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## BUILDING A CIRCLE FOR QUEER WOMEN: AFFORDANCE OF COMMUNAL CONNECTIVITY

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I always asked my informants how they would feel if the dating apps they had been using were to disappear the next day. This question was not entirely hypothetical. Zank, once a popular app for queer men, was permanently shut down in 2017 by the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission due to its pornographic content. Rela, an app for queer women, was temporarily taken off the shelf the same year, allegedly because of its involvement in an organized protest for marriage equality in Shanghai.<sup>1</sup> Shawn, who was twenty-four and identified as queer,<sup>2</sup> responded to my question as follows:

I think [dating apps] more or less represent the legitimacy and legality of our lesbian *quanzi*. For me, their value is greater than their use value. I am very glad that they exist, and I cannot accept the idea of their being taken off the shelves.

Similar to Johnny in the last chapter, Shawn saw lesbian dating apps as a symbol of legitimacy for same-sex intimacy. Xiaoyan, age twenty-eight and identifying as lesbian, also said that the disappearance of lesbian dating apps would be very upsetting:

Apps like Rela and Lesdo are built for the lesbian *quanzi*. In China, the lesbian population is small. When you develop an app, you want to make money, right? But even although you know the market is small, you still develop the app. It is probably because you are passionate and altruistic.

These apps are well designed, and I cannot deny that because of these apps, people in the lesbian *quanzi* know that they are not alone in this world. . . . Therefore, if these apps disappeared, I would be very sad.

Both Shawn and Xiaoyan mentioned the term *quanzi* 圈子 (circle). The term is commonly used by Chinese LGBTQ people to represent the group they belong to. It can refer to a generic community or “an immediate small network of close friends, a sense of shared socioeconomic location or way of life for a wide demography” (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 133). Its contextualized and relative nature is similar to the idea of “publics” articulated by Sonia Livingstone (2005; refer to chapter 1). Both *quanzi* and publics entail a form of emotional connection with a collective that is beyond a dyadic relationship. In talking with my queer female informants, I found this *quanzi* aspect extremely salient in their use of dating apps. I am not suggesting that my queer male informants did not speak about their *quanzi* in their narratives. In fact, the discussion of hope in the last chapter highlights the potential that queer men saw in gay dating apps to bring forth a visible, legitimate gay community in China. However, my queer male informants tended to emphasize dyadic—sexual or romantic—connections. My queer female informants, as I show in this chapter, reported using dating apps such as Rela and Lesdo not only for romance and casual sex but equally for emotional support, information, and advocacy.

Recent research on queer digital culture has explored the role of social media in queer world-making (e.g., Cavalcante, 2019; Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards, & Churchill, 2019). Researchers have asked if dating apps have helped to build the queer communities, with mixed results. For instance, Sam Miles’s (2017) in-depth interviews with queer men living in London show that only heavy app users perceived dating apps to be useful in reconstituting the fragmented gay communities in the city. Light users said they did not share anything in common with the other users except that they used the same app. In her study of queer women’s use of Tinder in Canada and Australia, Stephanie Duguay (2019) argues that Tinder fails to foster a sense of queer community. She traces this shortcoming to a lack of affordances that enable interactions between queer women and little interest among queer women in meeting women who were physically far away. Conversely, the informants in

Thomas Baudinette's (2019) ethnographic study of Tokyo's gay culture held dating apps in high regard. Dating apps drew them into Ni-chōme, a well-established gay district, and reinforced the "gay feeling" of that neighborhood. His informants said that dating apps were so critical to this "gay feeling" that "a visit to Ni-chōme would be incomplete without using dating applications" (p. 97).

Following this line of inquiry, this chapter elaborates on how dating apps such as Rela and Lesdo have enabled my queer female informants to connect with and constitute their *quanzi*. My focus on the social aspects of my queer female informants' use of dating apps should not be read as perpetuating the stereotype that queer women are not interested in sex, as apps can fulfill both sexual and social needs. My decision to narrow down to the social aspects of queer women's app use was based on the fact that, compared to other networked sexual publics, the issue of *quanzi* stood out in the accounts of my queer female informants. As I show later, the underemphasis of hookup experiences in their accounts is likely to be a social product of both the apps' features and the patriarchal scrutiny they are living in.

This chapter's focus on queer women was further informed by intersectional thinking (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2016). Although dating app studies are growing, we have not yet adequately addressed the unique experiences of queer Chinese women. Only a handful of studies have focused on queer women's experiences with dating apps (e.g., Choy, 2018; Duguay, 2019; D. T.-S. Tang, 2017). Further, when queer women have been recruited as research participants, they have often been lumped together with queer men or the general population. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) work on "intersectionality" describes how race and gender intersect to produce social injustice against African American women. Likewise, intersectionality-like thinking helps me to highlight the unique struggles queer women face as they occupy the intersection of two subordinate positions.

