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The Politics of Dating Apps

Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China

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CYCLES OF UNINSTALLING AND REINSTALLING: CONTRADICTORY AFFECTS IN GAY APP USE

> I have uninstalled [the app] multiple times. It is a cycle. I believe many Blued users have a similar experience to mine. For this app, after you uninstall it, you install again. Then [you] feel it is meaningless and uninstall it again. For different reasons or feeling upset, you just don't want to log onto the app. Then you re-install it the next day.

I quietly listened to River, age twenty-six and gay-identifying,[1] describe his entanglement with Blued, a dating app that he had been using for six years. His repetitive uninstalling and installing of a dating app for reasons unrelated to finding a romantic partner was a rather distinctive phenomenon observed primarily among my queer male informants.[2] In this chapter, I explore this phenomenon through the lens of affect. My arguments are twofold. First, I argue that this phenomenon is a manifestation of the ambivalence toward gay dating apps felt by my queer male informants. Second, I also suggest that these contradictory emotions emerged from both using these apps and living as gay men in China.

A plethora of studies have been conducted on why we adopt or abandon a specific communication technology. For instance, the technology acceptance model (TAM) (F. Davis, 1989), a major theory in the field, explains why we adopt particular information systems in an organization. According to this model, the perceived usefulness and ease of use of a system are two major predictors of the intention to use it. This model

and its variations have received robust support in empirical studies outside organizational contexts, examining, for example, the adoption of social media (e.g., Choi & Chung, 2013; Dutot, 2014; Rauniar, Rawski, Yang, & Johnson, 2014). Meanwhile, research on abandoning a digital medium has been more limited. Based on the nascent scholarship on nonuse and abandonment (e.g., Birnholtz, 2010; Mainwaring, Chang, & Anderson, 2004; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), Jed Brubaker, Mike Ananny, and Kate Crawford (2016) explore why people quit Grindr. The reasons they have identified include the following: (1) users found that using the app was time-consuming, (2) they were unable to look for the relationships they wanted on the app, (3) similar profiles always showed up, and (4) the app promoted the culture of "always keep looking" (p. 380). This analysis might very well explain why people disconnect from a dating app. However, it does not show why people reconnect again in the cycles that characterized queer Chinese men's use of dating apps. In his study on gay men's use of an online dating website in Australia, Elija Cassidy (2018) proposes the useful idea of "participatory reluctance" to capture the constant tug of war between use and nonuse, what he defines as "participation in a state of discontent—neither fully active or absent" (p. 7). Although his informants recognized that the relationships they wanted could not be fulfilled on the site, they found no alternative to socialize with other gay men. Therefore, they had no choice but to continue using the website.

The explanations above share two motifs. All authors appeal to users' cognitive appraisal of the usefulness or rewards derived from using a specific technology. In addition, they use in-app experiences to explain for connections and disconnections. Elaborating on his "media go-along" methodology, Kristian Jørgensen (2016) points out that "both navigation and its associated feelings constitute the media environment as a place for the user" (pp. 38–39) in the dating app context. In other words, users emotionally engage with the media environment through feelings, which help them navigate and make sense of it. By turning to affect in this chapter, I move away from the cognitive paradigm exemplified by TAM. The option I explore is to treat dating apps as an "affective fabric" (Kuntsman, 2012) interwoven with various kinds of emotional threads across multiple contexts. Specifically, I argue that the ambivalence my

queer male informants felt toward the dating apps came from their in-app experiences and that such ambivalence was also deeply rooted in the queer politics of China. I call this second type of emotions "out-of-app emotions," as opposed to "in-app emotions," which are triggered by the direct use of the apps.

To support my argument, I first offer an abridged history of male homosexuality and some data on gay dating app usage in China. This background information is needed to understand the affective dimension of queer politics in China, which is very different from that in the United States. Since the mid-1990s, social sciences and humanities scholars have turned their attention to affect and emotions. I differentiate two different "schools" of affect theory (Schaefer, 2015). The first school considers affect and emotion as two distinct registers, whereas the second uses the words *affect* and *emotion* interchangeably. My thought aligns more with the second school. Specifically, I draw on the theories of Sara Ahmed (2004b, 2010) about the intricate relationship between emotions, objects, and experiences. Using her concepts, I analyze the source of ambivalence reported by my queer male informants in relation to dating apps and discuss why such ambivalence was not prevalent among my straight informants.

LIFE AS A GAY MAN IN URBAN CHINA

Although descriptions of male same-sex practices are not uncommon in Chinese historical records, prior to the twentieth century traditional Chinese culture did not have a specific term for homosexuality (Chou, 2002).[3] It was not until the 1910s and 1920s, when medical journals, magazines, and sex education manuals from the United Kingdom and Germany were translated into Chinese, that the term *homosexuality* was introduced into the Chinese lexicon (Sang, 2003).[4] From that time, writers began using pejorative terms such as *pi* 癖 (obsession) and *renyao* 人妖 (human monster) to refer to men who have sex with men (Kang, 2009).[5] Coinciding with this development, the first half of the twentieth century saw the downfall of the nation, due in large part to the threat of Japanese imperialist expansion. In these turbulent times, a generation of cultural conservatives and tabloid writers began to treat male homosexuality "as a

cause of moral confusion, a symptom of political corruption, a social vice, a crime, a sign of colonial oppression and national humiliation, and a behavior alien to the Chinese" (p. 86). These writers began to pathologize homosexuality as a dire threat to national identity.

