Transgression in the closet:
Gay academics’ experiences of heteronormativity in China

Le Cui

Abstract

Homosexuality was decriminalised in China in 1997 and removed from the official list of mental disorders in 2001. However, it is still a social taboo and Chinese queer people face persistent discrimination from the authorities and the public. While international research has documented queer teachers’ workplace experiences, little is known about queer teachers’ experiences in China. To address this paucity, this thesis explores gay academics’ lived experiences of heteronormativity (Warner, 1993) in Chinese universities. The central research question is: How do gay academics navigate heteronormativity on campus in Chinese universities? Drawing on interview data from 40 gay academics in China, this research explores their experiences of managing sexual identity, interacting with queer students, addressing queer issues in the classroom, and conducting queer research.

Informed by queer theory (McCann & Monaghan, 2020), this research seeks to deconstruct normative identities and notions that are regarded as normal in Chinese universities. Heteronormativity is employed as a key theoretical concept to identify the pervasive policing practices that perpetuate the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary and hierarchy. This thesis interrogates a variety of institutional practices and interpersonal interactions on Chinese campuses that privilege heterosexuality and marginalise homosexuality. It is shown that heteronormativity in Chinese universities is reinforced by the Party-state power. Furthermore, a queer perspective enables this research to trouble dominant discourses in literature, such as the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004).

The findings demonstrate that, despite a heteronormative and repressive climate, many gay academics adopted various strategies to manage their sexuality, support queer students, enact queerness in the classroom, or expand the institutional space for queer research in Chinese academia. The closet might enable gay academics not only to pass as heterosexual, but also to challenge heteronormativity. By drawing on Butler’s (1990) formulation of agency and highlighting gay academics’ subjectivities as both closeted and agentic, I argue that their agency involves a simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to heteronormativity and repressive politics. This research has implications for promoting sexual equity in Chinese higher education, as well as rethinking the approach to addressing queer issues in China where an explicit challenge to the institution and authorities is politically risky.
Acknowledgements

This doctoral journey in New Zealand has been difficult, constantly stressful and at times painful. I would like to thank the following people who helped make this PhD possible, or a little easier:

- Louisa Allen and John Fenaughty, for supervision, encouragement, and belief in my ability.
- All the participants, for your voices and trust.
- My elder brothers Song Cui, Huan Cui, and sister-in-law Yiheng Wu, for financially supporting my PhD.
- Danping Wang and Karen Huang who offered me Chinese language teaching opportunities. The work I undertook as a Graduate Teaching Assistant provided important financial support for this PhD.
- Sponsors who have provided scholarship for this research, including: the Fred and Helen Hanan Endowed Scholarship in Chinese Studies, from the University of Auckland, 2021; the Rainbow Scholarship, from the Chinese Rainbow Network (United States), 2019; and the Chinese Society for Women's Studies Scholarship for Junior Feminist Scholars, from the Chinese Society for Women's Studies (United States), 2018.
- Media editors and journalists Alex Yang Li, Yineng Cai, Phoebe Zhang, Qin Chen and Julianne Evans, who made my and participants' experiences heard by Chinese and global audiences.
- Many queer activists in China who helped me spread the poster for participant recruitment, particularly Wei Wei.
- Yuxin Pei and Pengpeng Feng, for being my referees when I was applying for this PhD programme.
- Barbara Grant, for support when I needed it.
- Friends, ex partners, and doctoral mates who have supported me in New Zealand, including Wendy Choo, Jonas Chen, John Shen, Gary Ye, Wen Xiong, Temi, Maria and Orlando, Lingshu Zhang and Liwei, Holly Zhang, Rosemary Li, and Linlin Xu.
- Friends who reviewed my early draft and offered feedback, including Yujiao Qiao, Runze Ding, Xiaoming Tian, Lucen Liu, Mark Tayar, Kyle Tan, Dian Dian, and Alfred Pang.
- My parents. I am sorry that I have not been by your side during these years and that I have not shared my sexual identity, this research, and my life with you although I know you will always love me unconditionally.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................................................... iv
Chapter 1 ......................................................................................................................................................................... 1
   Introduction ................................................................................................................................................................. 1
      Research context and significance .............................................................................................................................. 2
         Homosexuality in China .......................................................................................................................................... 2
         Chinese universities in repressive politics .............................................................................................................. 3
         Queer lives in Chinese education ......................................................................................................................... 5
   Key concepts and definitions ........................................................................................................................................... 7
      Gay .............................................................................................................................................................................. 7
      Queer ........................................................................................................................................................................ 8
      Heteronormativity ...................................................................................................................................................... 10
      Closeted, coming out ............................................................................................................................................... 12
      Agency ......................................................................................................................................................................... 13
      Queer pedagogy ........................................................................................................................................................ 16
      Sexuality research as dirty work ............................................................................................................................. 18
   Thesis overview ............................................................................................................................................................. 18
Chapter 2 .......................................................................................................................................................................... 21
   Queer teacher research: A literature review .................................................................................................................. 21
      Workplace climate for queer teachers ....................................................................................................................... 21
      Queer teachers’ identity management ....................................................................................................................... 23
      Queer teachers’ experiences of supporting queer students ................................................................................... 26
      Queer teachers’ experiences of teaching in the classroom ....................................................................................... 27
      Queer academics’ experiences of conducting queer research ............................................................................... 30
   Theoretical development of queer teacher research ................................................................................................. 31
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................................... 33
Chapter 3 .......................................................................................................................................................................... 35
   Methodology ................................................................................................................................................................. 35
      Queer methodology .................................................................................................................................................... 35
      Data collection ........................................................................................................................................................... 39
      Data analysis ............................................................................................................................................................... 40
      Ethical consideration .................................................................................................................................................. 41
      Queer reflexivity of the “insider/outsider” binary ..................................................................................................... 42
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................................... 44
Chapter 4 .......................................................................................................................................................................... 45
   “I have to get married to protect myself”: Gay academics’ experiences of managing sexual identity in China ........................................................................................................................................ 45
      Passing via marriage and heterosexual relationships ............................................................................................ 46
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary of findings</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions of the study</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heteronormativity in Chinese education</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer research/politics in China</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and future research</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: The disciplinary notice I received in my former institution</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Recruitment Advertisement</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Ethics Approval</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Interview questions (English and Chinese)</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Consent Form (English and Chinese)</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Examples of coded interview transcripts</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Examples of generating themes</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: Participant Information Sheet (English and Chinese)</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

This research is an escape. An offer of a doctoral programme in New Zealand meant I could quit my job in a Chinese university where I was penalised and under surveillance. It all started with my coming out as a gay academic in 2015. My coming out was related to a lesbian student who sued China’s Ministry of Education over textbooks that describe homosexuality as a “disease” (BBC, 2015, 2016; The New York Times, 2015; The Washington Post, 2015). Her activism was suppressed by her university, and she was outed by her teacher to her family. She then was taken to the hospital by family to “cure” her homosexuality (Los Angeles Times, 2015; The Paper, 2015). By publicly coming out on media as a gay teacher, I wanted to show my support for her, and her activism (Beijing News, 2015; NGOCN, 2015; Southern Weekly, 2015).

Soon after, I was reprimanded by two Vice-Chancellors of my university in charge of teaching and ideology respectively, then was officially penalised for my coming out, as well as for my teaching about queer issues in class. The punishment involved a disciplinary notice circulated in the university (Appendix A), a fine taken out of my salary, as well as a written guarantee that I would never again talk about homosexuality in my classroom and on the internet. Since then, it seemed I was back in the closet and had to cautiously censor my sexuality on campus. It took years and a move to New Zealand before I felt ready to tell my story (Cui, 2020, May 17; Inkstone, 2020, 2021; PinkNews, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2020b).

My experience as a Chinese gay academic drove me to reflect on how my life was affected by the personal, the social, and the political. I wonder if other gay academics in China have similar or different experiences. To reveal these experiences means to challenge the social and political constraints that mute queer voice and erase queer existence in China. Therefore, this research is also a resistance.

The guiding research question for this study is: How do gay academics navigate heteronormativity in Chinese universities? The thesis explores this question with 40 gay academics who were working or had previously worked in universities in mainland China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted to identify key aspects of participants’ experiences related to the research question (Chapter 3). Four sub-questions situated in important contexts of their professional life further elucidate the central research question:

1. How do gay academics manage their sexual identity in China?
2. How do gay academics interact with, and particularly support, queer students in China?
3. How do gay academics address queer issues in the classroom in China?
4. How do gay academics conduct queer research in China?

I start this thesis by introducing the social and political context that impacts Chinese gay academics’ professional experiences and underline the importance of this research. In the rest of this chapter, I introduce the key concepts of the thesis, followed by an outline of the thesis structure.