In the following, I first describe the distinct set of challenges faced by queer women living in China. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, the concept of "affordance" enables a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between communication technology and society (Baym, 2010; Hutchby, 2001; Neff, Jordan, McVeigh-Schultz, & Gillespie, 2012).

Based on my analysis of the design and users' experiences with the two lesbian dating apps, I explore a salient affordance of these apps: communal connectivity. I argue that dating apps have enabled queer women to connect with their *quanzi* even as they also reproduce heteronormativity.

## THE DOUBLE PREDICAMENT FOR QUEER WOMEN

In the historical research on Chinese female same-sex desire, there have been two ongoing interrelated debates. The first discussion is how prevalent female same-sex relationships were in premodern China, while the second involves whether these relationships were tolerated. In one of the earliest historical studies on Chinese sexuality written in English, Robert van Gulik (1961) suggests that female same-sex relationships in ancient China were not only prevalent but also tolerated. Based on Daoist sexual manuals and historical literature canons, van Gulik contended that female same-sex relationships were commonly found between wives or concubines in polygamous marriages. Historical descriptions of the lives of women in the palaces also show the prevalence of *duishi* 对食 (paired eating), a practice where two women live like a husband and wife (Hinsch, 1990; Shi, 2014). Van Gulik's claim that female same-sex relationships were common, however, is objected to by historian Bret Hinsch. In his work—which primarily explores the history of male homosexuality—Hinsch (1990) points out that compared with references to male homosexuality in historical sources, references to female homosexuality were rarer. He writes:

Partly this lack was due to the relative absence of personal freedom accorded women. Bound to their husbands economically and often forced into seclusion in the home, many women were denied the opportunities to form close bonds with women outside their household. (p. 173)

The disagreement between van Gulik and Hinsch can be reconciled by considering the baseline for comparison. Hinsch's point of comparison was the number of references to male homosexuality in historical records, which led to his conclusion that female homosexuality was less common than male homosexuality. Also, the different corpuses that these authors used in their analyses affected how frequently female same-sex relationships would have been referenced. References to female same-sex

relationships have often appeared in the minor literature, instead of the canons that van Gulik and Hinsch relied on. For example, based on her analysis of such literature from late sixteenth- to twentieth-century China, Tze-Lan Sang (2003) argues that there has been more material on female same-sex relationships than we might have thought. For instance, husband's wives having sex with each other was a common theme she found in erotic literature written by male authors.

Can this recurrent motif be an indicator of female homosexuality being tolerated in premodern China? This brings up the second issue on which scholars of Chinese sexuality have disagreed. When van Gulik found references to female same-sex practices in Daoist sexual manuals, he assumed this meant female same-sex practices were accepted. Wah-shan Chou (2000) argues that because Chinese traditional culture has never explicitly rejected homosexuality, there is a cultural tolerance of it, including female homosexuality. Sang (2003), however, fundamentally rejects both claims. The erotic literature she included in her analysis always situates female same-sex relationships within a heterosexual marriage. The typical story in this literature is that two wives love each other, so they are not jealous of each other even if their husband favors one over the other. However, when two women love each other to the extent that they cannot accept a heterosexual marriage, they generally face death. In this sense, polygamous marriage is portrayed as a way for women to cover up their same-sex desires in this literature (Sang, 2003), which reflects what Adrienne Rich (1993) calls "compulsory heterosexuality." Liang Shi (2014) writes, "the fact that women find it necessary to hide female-female love under the cover of heterosexual marriage points to a milieu that forbids the expression and existence of such love" (p. 57).

In the 1920s, the Western discourse of sexual liberation and the idea of homosexuality were introduced to China (see chapter 4 for more details). Although Chinese intellectuals began to acknowledge women's right to derive pleasure from sex with their male partners, they continued to assert that it was unacceptable for women to receive pleasure from same-sex behaviors because they might resist marriage (Sang, 2003). Shi (2014) locates several fictional accounts from this era where lesbians are denigrated and dismissed. For example, there is a story about a female-serving

female prostitute. In this story, the prostitute is referred to as “one of the eight anomalies of Shanghai,” who tricks her clients into giving her all their money. Other narratives call queer women’s communities *mojing-dang* 磨镜党 (mirror-rubbing gang), suggesting these women are violent and ganglike. Historically, where lesbians were acknowledged, they were often depicted as predatory villains.