When the Communist Party of China (CPC) founded modern China in 1949, no law explicitly criminalized male homosexuality. However, if a man was found engaging in same-sex activities, he would be sanctioned by the party or sent to a labor camp (Davis & Friedman, 2014). In 1978, male homosexuality was officially outlawed. Falling under the vaguely defined crime of "hooliganism," male same-sex activities were codified as a cause of public disorder. According to Yinhe Li (2014), the first mention of homosexuality in the mass media appeared in *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the CPC, in 1980. The newspaper linked homosexuality with the fall of spirituality and moral degradation in the West. In 1986, the first AIDS case was reported in China, which the media framed as the consequence of living a Western liberal lifestyle. Thereafter, the second edition of the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders*, published in 1989, classified homosexuality as a mental disorder. In a nutshell, from the 1970s to the 1990s, being gay in China went from being regarded as immoral to being illegal and even a mental disorder.

The government and medical establishment changed their stance toward homosexuality around the turn of the twenty-first century, which shifted how gay men perceived themselves. In 1997, the law against male homosexuality was abolished. In 2001, the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* removed homosexuality as a mental illness. During this time, a disparate "structure of feelings" (Williams, 1961) between the older and younger generations also emerged. Based on his extensive interviews with gay men living in China, Travis Kong (2011) reported that those who were born in the 1980s celebrated their differences and individuality. Comparatively, earlier cohorts had internalized homophobia and felt ashamed of their feelings. This shift partly occurred because younger generation growing up in the 2000s greatly benefited from the Chinese economic reform in three ways. First, economic reform brought in commercial media programs that publicly addressed the issue of homosexuality. Second, the establishment of consumption venues such as bars,

karaoke lounges, and bathhouses offered physical venues where gay men could meet. Third, the rise of the internet facilitated gay men's exploration and development of their sexual identity. The earliest gay-oriented websites started appearing around 1998 (Ho, 2010). One of Kong's (2011) informants described the internet as "the real enlightenment" (p. 163) because it provided gay men with nonpathological information about being gay and suggested ways to connect to the larger queer community.

However, gay men accepting themselves and building their community did not translate into mainstream acceptance among the Chinese public. Even today, gay men are not completely free from social discrimination (Liu & Choi, 2006). A 2013 Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that only 21 percent of the population in China agreed that society should accept homosexuality, compared with 54 percent in Japan and 39 percent in South Korea (Pew Research Center, 2013).[6] Currently, social pressures primarily come from the workplace and family. In corporations and government departments, married men are considered to be more responsible and stable and are therefore more likely to be promoted. Gay men who are not married to women have fewer career advancement opportunities. Further, the Chinese family exerts tremendous pressure on marriage. Kong's (2011) informants had to devise various tactics to handle such pressure. Some avoided mentioning anything related to relationships or marriage. Others told their parents they did not have the time or money to marry. Still others engaged in "cooperative marriage," a fake marriage between a gay man and a lesbian that has become increasingly popular (Choi & Luo, 2016).

The advent of smartphones further shaped the way gay men connect with each other. Grindr, the gay dating app pioneer, was launched in 2009 in the United States, two years after the iPhone was released. In China, Blued, the first locally developed dating app for men who are interested in men, was founded in 2012 by Geng Le.[7] Following Blued, the local apps Zank and Aloha were launched in 2013 and 2014, respectively.[8] At the time of writing, Western apps such as Grindr and Jack'd can be used in China, but their connections are not stable; furthermore, because Grindr and Jack'd are available only in English, many gay men

in China prefer using local apps that are in Chinese. Although nationally representative user statistics are unavailable, studies conducted by private analytic agencies and information released by the app companies indicate that local dating apps are extremely popular among gay men in China. In June 2015, Blued reached three million daily active users (Dou, 2015). One big data research agency found that in 2015, out of the pool of 120 million monthly active smartphone phone users it monitored, 460,000 used Blued, 207,000 used Zank, and 71,000 used Aloha (Analysys, 2016). All of these apps operate on geolocation information and provide "people nearby," "swiping," "status updates," and "live streaming" features (see chapter 1).

The overview provided above shows that, undoubtedly, the life of gay men in China has become easier in the last two decades due to decriminalization, depathologization, and economic reform. The increasing popularity of dating apps now offers gay men in China new ways to connect. Nonetheless, being gay is still not entirely socially acceptable in this country. Later in this chapter, I explain how users translate these complicated social circumstances into contradictory emotions through dating apps. But before I dive into the lived stories of my informants, I explain my understanding of affect and emotion to support my analysis.

