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The Politics of Dating Apps

Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China

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NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. Nancy is a pseudonym chosen by my informant. I encouraged all of my informants to provide me with a Chinese or English pseudonym. When they did not have any ideas or the name they came up was too similar to their real name, I created one for them.

2. On February 23, 2018, Momo announced that it had bought Tantan for approximately USD600 million.

3. Some apps, such as Blued, require users to submit their national identity card in order to become a live streamer.

4. These apps often update their features. My description in this book is accurate only at the time of writing.

5. *Yue?* can be considered as the Chinese equivalent of "you up?" from Western dating app culture. The difference is that "you up?" is often sent late at night but there is no temporal constraint for sending *yue?*.

6. In this video, which Michael Stephen Kai Sui shared on Weibo, he imitates twelve men from different countries and regions chatting with each other in Chinese. During the conversation, the phrase *yuepao shenqi* is brought up. At the time of writing, the full video is available at https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDEwMjAxNTQ0 .html?spm=a2h0k.11417342.soresults.dtitle and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v =D9dApqW8WZk&list=RDD9dApqW8WZk&start_radio=1&t=0. Alternatively, readers can search for "Mike Sui's 12 Beijingers" on YouTube.

7. Here are a handful of studies that fall under each issue. (1) Why do people use dating apps, and what are their demographic and psychographic characteristics (e.g., L. S. Chan, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017b)? (2) What do people use dating apps for, and what affects their various uses (e.g., Miller, 2015b; Solis & Wong, 2019; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017a; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014)? (3) How do people represent themselves on dating apps, and what are the implications

of self-representation and face-to-face encounters (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014; Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014; L. S. Chan, 2016; Duguay, 2017; Fitzpatrick, Birnholtz, & Brubaker, 2015; Miller, 2015a)? (4) How do people develop relationships on dating apps (e.g., L. S. Chan, 2018a; De Seta & Zhang, 2015; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2018; Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2017; LeFebvre, 2018; Licoppe, Rivière, & Morel, 2016; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018; Tong, Hancock, & Slatcher, 2016; Yeo & Fung, 2018; Zhang & Erni, 2018)? (5) What are the risks and concerns associated with the use of dating apps (e.g., Choi, Wong, & Fong, 2017; Corriero & Tong, 2016; Landovitz et al., 2013; Lutz & Ranzini, 2017; Rice et al., 2012; Sawyer, Smith, Benotsch, 2018; Yeo & Ng, 2016)?

8. The idea of intimacy has been explored in multiple disciplines. My understanding of intimacy is based mainly on sociological literature, such as Anthony Giddens's (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* and Zygmunt Bauman's (2003) *Liquid Love: On the Fragility of Human Bonds*.

9. The phrase "the personal is political" has often been attributed to the American feminist Carol Hanisch. However, Hanisch (2006) explains that the phrase was coined by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, the editors of *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, in which Hanisch's article on consciousness-raising appears.

10. I was inspired by the "Wittgenstein trick" (Becker, 1998, p. 139): what would be left if I were to take away personal relationships from dating apps?

11. I treat network publics and networked individualism, a concept elaborated in Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012), as two sides of the same coin. Rainie and Wellman argue that in the digital era we are detached from traditional communities but are reembedded in several relational networks. Their focus is on the constitution of selfhood in network society. The concept of network publics, alternatively, highlights not the self but the collective that the self belongs to.

12. Other studies of dating apps falling under the critical tradition have explored issues such as data cultures (Albury, Burgess, Light, Race, & Wilken, 2017), the creation of queer communities (Baudinette, 2019; Crooks, 2013; Roth, 2014), the politics of play and games (Race, 2015; Wang, 2020), gender politics (Bivens & Hoque, 2018), and state censorship (T. Liu, 2016).

13. Further, the same environmental feature can theoretically provide different affordances for different animals. For instance, a water surface affords support only to water bugs, not to human beings (Gibson, 1979).

14. Donald Norman (1988) popularized the contrast between affordances and constraints. To him, affordances are positive and physical, whereas constraints are negative and, in addition to physical, cultural. An example he gives to illustrate the contrast uses Legos to build a police motorcycle. The physical shape of a Lego piece both affords and constrains how we can fit one piece onto another piece; however, our cultural understanding that "yellow is a headlight" further restricts how we can build the motorcycle.

15. In my original formulation, I named this affordance *visual dominance*. However, visual dominance is better conceptualized as an outcome resulting from visibility (see Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017).

16. For an overview of the global transformation of intimacy, see Mark Padilla, Jennifer Hirsch, Miguel Munoz-Laboy, Robert Sember, and Richard Parker (2007).