These two debates—how common female same-sex relationships have been and whether they were tolerated in premodern China—remain controversial because the limited historical references resist a definitive conclusion. However, scholars have universally agreed that Chinese queer women have been less visible than their male counterparts in representations of all kinds and in real life. In news coverage of LGBTQ issues, Chinese journalists have often focused on the gay subculture (Sang, 2003). Lesbians have rarely appeared in independent movies.<sup>3</sup> Shi (2014) can identify only four local productions since 2000 in which female same-sex relationships appear as a major plot. He also observes that even in the Beijing Queer Film Festival (formerly known as the Beijing Gay and Lesbian Film Festival), movies about gay men outnumbered those about lesbians by a ratio of more than four to one.

In terms of real-life visibility, although gay public culture in China has a substantial spatial manifestation (for example, in parks, bars, bathhouses, and public bathrooms), queer women have a less spatially dominant public culture (Shi, 2014; Liu & Lu, 2005). The “three obediences” (*sancong* 三从) in Confucianism, which I discuss in chapter 2, required a woman to obey her father, her husband, and her sons. Elisabeth Engebretsen (2014) argues that these precepts have historically discouraged women from developing an independent presence in public spaces. Further, lesbian activism has often relied on the politics of community, not on the politics of visibility, which has prioritized its integration into mainstream society by “de-emphasizing difference and highlighting commonality and similarity” (p. 126). Lesbian rights organizations have also lacked financial resources. As men who have sex with men are regarded as being high risk for HIV in China (“2018 nian Zhongguo aizibing ganran renshu,” 2018), local gay rights organizations can frame themselves as HIV-prevention advocacy groups, which helps them apply for funding from the state. Lesbian activism lacks a solid link with the HIV-prevention effort and

therefore has been unable to secure stable financial support from the state (Engebretsen, 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Apart from public culture, Lucetta Kam (2013) elaborates on the prevalence of queer women marrying men. Chinese queer women face the same parental pressure to marry as queer men. However, returning to intersectionality's need for specificity when evaluating oppression, women are placed in a different situation. For a queer woman, marriage is the most legitimate way to gain autonomy from her parents. At the same time, it puts her on an undesirable life trajectory. Therefore, some of Kam's informants lived a secret dual life, marrying a man while maintaining an extramarital relationship with a female partner. Those who were more fortunate had husbands who agreed to an open relationship. Others went further, entering into a "cooperative marriage" with a gay man. Kam views the latter as a tactic lesbians used to demonstrate their "public correctness," a set of socially correct behaviors queer women must perform to secure public recognition.

In summary, although female same-sex relationships have existed in China since ancient times, they have been confined to either a polygamous marriage in the past or a monogamous marriage today. When female homosexuality was not subsumed under a heterosexual relationship, it received heavy criticism. By virtue of being women, lesbians are also restricted in their individual ability to create a visible public culture in everyday life and have limited collective capacity to seek financial support from the state. Female homosexuality has never been criminalized in modern China to the same degree as male homosexuality. Still, sitting at the intersection of two oppressed identities—female and queer—queer women encounter more challenges than straight women and queer men combined. With this double predicament, how can popular lesbian dating apps enable greater agency? How do these apps contribute to the making of their *quanzi*?

## COMMUNAL CONNECTIVITY OF LESBIAN DATING APPS

In the introductory chapter, I trace the origin of the concept of affordance. Its transitions across multiple academic fields have generated fruitful discussions and applications of the concept but have also created conceptual

ambiguities (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017; Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001; Nagy & Neff, 2015; Norman, 1988). Yet scholars generally agree that an affordance is not a feature but is something that results from the interactive relationship between the features and the users of an object. That is, the constitution of an affordance concomitantly depends on the materiality of the technology and the users' interpretation. Due to this contingency, the outcome of an affordance cannot be predetermined. An affordance is, as Andrea Scarantino (2003) puts it, the "promise" that an object offers to us. A promise is a potential effect that is yet to be actualized, thereby highlighting the nondeterministic role of technology in our behaviors and society.

In the introductory chapter, I also review the five affordances of dating apps, which I identified in my earlier work (L. S. Chan, 2017b) as mobility, proximity, immediacy, authenticity, and visibility. When I first theorized these affordances, I was interested in why straight men and women in the United States used dating apps for dyadic relationships. I mainly was thinking about Western apps such as Tinder and Coffee-MeetsBagel. Therefore, these affordances were formulated in relation to building dyadic relationships, whether sexual or romantic, long-term or short-term, involved or casual. Because affordances depend on both the features and the users, my research on Chinese lesbians and their dating apps revealed a different kind of affordance that I had not considered earlier. I call this affordance *communal connectivity*. In the following, I analyze the features of the two most popular apps for queer women in China, Rela and Lesdo, together with the interpretation of these apps by my queer female informants and the actual uses of these apps.

