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# **The Politics of Dating Apps**

## **Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China**

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# 2

## ARE DATING APPS A FEMINIST TOOL? A TECHNOFEMINIST ANALYSIS

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Every weekend, hundreds of parents conglomerate in one section of Tianhe Park to help their adult child, usually a single child due to the one-child policy, look for a spouse. In this park, they literally “advertise” their children to other parents. Parents fill out an A4-size form entitled “Weihun Qingnian Jiazhang Xiangqin Huodong Guanggao Biao 未婚青年家长相亲活动广告表” (“Unmarried Youth’s Parents Matching Activity Advertising Form”).<sup>1</sup> This form documents their child’s age, height, weight, education level, property ownership, household register, income, nature of occupation, and spousal selection criteria. Hundreds of forms, hung on strings and tied around trees, are grouped in sections according to the gender and age of the child. People with an overseas degree have a separate section to designate their increased status. Worried parents walk around and look at the other forms or stand beside their own forms, waiting for other parents. In their analysis of a similar activity in People’s Park in Shanghai, Jun Zhang and Peidong Sun (2014) argue this kind of parental intervention does not revive the traditional arranged marriage practice. Instead, they see it as a response to the contemporary discourse that people, particularly women, have a hard time getting married if they become too old. But how old is too old?

Nancy, introduced in the last chapter, was showing me Tianhe Park as we chatted. But she became quiet when we started reading the forms.

Suddenly, she turned to me and asked, “Do you think *shengnü* like me will have a better market in the United States?” The term *shengnü* 剩女 (leftover women) emerged in the media discourse of the mid-2000s to refer to older, educated, rich, single women (Hong Fincher, 2014; To, 2015). It is a pejorative term. Women do not wish to be addressed as *shengnü*, and parents do not want to hear their daughter being described as such. Underscoring its sexist subtext, no equivalent term exists for older, rich, single men. Instead, these men in China are known as *zuanshi wanglaowu* 钻石王老五 (diamond bachelor)—a term that does not carry a negative connotation.

Matching activities like this reflect gender inequality in Chinese society that places women in an inferior, subordinate position. Besides the different connotations for single women and men, gender inequality also manifests in dating and romantic practices. The traditional norm in American dating is that men are expected to lead the courtship process. Women who make the first move are considered “too easy” and are not valued (Bailey, 1988). The same convention to give more control to men exists in China, where women are taught to be reserved when seeking romance. In response to this gendered phenomenon, some Western dating apps have strived to give more power to women. Bumble, founded by Whitney Wolfe—a cofounder of Tinder who later quit the company due to the sexual harassment she faced there—was designed in a way that a conversation between a woman and a man could be initiated only by the woman. In doing so, Bumble has endeavored to, as Wolfe puts in, “reconfigure the way that we treat each other” (cited in Tait, 2017, para. 10). Once, an app established in Europe, similarly lets women rate their male dates (“Dating app Once,” 2018), further disrupting established gender norms.

In this chapter, I explore the following question: do dating apps empower women in China? My concern with empowerment stems from Linda Layne’s (2010) suggestion that the ultimate feminist concern is reclaiming women’s autonomy. Accordingly, technologies can be feminist if they are consciously designed to make women’s lives easier or their unintended consequences improve women’s lives. Deborah Johnson (2010) specifies four forms that feminist technology can take—technology that improves the condition of women, technology that contributes to

gender equality, technology that favors women, and technology that elicits more equitable gender relations than those associated with prior technology. However, whether a technology can become feminist cannot be disconnected from women's status in society.

In order to answer my own question, in what follows, I first sketch the trajectory of women's status in modern China. This sketch is partial, but I hope it captures the specific segments of the trajectory that provide sufficient contextualization for the later discussion on the role of dating apps. As I mention in the introductory chapter, my analysis of the use of dating apps is informed by technofeminism's conception of gender and technology as mutually constitutive. This approach pays attention to the gendered meanings related to the use of technology (Wajcman, 1991, 2006, 2007).<sup>2</sup> The remainder of this chapter tells the stories of my straight female informants. Through these stories, I analyze the possibilities and challenges dating apps have presented and discuss why dating apps ultimately may not be able to fulfill the political goals feminists strive for.

## THE CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN IN MODERN CHINA

Traditional Confucian culture considered women to be men's property. The "three obediences" (*sancong* 三从) in Confucianism demanded a woman obey her father as a daughter, her husband as a wife, and her sons after her husband died. Marriage was arranged by parents as early as six or seven years old. For a daughter to be married, her parents had to pay a dowry to the prospective husband's family. Thus, for parents, having a daughter was a net loss for their family's wealth. Furthermore, once married, there was no way for a woman to request a divorce (Fei, 1939). Similar to traditional Western societies, Chinese women were not given any sexual agency. If they exercised their sexual desires, they were stigmatized as a *dangfu* 荡妇 (loose woman), while no equivalent terms were applied to men who had extramarital encounters. Women in China during these years followed scripted gender roles or risked the consequences.