17. Cantonese and Putonghua are so different that they are mutually unintelligible; therefore, Cantonese has become a site for identity politics. In July 2010, a

Guangzhou government officer suggested a major local television station start using Putonghua instead of Cantonese in its news program. More than a thousand people, mostly in their twenties and thirties, gathered to protest against the proposal. The protest ended peacefully, but online discussion of the protest was censored afterward (E. Wong, 2010).

18. I count Nancy as a straight woman because she identified herself as straight when I interviewed her.

19. One of my heterosexual female informants, Chloe, had just stopped using dating apps before I conducted the interview with her.

CHAPTER 2

1. In *xiangqin* 相亲 (matching), parents take the lead to preselect several candidates for their adult children. The parents then arrange for their children to meet with these candidates one by one over a meal. During this meeting, the young adults introduce themselves to each other, and if they like each other, they will begin to date. One way for parents to identify suitable candidates is through their personal networks. Another way is to attend the matching activities in the parks.

2. Regarding the use of dating apps, the dominant theoretical framework that recent dating app studies have been relying on is uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). I provide my critique to this approach in the concluding chapter.

3. In rural China, it is normal for a couple to live with the husband's parents, a practice called *patrilocality*. In some of the rural-to-urban couples interviewed by Susanne Yuk-Ping Choi and Yinni Peng (2016), the wives negotiated to stay closer to their natal families. However, some men split up with their girlfriends because their girlfriends refused to live with their parents.

4. China's census data from 2000 is available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/5rp/index.htm. Its 2010 census data is available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm.

5. Yifei Shen (2011) argues that while fathers are losing power to their daughters, husbands are still in a more dominant position than their wives. She calls this *postpatriarchy*.

6. The algorithmic alert system has its limitations. It does not detect semantic nuances. For example, an alert was generated when I typed *yue ge fangwen* 约个访问 (arrange an interview). Meanwhile, when I broke down the character *yue* 约 into two characters 纟 and 勺, the system did not recognize the meaning.

7. Readers who start reading from this chapter may want to look at the introductory section of chapter 1 to familiarize themselves with the various features that dating apps in China offer that are not common in Western apps.

8. Very often, people say or do things in online interactions that they would not say or do in face-to-face interactions. John Suler (2004) calls this phenomenon the online disinhibition effect. Dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority contribute to this effect.

9. Gayle Rubin (1984) contends that, due to the influence of Christianity, Western culture "always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent" (p. 278).

CHAPTER 3

1. One of the sex-related jokes Victor shared with me goes as follows: "A man asks a woman to pay for a pack of cigarettes. The woman says, 'Tonight, one minute is worth one dollar. How expensive the cigarettes you want to smoke depends on your performance.' The man later is found to be smoking a pack of cigarettes that costs two dollars."

2. Comprehensive critiques of hegemonic masculinity can be found in Øystein Gullvåg Holter (2003) and Richard Howson (2006).

3. According to Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinities may manifest at the local, regional, and global levels, as follows: "1) Local: constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction of families, organizations, and immediate communities, as typically found in ethnographic and life-history research; 2) Regional: constructed at the level of the culture or the nation-state, as typically found in discursive, political, and demographic research; and 3) Global: constructed in transnational arenas such as world politics and transnational business and media, as studied in the emerging research on masculinities and globalization" (p. 849).

4. *Cha chaan teng* is a Hong Kong–style fast food that is very popular in Guangzhou. Victor mentions *cha chaan teng* and coffee shops. Both are fast food.

5. Including prostitution in corporate entertainment is not uncommon in East Asia (Norma, 2011; Zhou, 2006).

6. Media psychologists are interested in how choice overload affects human decisions. Jonathan D'Angelo and Catalina Toma (2017) experimentally assessed the effect of the number of choices on the level of satisfaction with one's partner selection in online dating. The participants in one group selected a date prospect from a pool of six, and another group chose from a pool of twenty-four. After one week, the participants in the large-choice condition were less satisfied with their selection and more likely to reverse their selection than those in the small-choice condition. The experiment demonstrates that more choices do not always mean better results.

7. As I point out in chapter 2, on dating apps, objectification goes both ways. Some of my young female informants exercised their female gaze, too.