## FEATURES OF RELA AND LESDO

The features of an app reflect the developers' vision, which includes the app's "purpose, target user base and scenarios of use" (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018, p. 889).<sup>5</sup> One of the cofounders of Rela (called The L when it first launched in 2012), Lu Lei, told the media that he built the app for his lesbian friends:

Although I think that my several lesbian friends are beautiful, adorable, and talented, they are still single. . . . Sometimes when we were dining



together, everyone was enjoying, and suddenly she [one of his lesbian friends] became quiet. I think that every human needs love, or at the least a company. ("The L chuangshiren," 2015, para. 9)

Back in 2012, there were no mobile dating apps for queer women in China. Queer women primarily used online forums and remained anonymous. Lu suggested that an app running on smartphones would enhance the visibility of individuals and the community as a whole ("Rongzi baiwan meijin," 2016). He also contrasted the ways queer men and women socialized. He noted that queer men's sociality was based mainly on sexual connections (similar to Gudelunas, 2012) while queer women's sociality was built on chatting, interacting, and building long-lasting relationships.

Lu translated his vision of building a queer-friendly environment into activism. On May 20, 2017, Rela, together with Qinyouhui 亲友会 (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays of China), launched a campaign for marriage equality. They arranged for eleven mothers of queer adult children to go to People's Park in Shanghai, which is a famous match-making market, to look for a spouse for their children (see chapter 2 for a similar park in Guangzhou). These mothers handed out informational flyers on marriage equality and LGBTQ rights to park visitors (Bhandari, 2017). The police came after an hour and ordered the parents to leave. Rela's operations were later temporarily suspended.<sup>6</sup>

Rela's concerns for building a queer women's community and social engagement were also reflected in the company's creation of features that were dramatically different from those of other Chinese gay dating apps. First, similar to the relationship status feature on Facebook, Rela users can "bind" their account to their partner's. The app counts how many days they have been together ("Rongzi baiwan meijin," 2016). With this feature, users can present themselves to other app users as a couple. This feature is not available on gay apps such as Blued or Aloha. Second, the landing page of Rela has an "status updates" feature. Users can see updates from people they have been following (figure 5.1). Also embedded in this page is a feature called "topics" where users can view and participate in discussions on popular subjects. The "people nearby" feature allows users to locate strangers. Although this feature is on the landing page of Blued,



**Figure 5.1**

The landing page of Rela displays updates from existing connections. (Screenshot taken by the author on March 24, 2019)

it is relatively buried in the interface of Rela, relegated to third feature in the navigation bar. If we consider the landing page of an app to be the most important feature envisioned by the app developer, Rela is more geared toward maintaining existing relationships and cultivating a community than developing new dyadic relationships. Third, related to “topics,” Rela launched a digital magazine called *Rela Zhoukan* 热拉周刊 (*Rela Weekly*), which hosts original content about careers, romance, and other issues pertinent to the community written by renowned queer writers, bloggers, and artists (“The L chuangshiren,” 2015). Lu’s idea that queer



**Figure 5.2**

The landing page of Lesdo has a feature called “community” where users can view blog posts created by others. (Screenshot taken by the author on March 13, 2019)

women’s relationships are less about casual, short-term connections than about building a long-term community is inscribed in these features.

Such an explicit focus on community-building is also apparent in Lesdo. Tingting Liu’s (2017) interview with Lesdo’s management shows that the app prides itself on its “community” feature. This feature also appears on the landing page of the app (figure 5.2). Users can view, like, comment on, and share blog posts written by other users. These posts

consist of up to five thousand Chinese characters and cover topics such as coming-out advice, lesbian-themed movies, health information, and cooperative marriage. Liu argues that the “community” feature “highlights the possibility of providing virtual community-based care for queer subjects” (p. 303).

Such emphasis on community-building in both Rela and Lesdo is likely one of the reasons that the accounts my queer female informants provided fell into the stereotype that they were not interested in sex. As the interview of Lu Lei shows, Rela was built with the biased assumption that queer women cared about long-lasting relationships more than short-term casual relationships. So was Lesdo. But features alone do not dictate what users do. That is, having an “status updates,” “topics,” or “community” feature does not automatically preclude queer women from seeking sex and connect them with their community. For this reason—returning to my emphasis on perception of affordances—it is necessary to consider how users have interpreted these features.

