua or Cantonese. Of the sixty-nine informants, all but one consented to having the interviews be audiotaped. For the one informant who declined to be audiotaped, I wrote extensive notes during the interview. The interviews were semistructured. The core questions remained the same across all interviews. I began by asking the informants easy questions: “Which dating apps are you using now? Which one is your favorite?” Most people did not have difficulty expressing what they liked and disliked. This question helped the informants think about their experiences; it also helped me understand the one or two apps that my informants appeared to be the most invested in. Sometimes, the informants recruited from one app said their favorite app was another. In this sense, my approach is akin to the “open touring invitation” approach in the “media go-along” methodology proposed by Kristian Jørgensen (2016). In this “tour,” I invited my informants “to narrate a pathway through the app that is mostly of their choosing” (p. 40). I asked questions such as the impressions they had of the dating apps before they started using them and the reasons they had downloaded these apps. Gradually, I asked questions about their use of the apps, including how they presented themselves on the profile and how they interacted with others. I always included one reflexive question at the end: “What do you think you would miss if your favorite app was gone tomorrow?” Although I had prepared a list of questions on key issues, I also allowed the informants to share the experiences they found meaningful.

Interviewing is a social process. My intersectional identity—being a cisgender gay man from Hong Kong and having been educated in the United States—may have helped me gain access to stories from these informants that they might not have otherwise shared, but it might also have made them reluctant to share other stories. I am aware that every story is told, framed, and interpreted from a particular position (Haraway, 1988). Therefore, the purpose of conducting interviews was to understand the significance, or the social meanings, dating apps had in the lives of the informants rather than to seek objective facts. As the

informants' recounting of their experiences was necessarily influenced by my presence and probing, I, as a researcher, also participated in the coconstruction of their narratives. Further, my research was informed by feminist inquiry—in particular, standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1993). Standpoint epistemology posits that women in certain marginalized social positions, or standpoints, are able to generate more accurate knowledge. In my research, I privileged the narratives of women and queer people because they have experienced social oppression from patriarchy and heteronormativity in China.

All recorded interviews were transcribed. With NVivo 11, I used a two-cycle coding process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). I created the first cycle of codes by describing each paragraph, paying attention to any references that might have been related to interpersonal, social, and political dynamics. Examples of these codes included “looking at handsome men” (from a heterosexual woman), “showing wealth in profiles” (from a heterosexual man), and “no lesbian characters in mainstream television” (from a lesbian woman). The second cycle of coding began with organizing the first cycle of codes. Codes from each transcript were constantly compared until some themes gradually emerged. For example, interview excerpts coded as “looking at handsome men” and “pondering the relationship between love and sex” were grouped together under the theme of “a laboratory of sexual experiments.”

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Larissa Hjorth (2008) demonstrates that, in order not to resort to a pedestrian cross-group comparison, we must attend to specificities of each group of users. In her case, they were female mobile phone users in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Australia, respectively. This book explores networked sexual publics of both genders and different sexual orientations. In considering what the best way to analyze and present my data, I followed Hjorth's approach. After this introduction, I present four chapters, each dedicated to one of the four networked sexual publics—straight women, straight men, queer men, and queer women. One may criticize such an organization for risking the compartmentalization of sexual experiences and reinforcing the socially constructed dichotomy of

men in relation to women and straight in relation to queer. I would argue that the dedicated discussion of each of these four groups of dating app users allows me to dive into the intersectional experiences of each one to discover the unique struggles, dilemmas, opportunities, and challenges each group faces and to draw connections between these different groups when appropriate. Likewise, in presenting my data, I could have written each chapter in the same structure, covering the same topics, and using the same subheadings. However, doing so would not only inevitably produce repetitive content but also assume that issues pertinent to one group are equally relevant to another. Instead, my organization of each chapter reflects what was important to my informants, as reflected by the data.

Earlier, when I elaborated how technology is related to gender, I mentioned technofeminism. Developed within the parameters of science and technology studies, technofeminism suggests that technology is “both a source and a consequence of gender relations” (Wajcman, 2006, p. 15). To fully understand the relationship of women with technology requires an examination of women’s interactions with information and communication technologies in daily life. In chapter 2, I ask the following: what do dating apps mean to straight female dating app users, and what challenges do they face when using these apps, in view of the status of women in contemporary China? In this chapter, I analyze how women interpret their use of dating apps. I argue that although dating apps may be a feminist tool, they conceal the structural gender inequality embedded in society at large.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to idealized forms of masculine behaviors relative to the behaviors of women and other subordinated masculinities such as gay, working-class, and racial minority masculinities (Connell, 1987). However, masculinities are not inherent qualities of men; they must be learned and performed. Accordingly, in chapter 3, I take a constructivist approach to examine the ways in which Chinese straight men perform gender on dating apps (Butler, 1999). Specifically, I look at their interpretations of the apps, self-presentations on the apps, and interactions with women they meet on these apps. I argue that their performances are best understood relative to *wen-wu* 文武 (literary-military) masculinities, an indigenous Chinese concept developed by Kam Louie

(2002). My analysis shows that although some gender performances of my male informants appear to be inclusive of femininity, they also reproduce the existing gender inequality.

Chapters 4 and 5 bring readers to the lived experiences of queer communities in urban China. When I spoke with my queer male informants, I quickly noticed a phenomenon that has been less prevalent among other groups of informants—constantly deleting and installing the same app. Instead of taking a cognitive approach that assesses the usefulness of a technology (F. Davis, 1989; Brubaker, Ananny, & Crawford, 2016), in chapter 4, I turn to the affective aspect of dating app use. Emotions move people. They pull people closer to some things and push them away from other things (Ahmed, 2004b, 2010). I argue that the cycle of deleting and installing among queer men is a manifestation of the contradictory affects my informants had in relation to their experiences with dating apps. I differentiate two types of emotions. In-app emotions are directly derived from the everyday use of dating apps. Out-of-app emotions are rooted primarily in the way male homosexuality is treated in contemporary Chinese society. I show how the everyday use of dating apps and contemporary queer politics have generated both positive and negative emotions related to dating app use.

I devote chapter 5 to the experiences of queer women in China. I view queer women as sitting at the intersection of two oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Because they are both queer and women, they face greater challenges than straight women and queer men combined. In this chapter, I ask the following: how do popular lesbian dating apps contribute to the queer world-making project and connect queer women to their community? I look at the features of two popular dating apps and the users' perceptions of them. I then propose the affordance of communal connectivity to account for the missing communal aspect in the typology of affordances I discussed earlier. At the same time, I recognize that despite their potential to connect queer women with their community, these apps reinforce heteronormativity within the community. Thus, they were—as we all are—prevented from reaching the queer utopia (Muñoz, 2009).

Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 are each adequately contextualized in a historical background on the relevant debates and issues related to gender and

sexuality in China. Readers are, therefore, welcome to read individual chapters if they are interested in a single gender or sexual category.

In the concluding chapter, I synthesize the findings of the previous chapters and provide a more thorough theorization of networked sexual publics, putting this concept in conversation with the three theoretical anchors I discussed above. Based on the research presented in this book and my reflections on some of the latest developments on dating apps worldwide, I put forth several propositions concerning networked sexual publics and suggest ways for scholars to further investigate this emerging global phenomenon. With this concept, I hope societal discussions of dating apps will move beyond the topic of hookups.