AFFECTS AND QUEER POLITICS

Affect theory concerns the noncognitive component underlying embodied experiences. Rather than being a coherent theory, affect theory is a set of competing ideas without a clear consensus. Donovan Schaefer (2015) identifies two schools of affect theory—the Deleuzian school and the phenomenological school. The Deleuzian school, which includes theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Patricia Clough, and Eric Shouse, contends that affect is pure intensity that structures our experiences. It is completely different from emotions in the sense that affect is a force our body feels before our consciousness recognizes it. To put it simply, once an affect can be named—that is, it is recognized consciously—it is no longer an affect; it becomes an emotion (Shouse, 2005).

The phenomenological school, which includes figures such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Sara Ahmed, uses the terms *affect* and *emotion*

interchangeably. Their theoretical perspective emphasizes embodied experiences. The analytical distinction between affect and emotion, in Ahmed's words (2004a), "risks cutting emotions off from the lived experiences of being and having a body" (p. 39). Schaefer (2015) himself argues that the separation of affect and emotion in the Deleuzian school has created a dualism that Deleuzian philosophy is eager to push back against. More important, theorizing affect as pure intensity means reducing the phenomenologically diverse experience to an abstract, singular modality, similar to reducing different colors, which are phenomenologically unique to our senses, into pure light waves. My view of affect is more in line with the phenomenological school because the affects experienced by my informants in their use of dating apps were deeply social. Their emotions were heavily shaped by both the long social history of homosexuality in China and their immediate personal experiences with dating apps.

Influenced by the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick (2003) writes, "affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects" (p. 19).[9] Ahmed (2004b) further elaborates on how emotions can be "attached" to things. She refutes the idea that emotions come internally from the individual psyche or externally from things. Instead, she views emotions as cultural and social practices embedded in histories. According to her, they result from contacts between the individual and the social, which then "produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (p. 10). In this sense, emotions are performative because they generate new associations and maintain existing associations between the individual and the social. Following the logic of capital accumulation, Ahmed's "affective economy" describes how a certain emotion builds up through circulation. Emotions form through interactions between individuals and things, then further interactions are interpreted through these emotions.

Affect theory is intimately related to queer studies through feelings of shame and pride. A profound articulation of shame and queer lives was put forth in Sedgwick's influential essay "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*" (1993). In it she writes, "if queer is a

politically potent term, which it is, that's because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" (p. 4). Citing Tomkins, Sedgwick argues that shame delineates identity because "shame, as opposed to guilt, is a bad feeling that does not attach to what one does, but to what one is" (p. 12). Jon Elster (1999) defines shame as "a negative emotion triggered by a belief about one's *own character*" and guilt as "a negative emotion triggered by a belief about one's *own action*" (p. 21, emphasis added). Queer shame is based on a convincing belief that the heteronormative world is right and that being queer is undeniably wrong. To live a queer life, therefore, is to perpetually fail to meet the norms of the heteronormative world. Comparing the regulative norms of heteronormativity to "repetitive strain injuries," Ahmed (2004b) contends that "through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being oriented in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted" (p. 145). Queer bodies hurt when they are forced to conform to heteronormative molds.

Since the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York, pride has become a major rhetoric used by gay rights activists to counter the mainstream discourse where gay men are ridiculed for their abnormal sexual practices and blamed for causing the HIV/AIDS outbreak. For some activists, pride has been treated as an antidote to shame. Elster (1999) defines pridefulness as "a positive emotion triggered by a belief about one's *own character*," whereas pride is "a positive emotion triggered by a belief about one's *own action*" (p. 22, emphasis added).[10] Similar to Ahmed, Erin Rand (2012) suggests that emotions are social and historical products, not simple psychological traits. The emergence of gay pride in the United States was tightly connected to sociopolitical circumstances. In the United States, citizens are protected by the First Amendment, which grants them freedom of speech and the right to peaceful assembly. However, the assimilationist stance and neoliberalization of gay pride have frustrated some American queer activists and scholars, who from the late 1990s started organizing "Gay Shame" to revive shame as a ground for collective resistance (Halperin & Traub, 2009).

Whether the discomfort felt by queer bodies about shame or pride in the gay movement, affects have often been ignored in traditional

disciplines that have focused on social structures, economic disparities, and institutional arrangements. Heather Love, in an interview with Sarah Chinn (2012), said, "Without attention to affect I think it's a real struggle to articulate and explain the way that oppression registers at small scales—in everyday interactions, in gesture, tone of voice, etc." (p. 126). Therefore, in the following analysis, I take up this challenge by discussing emotions that my queer male informants articulated when they described their experiences with dating apps. I am not concerned with whether the emotions I identify are basic or synthetic emotions or whether I have produced an exhaustive list. After all, even psychologists of emotion disagree on how many basic emotions there are.[11] What is important is not the exact number of basic emotions we have but what emotions do (Ahmed, 2004b). Some emotions pull people closer to an object, while others push them away.