#### INTERPRETATION OF RELA AND LESDO

My informants said they often developed beliefs about the dating apps they intended to use before they used them. These beliefs came from sources like marketing materials, online commentaries, and stories from their peers. For instance, Momo is known by the general public as *yuepao shenqi* 约炮神器 (a magical tool for hookups) due to a viral video and its initial advertising campaign (T. Liu, 2016). In chapters 2 and 3, I show how some Momo users were motivated by these marketing techniques, while others actively resisted them. My queer male informants held similar beliefs about Blued, for example, partly because they read numerous stories shared on online forums about Blued being a hookup app before they downloaded it.<sup>7</sup>

My queer female informants told me a very different story. Only a few of them had considered lesbian dating apps such as Rela and Lesdo as hookup apps before they used them. Instead, most saw these apps as a platform to make friends and obtain information about their *quanzi*. Recalling how she came to download Lesdo, Shawn said the app was recommended by her lesbian friends living in Beijing. “They said this app is great for making friends. So I was curious and wanted to find out how

many people similar to me were around.” This belief that lesbian dating apps are mainly for making friends, but not for hooking up, was also shared by Xiaoyan. She explained why she downloaded Rela:

I wanted to make friends of the same sexual orientation as mine. I thought this way of chatting and interaction would be more comfortable. I did not have issues with my identity, but sometimes I thought that, as a lesbian . . . interacting with straight women is pretty different. . . . None of my friends had even used the app [for hooking up].

Apart from word of mouth, my queer female informants learned about these apps through microblogging platforms such as Douban and Weibo. Douban and Weibo are not platforms tailored to queer women, but users can follow people or organizations that are known to their *quanzi*. Shawn remembered how she first read about Rela from a story posted on the official Weibo account of Qinyouhui. The story described Rela as an information portal for queer women. Xiu, age twenty-three and lesbian-identifying, was attracted to Rela by its radio program: “At that time, Rela had a radio program that was quite appealing to me. . . . I like its topics because we do not have many radio programs for us.” Although Kay Siebler (2016) laments the diminishing influence of LGBTQ organizations in the digital era in the American context, the internet is where these organizations in China have flourished.

Why did my informants view lesbian dating apps as a platform for platonic relationships and information about their *quanzi* rather than for sexual relationships? A plausible reason is the presumed relative underemphasis on hookup culture in the queer women’s *quanzi* that my informants belonged to. Becky, age thirty-four and bisexual-identifying, commented on the hookup culture as follows:

Lesbians and gay men are very different. For gay men, perhaps they will have sex after they find each other “okay.” But for lesbians, we chat, chat, chat, and keep chatting. It is tiring actually. You keep chatting, understanding each other, but not for the purpose of dating. And then, [you] talk about life, ambition, and different topics. Only after all of these there is a possibility of having sex.

Becky’s comment is consistent with the way Rela’s founder envisioned queer women’s sociality. Xi, who also identified as bisexual but was ten years younger than Becky, shared a similar view:

The prerequisite [for hookups] is that we need to be able to communicate. I remember my friends and I had a conversation before. We said, “If we meet up with someone whom we plan to hook up with but cannot talk about our philosophy of life, why should we have sex?” I think a sexual relationship is also communication. If you two have no interest in communicating, it won’t be harmonious on the bed either.

My queer female informants often joked about the need to know the so-called *sanguan* 三观 (three views)—worldview, outlook on life, and values—of their potential hookup partners before hooking up. In contrast, only one of my straight female informants, Kangqi, said that *sangguan* was important to finding a casual sex partner. Further, none of my male informants, straight or queer, mentioned *sanguan* as a criterion for seeking casual sex partners. *Sanguan* remained characteristic of the expectations queer women had for relationships forged through dating apps.

In their recent research on women’s motivations to have casual sex in the Canadian context, Heather Armstrong and Elke Reissing (2015) found that both straight and queer women were equally likely to consider physical appearance as a salient criterion when looking for a casual sex partner. They remark that the shifting cultural norms in Canada have allowed women to feel more comfortable seeking casual sex for purely physical reasons. In chapter 2, I mention that my straight female informants felt empowered by their pursuit of casual sex. This result is consistent with Armstrong and Reissing’s study. However, such rhetoric was not found among my queer female informants. Indeed, my historical review above points out that Chinese lesbian activism has emphasized the desire to integrate into mainstream society and that queer women must display “public correctness” (Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013). In this sense, the underemphasis on hookup culture in Chinese queer women’s *quanzi* reflects the sexual conservatism that the members in the *quanzi* perceive to be crucial to their survival in the heteronormative society. Using the distinction I make in the previous chapter, in-app, my queer female informants conformed with an image of an ideal user who was more interested in building a community, while, out-of-app, queer women in China have never been allowed to pursue serendipitous sexual encounters.

## COMMUNAL CONNECTIVITY AND ITS MULTIPLE OUTCOMES

My analysis above demonstrates two aspects of the Chinese lesbian dating app culture. On the one hand, lesbian dating apps have dominant “status updates,” “topics,” and “community” features. On the other hand, their users regard them as platforms for platonic friendships and information. The affordance resulting from the intersection of these two aspects is what I call *communal connectivity*. Jessica Fox and Bree McEwan (2017) refer to this as “network association,” which “enables group members, no matter how disparate or geographically distant, to identify other members” (p. 303). Dating apps such as Rela and Lesdo similarly make users a “promise” (Scarantino, 2003) that if they want to, they can be connected to the larger *quanzi*. I suggest that because this affordance stresses the communal aspect of dating apps, it is fundamentally different from the five affordances I identify earlier.