In 1950, one year after the Communist Party of China (CPC) founded modern China, the party banned arranged marriages and allowed "no-fault" divorce if mediation by the state failed (D. Davis, 2014). In 1954, a consistent policy regarding women's voluntary use of contraceptives

was also formulated. After this point, contraceptives became available without a doctor's prescription (White, 1994). Meanwhile, the parent-child relationship also underwent a radical transformation. Instead of the father being the authority in the household, the children occupied the same position as their father, unless the father was a cadre in the CPC (Yan, 2009). This shift in policy cultivated autonomy and self-development among young women. The image of "iron girls" (*tie guniang* 铁姑娘) was particularly propagated during the Cultural Revolution. The iron-girls campaign was used to mobilize and organize women to enter traditionally male occupations. In 1964, Mao Zedong stated that "times have changed, men and women are the same. Whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can achieve as well" (cited in Jin, Manning, & Chu, 2006, p. 617). During this period's legal and policy reforms, women experienced an increase in social status that had been unheard of in premodern China. Zheng Wang (2005) calls this series of efforts by the state to improve women's status "socialist state feminism."

However, one should not assume that, with state feminism, women in China during the Maoist era had achieved gender equality. The All-China Women's Federation, founded in 1949, is the designated leader of women's movement in the country. It is not a grassroots organization but is part of the CPC. While the federation's members are placed into the state structure at every level (Judd, 2002), the fact that the federation is part of the CPC but not of the government renders the federation powerless because its members are not allowed to play a leading role in governance (Z. Wang, 2005). Further, during the Maoist era, by absorbing the women's movement into its anticapitalist agenda, the CPC suppressed sexual differences (Rofel, 2007; J. Yang, 2011). It was not until the economic reform that women's bodies were allowed to be sexualized. In the late 1970s, images of fashionably dressed and sexually appealing women began to appear in the state-run media (H. Evans, 2008).

In recent years, some scholars have observed that urban women in China continued to develop their sexual agency and marital power. Yuxin Pei (2013) documents how, beginning in the early 2000s, several female writers gained fame by writing erotic literature. This was the first time since the economic reform that the sexual imaginations of female writers dominated the public sphere. Through extensive interviews with straight

women living in Shanghai, Pei also found they had diverse sexual and romantic experiences. Some of these women stated that with their sexual capital, they had greater privileges than men. Pei argues that the women she interviewed “used ‘gender equality’ as a weapon, as a tool, not to strive for ‘equality between men and women’ but to take advantage” (p. 189, my translation from Chinese). During this same time, Susanne Yuk-Ping Choi and Yinni Peng (2016) also found a gradual change in the gender hierarchy among rural-to-urban migrant couples and families. The wives in these households were expected to control their husband’s finances and had greater bargaining power in deciding where the couple would eventually live.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, existing side by side with these progressive trends, the CPC has reregulated women’s lives. Among these regulations, the one-child policy, implemented from 1979 to 2015, created a severe national sex ratio imbalance. Chinese families traditionally prefer sons over daughters because sons inherit the family’s name and are expected to make money for the family. Under the one-child policy, most families were fined for having additional children. The preference for sons together with the threat of financial penalty for having two or more children have led to many cases of female infanticide, selective abortion, and unreported birth (Hull, 1990; Johansson & Nygren, 1991; Junhong, 2001). According to China’s 1990 population census, for every 100 newly born baby girls, there were 119.92 baby boys. The 2010 population census revealed a further deterioration of the imbalance: the ratio increased to 100 to 121.21. In Guangdong province, the ratio reached 100 to 129.29.<sup>4</sup>

The government has treated this imbalance as the cause of the rise in sex-related crimes because many marriage-age men cannot find a wife (Li, 2014). Men have fewer choices because women enjoy more education and vocational opportunities than before, while men prefer wives with less education and fewer accomplishments than themselves. An increasing number of women with advanced education and established careers have remained single. The term *shengnü* gradually emerged in media discourse starting in the mid-2000s (Hong Fincher, 2014). The exact origin of the term is difficult to trace. However, in 2007, this colloquial term became one of the 171 official new words highlighted in *Zhongguo Yuyan Shenghuo Zhuangkuang Baogao* 中国语言生活状况报告 (*The Chinese Language*

*Life Report*) published by the Ministry of Education and the National Language Committee (Zhang & Sun, 2014). According to this report, the official definition of the term is “Urban professional women who are over 27 years old who have high education level, high salary, high intelligence, and attractive appearance, but also very high expectations of marriage partners, and hence are ‘left behind’ in the marriage market” (cited in To, 2015, p. 1). Popular television shows in China have also blamed women for being too ambitious and career-minded (Feldshuh, 2018). However, as the national statistics have shown, because there are more men than women, it is *men* who are “leftover,” not women. Therefore, Leta Hong Fincher (2014) contends that the term was created by the state to coerce women into marriage:

In one sense, “leftover” women do not exist. They are a category of women concocted by the government to achieve its demographic goals of promoting marriage, planning population, and maintaining social stability. The state media campaign against “leftover” women is just one of the signs that in recent years, contrary to many claims made by mainstream news organizations, women in China have experienced a dramatic rollback of rights and gains relative to men. (p. 6)

This brief social history illustrates the dynamics between gender structure, gender symbols, and gender identity related to women (Harding, 1986). Society has organizing principles that structure relationships between men and women through kinship and economy. Gender, reflected in images of manhood and womanhood, is symbolic. On the personal level, gender is also an identity. It is about who one is and guides how one should present oneself to others. These three aspects of gender may reinforce or contradict each other. In the Chinese context, structurally speaking, women have risen from the submissive position dictated by the “three obediences” in ancient China to a position closer to their male counterparts during the heyday of socialism.<sup>5</sup> A distinct feminine identity has also been cultivated by consumerism since the economic reform. Nevertheless, we have witnessed the emergence of *shengnü* as a pejorative symbol for educated but unmarried women in recent decades.