From the rich personal narratives of my queer male informants, I differentiate in-app emotions, which are directly derived from the everyday use of dating apps, from out-of-app emotions, which are rooted primarily in the way male homosexuality is treated in contemporary Chinese society. I also identify positive emotions that drive users closer to dating apps and negative emotions that pushed them away from the apps. Dichotomizing emotions into positive and negative may appear to oversimplify the complexity of human emotions. However, I argue that positive and negative emotions are not mutually exclusive because my informants oftentimes experienced several emotions within a very short period of time. Identifying the valence of emotions also delivered analytical value. Understanding these contradictory emotions and the oscillation of positive and negative feelings is vital to the puzzle I outlined at the start of this chapter: what led my queer male informants to cyclically install and delete these dating apps?

IN-APP EMOTIONS

POSITIVE EMOTION: JOY

During our interviews, my informants often expressed moments of joy when they recalled their experiences using dating apps. With an app's global positioning system, users can find other queer men who are

physically nearby. Roderic Crooks (2013) calls the virtual space created by these apps an "ad hoc social space." Yoel Roth (2014), in his critical reading of Scruff, a popular app in Western countries, suggests that this overlaying of a virtual, digital space on top of an actual, physical place created a heterogeneous space where queerness can coexist with heterosexuality. A McDonald's, a church, or a cafeteria can immediately be turned into a gay space with these apps.

My informants generally agreed that dating apps had allowed them to connect with each other. Gay bars in Guangzhou are scattered around the city and are often found in hidden locations. Many of my younger informants either did not know where these bars were, or if they had visited them, they preferred not to speak with strangers. In addition, consumption at these venues was not cheap. A standard cocktail in a well-known gay bar or restaurant in the city cost CNY60 (~USD9), which was considered expensive because many of my informants made CNY5,000 (~USD725) or less per month. Therefore, dating apps provided them with an economical way to meet other queer men in the city.

Gay dating apps also tell their users the exact physical distance between themselves and others (figure 4.1).[12] This indicates the likelihood of an offline interaction because greater distances reduce the intention to meet. Commenting on the dating app Blued, the gay-identifying man named Green, age twenty-four, said, "The app can easily locate people who are nearby, making it easier to meet face to face for chit-chat or a coffee. So I think it can help me find a person whom I can have a great conversation with." Similar to my heterosexual informants, distance matters more in romantic relationships. Yuan, age twenty-six and gay-identifying, commented, "Distance matters. I think five kilometers are still acceptable, but some people think it is already too far. . . . But beyond 10 kilometers is like, a long-distance relationship."

Although dating apps afford visibility and authenticity, users can choose to remain anonymous. On registering for a dating app account, users are asked to set up their profiles by uploading photographs and filling out their personal information. Some Western apps, such as Tinder, link users' profiles to their Facebook accounts. However, most gay dating apps in China do not require users to disclose their information
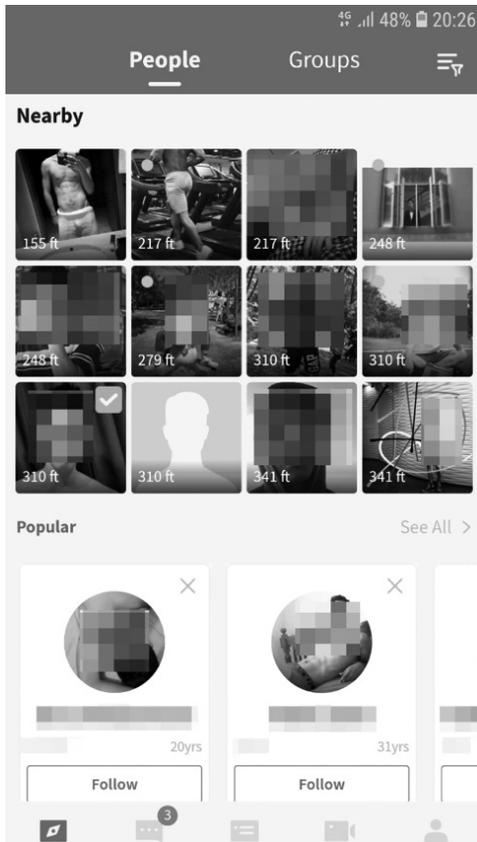
Figure 4.1
Blued shows the exact distance between users. (Screenshot taken by the author on July 21, 2018)