Evans et al. (2017) propose a three-pronged conceptual framework to identify what property of communication technology can be considered an affordance. Their first criterion is that it cannot be a feature. Communal connectivity is not characteristic of a single feature of dating apps. The features contributing to communal connectivity are the “Status updates,” “Topics,” and “Community” features or, on a more basic level, the mobile data transmission. Second, an affordance has range. Communal connectivity is neither present nor absent but encompasses a range of engagements. It makes sense to say “User A is fully connected to the *quanzi*” or “User B is somewhat connected to the *quanzi*” based on how frequently they post, read, or comment on a blog post, for example.

Having passed two of the three thresholds, let us consider the third criterion Evans et al. (2017) propose: an affordance is not a consequence of using the technology. They remind us that “an affordance can be associated with *multiple* outcomes” (p. 40, emphasis in original). Based on this criterion, they argue that anonymity is an affordance, but privacy is not. Privacy “is an outcome resulting from affordances such as visibility or editability” (p. 44). I agree that an affordance should be able to lead to multiple outcomes. For example, James Gibson (1979), who coined the term *affordance*, points out that pressing the blade of a knife against something can result in either cutting or hurting. However, I disagree with the reasoning offered by Evans et al. because their argument is

reductive. They assume there are some elementary affordances that produce various outcomes. As privacy is the result of visibility and editability, it cannot be an affordance itself. What Evans et al. have failed to note is that anonymity, which they consider an affordance, also comes from visibility and editability. Anonymity can be considered an outcome when people choose to hide their identity from others (that is, visibility) or delete their information (that is, editability). In fact, with this reductionist logic, even editability cannot be an affordance because it results from the affordances that we can input, store, retrieve, and replace data in a digital network.

I suggest setting aside the question of whether a property is a result of other affordances. Instead, we should focus on whether that property can lead to different outcomes. If multiple outcomes are possible, then it passes the third threshold. My modification to the criterion of Evans et al. (2017) highlights the contingent nature of affordances. Although communal connectivity is a result of mobility and visibility, it is primarily about connecting to the larger *quanzi* rather than to individuals. My research demonstrates that connecting to one's *quanzi* leads to multiple outcomes, including emotional support, information, and advocacy.

My informants' narratives prominently described using dating apps for emotional support. Similar to the queer male informants discussed in the last chapter, my queer female informants faced tremendous social pressure. Most of them had not come out to their parents and wanted to be filial daughters. Being a filial daughter involves making the right choices so that one's parents will not worry about one's life (Eklund, 2018). Many of my informants knew that their parents would be extremely worried about their future if they came out. Therefore, they hid their sexual orientation from them. In addition, my queer female informants working in government-related institutions also were greatly concerned about the visibility of their sexuality. For instance, Shawn worked as a branding executive in a state-owned enterprise. From the beginning, she knew she had to be very careful about not revealing her sexual orientation to her colleagues. Later, she found out that her department supervisor was gay but had been living a double life in a heterosexual marriage. This further reinforced her belief that she must keep her sexual orientation a secret at work.



With communal connectivity, dating apps enable their users to seek emotional support outside of the sphere of work and family. This chapter begins with a quote from Xiaoyan. She said that lesbian apps helped their users to know that “they are not alone in this world.” Xi added, “Everyone shares the same worry but with subtle differences. I think it is very important to communicate my feelings.” Dating apps, to her, were an important platform for vetting and sharing secrets. Her use of dating apps, therefore, echoes the longstanding use of the internet for the queer communities to search for belonging and identities (Campbell, 2004; Gray, 2009; Gross & Woods, 1999; Mowlabocus, 2010).

In her study of the app Butterfly, Christine Choy (2018) found that queer women in Hong Kong used forums to find information on lesbian-friendly commercial venues. Similarly, my informants sought out news and information disseminated through the blog posts and live streaming on Rela and Lesdo. One type of information described how to come out to one’s parents. Charlie, age twenty-four and lesbian-identifying, recalled watching live streaming by several hosts from Qinyouhui on Rela both before and after she came out to her mother:

Before I came out, I would watch the live streaming by Qinyouhui. I watched some lesbians recounting their experiences of coming out. I would ask them questions. Even after I had come out to my mother, I watched their live streaming where they invited some parents. I would ask these parents, “Will my mom feel bad? Will she feel uncomfortable?”