CHAPTER 4

1. In this chapter, I use *queer male informants* as an umbrella term to refer to all of my nonheterosexual-identifying male informants. Whenever I refer to individual informants, I follow how they wanted to be referred to. *Tongzhi*, which literally means "comrades" in Communist parlance, is a gender-neutral label used by queer people in China to refer to themselves. My informants also used Western identity labels, such as *ku'er* 酷儿 (queer). The English word *gay* is common enough to be used as an everyday sexual identifier, but it is also translated as *ji* 基. Accordingly, gay men describe themselves as gay, *ji*, or *jilao* 基佬 (*lao* is a Chinese colloquial term for "guy"). Hongwei Bao (2018) recently found that people from different social and economic backgrounds preferred different labels. For instance, people who had a more cosmopolitan outlook addressed themselves as gay or *ji*, whereas those who worked for LGBTQ-serving organizations preferred *tongzhi*. I did not see such a pattern among my informants.

2. Only one queer female informant and no straight informants told me that they had repetitively deleted and installed a dating app for reasons unrelated to finding a romantic partner.

3. For example, *duanxiu* 断袖 (cutting a sleeve) and *fentao* 分桃 (sharing a peach) have appeared in Chinese classics. The former refers to Mizi Xia, a male concubine who shared a piece of peach with the Duke Ling of Wey, who ruled the state of Wey from 534 BC to 492 BC. The latter refers to Emperor Ai of the Han empire from 534 BC to 492 BC, who cut off his sleeve to avoid waking up his male partner who had been sleeping on it. These terms do not carry negative connotations. For a historical view of Chinese male homosexuality, see Bret Hinsch (1990).

4. There was also liberal discourse about homosexuality among some of the translated materials. According to Tze-Ian Sang (2003), "It would be more accurate to say that, in the 1920s, the literate, urban Chinese public had no definite opinion on the nature of same-sex love and that the Chinese intellectuals who had access to theories of homosexuality written in other languages had a great deal of room in which to maneuver" (p. 106).

5. Unlike *duanxiu* and *fentao*, *pi* and *renyao* carried a stigma. In particular, *renyao* was used as an umbrella term to describe sexually deviant men, including "sexually prematurely developed boy[s], cross dressers, intersex people who might have sex with both men and women, Peking opera *dan* actors, male prostitutes, and any men who behaved and dressed in a feminine fashion and had sex with other men" (Kang, 2009, p. 34).

6. Due to the rarity of physical homophobic expression in China, Wah-Shan Chou (2000) argues that there is a cultural tolerance of homosexuality in China. However, this celebratory tone has been heavily criticized by other scholars, who regard tolerance as a silencing tool (Kam, 2013; Liu & Ding, 2005).

7. Geng Le also started danlan.org, one of the earliest gay online forums, in 2000.

8. Zank was shut down in 2017 after the government cracked down on the pornographic content in its live-streaming.

9. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's interpretation of Silvan Tomkins can be found in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995).

10. Accordingly, shame is the opposite of pridefulness, whereas guilt is the opposite of pride.

11. For example, Silvan Tomkins (1962, 1963) proposed nine building blocks of affects that can form more complex emotions. These include enjoyment-joy, interest-excitement, fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage, shame-humiliation, disgust, dissmell, and surprise-startle. Robert Plutchik (1979) suggested that there are eight, not nine, primary emotions. These are joy, sadness, acceptance, disgust, fear, anger, surprise, and anticipation. Some of the emotions identified by Plutchik were also identified by Tomkins; some were similar but not completely the same, like sadness in Plutchik's model and distress in Tomkins's.

12. Western media have criticized gay dating apps such as Grindr for publishing the exact distances between users because any user can be tracked down to their exact position through triangulation ("It Is Still Possible," 2018).

13. When I logged onto Blued on July 21, 2018, in Guangzhou, only 15 of the closest 150 people I could see on my app had verified photographs, reflecting this feature's lack of popularity.

14. Jack'd, owned by the American company Online Buddies at the time of writing, was once popular in China. However, my informants told me that because the app was in English and the connection was unstable, they had gradually moved to locally developed apps.

15. This profile was collected as part of my earlier study (L. S. Chan, 2016) in which I compared 204 Jack'd profiles from the United States and 204 Jack'd profiles from China using geographically stratified sampling.

16. *Dashu* 大叔 (uncle) in Chinese gay culture is equivalent to a daddy in Western gay culture. Both refer to an older man sexually interested in younger men.

17. On August 13, 2020, when I was finalizing this manuscript, the organizers of Shanghai Pride announced indefinite cancellation of all future activities. I could not recontact my informants to get their views on this; however, I agree with Jose Muñoz (2009) that we must keep our hope amid difficult times.

18. I discuss the communal aspect of dating apps in detail in chapter 5.

19. Alan Chan and Sor-Hoon Tan (2004) provide a wonderful overview of filial piety in Chinese thought and history.

CHAPTER 5

1. In April 2019, Tantan, the app for straight people, was also taken down by the government because of its pornographic content. The app was relaunched in June.