Under this context, what is the role of dating apps in shaping women’s position in Chinese society? Can these apps improve the condition of women and contribute to greater gender equality? And are there any

unintended consequences of using dating apps that may elicit more equitable gender relations than those associated with prior infrastructure of intimacy, like *xiangqin* 相亲 (matching) in the park? In the following, I present four metaphors of dating apps drawn from interviews with straight female informants. I also report challenges my informants faced in their experiences of using dating apps and the ways they reacted to these challenges.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF USING DATING APPS

Extending the social shaping of technology paradigm (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985), technofeminism focuses on women's technological practices and the implications these practices have on their status in the society (Wajcman, 1991, 2006, 2007). Technofeminism is also concerned with women's agency and their technological interpretations. Several metaphors emerged from the narratives my informants provided that account for their experiences using dating apps such as Momo and Tantan. While I present these metaphors separately, they are not mutually exclusive. Some of my informants held two or three interpretations at the same time. I intend my typology presented here to showcase a wide range of interpretations across four central metaphors—a laboratory for sexual experiments, a springboard to romance and marriage, a third place between home and the workplace, and a gateway to new worlds.

### A LABORATORY FOR SEXUAL EXPERIMENTS

David Gudelunas (2008) argues that for many years in the United States, newspaper advice columns provided knowledge on sexuality to the public during a time when the topic was forbidden in schools. Some of my informants pointed out that the education system in China has similarly provided little room for its citizens to think about intimate relationships or sexuality. Thus, dating apps offer an interactive environment in which women can explore their sexuality and think about the relationship between sex and love. Kangqi, age thirty-four, came to Guangzhou from a small city in Sichuan province three months before our interview. She complained, "Our education . . . does not teach you [men] how to handle

intimate relationships, how to get along with women, how to express affection, what is or what isn't sexual harassment." She had been looking for open relationships in recent years, and Momo had played an important role in her experiment:

[In my town,] there were only some [Momo] users. . . . I and one of the men developed a casual sexual relationship, a purely sexual, mutually gratifying relationship. Although I was living in a small town, I was relatively open-minded.

She said that because none of her boyfriends lived in Guangzhou at the moment, she planned to use Momo to look for boyfriends.

Other informants' stories showed that their experiences with dating apps provided them with opportunities to reflect on their attitudes toward sex and relationships. Xiaojiao, age thirty, recalled meeting a man on Tantan who was in an open relationship with his girlfriend. She said, "In the past, I knew nothing about sex. He was my teacher. I think that I learned from him how to separate sex [from romantic relationships]." Like Xiaojiao, Queenie, age twenty-five, met her sex partners on Tantan. But when I asked her if she could disentangle sex from emotion, she said:

No. My point is, I enjoy the process. But first, I have to think [the person] is okay, is interesting. [A stranger] can bring me a sort of fantasy, like the feeling of smoking weed. . . . But if you are talking about sex without love, it doesn't work. I have to strike a balance.

Thus, although Xiaojiao recognized she could enjoy sex without committing to a person, Queenie understood that what gratified her was the liminal space between familiarity and strangeness. I refer to dating apps as a "laboratory" because for Xiaojiao and Queenie, they provided a space to test out how their sexual desires could be acted on.

Pushing these experimentations even further, younger informants tended to use dating apps for fantasy. As a Tantan user, Brady, age twenty-three, said, "If I feel bored, I will log onto the app to see if there are any good-looking people nearby, check out their profiles, and 'like' their profiles if they are good-looking." Amanda, age twenty-four, said she did not believe that dating apps were places to look for relationships. Eventually, she became a pure lurker who just looked at pictures. Rosy, age twenty-one, also enjoyed just looking at the photographs. She did not bother

wasting time chatting with men: “I just press the ‘like’ button. That’s it.” These practices reflect Brady, Amanda, and Rosy’s interests in experimentation with browsing media that may not lead to dates or long-term relationships.

Moreover, Rosy’s refusal to waste time also reflected a cost-and-benefit analytical mentality. Dating apps serve as a suitable laboratory for sexual experiments not only because they provide experimental “materials”—a diverse group of men—but also because they demand very low involvement. Rosy appreciated the efficiency of using dating apps to look for hookups because they merely required a photograph to be uploaded and a couple of lines to be written on the profile. To her, dating apps required little emotional investment: “If they work, I will keep using them; otherwise, I will let go. It is like a game. I won’t be very serious.” As Zygmunt Bauman (2003) wittily comments, “termination on demand— instantaneous without mess, no counting losses or regrets—is the major advantage of Internet dating” (p. 65). I see young women like Rosy fully embracing the advantage of easy termination in relationships on dating apps and the use of these apps itself.