Information like this is not available from the Chinese mainstream media. This is why dating apps are important to the lives of queer women. My informants also looked for other kinds of information. For instance, Shushu, age twenty-six and identifying as queer, and her partner wanted to know how other lesbian couples lived their lives. Recently, marrying overseas has become a trend for Chinese LGBTQ people who have the requisite financial resources. Dada, age twenty-five and identifying as bisexual, recalled watching a live stream on Rela where the host meticulously described the procedure and costs. Dada also enjoyed listening to the gossip of famous live streamers. As Max Gluckman (1963) puts it, gossips “maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups” (p. 308) and an “outsider cannot join in gossip” (p. 312). To Dada, participating in gossip allowed her to imagine a group of invisible audience who she

knew were somewhere in the city, sharing her interests, and most important, her sexual orientation.

Communal connectivity not only enables app users to benefit from the *quanzi* but also allows them to contribute to it. One informant, Xi, a professional psychological counselor, provided counseling on dating apps by writing blog posts and live streaming. She said,

On Lesdo and Lespark, because there is a forum section, I can do some advocacy work, such as anti-domestic violence and anti-sexual harassment. . . . I usually start a blog post, others will reply, and then it will become a group chat. I have done live streaming as well.

Gaining a sense of belonging and membership to a larger community is a powerful drive. Research in the Hong Kong context has found that feeling of being a part of the queer community mitigates the stigma of being a sexual minority, which in turn relates to better mental health (Chong, Zhang, Mak, & Pang, 2015). These three uses of dating apps afforded by communal connectivity—emotional support, information, and advocacy—go beyond dyadic relationships. They are about seeking and maintaining the queer women's *quanzi*, the communal aspect of dating apps that was completely missing in the narratives of my straight informants and much weaker among my queer male informants.

## REPRODUCING HETERONORMATIVITY

Communities enforce norms (Blackshaw, 2010). As Judith Butler (2004) writes, “norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce” (p. 41). In certain lesbian online chat rooms, regulars actively evaluate whether newcomers are “authentic” lesbians based on subjective and arbitrary criteria (Poster, 2002). In Western gay dating contexts, the expression “no fats, femmes, or Asians,” signifies the fatphobia, femmephobia, and racism that are prevalent in queer male communities (Ayres, 1999; Conte, 2017; X. Liu, 2015). The privilege given to masculine, straight-acting bodies is one of the many manifestations of heteronormativity, which Lisa Duggan (2003) defines as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions,

but upholds and sustains them” (p. 50). The lesbian dating apps I analyze in this chapter also reproduced heteronormativity in the Chinese queer women’s *quanzi*. Specifically, the videos produced by these apps and the designs of the apps assert a distinct gender role difference between the butch and the femme, or what my informants called *T* and *P*.<sup>8</sup>

Rela and Lesdo produced several queer-themed microfilms and online videos. Jia Tan (2018) calls these “social app videos.” Most of these videos last for about ten minutes, although some are longer.<sup>9</sup> They generally cover the everyday issues related to being a queer woman in China, such as coming out to parents and forming romantic relationships. For example, *The L Bang* 热拉帮, a four-episode sitcom produced by Rela in 2015, describes the lives of five lesbian, gay, and bisexual neighbors in a high-rise residential building in contemporary Shanghai. The female characters find each other on Rela, and two of them later become a couple.<sup>10</sup> The portrayal of female same-sex intimacy in these videos is a milestone in the history of media representation. As I mention above, movies about female same-sex intimacy have been scant in China. Even when female same-sex intimacy is portrayed, it is often presented as the character’s past experience (Martin, 2010). The “platform presentism” of these videos produced by Rela and Lesdo (Tan, 2018) forges a tighter temporal connection with the audience.

However, images of both androgynous or masculine lesbians and feminine lesbians are part of these videos. In *The L Bang*, Cooka and Anda have very short hair and often wear shirts, while Nana has longer hair and wears earrings and skirts (figure 5.3). Both Cooka and Anda are fond of Nana, who eventually chooses Cooka. This T/P relationship perpetuates the categorical gender binary from heteronormativity where each partner represents a masculine or feminine ideal.

If we believe the representations above reflect the vision of the app developers, heteronormativity has also been inscribed into the apps through their design. Both Rela and Lesdo probe users to indicate their gender roles. On Rela, users are offered six options on the registration page: T, P, H (versatile), Bisexual, Other, and Not disclosed. On Lesdo, only the first five options are available. Users can also use these labels to screen out unsuitable partners. Some of my informants regarded this classification as useful. Charlie, identifying as H, explained,



**Figure 5.3**

A scene from *The L Bang*, a queer-themed sit-com produced by Rela. From left to right are Nana, Cooka, and Anda (facing away from camera). (Screenshot taken by the author on June 18, 2019)

Well, for those who dress up more like a man, they are very clear about what they like, that is, “I just like a girl with long hair, who wears a skirt.” So they will explicitly state, “I want to find a P.” . . . With these labels, people can tell how you look like immediately.