Research context and significance

Homosexuality in China

Homosexuality was decriminalised in China in 1997 and removed from the official list of mental disorders in 2001. Since these two changes to law and clinical practice, however, the Chinese government has remained largely silent on the issue of homosexuality (Mountford, 2010). There is no same-sex marriage or civil union in Chinese family law. Nor is there anti-discrimination provision for queer people at work under Chinese Labour Law. Homosexuality is still a social taboo, censored and erased in media, education, and many other aspects of Chinese society (Mountford, 2010; Song, 2021). Queer people face persistent discrimination and prejudice from the authorities and the public (Liu & Choi, 2006). A national survey of 18088 gender and sexual minority individuals conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (2016) shows the extremely low visibility of sexual and gender minorities in Chinese society. Only around 5% of them were fully open about their sexual identity, gender identity or gender expression at schools, universities, or the workplace. “Most strikingly, the workplace remains the last place where Chinese LGBTI people feel comfortable living openly.” (p. 8) According to the same report, over half of sexual and gender minority people reported having been unfairly treated or discriminated against due to gender or sexual identity. The family was the place where the discrimination occurred most frequently, followed by educational institutions and the workplace. This survey also shows that more than one-fifth of respondents had experienced negative treatment in the workplace, around 15% had been denied employment because of their gender and sexual identity, and 8% had been dismissed by an employer (Suen et al., 2021).

Marriage is a significant source of stress experienced by Chinese queer people. In traditional Chinese culture, marriage is considered a filial obligation and a stage that everybody should pass through (Li, 1998; Sigley, 2002, 2006; To, 2013, 2015; Zhou, 2006). Most Chinese queer people submit to social expectation to enter into heterosexual marriage (Li, 1998; United Nations Development Programme, 2016). Many gay men hide their sexual identity and marry a heterosexual woman (Li, 1998), with those unwitting wives suffering both physically and mentally (Tsang, 2021). Another way for Chinese queer people to meet social expectations about marriage is “cooperative marriage” (Wang, 2014, 2019) - marriage between a gay man and a lesbian woman to give the appearance of heterosexuality. Such a strategic collaboration is a pragmatic response to the tension between the dominant culture of marriage and the rise of individualism in contemporary China (Choi & Luo, 2016). Existing research has shown that family pressure - the need to meet the parental expectation of marriage or to protect parents...
from social stigma - is often the main reason for Chinese queer people to marry (Choi & Luo, 2016; Huang & Brouwer, 2018; Li, 1998). However, little is known about whether or how Chinese queer people’s professional experiences affect their decision about marriage or heterosexual relationships, which is the gap this research can bridge. As the data chapters show, unmarried participants faced disadvantage in career promotion and maintaining good colleague relations (Chapter 4) and were more likely to expose their sexual identity in their teaching and research about queer issues (Chapter 6 & 7). As such, heterosexual marriage could protect them from potential discrimination and risks, and even enabled participants to challenge heteronormativity in the workplace.

In recent years, the Xi’s regime has increasingly stressed the Party's absolute control over every aspect of society (China Youth Activists Development Concern Group, 2019), squeezing out the already-limited queer visibility. In 2020, Shanghai Pride, the largest and longest-running Pride festival in China, shut down due to pressure from the authorities and a narrowing of the space for queer activism in China (CNN, 2020). Online queer space also shrunk as China tightened rules on internet publishing to crack down on online speech (CNN, 2021; Inkstone, 2021; Reuters, 2021b; South China Morning Post, 2021a, 2021b; SupChina, 2021; The World of Chinese, 2021; Vice, 2021). Queer non-government organisations face increased censorship and repression and become targets of state violence (Wang, 2021). Meanwhile, the connections between hegemonic masculinity and national image are consolidated by top-down structures of propaganda and censorship (BBC, 2021; Song, 2021). Homosexuality is increasingly framed by Chinese nationalists as western influence and ideology incompatible with Chinese culture, within the context of tension between China-West relations and the consequent Chinese national security regulations (Al Jazeera, 2021; Protocol, 2021; South China Morning Post, 2021b). In such a climate, queer activists have to cautiously calculate risks before organising and publicising an event, because queer activism can only survive by being depoliticised and unconfonfrontational (Bao, 2021; Tian, 2019; Wang, 2021). Such increasing violence toward queer people is deeply rooted in the institutional heteronormativity in China’s repressive politics.

Chinese universities in repressive politics

Domination over the nation’s over 3,000 university campuses is one of the Party-state’s most crucial control frameworks to preserve social stability in China. Yan’s (2014) research maps out the institutionalised control mechanism that operates on campuses to nurture political compliance since the 1990s. Various measures are used by university authorities to consolidate domination over university students, such as ideological indoctrination and surveillance, student group management, the reward for political loyalty, and student informants’ reporting (Yan, 2014). Regarding university teachers, a plethora of means of surveillance operate on campus and have a chilling effect on academics’ expressions, including CCTV, facial recognition technology, internet surveillance, and student informants (Scholars at Risk, 2019; South China Morning Post, 2018). Since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, ideological control over Chinese academics has been tightened and political dissent has become increasingly difficult (The New York Times, 2013, 2014). A directive from Beijing’s central propaganda
department to universities banned seven topics from being discussed in university classrooms (University World News, 2013). These taboos included civil society, civil rights, universal values, legal independence, press freedom, the privileged capitalistic class, and the historical wrongdoings of the Party (South China Morning Post, 2013). Meanwhile, teachers are expected to spread Party-state ideologies in the classroom (South China Morning Post, 2019). Chinese academics can face a range of consequences for their dissenting expressions, including investigations, suspensions, loss of profession, intimidation, prosecution, and imprisonment (Scholars at Risk, 2019).

In addition to the classroom teaching, this repressive political climate also had a significant impact on academics’ research. Government funders and academic publishers in China require all research to conform to the Party-state ideologies (Qin, 2017; Tenzin, 2017). Chinese academics often felt forced to research officially sanctioned topics to improve their prospects in the competition for government funding (Tenzin, 2017). This political censorship has even been exported abroad and affected China scholars outside of mainland China (Greitens & Truex, 2018). Leading international publishers such as Cambridge University Press, Taylor & Francis and Springer Nature were requested by Chinese authorities to censor publications (Financial Times, 2017; Scholars at Risk, 2019; The Guardian, 2017; The Washington Post, 2017; Wong & Kwong, 2019), giving rise to vigilance against China’s “long arm” influencing academic freedom (Redden, 2018). Foreign academics in China studies are subject to visa bans or difficulty (Link, 2013; Shambaugh, 2019; The Washington Post, 2011), surveillance and intimidation (The Guardian, 2019), as well as detention or imprisonment in China (The Guardian, 2017).

Under such a repressive climate, Chinese academics have to practice careful self-censorship and follow the Party directives in their teaching and research (Hao & Guo, 2016; Tenzin, 2017; Du, 2018, 2020). In Du’s (2018) research on academics in a Chinese university, the self-censorship strategies developed by academics include the plentiful use of metaphors in class to avoid sensitive words, avoiding discussion of Chinese politics in class, as well as compromising their personal political views in their research and publications. However, it is also found that Chinese academics can use their university-granted freedom to encourage critical thinking in class and provide students with balanced views within the boundaries of a political bottom line (Xiaoxin, 2018). Yet, little is known about the intersectional experiences of queer academics in China who are informed by both the political climate and omnipresent heteronormative culture. Furthermore, a focus on constraints of academic freedom experienced by Chinese academics might imply them as simply submissive in relation to regulatory forces. As such, this research highlights both oppression and resistance experienced in gay academics’ professional life. For instance, Chapter 6 and 7 explore how the repressive campus climate constrained participants from teaching and researching queer issues, as well as their strategies to navigate and challenge heteronormativity and political control. It is demonstrated that despite repressive politics and highly heteronormative culture on campus, Chinese gay academics are not just victims. Rather, they submitted to, and simultaneously strategically subverted, the normalising forces in Chinese universities.
Queer lives in Chinese education

The repressive climate in Chinese universities is evident in how queerness is suppressed on campus. During recent years, one queer issue in China that held domestic and international attention was China’s “homophobic textbooks” (South China Morning Post, 2020a). Research finds that most university textbooks on mental health in China still stigmatise and pathologise homosexuality (Fang, 2013). These textbooks were used by activists to advocate sexual equity and diversity in Chinese universities (Yang, 2019). Activists sued China’s Ministry of Education in 2015 (BBC, 2015, 2016; The New York Times, 2015; The Washington Post, 2015) and a university publisher in 2017 (Cui, 2020; Reuters, 2021a; The New York Times, 2020) over homophobic textbooks, but both cases failed. On the one hand, textbooks that describe homosexuality as a mental disorder are pervasive and are ignored by the educational authorities and publishers. On the other hand, sexuality education textbooks that positively represent homosexuality and advocate equality were banned and censored by the authorities (Noon, 2019). In 2021, China’s Ministry of Education responded to a top political adviser’s call for more physical education as an antidote to the supposed “feminisation” of young men, planning to improve gym classes to cultivate male students’ masculinity (BBC, 2021; Sixth Tone, 2021). These top-down institutional practices regarding gender and sexuality education sustain and reinforce heteronormative culture in Chinese education.