#### A SPRINGBOARD TO ROMANCE AND MARRIAGE

Going against the discourse of dating apps as *yuepao shenqi* 约炮神器 (a magical tool for hookups), some informants said they believed they could find a boyfriend or husband on these apps. Katie, age thirty-three, was one of the few informants I interviewed who had used Western apps such as OkCupid because of her good command of English. She used OkCupid to look for long-term relationships, even though she said many people on the app were seeking hookups. Dating apps provided Katie with a new set of potential boyfriends because she described her social circle as limited: “In gatherings, my friends will show up with some new friends, but these people are usually married, so I cannot look for a partner on such occasions.”

Other Chinese urbanites were also interested in expanding their pool of potential boyfriends. Jessica’s strategy was to get to know as many interesting people as possible on Momo and then, ideally, to develop a serious relationship with one of them. She emphasized, “I have a clear

goal; after all, I am at my current age.” As I discussed earlier, she was responding to the enormous social pressure to get married to avoid the psychological threat of being called *shengnü*. As a twenty-seven-year-old college graduate employed as a civil servant, Jessica just made the cut of becoming a *shengnü* according to the official definition. She complained that whenever she called home, the first question her mother asked was whether she had a boyfriend. It is no wonder that she was concerned.

Some features afford a safer way to seek a suitable partner. Queenie, who looked for sex partners on Tantan, enjoyed reading the personal profiles created by men that allowed her to better understand them. She also set up an age filter so that only people between eighteen and thirty years old showed up on her app. Nancy, age twenty-eight, appreciated the alert function on these apps, which protected her from sexual harassment. “Because [the app] has a list of preselected keywords—for example, ‘yuepao’—the system will remind you to report [harassment].” Polly, age twenty-nine, showed me how this automated alert system worked on Momo. She sent me a message containing the word *yue* 约. On my end, I received a message from Momo reminding me to report if I found the message from Polly offensive (figure 2.1).<sup>6</sup> Overall, my female informants interpreted these features—including detailed profiles, filters, and the alert system—as beneficial. These features were helpful to their search for Mr. Right, who could save them from being stigmatized as *shengnü*.

### A THIRD PLACE BETWEEN HOME AND THE WORKPLACE

To some of my informants, dating apps are what Ramon Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett (1982) call “third places.” These are places that “exist outside the home and beyond the ‘work lots’ of modern economic production . . . where people gather primarily to enjoy each other’s company” (p. 269). This interpretation is particularly salient for my nonlocal informants.

Xiaoshan, age twenty-nine, moved to Guangzhou two years ago so she could work to support her husband and son back home in Guangxi province. Working as a masseuse in a hotel, she said the nature of her job made the workplace very competitive. Therefore, she was not close with her colleagues. When she wanted to vent, she turned to Momo because



**Figure 2.1**

After my informant sent me a message containing the word *yue* 约 on Momo, the system autogenerated a message reminding me to report her if I found the message offensive. (Screenshot taken by the author on October 17, 2016)

only strangers could see her “status updates.” She explained, “I cannot share how I feel on WeChat because my family and friends will be worried if they see these messages.”<sup>7</sup> Using Momo and hanging out with people she met on the app were her sole social activities. She liked hiking, and she joined groups that were related to hiking and outdoor activities in the “groups nearby” feature in Momo. Personally having moved to a new city for study and work, I was glad to hear that she was able to find hiking buddies on the app. Xiaojiao, who had also left her hometown,

told me that “My social life is my life on Tantan.” Similarly, when Jessica first started working for her company in another city, most of her colleagues were married men who often stayed home on weekends. Momo was the primary channel for these women to make friends.

While home was simply unavailable to my nonlocal informants like Xiaoshan, it also could not provide the kind of sociability my local informants needed. Due to the former one-child policy, many younger Chinese have no siblings. Polly, a local Guangzhouese, told me she just needed someone to talk with. Classmates might not have been the best listeners because they were in a competitive environment. However, on Momo she befriended two men and one woman. She remarked:

They are around my age. Our friendship was formed in a very short period of time during a gathering. There is chemistry, not the chemistry between a boyfriend and a girlfriend. It feels like we have known each other for years.

Further, some users are torn between their workplace and their household. For Jennifer, a thirty-seven-year-old single mother, her time was divided between her job and her nine-year-old son. On weekdays, she was either at work or with her son. She devoted the weekends to her son, unless her former husband took their son out. “The social circles of modern people are tiny,” she lamented. She did not feel comfortable revealing to her colleagues that she was a single mother because being a single mother, like being a *shengnü*, was stigmatized. However, on Momo, she could present herself as a single mother. She met two other women who were also mothers from the chat group supported by the app. When she had spare time, she hung out with them. As a local Guangzhouese, she also set up a chat group on Momo for Cantonese speakers. I joined the group with her permission. Although the group’s chat name contained the terms “movie” and “tabletop games,” during the entire duration of my fieldwork in 2016, the group members never met face to face for movies or tabletop games. All interactions happened on the app. The conversations centered mainly on daily life. On one occasion, a man flirted with a woman, inviting her to his home. The woman questioned his “size.” The conversation ended with both of them admitting they were simply kidding. Jennifer told me that this kind of sexual joke was quite common

in her chat group but no one took this type of conversations seriously. Nonetheless, she saw these trivial jokes as a welcome distraction from her life, which was mostly devoted to work and her son.