The rationale Charlie offered in support of the labeling system was that labels help people manage expectations. However, my other informants said that such systems were outdated. Shushu remarked that “it is unnecessary to use a label to restrict myself.” She preferred to identify as queer—a more fluid term than *lesbian*—and resisted the labels of T and P. Magda, age nineteen and preferring to be identified as a female homosexual, found Rela’s emphasis on role distinction to be extremely heavy and was very “uncomfortable” with it. She connected the app design to one of the videos Rela had produced:

I did not watch it. But just based on its description, I can feel that it is putting female homosexuality into a heterosexual frame. I feel that the female lead is just biologically a female but acts the same as the men in popular TV drama.

The affordance of communal connectivity of Rela and Lesdo enabled my informants to seek emotional support, look for information, and

engage in advocacy that was beneficial to their *quanzi*. But connecting with their community also meant complying with norms encoded into the apps.<sup>11</sup> These lesbian dating apps reproduced heteronormativity by perpetuating stereotypical gender roles in their videos and foregrounding gender role labels on the app. Although the butch-femme classification has a very long history within Western lesbian communities (Kennedy & Davis, 1993), recent research in the United States has revealed a deep divide between those who endorse these labels and those who do not. Esther Rothblum (2010) describes this as follows:

At one end of the continuum are lesbian, bisexual or queer women who perceive butch or femme to be core identities, equal in salience to gender, race, or sexuality, and who regard these concepts as extremely important. At the other end of continuum are women who find the terms outdated or meaningless, or who embrace the terms but find that both or neither fit them well, or who are creating their own terms and definitions. (p. 41)

I respect my informants who found these labels useful. However, I would argue that inscribing these categorical labels onto the app's design assumes that someone has a fixed gender identity and can have only one gender identity at a time. Every time these labels are used, gender is reified. Reflecting on her experience of not being recognized as a lesbian by another lesbian woman, Robbin Vannewkirk (2006) argues that "attempts to read a vibe . . . must take into consideration the possibility that personal reality can shift" (p. 84). That is, gender should not be seen as an essential attribute. Critiquing a similar design on Butterfly, Denise Tang (2015) warns that "the reinforced label selection on using the app might have curbed imaginative connections" (p. 270). Codified gender roles perpetuated by these Chinese lesbian dating apps preclude change, fluidity, and imagination. To bring forth a more inclusive and flexible *quanzi*, these apps must stop constructing categorical gender differences.

## CONCLUSION

A queer utopia, as envisioned by Jose Muñoz (2009), is "a space outside of heteronormativity" that "permits us to conceptualize new worlds" (p. 35). We can think of the queer women's *quanzi* supported by dating apps such as Rela and Lesdo as a manifestation of a queer utopia. Connecting

with one's *quanzi* is especially important to queer Chinese women because female same-sex intimacy has been historically suppressed, and their everyday mobility has been greatly limited under a patriarchal society. Engebretsen's (2014) research on the politics of community in lesbian activism and Kam's (2013) idea of "public correctness" for individuals have revealed that in facing the double predicament of being both queer and female, these women must act carefully to survive. Perhaps because of these historical and social circumstances, the sense of having a *quanzi* has been paramount to living as a queer woman in China.

Prior research on dating apps examined the extent these apps have destroyed or reinforced LGBTQ communities (Baudinette, 2019; Choy, 2018; Duguay, 2019; Miles, 2017). Dating apps such as Rela and Lesdo, with their affordance of communal connectivity, enabled my informants to secure emotional support, look for information that was relevant to their lives, and contribute to their *quanzi*. At the same time, connecting to a community demanded compliance with gender norms, as heteronormativity was reintroduced by the apps through their categorical gender role distinction. In this light, the space of this particular set of networked sexual publics also presented a challenge to establishing a queer utopia. As a Chinese idiom says, "The water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up." The influence of dating apps on LGBTQ communities depends not only on the features of the apps but also on how users interpret these apps. The usefulness of the concept of affordance lies exactly in its ability to capture such contingencies.<sup>12</sup>

My analyses in the last two chapters have demonstrated that queer politics and the use of dating apps are mutually constitutive. On the one hand, the affects derived from living daily life as a queer man in China have influenced their perception of dating apps. On the other hand, the use of dating apps by queer women has helped to build a queer, albeit restrictive, *quanzi*. In the concluding chapter, I bring back the experiences of my straight male and female informants into view to return to my concept of networked sexual publics.

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# The Politics of Dating Apps

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