Considering the absence of queer-affirmative education, it is not surprising that Chinese students’ understandings of homosexuality are often limited. Existing surveys show that many Chinese university students hold a negative attitude toward homosexuality (Tian et al., 2011; Yan et al., 2002; Zhang, 2019; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). For instance, a recent survey of 9355 heterosexual students from 26 Chinese universities shows that only 54.4% considered homosexuality as normal, 25.6% were unsure whether homosexuality is normal, and 20.0% considered homosexuality as abnormal (Zhang & Zhang, 2020). Such a climate has a significant impact on queer students’ experiences at schools and universities. A national survey of 732 LGBTQ students in mainland China finds that most Chinese universities and schools were not inclusive for LGBTQ students (Wei & Liu, 2019). Chinese LGBTQ students were at great risk of psychological distress, with about 85% feeling depressed and around 40% having suicidal thoughts (Wei & Liu, 2019). Chinese LGBT students often have to cautiously manage their sexual identity to avoid being bullied by others (Cui, 2017; Wei & Liu, 2015). In another national survey of 2,077 LGBTI+ students from universities and middle schools in mainland China, only 11.07% were completely out at universities or schools, 23.05% did not know any other LGBTI+ students in their university or school, which means that their lives could be cautious, isolated, and invisible (Common Language, 2016).

One reason that contributes to the invisibility of Chinese queer students is the suppression by the authorities (China SOGIE Youth Network, 2019; Cui, 2017, 2020; Sixth Tone, 2016; Song, 2021). Queer student groups and activism in universities are subjected to surveillance and censorship by the authorities both within and beyond the university (China SOGIE Youth Network, 2019; Cui, 2017; SupChina, 2021). It is difficult for queer student groups to obtain official recognition from their university; thus, those groups are often technically unregistered in
the university (China SOGIE Youth Network, 2019). This supposed illegality gave authorities a reason to take them down. In July 2021, Chinese social media giant WeChat abruptly shut down dozens of accounts run by queer student groups in universities, reflecting the authorities’ growing intolerance of queer discussions in universities (CNN, 2021; Reuters, 2021b; South China Morning Post, 2021a, 2021b; SupChina, 2021; The World of Chinese, 2021; Vice, 2021). This crackdown on queer student groups could be linked to China’s wider tensions with the west and a new focus on traditional Chinese values (Al Jazeera, 2021; Protocol, 2021; South China Morning Post, 2021).

However, despite heteronormative campus climate and the lack of institutional support, it is found that most Chinese LGBTQ students felt comfortable about their sexual orientation and safe living and learning at universities and schools, and many came out to their friends and schoolmates (Wei & Liu, 2019). Such diverse experiences of Chinese queer students echo western educational scholars’ critique of the dominant discourse of “queer student at risk” (Quinlivan, 2002; Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004). As Allen (2015a) proposes, the “normal” descriptions of queer students as vulnerable and in need of protection limits how we might understand queer students’ experiences beyond the dualistic binary of either “victims” or “heroes”. To refuse the flat portrayal of queer students, Chapter 5 draws on some participants’ narratives about their interactions with queer students and shows that Chinese queer students could experience university life in diverse ways. By showing that Chinese queer students were not necessarily “at risk”, this research can trouble existing literature on Chinese queer students whose lives are typically portrayed as negative (Common Language, 2016; Cui, 2017; Wei & Liu, 2015).

Compared with queer students, Chinese queer teachers are even more invisible. Some surveys on public attitude toward homosexuality show Chinese people’s negative attitude toward homosexual teachers (Li & Zheng, 2013; Tian et al., 2011). For instance, a survey of 567 Chinese university students shows that only around 25% accept homosexual teachers (Tian et al., 2011). Another survey of 400 Chinese people showed that more than half thought that homosexual people should not be school teachers (Li & Zheng, 2013). In such a climate, little is known about queer teachers’ lives in China except for occasional news reports. Cui Zi’en, a lecturer at the Beijing Film Academy, publicly came out in 1991 and was regarded as the first Chinese gay man who was openly out. Consequently, he paid a huge price and was banned from teaching for ten years (Bao, 2018, p. 121; Global Times, 2012). Two decades after Cui Zi’en’s coming out, Wei Wei, a gay academic, publicly came out in his monograph on the Chinese gay community (Helanonline, 2012). As a Professor in queer studies and an activist who actively advocates queer rights (NetEase, 2018; Sohu, 2020; Wei, 2020), he is currently the most well-known and respected queer scholar in China. However, Wei’s success does not mean Chinese queer teachers can easily come out today. My personal experience is an example to illustrate this, as I explained at the beginning of this chapter (Cui, 2020, May 17; Inkstone, 2020, 2021; PinkNews, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2020). In 2018, a Chinese kindergarten teacher was fired after his gay identity was exposed (Inkstone, 2018; Reuters, 2018). What cannot be seen from these reports about the consequences of queer teachers’ coming out or identity exposure, is the lived experiences of most Chinese queer teachers who are closeted and silent, which is the focus that this research aims to explore.
Key concepts and definitions

In this section, I clarify some key concepts and terms featured in my research question and analytic framework. As the meaning of these terms can be contested, here I explain how I employ them for my analysis.

Gay

This research uses “gay” as an identity term for Chinese men with same-sex desire, instead of the Chinese term “tongzhi” (同志). “Tongzhi”, literally meaning “same will” or “comrade”, was appropriated as an identity label by gay activists in Hong Kong in the 1980s. Since then it has spread beyond Hong Kong and gained popularity in Chinese societies (Lau et al., 2017). Many scholars have chosen “tongzhi” as the identity term in their research on Chinese queer people (Kong, 2011; Wang, 2019; Zheng, 2015). When I recruited participants for this research, I used both “gay” and “tongzhi” in the participant recruitment poster (Appendix B). “Gay” was used in the English title and “tongzhi” (同志) was used in the Chinese title (Appendix B). Notedly, participants in this research did not perceive “tongzhi” as the only or most common term to self-identify. Responding to my interview question of choosing a self-identified term among “tongxinglian (同性恋, homosexual), “gay”, “tongzhi”, and “Ku’er (酷儿, queer)”, many participants did not think there are any differences between “tongxinglian”, “gay” and “tongzhi”. Even those who did see the differences used them interchangeably. “Tongxinglian”, “gay” and “tongzhi” were all common in participants’ expressions and none was used dominantly. By contrast, only one participant chose the word “Ku’er”. As such, despite being a Chinese term, “tongzhi” is not necessarily the term that most commonly used by Chinese queer people compared with other identity labels. This echoes a survey of self-identification labels selected by sexual minorities in Hong Kong: 64% of respondents selected either “gay” or “lesbian”, 61% selected “tongxinglian/homosexual”, 25% selected “tongzhi”, and only 15% selected “queer” (Lau et al., 2017). It is also found that an increasing number of people with same-sex desire in China refer to themselves as, or are more willing to be called, “gay” or “lesbian” rather than “tongzhi” (Wong, 2011).

Using “gay” as an identity label in the Chinese context also means recognising the complexity of identity construction in the era of globalisation. Tracing the appropriation of “gay” in China, Wong (2011) argues that the adoption of “gay” in China is a hybridised form of sexual identification, which enables one to engage in a stylish and modernised presentation of self. However, what “gay” means in China may not be the same as what it means in the US. Wong (2011) thus suggests researchers be “critical of essentialist positions of identity and a conceptualization of pure origins” (p. 165) and pay attention to “the twists and turns of transnational cultural flows that result in different forms of hybridized identity” (p. 152). In this vein, this research can enrich the understandings of being gay by exploring gay subjectivities that are shaped by both the Chinese context and western discourses such as the “coming out imperative” (Chapter 1 & 6). As this thesis shows, participants’ constitution of gay subjectivities is in deep contrast with the western model of gayness that emphasises the values of pride and...
coming out (see the following definitions of “closeted, coming out”). Such conceptualisation of sexual identity is in line with queer theory that views identity categories as always dynamic, diverse, and unstable (McCann & Monaghan, 2020).

Queer

*Queer* is a “deliberately ambiguous term” that resists stable discrete definition (Monaghan, 2016, p. 7). As Jagose (1996) articulates, “its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics” (p. 1). This is where the queer concept finds its political potential for disruption, transgression, and interrogation. However, its uncertainty and openness also result in its difficulty in pinpointing meaning, as well as its multiple mobilisations that mutually coexist in research. Burford and Allen (2019) identify three ways of using queer by researchers: 1) queer as personal identities outside heterosexuality and gender binary; 2) queer as non-normative sexual practices and gender expressions; 3) queer as a political stance and ideological commitment that deconstructs identity and interrogates norms.