The above narratives show how dating apps have created a third place for my informants where they could enjoy another's company. Although this space was sometimes filled with sexual jokes, it was highly social in nature. The emotional bonding enabled friendships to form. This image of a third place is not commonly found in the narratives about dating app cultures in the West.

### A GATEWAY TO NEW WORLDS

Like social media, dating apps attract people from all walks of life. My informants had more opportunities to interact with people and try out alternative experiences by using dating apps. Wenwei, who declined to reveal her age, started using Tantan at the beginning of 2016 after her divorce. She said that her life "couldn't have been livelier since then." Katie provided me with more details of her experience:

In the past, I did not go to bars. But after chatting with [people on OkCupid], I have started going to bars with friends after work. I want to try new stuff, different things. There are so many different types of people with different lifestyles, I want to see more.

Meeting more people made Katie think about studying overseas to improve herself. An even more inspiring story was that of Xiaolan, who was twenty-three. Among all the straight female informants I interviewed, dating apps had the most profound impact on her personal life:

I once met a man from Slovakia. He said to me, "You don't know anything." I then read the BBC news like crazy, to gain a wealth of information. I have never been so curious about the world, never been so enthusiastic about knowledge.

These examples illustrate how female dating app users accumulate social capital from dating app use. Social capital is the actual or virtual resources a person can accrue from social relationships (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). There are two kinds of social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital is formed by wide but relatively shallow connections with people from different backgrounds who can provide diverse

information. Bonding social capital is based on strong relationships that offer trust and emotional support. Prior studies have shown that the use of social media contributes to both bonding and bridging social capital (e.g., Chen, 2011; Zhang, Tang, & Leung, 2011). The narratives of my informants—for example, “My social life is my life on Tantan” from Xiaojiao and “I want to try new stuff, different things” from Katie—demonstrate that dating apps are a source of both bonding and bridging social capital.

### CHALLENGES IN USING DATING APPS

Technology almost never has a one-sided influence on us. Julie Frizzo-Barker and Peter Chow-White (2012) found that working mothers benefited from the flexibility, efficiency, and connectivity afforded by smartphones. Simultaneously, they had to handle the stress that came with the “always on” lifestyle, complicating the way they reconciled their private identity as mothers and their public identity as workers. Although dating apps open up new possibilities for women, they also introduce new challenges. Interviewing female app users revealed three major challenges they faced and the measures they took to tackle these challenges.

### RESISTING THE STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH DATING APP USE

Research has shown that “slut shaming” is common in American dating app culture (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014; Lee, 2019). What is different in China is that simply using a dating app can jeopardize one’s reputation. Katie never mentioned to her friends that she was an OkCupid user: “In China, people like judging others. . . . If I use this app while others don’t, they will question my intention. ‘Why do you use this app to meet people?’ They will think you are weird.” The labeling of *yuepao shenqi* also contributes to this stigma. Like Katie, Jessica never said a word about using Momo to her friends. “I feel that if I mention Momo, people will basically associate it with *yuepao shenqi*. I will feel embarrassed, even though my major objective is to make friends.” The feeling of embarrassment has to be understood against the cultural assumption that women should be passive and subservient. Deviation

from this norm brands a woman a *dangfu*. Further, although Jessica did not want to be judged by her colleagues, when she told me she had come across a male colleague on Momo, she said it with a mix of teasing and disdain. This reaction perhaps represents the internalized stigma associated with using dating apps.

Some informants experienced firsthand negative judgments from others. One time, Nikki, age twenty-six, went on a date. The young man noticed Momo on her phone and questioned why she was using, in his words, “a thing like that.” Nikki explained to him that she downloaded the app simply because her friends were using it. She also had to delete the app in front of him to prove her innocence. Another case was Xiaolan. Her Tantan profile said, in English, “We can talk everything, including life, love, or something other [sic].” She told me she used to have a few sentences describing her sexual openness, but she had to delete them because some men on the app criticized her promiscuousness. Not every woman I interviewed hid her dating app use. Nonetheless, they selectively disclosed the information they believed their family or friends would accept. For instance, Xiaoshan told her husband back home that she used Momo, but she did not tell him that she hung out with people she met on the app. Xiaolan also told her roommates about Tantan, but she did not reveal the sexual encounters she had had.

These small denials hint at a deeper undercurrent in Chinese society. Although women are gaining sexual independence on a macro, societal level, as illustrated by the sexualization of female bodies and the rise of several female erotic writers I discuss earlier in this chapter, the scenarios above show that women’s sexuality is still under micro, interpersonal patriarchal control. Expressing and exercising sexual desires are still mainly reserved for men.