on their profile. For example, Blued allows users to upload photographs and asks for ten pieces of demographic information; however, users can either leave this blank or provide fake information (figure 4.2). Blued users can apply for an official verification of their face photograph. To accomplish this, they must upload a video that clearly shows their face on the platform. The platform then compares this video with their other photographs on the app. Once verified, a check mark will appear next to the profile. However, this feature was not popular among Blued users when I conducted my research.[13]
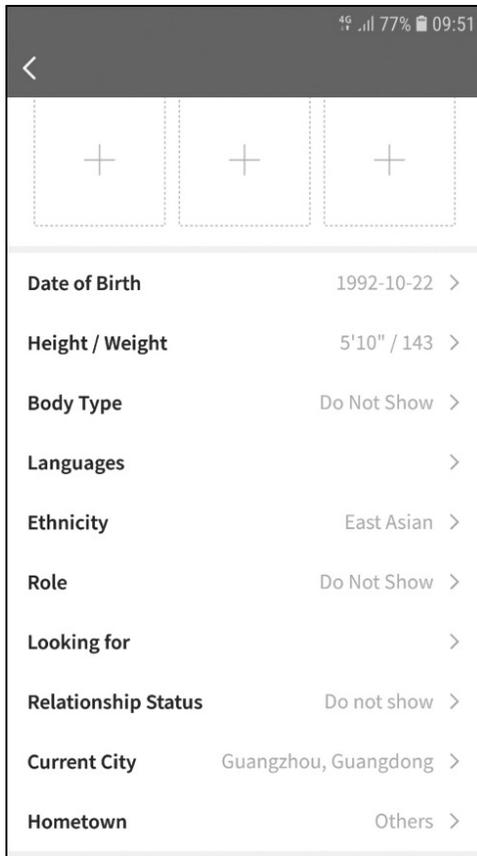
Figure 4.2
Blued allows users to upload photographs and asks for ten pieces of demographic information. (Screenshot taken by the author on July 21, 2018)

Given the ability to hide their identity, my queer male informants said they felt freer to exercise their sexual desires. For instance, Yuan had experienced cybersex via his smartphone's camera with people he had met on Blued. He accepted this practice only because "this won't leak information about your everyday life." Even with people he had known for some time, he still hid his face from the video, pointing out that he was "wearing a mask to act."

Compared with previous decades, the modern era and its technological progress had given my informants supreme anonymity. In earlier eras,

queer men relied on subtle body language and accessories (such as ear-rings or handkerchiefs) to determine the sexual orientation of someone they encountered in a public space, and police raids of public bathrooms were commonplace. With dating apps in their hands, queer men did not have to worry about misrecognizing a straight man as gay or being caught by the police when they sought casual sex. These rewards sustained my informants' continued use of the dating apps.

NEGATIVE EMOTIONS: ANGER AND DISGUST

In-app experiences are not always positive. A common complaint among my informants was that using dating apps risked being deceived because the users of online dating sites often misrepresented themselves (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Whitty, 2008). In Chinese dating app culture, one's *yanzhi* 颜值 (literally, the "the value of one's face") (S. Wang, 2020) has a significant impact on how popular one is on an app. Therefore, the use of fake photographs or photograph enhancement is common-place. Xiaoming, age twenty-one and identifying as a male *tongzhi*, once encountered a man impersonating someone else: "I chatted with person B before and person B sent me a photo of his. Then person B talked to per-son A and sent his photo to person A as well. When I chatted with person A, he sent me person B's photo." Xiaoming was outraged at this transgres-sion. Experiences like this made my informants extremely suspicious of others' photographs. For instance, Erza, age twenty-four and identifying as a man who desires other men, estimated that out of ten profiles on Blued, three or four used fake photographs and another three or four used edited photographs. Prior research has found that if the discrepancy between the online persona and the offline persona falls within a rea-sonable range, it is often tolerated or even expected (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012). However, my informants considered fake photographs unreasonable and were greatly irritated by them.

Back in 2014, when I started conducting research on dating apps in China, I encountered an interesting profile on Jack'd—a complaint.[14] The profile creator used photographs of Ye Haiyan, a prominent Chinese feminist activist. Under the "About me" section, this creator criticized another's online profile for providing fake information:

> There is a person sending out fake photos every day. He keeps chang-ing his information, sometimes in Shenzhen, sometimes in Wuhan, and sometimes in Hong Kong. His age, height, and weight are changed all of the time. The only thing that he does not change is asking for dick pics from others. Don't you feel tired? . . . Can't you be sincerer? You are not handsome; you are not outstanding. No one is interested to know who you really are. If you really regard yourself as a big gun and are afraid of fans' following you, you don't have to send photos. Sending fake photos and, what's worse, web photos that others have been sending out for some time? Don't you think you are very "low"?[15]

This profile highlights the prevalence of fake information on dating apps and indicates how angry the writer of the critique was. Further, it speaks to another issue that my informants found disgusting—harassment. In chapter 2, I pointed out that my straight female informants received unsolicited sexual requests from men on dating apps. My queer male informants shared similar experiences. In the words of Huajun, who was twenty-eight and identified as gay, on dating apps "you cannot choose to be disturbed or not to be disturbed."