Following queer concept’s embrace of uncertainty and openness, the use of queer in this research is diverse and does not seek definitional uniformity. It can be used as an umbrella term for those whose identity, desire, or practice that does not conform to dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality (e.g., queer teachers, queer students, queer identity, queer issues, queer community). It is also used as a political tool and theoretical framework (e.g., queer theory, queer pedagogy), in line with the third category of use outlined above. This adoption of queer is rooted in radical deconstruction and anti-essentialism and seeks to unsettle normative identity and notion (McCann & Monaghan, 2020). As Halperin (1995) states: “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing particular to which it necessarily refers” (p. 62). In this vein, queer is often used as a verb, referring to practices that subvert normative culture and seek out new ways of becoming (e.g. queering the heteronormative classroom). To “queer” something means to destabilise it, interrogate it, and decentre it from the norm. For instance, an important aim of this thesis is to “queer” the Chinese academy which institutionally centres heterosexuality and casts homosexuality as the abnormal other.

As Chapter 3 shows, this research is informed by queer theory theoretically and methodologically. Queer theory is a community of scholarship that emerged around the 1990s and is associated with thinkers like Judith Butler (1990), Eve Kosofky Sedgwick (1990), Michael Warner (1993), Annamarie Jagose (1996), and Jack Halberstam (1998, 2011). Drawing from poststructuralism, queer theorists seek to interrogate meanings and boundaries used to sustain identity and produce knowledge. The deconstructive aims of queer theory are antithetical to identity politics, which organises around discrete identities and involves striving for social justice in relation to identities (McCann & Monaghan, 2020). From a queer lens, identities are always multiple, unstable, and regulatory (Ryan, 2020). In this vein, queer research departs from gay and lesbian scholarship in that it seeks to destabilise identity by highlighting the provisional and contingent nature of identity categories, rather than understanding identity as unified, fixed, and
stable. As such, queer scholars can see sexual identities as “necessary but problematic” (Nelson, 1999, p. 375). As Butler (1991) writes:

…identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies. (pp. 13–14)

Thus, queer research, as Allen (2015) argues, “is by its nature diverse and not easily extracted from sexual politics no matter how much queer theorists might wish to elude the capture of identity's political embrace” (p. 682).

Queer theory’s deconstruction of identity is enabled by problematising “the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire” (Butler, 1990, p. 6) which constitutes the heterosexual matrix. Coined by Butler (1990), the heterosexual matrix is a “grid of cultural intelligibility” which “assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (p. 151). The challenge to the assumed “coherence” and “continuity” of sex, gender and desire subverts what we understand as identity. Butler’s (1990) most cited contribution to queer theory is her argument that gender identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results. Put differently, gender is a doing, not a being. In this way, queer theory deconstructs the foundations of identity by demonstrating what is conventionally thought to be interior, fixed and natural, is produced through repetition of acts.

Queer theory’s resistance to fixed categorisations, and its disruption to taken-for-granted meanings, mean that it can be applied far beyond questions of gender and sexuality. The area of queer investigation has spread out in a variety of directions and been expanded to seemingly non-queer subjects. As Love (2011) identifies,

These days, queer is not only also about race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nation, but is also about affect, citizenship, the death drive, diaspora, digitality, disability, empire, friendship, globalisation, the impersonal, indirection, kinship, living underground, loss, marginality, melancholia, migration, neoliberalism, pedagogy, performativity, publicity, self-shattering, shame, shyness, sovereignty, subversion, temporality and terrorism. The semantic flexibility of queer - its weird ability to touch almost anything - is one of the most exciting things about it. (p. 182)

Within educational research, scholars also suggest stepping outside the conventional realms of queer research in education and escaping “the queer cul-de-sac” which typically takes sexuality and gender as its focus (Allen, 2015b; Rasmussen & Allen, 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2014; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). This approach to adopting queer theoretical tools aims to shake and unsettle sedimented knowledge and bend the rules governing social convention in educational contexts. This work, as Gowlett and Rasmussen (2014) argue, can open up “the possibility of doing life differently and … is extremely political” (p. 333). To answer this call, a
queer lens is employed to examine a variety of institutional practices in Chinese universities which seem neutral but prove to be heteronormative (see the following definition of “heteronormativity”). The political potential of this queering comes from “throwing light onto seemingly neutral practices and creating a discomfort about them” (Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 334). In this way, this research adopts queer theory which involve, as McCann and Monaghan (2020) state, “a deconstructive/destabilising bent” (p. 146).

Heteronormativity

This research focuses on gay academics’ experiences of heteronormativity on Chinese campuses. Coined by Warner (1993), heteronormativity is defined as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent - that is, organized as a sexuality - but also privileged” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548). Put differently, according to Cameron and Kulick (2003), it means “those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary” (p. 55). Tracing two of the founders of queer theory Warner and Seidman’s uses of the term heteronormativity, Marchia and Sommer (2019) identify its five main dimensions. Heteronormativity

1) reinforces the dominant heterosexual code with its hierarchy, normalization, and exclusion; 2) is a pervasive system that needs to be addressed, questioned, and challenged in terms of sexuality; 3) is the privileging of heterosexuality; 4) is linked to the oppression of LGBTQ people; and 5) is inherent in heterosexual institutions and social codes. (p. 276)

This theoretical concept, as Allen (2011) notes, enables a shift of emphasis in addressing queer issues “from LGB subjects as ‘victims’, to practices and processes which scaffold sexual/social injustices” (p. 157). As Britzman (1995) argues, “Queer Theory is an attempt to move away from psychological explanations like homophobia, which individualizes heterosexual fear of and loathing toward gay and lesbian subjects at the expense of examining how heterosexuality becomes normalized as natural” (p 153). As such, attention is refocused to concentrate on the centre rather than the margins to problematise the normal and disrupt the status quo. This work involves identifying the pervasive and largely invisible practices that reinforce the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary and hierarchy.

Although heterosexuality is privileged in the power operation of heteronormativity, not all forms of being heterosexual are legitimate. Reminding us of “the impact of regimes of normative heterosexuality on heterosexuality” (p. 40), Seidman (2005) argues that “normative heterosexuality not only establishes a heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy but also creates hierarchies among heterosexualities” (p. 40). For instance, those who violate monogamous and familial norms, despite being heterosexual, are defined as bad sexual citizens and cannot claim the full privileges of heterosexuality (Seidman, 2005). Jackson (2006) thus suggests that heteronormativity only legitimates specific forms of heterosexual relationships. As she argues, “heteronormativity defines not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life”
Such regulation of way of life by heteronormativity is particularly evident in the Chinese context where marriage and parenting are regarded as life courses everyone should experience, and filial obligation every child should fulfil (Li, 1998; Sigley, 2002, 2006; To, 2013, 2015; Zhou, 2006). As Chapter 4 shows, the heteronormative notions about ways of life informed many gay academics’ workplace experiences. They had to cope with the matchmaking initiated by colleagues and leaders, as well as conversations between colleagues which were constantly about marriage, family, and parenting. Many participants thus made up a heterosexual relationship or kept a distance from people on campus.

International research has shown that schools and universities are heteronormative spaces (Allen, 2006b; Epstein et al., 2003). In such spaces, queer students (Allen, 2015a; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Wei & Liu, 2019) and queer teachers (Amoor, 2019; Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Ferfolja, 2010; Gray et al., 2016; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995) are subjected to silencing, marginalisation and exclusion. The understanding of educational institutions as heteronormative enables educators and policymakers to rethink the approach to addressing queer issues in education. Queer scholars propose moving beyond viewing queer youth as a minority group that requires reparation and individual support (Allen, 2018a; Formby, 2015, 2017). As Quinlivan and Town (1999) explain, minoritising queer students under the “at risk” label frames their “problem” as personal, at the expense of questioning the normalisation of heterosexuality. However, as Chapter 5 shows, the institutional approach to addressing queer issues proposed by western scholars may not apply to China where queer advocacy and any challenge to the authorities are politically risky.