### ASSESSING MEN’S PURPOSES

Affordances provide possibilities. Through various affordances of dating apps, users may pursue different types of relationships. Being proximate to each other enables an easy coffee date, but some users may exploit this affordance for casual sex. Thus, my female informants wanted to identify the purposes of the male users they encountered. To do this,

they examined the men's photographs and written profiles and chatted with them.

Photographs are the dominant aspect of a dating app profile, which I call visibility (L. S. Chan, 2017b). My informants held different folk theories linking people's photographs and their relational goals. Wenwei told me she usually ignored profiles that contained only scenic photographs rather than faces. To her, the men behind these profiles were unwilling to disclose their identity and were not looking for a serious relationship. Nancy recounted an experience with a good-looking young man. She was interested in him until one night, she found that he had posted a shirtless photo. "Just looking at the photo made his objective very clear," she told me. "It was midnight. Obviously, he was looking for girls [to hook up with]."

My informants also found the length of the men's written profiles to be good indicators of their objectives. Katie said long and well-crafted profiles meant that the men were not into casual relationships. Conversely, "If nothing is written, I will find him unreliable," she supplemented. Polly agreed with Katie: "For men who use Momo for *yuepao*, they will not share their information. . . . If they are married and they share their authentic information there, . . . their family members might get involved."

Very often, a man's purpose cannot be identified from his static profile; his purpose may be best discovered through chat. Kangqi showed me her exchanges with a man she had added to WeChat. After asking if Kangqi was working, a benign topic, the man suggested going to her home and boasted about his sexual potency. Sometimes, men were less explicit in their sexual intent. Brady commented, "They give you a hint. . . . They usually suggest meeting at 10 p.m. It is too late for dinner or movies. So I won't accept the invitation." However, reading between the lines requires experience and practice. When she first became involved in the dating app scene, Rosy did not know what a single-word message *yue?* 约? (meet?) meant. She innocently thought it was referred to meeting up for coffee or for a movie. She later learned from Baidu, the Chinese counterpart of Wikipedia, that this was a coded word for hookups.

## HANDLING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The third common challenge my informants faced was handling unsolicited sexual requests and sexual harassment. All of the women reported being asked for hookups, regardless of which apps they were on. This phenomenon reflected both the public impression that these apps were *yuepao shenqi* and the increasing sexual openness of contemporary China. Dissociative anonymity—the opportunity to separate their online actions from their real-world identity—might also have encouraged some users to become more direct in soliciting casual sex from others (Suler, 2004).<sup>8</sup> These sexual solicitations were extremely direct, involving phrases like *yue bu yue?* 约不约? (meet or not meet?) or simply *yue?* as noted above. Even Kangqi, who used apps to look for sex, said that some men “are way too single-minded, pushy about hooking up with you.”

Although some of my informants used these apps for sexual experimentation, others regarded dating apps as a platform for romance, friendships, and exploring a new world. To this end, they developed various tactics, from being proactive to passive, to respond to undesirable sexual solicitations. The following are the four tactics I gathered from my informants' experiences.

The first, a proactive one, was to preemptively indicate one's rejection of casual sex on one's profile. On her Momo profile, Polly wrote, “*Ni ai wo, ta gun; ni ai ta, ni gun; yuepao zhe, gun* 你爱我，她滚；你爱她，你滚；约炮者，滚” (If you love me, she gets out; if you love her, you get out; asking for hookups, get out). Amanda's statement on Tantan was concise: “*Bu yue zhi liao* 不约只聊” (Not for hookups, just for chat). Because Tantan shows users how many people have “liked” their profiles, Amanda found that after putting this statement on her profile, she received fewer “likes” per day. Coco, age thirty-four, wrote, “*Ni gan re wo shishi* 你敢惹我试试” (Don't you dare proposition me) on her Tantan profile.

Were these statements effective? Yes, but not always. Although Polly, Amanda, and Coco reported fewer sexual requests after putting these statements on their profiles, Jennifer told me that her warning message did not decrease the number of sexually harassing messages she received. The failure of the first tactic led to the second one, which was to report harassers to the app. This tactic is reactive because women report

offenders after receiving a harassing message. Commenting on Momo, Jennifer said, “The administrators . . . will delete [harassers’] accounts immediately if they receive complaints.” The administrators, according to Jennifer, reviewed the past ten message exchanges between her and the suspected harasser. It took only a couple of minutes for the harasser’s account to be removed. In her workplace, however, Jennifer and her female colleagues rarely reported sexual harassment: “It is inappropriate to report . . . unless you are thinking about quitting.” What we see here is that being a female dating app user gave her more power than being a female employee in the workplace.

The third tactic was blocking or ignoring the harassers. While reporting harassers to administrators could result in their accounts being permanently removed, blocking or ignoring harassers allowed them to stay. This was not a passive tactic but an empathetic one because women who adopted it tended to agree that hookups were “normal.” Fanny, age thirty-one, said, “It is a separate issue that I don’t [hook up], but the existence of this practice is perfectly normal.” If any of the men she met on Tantan implied they had sexual intentions, she stopped replying to them. Similarly, Yiping, age thirty-eight, ignored or blocked harassers because she said any reply provided them with positive reinforcement. She remarked that the hookup culture was

Inevitable. . . . These young people do not need to go through the sexual liberation period. They do not need to be “liberated.” They were born in an environment where [hookups] are as normal as drinking water.