Harassment occurred pretty often on Blued because the app allows users to send messages to anyone at any time. Allen, age twenty-four and identifying as gay, lamented,

> I met a forty-year-old "uncle."[16] He was extremely disturbing. As long as you were on Blued, you would notice that he sent you a message every two days. You had already clearly rejected him, but he still kept messaging. . . . He also sent photos. . . . I told him not to disturb me anymore, but he did not listen. Eventually, I blacklisted him.

Harassing messages can be very direct. The most common one my informants received was yue? 约? (meet?). This one-word message implied meeting for sex. Messages can be vulgar, too, with language like "I want to suck your dick" or including an unsolicited "dick pic." Some of my informants even encountered harassers who teased them for being naïve because they were looking for friends on these apps. In their critical analysis of the prevalence of dick pics in Western digital culture, Susanna Paasonen, Ben Light, and Kylie Jarrett (2019) write, "dick pics are perva-sive within dating and hook up apps used by same-sex attracted men and are a generally accepted actor within this sexual infrastructure" (p. 6). Yet dick pics are definitely not common in Chinese gay dating app culture,

at least from my informants' perspective. The ubiquity and acceptance of dick pics to which Paasonen et al. refer do not match up with the experiences in China, and such overgeneralizations may lack cultural specificity.

Another issue pertaining to geoinformation is that locative information is available to *both* parties on dating apps. This feature brought another layer of discomfort to my informants. Damon, age twenty-five and identifying as gay, explained to me that when someone knew how close he was, he had difficulty rejecting an invitation. "He and I live in the same building, and he has constantly invited me to hang out or visit his home. It is so difficult to reject." Eventually, Damon stopped using Blued and switched to an app that showed him only people from different cities.

My informants regarded such harassing and annoying behaviors as "low" or lacking *suzhi* 素质 (quality), as indicated in the profile I translated above. The word *suzhi* "justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts, with those of 'high' quality gaining more income, power and status than the 'low'" (Kipnis, 2006, p. 295). In the Chinese gay culture, the *suzhi* discourse has often been used to discriminate against so-called money boys who come to the city from rural China (Ho, 2010; Kong, 2011; Rofel, 2007). My informants, however, used this term less to refer to money boys than to describe older gay men who bluntly, explicitly, and persistently solicited sex from them even though they had already clearly rejected such solicitations. My informants did not object to seeking casual sex on dating apps or being propositioned. Rather, they objected to being disturbed again after they had rejected the initial solicitation. The lack of *suzhi*, in this context, refers to an online etiquette that the older app users failed to comply with. The case of Allen and his forty-year-old admirer illustrates the point.

OUT-OF-APP EMOTIONS

POSITIVE EMOTION: HOPE

Apart from joy, my informants' experiences revealed an additional layer of emotion emanating from their experiences of living as gay men in contemporary China. This was the hope of gaining social acceptance.

As I mentioned above, the dominant rhetoric in Western LGBTQ activism is pride. However, due to limited freedom of speech and assembly in China, large-scale LGBTQ events are rarely seen. For example, the Beijing Queer Film Festival, which started in 2001 as the Beijing Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, was repeatedly raided by the police until it was eventually stopped in 2014 (P. Fan, 2015). The award-winning gay romance *Call Me by Your Name* was suddenly removed from the Beijing International Film Festival by the organizer in 2018. During my fieldwork, Guangzhou Gay Pride events were canceled just a few days before they opened. One of my informants told me that the event could proceed only as an underground private affair. In 2016, China voted in the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council against the establishment of the mandate of the UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In 2019, it again refused to recognize rights by voting against the mandate's renewal. Thus, if feelings of pride are a reaction to the things that someone has done (Elster, 1999), currently the local Chinese queer community has little to feel proud of. It has made no significant accomplishments and failed to enact legal protections from discrimination.

However, hope works on a different logic. It looks to the future, not the present. Simply put, hope is the expectation that something good may happen (Elster, 1999). Precisely because it is based on something that has not yet been realized, hope is difficult to completely disregard. For this reason, it is a highly resilient emotion. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Jose Muñoz (2009) notes that even though negative emotions can bind people together, hope is what drives LGBTQ people to pursue utopia in the midst of their current unpleasant situations. Although there is no doubt that my queer male informants felt tremendous social pressure, there were sporadic events that gave them hope. For example, in April 2018, Weibo, a major Chinese Twitter-like platform, announced that it would ban homosexual content in a supposed effort to clean up the online environment. Such a ban touched the nerves of both the LGBTQ community and its advocates, who immediately criticized this policy through hashtags. Four days later, the Weibo platform reversed the ban. Even *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the CPC, responded to the ban by encouraging tolerance toward queer

people ("Online Outcry," 2018). In Shanghai, where the LGBTQ culture is striving, Shanghai Pride and three separate queer film festivals (Cinemq, ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival, and Shanghai Queer Film Festival) have been held in the city every year. Although these events are all run by volunteers and are "tolerated rather than supported by the local government" (Newby, 2018, para. 6, describing Shanghai Pride), they have helped to build a more tolerant city by facilitating conversations between the general public and the LGTBQ community.[17]