Unpacking how heteronormativity works, Herz and Johansson (2015) identify two ways of approaching heteronormativity in empirical studies: a bottom-up version and a top-down version. The bottom-up version focuses mostly on individuals and underplays the importance of analysing social institutions and political systems, while the top-down version is based on a structural view of society and focuses on social institutions (Herz & Johansson, 2015). Both approaches have been adopted by educational scholars in their research on heteronormativity in educational settings. For instance, heteronormativity is identified in teacher-student interactions, students’ peer relationships, teachers’ colleague relationships, as well as teachers’ interactions with students’ parents (Beagan et al., 2020; Brockenbrough, 2012; Francis, 2019; Hoang, 2019; Neary, 2017; Russell, 2010; Toledo & Maher, 2021). Using a bottom-up approach to heteronormativity, this body of work shows how heteronormativity exerts power over individuals in interpersonal interactions. Heteronormativity in educational settings results in homophobic harassment and bullying, use of abusive language, and everyday microaggressions experienced by those who do not fit into the norms (Beagan et al., 2020; Brockenbrough, 2012; Ferfolja, 2007a; Hoang, 2019). However, queer students’ and teachers’ experiences of heteronormativity are not simply about prejudice exercised by ignorant or discriminatory individuals. A top-down approach to heteronormativity demonstrates that heteronormativity is embedded in the institutional processes such as educational policies (Connell, 2012; Naeimi & Kjaran, 2021; Rudoe, 2018; Smith, 2004), curriculum and pedagogies (Atkinson, 2021; DePalma & Francis, 2014; Liew, 2014; Naeimi & Kjaran, 2021), professional development activities (Ferfolja, 2007a), and school social work practices (Hoang, 2019).
Drawing on gay academics’ experiences in China, this research contributes to the empirical analysis of heteronormativity in Chinese higher education. Combining both bottom-up and top-down approaches suggested by Herz and Johansson (2015), this thesis shows heteronormativity on Chinese campuses operates both individually and institutionally, and is scaffolded and reinforced by the Party-state political control over Chinese universities.

Closed, coming out

“Closed” is a metaphor for the experience of queer people who live without disclosing their sexual or gender identity, while “coming out” is used to describe queer people’s disclosure of their queer identity. The reach of this metaphor is global. “Coming out of the closet” has been translated into Chinese (chugui, 出柜) and is commonly used within and beyond the Chinese queer community. More than 84,600,000 results appeared when searching the Chinese translation of “coming out” in Baidu, the largest search engine in China (data accessed on July 10, 2021). Many Chinese scholars have documented Chinese queer people’s experiences of coming out (Jing et al., 2014; Wang, 2011; Wei, 2012, 2015; Wei & Liu, 2019).

In the western context, the metaphor of closet not only structures understandings of queer people but also informs the structures of thoughts. As Fuss (1991) articulates,

> Inside/outside functions as the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production. It has everything to do with the structures of alienation, splitting, and identification which together produce a self and an other, a subject and an object, an unconscious and a conscious, an interiority and an exteriority. (pp. 1-2)

Similarly, in Sedgwick’s (1990) seminal book *Epistemology of the Closet*, she argues that “the relations of the closet — the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition — have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally” (p. 3). For instance, Sedgwick identifies a range of binaries that are structured by the closet, including “knowledge/ignorance”, “natural/unnatural”, “secrecy/disclosure”, “public/private”, “health/illness”, “same/different”, “homo/hetero”. Those seemingly symmetrical binary oppositions, according to Sedgwick (1990), “actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation” (p. 10). Within each dyad the supposed central only gains meaning in relation to the supposed marginal category, via a “simultaneous subsumption and exclusion” of the subordinated category (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 10). Following this logic, heterosexuality only exists in relation to homosexuality and the normalisation of heterosexuality is predicated on the repression of homosexuality.

Such hierarchical relation is evident in the discourses about the closet which privilege coming out and subordinate the position of being closeted. For instance, according to the models of “homosexual identity formation” described by psychologists since the 1970s, coming out is marked as a crucial step that can lead to peaceful and stable feelings, as well as one integrated identity that unites the private and public self (Cass, 1979, 1984). Coming out is also used as a political tool to mobilise and advocate in identity politics. In these discourses, coming out is
positioned as positive and empowered, while non-disclosure is described as hiding in the closet. Consequently, there is an expectation of showing their pride attached to queer people.

Within the educational context, queer teachers are often expected to come out and be role models for students (Barnard, 1994; Harbeck, 1992; Sears & Williams, 1997). As Barnard (1994) suggests, “queer teachers owe it to themselves and to all their students to be out in the classroom” (p. 28). Following this logic, closeted queer teachers are considered as “appallingly cowardly in coming out” (Barnard, 1994, p. 28), or “miserably failing our community and our movement” (Sears & Williams, 1997, p. 4). Based on this context, Rasmussen (2004) identifies a dominant discourse of “coming out imperative” faced by queer teachers. As she points out,

Students and teachers who fail in their duty to come out may be marked as lacking, while those who do come out may be celebrated as role models promoting tolerance and inclusivity, empowering themselves and others ... There is an imperative for lesbian and gay identified people to come out in educational settings, and ... this imperative can place people in an invidious position. When coming out discourses are privileged, the act of not coming out may be read as an abdication of responsibility, or, the act of somebody who is disempowered or somehow ashamed of their inherent gayness. (pp. 145-146)

Following Rasmussen (2004), this research interrogates the “coming out imperative” by exploring closeted gay academics’ experiences of navigating and challenging heteronormativity. It is demonstrated that coming out was not an essential prerequisite for supporting queer students (Chapter 5), addressing queer issues in the classroom (Chapter 6), and conducting queer research (Chapter 7). Rather, the protection and power provided by the closet allowed some participants to transgress the norms without risking their personal and professional life in a heteronormative and repressive environment. The closet, thus, could be a site where gay academics actively exercised agency (see below the definition of agency).

Furthermore, it is also demonstrated that the boundary of the closet could be obscure. Like participants in Wei’s (2007) research on the Chengdu gay community in Southwest China, many participants in this research disclosed their sexual identity to selected people, instead of coming out in public. For instance, they could reach other queer people on campus via the gay “dating apps”. In this way, they built trusted relationships with queer colleagues (Chapter 4) and supported queer students (Chapter 5) without risking their professional life. Another way that some participants obscured the boundary of the closet was contextually adopting different identity management strategies and letting others “suspect” their sexual identity. By self-positioning as neither inside nor outside the closet, they performed shifting subjectivities and blurred the “heterosexuality/homosexuality” binary (Chapter 4). In doing so, they disrupted heteronormativity that scaffolds the power dynamics of the closet.

Agency

In the humanist or individualistic mode of the person, agency is a feature of each sane, adult human being, while individuals are conceived as being in relation to the external society which “acts forcefully upon them and against which they can pit themselves” (Davies, 1991, p. 42).
Embedded within this humanist discourse is an understanding that identity is continuous, unified, rational, and coherent (Davies, 1991). In contrast to the traditional concept of human agency, Butler (1990, 1997a) moves beyond an understanding of agency as the property of a priori, self-aware subject, and thinks of agency as discursive. In a Butlerian analysis, subjectivity is socially constructed in and through the “regulated process of repetition” of norms (Butler, 1990, p. 145), and agency is the capacity to name discourse and thereby performatively constitute subjects. As Butler (1993) articulates:

There is no subject who is “free” to stand outside these norms or to negotiate them at a distance; on the contrary, the subject is retroactively produced by these norms in their repetition, precisely as their effect. What we might call “agency” or “freedom” or “possibility” is always a specific political prerogative that is produced by the gaps opened up in regulatory norms, in the interpelling work of such norms, in the process of their self-repetition. Freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power. (p. 22)

Butler’s version of agency is articulated through her concept of performative resignification (Butler, 1990, 1997b). Agency is situated within the process, or, repetition of the signifiers that constitute the subject. Yet, the self-repetition of given signs and norms in the constitution of the subject does not mean that the subject is socially determined and without agency. Rather, agency is “located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (Butler, 1990, p. 145). The performative constitution of the subject opens the possibility for the norms to be reworked. As Niesche and Gowlett (2019) explained, “when performatives are (re)cited there is a moment created for them to be modified and altered.” (p. 74) This condition of agency is explained by Butler in an interview, using herself as an example:

I work within the norms that constitute me. I do something with them. Those norms are the condition of my agency, and they also limit my agency; they are that limit and that condition at the same time. What I can do is, to a certain extent, conditioned by what is available for me to do within the culture and by what other practices are and by what practices are legitimating. (Olson & Worsham, 2000, p. 752)

Such conception of subjectification and agency helps shift thinking on the relationship between agency and norms beyond a binary model of coercion versus escape, determinism or free will (Gowlett, 2014). While the norms that govern reality are recited and reproduced, subjects can contest and alter the norms via citational practices that resist those norms. In other words, it is through reciting norms that a possibility for resignifying norms, or exercising agency, is created. As such, action of agency is not the moment of freedom from the constraining regulations of norms. Rather, agency involves simultaneous mastery and submission, which is the consequence of the process of subjectification. As Butler questioned:

What other options emerge between these two extremes? Is there a way to submit provisionally and critically to such norms, and to do so in ways that change the norms themselves? Is it possible to inhabit the norms in order to mobilize the rules differently? (Butler, 2006, p. 532)
This formulation of agency in between the extremes of conforming and fleeing rejects the self as prediscursive and challenges conventional understanding of agency as an individual’s “capacity to conceive and execute his/her own actions and projects” (Barvosa-Carter, 2001, p. 125).