The final tactic was a passive one: to quit. In their study of gay men quitting Grindr, Jed Brubaker, Mike Ananny, and Kate Crawford (2016) found that people left Grindr partly because the app was too much about casual sex and was therefore dehumanizing. Similarly, several women told me that they had uninstalled dating apps because of the disgusting messages they received. Chloe, age twenty-three, was hoping she could meet friends on Momo, but she deleted the app immediately after a man asked her for a hookup. Jennifer and Kangqi also uninstalled Tantan because there were too many, as Jennifer put it, “people like that” on the app.

## LIBERATING OR DISCIPLINING?

When studying the social significance of mobile phones to young Chinese migrant women working in Beijing, Cara Wallis (2013) coined the phrase “immobile mobility” to point to a contradictory observation. Although young women have surpassed physical and social boundaries through their mobile devices, they have continued to occupy a relatively low position on the socioeconomic ladder. Wallis’s analysis suggests that, to evaluate the feminist potential of a technology, we cannot isolate the technology from the larger sociopolitical context in which it is used. Based on the narratives of my informants, what should we conclude about the feminist potential of dating apps? Do dating apps reproduce or disrupt the existing gender inequality in the broader context of women in China? I argue that, on the surface, dating apps and their various affordances provided my informants with opportunities to disrupt the oppressive patriarchy. In the following discussion, I highlight three such disruptions. Nevertheless, I also emphasize that each of these progressive developments masks an underlying structural gender inequality.

First, dating apps, such as Momo and Tantan, provide a medium for people such as Xiaojiao and Queenie to explore sexual desires and assert sexual agency. As Pei (2013) describes, some female writers have developed a distinct gender identity by writing erotic novels. In this same register, my informants’ sexual experiments on dating apps helped them develop their female sexual identity. These apps became an arena where they could negotiate and participate in hookups, an activity that was and is still widely perceived to be exclusive to men. Kangqi was pursuing open relationships through the dating apps. The pursuit of multiple sexual relationships in China, as Pei argues, is a manifestation of women reworking the traditional sexual script that stresses sexual exclusivity. In this sense, dating apps have created more equitable gender relations in terms of sexual exploration, one that was not available in prior infrastructure of intimacy such as *xiangqin*.

Even though dating apps seem to be a liberating space for women to develop their gender identity, they experience condemnation for using them. Recall that Xiaolan had to rewrite her Tantan profile to hide her sexual intent after being criticized by men on the very same app. As a

result of social stigma, women had to keep their use of dating apps private. Using dating apps, regardless of the purpose, could invite harsh judgments from others. To reword Gayle Rubin's (1984) summary of sexual negativity, "dating apps are presumed guilty until proven innocent."<sup>9</sup> Nikki, who had Momo installed in her phone, was pressured to uninstall it in front of her date. What is under male surveillance now is not just women's sexuality but their use of technology.

Second, younger women, such as Brady, told me they enjoyed looking at pictures of men on dating apps, subverting the subject-object gender structure. The notion of the "gaze," a manifestation of power and pleasure, has been widely discussed in psychoanalysis and film theory. Instead of the classic arrangement in which male audiences look at female characters (Mulvey, 1975), these young women derive gratification from looking at men's photographs on their phones. When swiping or clicking, they are also judging the appearances of these men in a privatized form of a beauty pageant. Although they are at the same time being looked at by men, dating apps break away from the traditional unidirectional gaze of men at women, giving them opportunities that were not available in earlier eras. A similar subversion is observed by Lisa Wade (2017), who found that, in American campus hookup culture, female students rejected sexism by objectifying men back.

This temporary visual gratification, however empowering in the short term, has not altered the derogatory cultural discourse of *shengnü*. Brady and Rosy were too young to face parental and societal pressures to get married. Their youth allowed them to merely look at photographs of men without worrying about being single. Other informants, such as Jessica and Nancy, who were just three or four years older than Brady and others, had already confronted pressure from their family and relatives. Jessica complained: "People will ask [my parents], 'Has your daughter gotten married yet? Does your daughter have problems? How come she doesn't have a boyfriend at her age?'" Earlier research has shown how single women have resisted this stigmatized label of *shengnü* (Gaetano, 2014). Some emphasized their career ambitions, while others said they believed in the equal division of household duties between spouses. Still other women tried to change the narrative by insisting that they were not left behind but chose to be single. These narratives, however, are predicated

on the material and financial success of women. Therefore, they cannot be appropriated by *all* women. Furthermore, *shengnü* and *dangfu*—two powerful symbols—work together to stigmatize women. If you do not use dating apps, you risk becoming the former; if you use dating apps, you risk being called the latter.

Finally, in response to the state's denunciation, Momo underwent "sanitization" (T. Liu, 2016). Since then, Momo and other apps have strived to build a harassment-free space where women can report harassment to administrators. Violators are banished from the apps. This practice was appreciated by Jennifer, who rarely reported sexual harassment at her workplace. Dating app companies, in this regard, have acted as feminist allies, eradicating online sexual harassment and challenging the gender structure that has always favored men.