My informants regarded the existence of gay dating apps as an indicator that their community would eventually be accepted. Jerry, age twenty-eight and identifying as queer, said, "Although these apps are not a mainstream thing, their existence and the online interactions they support allow Guangzhou *tongzhi* to survive. . . . [Dating apps] represent our existence. . . . Apps give me hope." The hope that Jerry articulated did not originate with his use of the dating apps. Rather, his strong affective response came from the symbolic meaning he associated with these apps. After living in New York for seven years, he believed one day queer people in China could freely live their queer lives in a way similar to their American counterparts. Dating apps represented the potential for a queer community that he could identify with. Johnny, age twenty-seven and identifying as a male *tongzhi*, said that the existence of dating apps meant that queer men no longer needed to "live underground." To him, dating apps provided the queer community with a certain level of legitimacy that one day would blossom into societywide acceptance. River even compared gay dating apps to the Christian Gospel. In the Gospel, faith in Jesus would bring believers eternal life in the future. To River, gay dating apps would bring him a gay community in the future. Although many of my queer male informants, including Jerry and River, were affiliated with LGBTQ-serving organizations in Guangzhou, they recognized that dating apps were an indispensable platform for developing a queer community.[18]

NEGATIVE EMOTION: FEAR

Although anger and disgust were negative in-app emotions caused by the prevalence of deception and unsolicited requests for sex, the most

dominant negative emotion my informants expressed in relation to dating app use was rooted in the social stigma of male homosexuality in China. They feared their family members and colleagues would discover they were gay. The opposite of hope, fear comes from expecting bad things to happen in the future (Elster, 1999). The geoinformation feature on dating apps, while allowing users to locate each other, also brings the risk of being involuntarily outed. In the early 1990s, being outed as gay was the worst possible nightmare for the professional future of American politicians (Gross, 1993). Likewise, in China today, being outed can have an extremely negative impact on a person's career and family relationships, even though homosexuality is no longer considered a crime or a mental disorder.

Many of my queer male informants had not come out to their colleagues. Among the queer-themed public accounts I followed on WeChat since the beginning of my fieldwork, dozens of people had explained that for career advancement, marrying and then divorcing was better than remaining single, particularly for those who worked in government or state-owned enterprises. My informants who worked in traditionally "masculine" occupations particularly expressed concern over being outed. Tesla, age twenty-four and gay-identifying, worked as a software engineer and worried about workplace discrimination. Huajun, who was a personal trainer, often had to blend in with his straight male colleagues by making sexist jokes. In all cases, it was easier for these queer Chinese men to align their public appearance with hegemonic masculinity than risk the professional and personal consequences.

Similarly, most of my informants did not plan to come out to their parents. In traditional Chinese culture, a son's most important duty is to continue the family line (Fei, 1939). Mencius once said, "There are three ways of being unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them."[19] Because these historical expectations loom so large, Chinese parents who learn that their son is gay are often devastated. Lasong, age twenty-six and identifying as a male *tongzhi*, told me that he did not upload any face photographs to dating apps. He did not want his cousin, who he knew was also gay and lived near him, to identify him. Instead of thinking that he and his cousin would become closer if they mutually recognized each other's sexual orientation, he was afraid his cousin would "betray" him

and tell his family. Jerry was one of the few queer men I interviewed who had come out to his mother. On hearing his revelation, his mother went to multiple hospitals to find out whether she could conceive a second child, which demonstrates how critical continuing the family lineage was to her.

Like hope, fear is resilient because it is an affective response to unpleasant events that have not yet happened. None of my informants had been involuntarily outed because of their use of gay dating apps. However, as long as they believed there was a chance that they would be exposed as gay, their fear remained. Shame, once a major rhetoric in Western gay history, did not surface in my interviews. I believe that this was because my queer male informants had come of age after the decriminalization and depathologization of male homosexuality in China. None of them saw themselves as immoral or wrong. And although they continued to fear being outed, they also saw their queer identities as a source of power to eventually change the minds of friends, family, and colleagues. They acknowledged that their families or workplaces might not endorse their sexual orientation, but they regarded this lack of endorsement as social conservatism they could push back on.

AFFECTIVE FABRICS OF DATING APPS AND QUEER POLITICS

The analysis of my informants' experiences revealed a contradictory set of emotions in relation to dating apps. Discussing digital culture, Adi Kuntsman (2012) proposes the concept of "affective fabrics" to describe "the lived and deeply felt everyday sociality of connections, ruptures, emotions, words, politics and sensory energies" (p. 3). Kuntsman urges us to pay attention to how "affect and emotions take shape through movement between contexts, websites, forums, blogs, comments, and computer screens" (p. 1). Although my analysis focused on only one type of digital platform, it was clear that the contradictory emotions my informants felt were not only derived from their everyday use of dating apps but specifically reflected out-of-app queer politics in China. Together, these emotions formed an affective fabric that both held them back and propelled them forward.