Within the western educational context, researchers have pointed out that students and teachers are conventionally understood in liberal humanist terms as autonomous individuals with varying degrees of freedom to choose what kind of person to be (Davies, 2006). Butler’s analysis provides a different insight into understanding agency in the educational context. Yet, as a philosopher, Butler does not link her analysis to the details of everyday lives and thus her conceptualisation of agency remains abstract and lacking in social specificity (McNay, 1999). Consequently, a body of literature links Butler’s work to various educational moments and demonstrates how Butler’s concept of subjectification is productive for thinking about agency in education (Allen, 2008; Davies, 2006; Gowllett, 2014, 2015; Niesche & Gowllett, 2019; Youdell, 2006a). For instance, by showing young people’s contradictory state of simultaneously opposing and submitting to discursive forms of power, Allen (2008) conceptualises youth as social agents who actively negotiate and contribute to the everyday construction of the social world. Similarly, drawing on Butler’s theory, Niesche and Gowllett (2019) show how the leadership team in an Australian school conforms to normative understandings, and simultaneously reworks them in unexpected ways.

Understanding students and teachers as produced through ongoing performative constitutions, as well as thinking of agency as discursive, also enables us to better understand the enduring injustice and normativity in educational settings. Butler’s theoretical propositions open new possibilities for challenging the sedimented meanings of prevailing discourses, as well as constituting subjects differently through everyday practices of performativity. Proposing “a performative politics in education” (p. 40) to interrupt abiding educational exclusions and inequalities, Youdell (2006a) writes:

> “The contingency of the discursive performative, and the mobility of discourse and discursive meaning, mean that these processes can be resisted, undercut, deflected; discursive meaning can be shifted; silenced, disavowed discourses can be deployed; subjects can be constituted differently….Such changes do not take place through legislation and policy development (although such reforms for equity remain welcome); rather, they occur through practising differently in the everyday, from moment to moment, across school spaces. (p. 40)

This research shows that Butler’s ideas are particularly useful for rethinking queer teachers’ agency. As outlined above, closeted queer teachers are conventionally understood by researchers as cowardly, disempowered, ashamed of their queer identity, or lacking in agency (Barnard, 1994; Harbeck, 1992; Sears & Williams, 1997). These negative representations are troubled by an emerging body of research that demonstrates queer teachers’ agency in the closet (Brockenbrough, 2012; Ferfolja, 2007b, 2014; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2018, 2019). These studies show that positioning the subject in heterosexual discourse not only enables closeted teachers to pass as heterosexuals, but simultaneously to challenge...
heteronormativity. As Ferfolja (2007b) argues, “silence, although complex, does not necessarily mean oppression, … passing does not equate to failure and that one does not necessarily have to be ‘out’ to have agency” (p. 583). Following Ferfolja (2007b), this research aims to explore closeted gay academics’ agency in the Chinese context. I show that closeted participants conformed to heterosexual norms that governed their professional life, and simultaneously adopted various strategies to disrupt heteronormativity. Butler’s analysis of subjectification and agency proves to be helpful in unpacking participants’ agency on the heteronormative and repressive campuses in China, where coming out, public advocacy and collective activism are hugely risky. As Gowlett (2014) argues, “For the most vulnerable, where the stakes of livability are high, a version of agency that functions within the system that constitutes it, provides possibility”. (p. 417)

Queer pedagogy

Informed by queer theory, queer pedagogy is concerned with how queer theory can open up new spaces for teaching and learning. Deborah Britzman’s (1995) article, entitled “Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight”, is the most cited in this field. In this seminal work, she describes education techniques that queer theory can offer to rethink pedagogy and knowledge. For instance, a queer pedagogy engages with the study of limits, which questions the grounds of thought by asking what makes something thinkable and what it cannot bear to know. Another method of queer pedagogy is reading practices that encourage readers to “exceed their own readings, to stop reading straight” (Britzman, 1995, p. 164). By reading queerly, it attempts to mark the repetition of normalcy and unsettle the sediments of knowledge about normalcy and difference. In these ways, as Britzman (1995) envisions, a queer pedagogy can be

one that refuses normal practices and practices of normalcy, one that begins with an ethical concern for one’s own reading practices, one that is interested in exploring what one cannot bear to know, one interested in the imagining of a sociality unhinged from the dominant conceptual order. (p. 165)

A queer pedagogy enables queer students to centre their experiences as “normal” and question the role their schools or universities play in making them feel “abnormal” and “deviant” (Quinlivan & Town, 1999). However, bringing queerness into the classroom does not necessarily mean focusing on queer people and introducing heterosexual students to queer lives. As Luhmann (1998) suggests, “If queer pedagogy ... is foremost concerned with a radical practice of deconstructing normalcy, then it is obviously not confined to teaching as, for, or about queer subject(s)” (p. 128). For instance, Alexander (2005) invites all students in his writing classroom - gay and straight - to think of the “constructedness” of their lives in a heteronormative society. For heterosexual students, this means examining “the ways in which ‘straightness’ is ‘performed’, is narrated, is constructed and maintained as an identity” (Alexander, 2005, p. 378). Similarly, Winans (2006) asks students to analyse how aspects of campus culture encourage or place positive value on heterosexuality. In these ways, heterosexual students are encouraged to reflect on how their knowledge of themselves as
straights comes into existence, and not to take their heterosexual privileges for granted. Furthermore, queer pedagogy provides an opportunity for heterosexual students to consider a wider range of possibilities in defining their sexual identity, and regard heterosexuality as one alternative amongst several, rather than the “normal”, choice (Quinlivan & Town, 1999).

To enact queerness in teaching, queer teachers can take advantage of their gender and sexuality to problematise and subvert normative identity and discourse (Alexander, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Kopelson, 2002; Reimers, 2020; Vicars, 2006). This can be enabled by demonstrating non-conforming gender performance (Reimers, 2020; Rofes, 2000; Skelton 2000), or deliberately performing ambiguous or fluid identities in their classroom to challenge conventional perceptions of gender and sexuality (Crawley, 2009; Khayatt, 1997; Kopelson, 2002; Willman, 2009). Consequently, one may wonder whether queer pedagogy can be equated with queer teachers’ educational practices. Such understanding of queer pedagogy draws a linear relationship between identity and practices, which goes against queer theory’s principle of reading all categories as constructed and unstable. On the one hand, those who identify as queer pedagogues, or implement a queer pedagogy, need not identify as queer themselves. Heterosexual educators and scholars can offer queer pedagogic opportunities and create spaces for students to examine and challenge normative identities (Allen, 2011a, 2011b). For instance, Allen (2011a) “comes out” as heterosexual by “undoing” the heterosexual self, to denaturalise and centre heterosexuality as the “natural” and “normal” form of sexuality. It involves revealing the constituted nature of heterosexuality and demonstrating personal endeavours to subvert heteronormativity (Allen, 2011a). On the other hand, queer teachers’ educational practices are not necessarily anti-heteronormative (Allen, 2006b, 2010). As Chapter 6 shows, some gay academics performed homophobic attitudes to homosexuality in the classroom out of self-protection in a heteronormative environment.

Existing literature has documented queer pedagogy in various contexts, such as in the English classroom (Banegas & Evripidou, 2021; Nelson, 1999, 2002; Winans, 2006), the writing classroom (Alexander, 2005; Monson & Rhodes, 2004), music education (Gould, 2013), social justice education (Pennell, 2020), and teacher education (Staley & Leonardi, 2020). Queerness can be enacted in every sphere of education, including early childhood education (Reimers, 2020), primary and secondary education (Jackson, 2009; Quinlivan & Town, 1999), and university classrooms (Allen, 2015b). However, little is known whether, or in what ways, queer pedagogy is possible in the Chinese context. This is the gap this research aims to bridge. As Chapter 6 shows, despite various concerns about addressing queer issues in the classroom, particularly classroom surveillance and censorship by the university authorities, many gay academics adopted a range of strategies to lower the risks of addressing queer issues. These strategies also enabled some participants to disrupt the heteronormative culture and political control on campus. To extend existing research on queer pedagogy to the Chinese context, I construct some teaching moments in participants’ classroom as queer pedagogy. For example, some participants invited their students to read Chinese classical literature queerly, or challenged heteronormative assumptions about relationships and sexuality (Chapter 6). By highlighting how gay academics’ queering was both enabled and restricted by the constraining forces in China, I explore what is possible for such queering to achieve, as well as “the limits of queer pedagogy” in repressive politics (Allen, 2015b, p. 765).
Sexuality research as dirty work

American scholar Janice Irvine’s (2014) provocative research on American sexuality researchers examines sexuality research as a form of dirty work, “an occupation that is simultaneously socially necessary and stigmatized” (p. 632). Her research reveals how systematic practices of the American university system construct sexuality research as dirty. Contemporary sexuality researchers in her study reported various difficulties in conducting sexuality research, such as barriers to graduate training, funding, publication, ethics approval and promotion. For instance, her participants reported the absence of departmental support for sexuality research, failure of colleagues and the leadership to recognise their research as legitimate, and general hostility in the departments toward sexuality research. Publishing sexuality research in mainstream sociology journals could mean slim publication rates, editors’ requirements such as multiple extensive revisions or changing titles to cover the research topic (Irvine, 2014). In terms of research funding, sexuality researchers faced scant funding resources and negative responses from funders (Irvine, 2014). Almost 20% of sexuality researchers in her study reported being asked by funders to modify their grant proposals and downplay its focus on sexuality, such as eliminating sensitive words in their proposal. Irvine argues that the stigma of sexuality research as dirty work represents persistent patterns of institutional inequality and shapes the broad production of sexual knowledge.