Although I applaud the dating apps for their harassment alerts and report systems, the contrast between this corporate initiative and the state's reluctance to combat offline harassment suggests that the state is shifting the responsibility to protect women onto companies. In 2016, a Guangzhou-based grassroots feminist group planned an anti-sexual harassment billboard campaign in the subway system (Lin, 2017). This could have been China's first subway advertisement to counter sexual harassment. However, after a year-long negotiation with the Guangzhou Administration for Industry and Commerce, the group's campaign was not approved and was never launched. The state's justified its refusal by claiming that the depiction of a human hand might cause public anxiety and asserting that grassroots organizations were not allowed to engage in public service advertising. This was hardly the only time the Chinese state had quashed efforts to reduce sexual harassment and gendered violence. The Chinese human rights activist Jinyan Zeng (2015) found numerous cases of violence against women in which local governments had not intervened. In December 2018, the Guangzhou Gender and Sexuality Education Center was also shut down, possibly due to its advocacy of women's rights (Feng, 2018). Together, these cases illustrate that in China, citizens' security is outsourced to companies by the state whenever the issue involved is deemed politically sensitive. The state's retreat from providing welfare to its citizens and the shifting of such duties to private companies are characteristics of neoliberalism (Harvey,

2005). When commercial entities such as Momo discipline online sexual harassers, women feel their voices are heard. However, the offline harassment of women remains untouched, unchallenged, and undisciplined by the state. Women can quit apps if they face online harassment; but they cannot quit their lives when harassment happens in their homes, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

The question of whether a dating app is a feminist technology is complicated by this contradictory evidence on identity, labels, and the changing gender structure. On the surface, dating apps seem to have led to more equitable gender relations. Based on Johnson's (2010) typology, these apps may be considered feminist. However, as Judy Wajcman (1991) suggests, technology can be used as a lens to view the larger culture. Through this perspective, it is apparent that dating apps are embedded in a larger sociopolitical environment where women are still subjected to surveillance with few legal protections.

So what does the future hold when a particular technology promotes more equitable gender relations only in a highly specific digital context while it is situated in an inequitable society in general? If we take the central tenant of technofeminism seriously—that technology shapes and is shaped by gender relations—we will expect one of three eventualities. The first possibility is that the liberation brought forth by a feminist technology in the specific digital context will have a spillover effect to the general society, which later becomes a favorable environment for more feminist technologies. The second possibility is that the hegemonic power inherent in the general society is so strong that it gradually takes away the disruptive potentials of the feminist technology, turning it into another conduit for patriarchy. The third possibility, which is theoretically possible but unrealistic, is the development of two separate spheres where gender relations are more equal in one sphere than the other.

I believe the first outcome is what feminist scholars and I would like to witness in the future. However, we cannot treat dating apps simply as a celebration of feminism as long as they conceal structural gender inequalities that have far-reaching ramifications. At best, dating apps can be liberating tools for women to exercise sexual agency, assert power over men through a feminine gaze, and be protected from sexual harassment.

At their worst, however, such apps hide the structural gender inequality embedded in the sexual double standard, marriage expectations, and state policies. To advance women's rights in contemporary China requires a fundamental change in the sociopolitical environment, not merely a technical solution.

## CONCLUSION

The stories of my straight female informants have related the gendered experiences of using dating apps in China. These narratives have also demonstrated a characteristic of networked sexual publics: using dating apps is a nuanced experience that cannot be boiled down to a typology of motives. For example, although it is true that my informants used dating apps to look for sex, they discussed experimenting with love and sex, topics absent from their formal education. It is also true that they used dating apps to search for Mr. Right; however, such a desire was driven by the fear of being called *shengnü*. Attending to their personal circumstances and the Chinese social context allows us to more fully understand what dating apps mean to them.

Moreover, these female app users faced different challenges when using dating apps. Because dating apps are associated with *yuepao shenqi*, using them constitutes a taboo—one that applies more to women than to men. One of my informants deleted the app in front of her date. Others hid their dating app use or selectively disclosed to their friends and family how they used the apps. My informants also developed various methods to assess men's purposes, from judging the length of the men's written profiles to chatting with them. When they faced unsolicited sexual requests or sexual harassment, they engaged in one of four tactics—proactively indicating their revulsion against casual sex on their profiles, reactively reporting harassers to the app's administrators, ignoring harassing messages, or passively quitting the app. Although dating apps in certain ways have empowered women in China, once the larger sociopolitical environment is taken into consideration, it becomes apparent that the empowerment provided by the apps is bound by space: it does not extend beyond these apps. The everyday environment in China does not offer women equal respect or adequate protection.

Unlike cyberfeminism, which wishfully believes in the liberating potential of technology, a more grounded technofeminist perspective reminds us that technology alone cannot ameliorate a societal problem. Dating apps are not an antidote to gender inequality. Part of the reason is that it takes two to tango; dating apps are also used by men who compete for power. A way to assert dominance, then, is through the performance of masculinity. That is the focus of the next chapter.