2. In this chapter, I use the terms *queer women* and *queer female informants* as umbrella terms to refer to all of my nonheterosexual-identifying female informants. When I refer to individual informants, I follow how they would like to be referred to. Apart from *ku'er* 酷儿 (queer) and *nü tongxinglian zhe* 女同性恋者 (female homo-sexual), *lala* 拉拉 and *les* (both derived from *lesbians*) are common sexual identities used by queer women in China. Bisexual people often call themselves *bi* or *shuang* 双.

3. All Chinese movies having LGBTQ content must, by definition, be independently produced because the state has banned such content in mainstream movies.

4. According to the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, women have accounted for only around a quarter of new HIV infection cases every year since 2012 ("2018 nian Zhongguo aizibing ganran renshu," 2018).

5. The analysis of this subsection is informed by the walkthrough method developed by Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay (2018) in which apps are treated as cultural texts. This method "is a way of engaging directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences" (p. 882). The complete methodology involves analyses of the app's vision, operation model, and governance, and a step-by-step observation of the registration, everyday use, and disconnection of the app.

6. Although media activism is a dominant form of activism in contemporary China (Tan, 2017; G. Yang, 2017), there have been cases of sporadic offline LGBTQ protests. For instance, on August 25, 2009, in People's Park in Guangzhou, which is known to the local gay community as a cruising spot, five policemen ordered gay men to leave the premises. The order from the police force resulted in a confrontation between around a hundred gay men and the five policemen. The policemen eventually left the park. This victory to claim the public space was widely celebrated by regional and international LGBTQ groups (Bao, 2018).

7. Officially, Blued positions itself as a health education app, not a hookup app (Miao & Chan, 2020).

8. An historical discussion of butch-femme differences in American lesbian communities can be found in Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis's *Boots*

of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community (1993). In Hong Kong, gender labels of *tb* (tomboy) and *tbg* are used. The shorthand *tbg* represents lesbians who act more feminine and prefer dating a *tb*. Physical appearances often determine one's choice of labels (D. T.-S. Tang, 2015). The labels *T* and *P* came from Taiwan and were introduced to mainland China in the early 2000s (Engebretsen, 2014).

9. These social app videos have three characteristics: they are produced by the apps, they are expected to be watched via the apps, and the use of the apps appears in the main storyline. Some titles produced by Lesdo are *Xiaxue & Weian: Always Miss You* 夏雪薇安之念念不忘 (2016, 34 minutes) and *True Love, Wrong Gender* 错了性别不错爱 (2016, 60 minutes). Rela produced *X-Love* 爱的未知数 (2016, 19 minutes) and *Girls Who Talk to Flowers* 如果花会说话 (2016, 12 minutes) (see Tan, 2018).

10. At the time of writing, all four episodes of *The L Bang* were available on YouTube.

11. James Gibson (1979) differentiated positive and negative affordances that result from the same interaction between the features of the environment and the actor. Accordingly, connecting with the community can be viewed as a positive affordance, whereas complying with communal norms can be viewed as a negative affordance.

12. That said, I am not suggesting that technology is a neutral tool. As I point out in chapter 1, technological artifacts are political (Winner, 1980). The notion of affordance allows us to avoid perceiving the effects of technology as linear and deterministic.

CHAPTER 6

1. In "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) argue that a queer world is different from a community or a group because "it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright" (p. 558).

2. I want to highlight that Kangqi was in an open relationship and Damon was single during the time of our interviews. Both were open to having casual sex. Therefore, their use of the term *mudixing* meant not simply someone seeking sex on dating apps but, more specifically, the singularity of such purpose.

3. Chad Van De Wiele and Stephanie Tom Tong (2014) published the first uses and gratifications study on Grindr based on data from worldwide users. Similarly, Brandon Miller (2015b) conducted a worldwide study on men who have sex with men. Elisabeth Timmermans and Elien De Caluwé (2017a) and Sindy Sumter, Laura Vandenbosch, and Loes Ligtenberg (2017) explore the motives for using Tinder based on American/Belgian samples and a Dutch sample, respectively. Randy Jay Solis and Ka Yee Wong (2019) look at dating apps in China.

4. Charles Ragin and Peer Fiss (2017) also argue that conventional regression-based interaction analysis is less compatible with intersectionality theory. See their work for an example of taking an alternative mathematical approach, qualitative comparative analysis, to examine how combinations of factors lead to poverty.

5. Alipay is a mobile wallet owned by the Alibaba Group.