Following Irvine (2014), global sexuality scholars document nuanced and diverse experiences of sexuality research in international contexts, such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand and African countries (Allen, 2019a; Dowsett, 2014; Epprecht, 2014, 2018; Fahs et al., 2018; Javaid, 2020a, 2020b; Keene, 2021; McCormack, 2014; Msibi, 2014). However, to date little is known about the institutional challenges faced by sexuality researchers in Chinese academia, particularly in a climate of increasing censorship and political control in China (Ho et al., 2018). One exception is Wei’s (2020) reflection of his own experience of promoting LGBTQ research as a gay academic in China. To extend the existing research on sexuality researchers, Chapter 7 explores some gay academics’ experiences of conducting queer research in China. Many aspects of the challenges faced by my participants echo Irvine’s (2014) study, as well as encountering some unique difficulties which were informed by the political control of the Chinese authorities. By highlighting how these participants’ experiences of research censorship were affected by the institutional heteronormativity and the top-down Party-state power, this research can add knowledge to the constitution of sexuality research as dirty work in the context of repressive politics.

Thesis overview

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 is a literature review of queer teacher research. Five major concerns are identified within the existing literature: workplace climate for queer teachers, queer teachers’ identity management, queer teachers’ experiences of supporting queer students, queer teachers’ experiences of teaching in the classroom, and queer academics’ experiences of conducting queer research. A review of all these themes is followed
by a discussion of theoretical development in queer teacher research spanning three decades, which reflects various approaches to understanding queer teachers’ agency. Research gaps are identified to demonstrate how the experiences of gay academics in China can contribute to knowledge about queer teachers.

This research employs methodological approaches informed by queer theory (McCann & Monaghan, 2020). Chapter 3 engages with the research methodology and provides information about data collection and analysis. It begins by explaining how queer theory is applied in this research methodologically, followed by an account of the methods used to generate and analyse data. The ethical considerations are outlined, including how confidentiality is guaranteed during the research process. I also detail an account of “queer reflexivity” (McDonald, 2013, 2006) to reflect on my shifting researcher positions as both an “insider” and “outsider” in various contexts of this research.

Chapters 4 to 7 make up the analysis section of the thesis. These four chapters are separately guided by the four sub-questions introduced at the beginning of this chapter:

1. How do gay academics manage their sexual identity in China?
2. How do gay academics interact with, and particularly support, queer students in China?
3. How do gay academics address queer issues in the classroom in China?
4. How do gay academics conduct queer research in China?

Chapter 4 focuses on academics’ experiences of managing sexual identity as closeted gay men in Chinese universities. Strategies that participants employed to manage their sexuality are identified. For instance, most participants positioned themselves in marriage or heterosexual relationships to conceal their gay identity. Many participants distanced themselves from people on campus to avoid conversations that constantly involved marriage and family. However, by showing outstanding academic or professional performance, several participants managed to transgress the boundary of the closet. In Chapter 4, I particularly highlight the ways gay academics disrupted heteronormativity in their identity management, to show how closeted teachers exercised agency in relation to the heterosexual norms. I argue that the closet enabled gay academics not only to pass or cover (Griffin, 1991, 1992) as heterosexual, but also to challenge heteronormativity.

Chapter 5 examines closeted gay academics’ interactions with queer students in China, with a focus on their support for queer students. It draws on participants’ narratives to interrogate some dominant discourses about queer teachers and queer students found in the western literature, including the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004), “queer teacher as role model” (Khayatt, 1997) and “queer student at risk” (Allen, 2015a; Quinlivan, 2002; Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004). For instance, I show that some participants supported queer students without publicly coming out on campus, and that participants’ perceived “support” of queer students could be heteronormative. I argue that the pervasive idea that queer teachers are the ones who can best support queer students by coming out and providing a role model for them, should be interrogated. This expectation about queer teachers can be unethical and overlook the responsibility of the institution. Considering the heteronormative and repressive campus climate
in China, I suggest acknowledging closeted participants’ individual approach to supporting queer students as strategic and feasible.

Chapter 6 explores gay academics’ experiences of addressing queer issues in the classroom in China. It first demonstrates participants’ concerns about addressing queer issues in the classroom. Given the unique political climate participants faced, I particularly highlight university authorities’ techniques of surveillance and censorship on classroom teaching. Next, I identify various strategies that participants employed to cope with their concerns and lower the risks of addressing queer issues. Examples of participants’ teaching moments are provided to showcase how they challenged heteronormativity in class. Some teaching moments in participants’ classroom are constructed as “queer pedagogy” which seeks to interrogate dominant identities and ideas (Britzman, 1995). I argue that the queerness of their teaching manifested in its potential conflict with the social and political constraints in the heteronormative and repressive context of Chinese universities.

Chapter 7 focuses on gay academics’ experiences of conducting queer research in China. It shows that although a plethora of institutional practices informed by the political climate constituted queer research as “dirty work” (Irvine, 2014) in China, some participants adopted various strategies to lower the risks and enhance legitimacy of their queer research. For instance, conducting queer research often involved “keeping a low profile” to avoid potential risks. Several participants published their queer research internationally or mainstreamed their queer research by mobilising official discourse and traditional value. To unpack the complexity of the constitution of sexuality research as dirty work, I highlight the nuances of participants’ experiences that diverged from the conventional understanding of research censorship in Chinese academia (Scholars at Risk, 2019). For instance, queer researchers could resist censorship by ignoring its expectation, and the institutions that restricted queer research simultaneously submitted to the power of higher levels. By demonstrating the instability of the “powerless researcher/ powerful censor” binary, it is argued that positioning Chinese queer researchers as simply victims does not adequately capture their agency and the power operation at play.

In the concluding chapter, I reiterate my argument by summarising the main findings, followed by a discussion of the contribution of these findings to the understanding of queer teachers and heteronormativity in education. I also identify the limitations of this thesis and suggest possible directions for future research.
Chapter 2

Queer teacher research: A literature review

This chapter reviews key academic research that explores queer teachers’ professional experiences in the workplace. The scope of this review, within existing literature written in English, means that it reflects queer teachers’ experiences predominantly in western countries. Five major themes emerge from existing literature: workplace climate for queer teachers, their identity management, their experiences of supporting queer students, their experiences of teaching in the classroom, as well as queer academics’ experiences of conducting queer research. The review of these themes is followed by a discussion of theoretical development in queer teacher research. The theoretical perspectives adopted by researchers in around three decades reflect various approaches to understanding queer teachers’ identity, subjectivity, power, and agency. Research gaps are identified in this chapter which demonstrate how the exploration of Chinese gay academics’ experiences can contribute to knowledge about queer teachers.

Workplace climate for queer teachers

Schools and universities are heteronormative spaces (Epstein et al., 2003; Wei & Liu, 2019). In such spaces, heterosexuality is the default of sexuality, while queer identities are invisible and muted. Although some queer teachers identify their workplace climate as positive and inclusive (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Neary, 2014; Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Reinert & Yakaboski, 2017; Rensenbrink, 1996; White et al., 2018), the majority of research reveals queer teachers’ experiences of heteronormativity. Queer teachers are subjected to silencing, marginalisation, harassment, and exclusion (Amoor, 2019; Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Ferfolja, 2010; Gray et al., 2016; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). Despite increasing non-discrimination protections for queer people, recent research shows that queer teachers face microaggressions in the workplace - “the often-unintended interactions that convey messages of marginality” (Beagan et al., 2020, p. 1; Pitcher, 2017).