The affective fabric of dating apps for my queer male informants was interwoven with both smooth and coarse emotional threads. The smooth part of the fabric was made with joy and hope. Locating other queer men who were otherwise invisible was once an impossible task for Chinese urbanites. Dating apps undoubtedly facilitated queer men's networking. Users can now anonymously look for casual relationships or set up a full profile to look for serious relationships. As for hope, as I mentioned, in Guangzhou there is no gay neighborhood where queer men can hang out safely and freely. Therefore, dating apps offer a possibility for a "queer village" (Crooks, 2013).

The coarse thread was primarily made up of anger, disgust, and fear. Although I have empathy for users who fabricate their identities on the apps to protect themselves, no one wants to be deceived. The threat of being deceived may perpetuate a vicious cycle of mistrust. When users experience deception or hear stories about their friends being deceived, they may lose trust in others. If they think people on an app are dishonest, why would they put their authentic information and photographs there? The distrustful environment and deceptive behaviors take on a life of their own in the behaviors of queer men who decide to remain closeted. Further, Chinese dating app culture is still nascent. Norms for interactions, including when it is appropriate to send a sexually suggestive photograph, have not yet been fully established (R. H. Jones, 2005). Unsolicited and incessant harassing messages induce disgust among some users. The fundamental fear related to dating apps is the risk of being outed. Until the day that society fully accepts homosexuality, gay dating app users will continue to be worried about being involuntarily exposed to family and colleagues.

Although positive emotions drove my informants closer to a dating app, negative emotions drove them away. In this affective economy, every new experience with a gay app charged the app user with stronger contradictory emotions. Slowly, the app became what Ahmed (2010) refers to as a "feeling-cause"—an object that can cause feeling. In this case, the feeling was ambivalence. One way my informants managed this feeling was by constantly installing and uninstalling the same app. This sense of ambivalence was also apparent from the long silence that usually followed when I asked my informants to evaluate the influence of

dating apps in their life. It was not easy for them to provide a conclusive evaluation because they were grappling with contradictory emotions.

Comparing the social environment of queer people with that of their straight counterparts, the latter did not have the same ambivalent feelings toward the apps they used. I am not arguing that there were no contradictory emotions induced by their use of dating apps. From my earlier analysis, it is obvious that my straight female informants had both positive emotions when exploring their sexuality and the world and negative emotions when facing sexual harassment and surveillance. The straight male informants were annoyed by bar promoters and impersonators and simultaneously enjoyed presenting themselves in a better light to maximize their opportunities for romance and casual sex. But these emotions were, inescapably, all in-app emotions. Out-of-app emotions, which are tightly connected to queer politics, were not relevant to them at all. In our heteronormative society, my straight informants had no fear of the stigma of being gay. Neither did they need to hope for social acceptance. Both fear and hope—the more resilient emotions—were experienced only by my queer informants. Therefore, it is little wonder that the feeling of ambivalence was more dominant among my queer informants than among my straight informants.

CONCLUSION

This chapter begins with a question: why did my queer male informants keep installing and uninstalling the dating apps they were using? Existing scholarship tackled this question primarily by appealing to users' cognitive evaluation of the technology's functions. My approach, by comparison, paid attention to my informants' affects and emotions in relation to dating apps. Relying on the phenomenological school of affect theory, I have shown that these emotions were tightly related to how homosexuality is viewed in China today. Using dating apps triggered multiple contradictory emotions among my queer informants. On the one hand, it allowed them to conveniently locate other gay men and to safely exercise their sexual desires. They saw these apps as a symbol of the future gay community. To them, these apps were an object of joy and hope. On the other hand, dating app use induced the fear of being outed, anger at

being deceived, and disgust over sexual harassment. Dating apps simultaneously carried negative emotional charges. By addressing this affective aspect of dating app use, my discussion moved beyond attributing the installing or uninstalling of apps to sheer usefulness or ease of use. My analysis showed that there were deep social and historical roots underpinning the use and nonuse of dating apps among gay Chinese men, a circumstance my straight informants did not share. My queer male informants' feelings toward dating apps, therefore, are most accurately described as a manifestation of contemporary Chinese queer politics. The dominance of fear and hope in relation to dating apps, rather than shame and pride, reflects the very different trajectories of queer activism and rights in China and the United States.

In the next chapter, I shift my attention to my queer female informants, my final set of networked sexual publics. Because of their unique social positions, they collectively told me a very different story. Compared with my queer male informants, they did not express significant ambivalence toward the dating apps. Instead, many of them held these apps in high regard. They thought of dating apps as contributing to their community. I explore the reasons behind this difference. Is it because the features of lesbian apps are different from gay apps? Is it because queer men and women have different subcultures? Or are queer women and queer men simply caught in different binds?