Queer teachers’ experiences of heteronormativity are documented within various spheres of education, from early childhood (DeJean, 2010; Reimers, 2020), to primary (Hardie, 2012; Melvin, 2010), secondary (Amoor, 2019; Brockenbrough, 2012; Ferfolja, 2007b, 2010; Henderson, 2019; Mayo, 2008; Rudoe, 2010; Sparkes, 1994), and higher education (Beagan et al., 2020; Giddings & Pringle, 2011; LaSala et al., 2008; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015; Nielsen & Alderson, 2014; Pitcher, 2017; Prock et al., 2019; Pugh, 1998; Rothmann, 2017). Such experiences are shared in research that focuses on a certain subgroup of queer teachers, including lesbian teachers (Clarke, 1998; Ferfolja, 2007b, 2010; Rudoe, 2010; Sparkes, 1994; Woods & Harbeck, 1992), gay teachers (Brockenbrough, 2012; Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Rothmann, 2017), bisexual teachers (Nathanson, 2009) and transgender teachers (Harris &
This heteronormality experienced by queer teachers is also pervasive across various disciplines such as music (Paparo & Sweet, 2014; Thomas-Durrell, 2020), sociology (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995), social work (Johnson, 2014; LaSala et al., 2008; Prock et al., 2019), education (Sears, 2002), physical education (Clarke, 1998; Woods & Harbeck, 1992), psychology (Liddle et al., 1998), business and management (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014), and science and engineering (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009). From a geographical lens, predominant research on queer teachers is based in the western context, particularly the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia (Duke, 2007; Ferfolja, 2009). Recently, more studies on queer teachers in non-western contexts emerge, such as research in South Africa (Msibi, 2018, 2019; Rothmann, 2017), Colombia (Lander, 2018), Israel (Amoor, 2019), and China (Wei, 2020).

Several dominant discourses that contribute to queer teachers’ experiences of heteronormality are identified by researchers, including discourses of professionalism (Mizzi, 2013, 2016), childhood sexual innocence (Connell, 2015), as well as the coming out imperative (Rasmussen, 2004). These discourses are explained as follows. The discourse of professionalism constructs professionalism and sexuality as mutually exclusive (Connell, 2015). “Professional” identity and practices often mean being heterosexual which is desexualised as the normative identity. Consequently, queer teachers are viewed as “unprofessional” because of pervasive misperceptions that their sexuality is abnormal and problematic. To conform to such a discourse, queer teachers have to censor their sexuality for fear of being perceived as unprofessional (Amoor, 2019; Connell, 2015; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Mizzi, 2013; Rudoe, 2010). In this way, the discourse of professionalism sustains heteronormality by silencing queer teachers’ sexual identity in the workplace.

Although the discourse of professionalism is not unique to education and operates in other professions, heteronormality in education can be more powerful, given its relationship to the moral panic over children and homosexuality. Queer teachers, as Connell (2015) argues, are “in the crosshairs of two simultaneous sex panics, one about children’s sexuality, the other about queer sexuality” (p. 60). The prevailing belief that children are sexual innocents and should be protected from (homo)sexuality is identified as the discourse of childhood sexual innocence (Connell, 2015). One way to stigmatise queer teachers is that they molest children or recruit children to their lifestyle (Griffin, 1992; Neary, 2013). Such public accusation is so strong that queer teachers often need to carefully monitor their physical contact with children and distance themselves from children (Griffin, 1992; Hardie, 2012; Russell, 2010). It not only prevents early childhood teachers and primary and middle school teachers from coming out (DeJean, 2010; Griffin, 1992; Hardie, 2012), but also affects high school teachers who cite adolescent’s sexual awareness as a similarly prohibitive factor in remaining closeted (Connell, 2015).

Although queer teachers often must be closeted to perform a professional image and avoid stigma surrounding queer sexuality, they are increasingly expected to come out. Affected by the western LGBT movement, where coming out is the primary tool of political action, queer teachers feel that they should show their pride (Connell, 2015). This could add another layer of psychological burden and even generate shame about their perceived failure to perform gay
pride (Connell, 2015). For example, a gay teacher in Connell’s (2015) study asked uneasily at the end of the interview: “I’m not the only one who doesn’t come out, am I? There have to be others like me, right?” (p. 76). Integral to the expectation of gay pride, queer teachers are also expected to be role models for queer students who are often portrayed as at risk (Allen, 2015a; Barnard, 1994; Connell, 2015; DeJean, 2007; Russell, 2010). Such an imperative to come out and act as role models for queer students is conceptualised as discourses of the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004) and “queer teacher as role model” (Khayatt, 1997; Russell, 2010). These discourses have normative effects. As Rasmussen (2004) argues, “teachers who fail in their duty to come out may be marked as lacking, while those who do come out may be celebrated as role models promoting tolerance and inclusivity, empowering themselves and others.” (p. 145). Consequently, facing expectations of being out to contribute to sexual diversity, queer teachers “find themselves trapped between heteronormativity and diversity” (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021, p. 23). These conflicting discourses lead to queer teachers’ ambivalence about how to present their identity in the workplace.

To recap, this section outlines some normative discourses that contribute to western queer teachers’ experiences of heteronormativity. These include the discourses of professionalism (Mizzi, 2013, 2016), childhood sexual innocence (Connell, 2015), as well as the coming out imperative (Rasmussen, 2004). However, these dominant discourses may not capture the workplace climate faced by queer teachers in China, given the unique social and political context of China. Little is known about the workplace climate queer teachers in China face, as well as how the climate affects queer teachers’ professional experiences. This thesis bridges this gap by exploring gay academics’ experiences in Chinese universities. It shows that, unlike their western peers, Chinese gay academics’ workplace experiences are significantly affected by the increasingly repressive political climate in China. The top-down Party-state power is imbedded in a plethora of institutional practices such as surveillance and censorship on teaching and research, and thereby sustains and reinforces (hetero)normative ideologies on Chinese campuses (Chapter 6 & 7).

**Queer teachers’ identity management**

It is within the heteronormative workplace climate, outlined above, that decisions around coming out become critical for queer teachers. In Griffin’s (1991, 1992) groundbreaking research on identity management of American gay and lesbian teachers, she describes four strategies - “passing”, “covering”, “being implicitly out”, and “being explicitly out” - as a continuum between the extremes of being totally closeted and publicly out. “Passing” involves lying to lead others to believe one is heterosexual. “Covering” means censoring oneself to prevent others from seeing one as queer. “Being implicitly out” involves honestly sharing about one’s personal life without actually labelling oneself as queer. “Being explicitly out” means directly disclosing queer identity to selected people. Informed by Griffin (1991, 1992), many researchers document queer teachers’ experiences of identity management in international contexts (Hardie, 2012; Neary, 2013; Sparkes, 1994). For instance, as a lesbian teacher in New Zealand, Hardie (2012) recalls her own experiences of using all the identity management strategies termed by Griffin (1991, 1992) in different contexts in her professional life.
Various contextual factors that have ramifications for queer teachers’ identity management are identified by researchers. These include geographic location, religious environment, policy environment, the leadership and sexual culture of schools and universities (Connell, 2012, 2015; DeJean, 2007; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Gray, 2013; Jackson, 2006; Neary, 2013, 2014; Toledo & Maher, 2021). In addition to these contextual factors, researchers also document the role the intersectionality of race and sexuality plays in queer teachers’ identity management (Amoor, 2019; Bennett et al., 2015; Melvin, 2010). It shows that coming out may not be desirable or possible once multiple identities and cultural loyalties are taken into consideration (Brockenbrough, 2012; Melvin, 2010). For instance, due to the importance of their connection to the black community, black queer teachers can prioritise their blackness over their queerness and choose to be closeted (Brockenbrough, 2012; Melvin, 2010). A white Australian lesbian teacher in Bennett et al.’s (2015) study also chose not to come out to her students, considering that her whiteness and queerness may be viewed by overseas students as pushing a queer western political agenda. These factors show the complexity of identity management for queer teachers in their professional life. However, most existing studies are conducted in western, democratic countries, while little is known about how queer teachers manage their sexuality in the non-western, non-democratic countries. As such, research on gay academics in China can fill this gap by highlighting how the social and political context of China affects their identity management (Chapter 4).

A striking feature documented in the literature about queer teachers’ identity management is their careful negotiation between the private and professional world (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Gray, 2013; Griffin, 1991, 1992; Hardie, 2012; Jackson, 2007; Neary, 2013; Rudoe, 2010; Russell, 2020; Sparkes, 1994). Queer teachers are conflicted about merging their sexual and professional identities and need to split the self into a public and private persona (Connell, 2015; Griffin, 1991, 1992). Around three decades after Griffin’s (1991, 1992) seminal research, despite legal protection and growing visibility of queer identities globally, identity management continues to lie at the heart of queer teachers’ experiences. Recent research shows that queer teachers in global contexts still feel compelled to conceal or cover their sexual identity for fear of discrimination (Amoor, 2019; Beagan et al., 2020; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Mayo, 2020; Rudoe, 2018; Russell, 2020). The stress of constant vigilance and caution against identity exposure takes an emotional toll (Amoor, 2019; Rudoe, 2010).

Another protective strategy is building a super-teacher identity (Jackson, 2007; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2019; Rudoe, 2010). Adoption of this strategy means displaying excellence in professional performance, to deflect attention from their sexuality and mitigate potential negative consequences of identity exposure (Msibi, 2019). The constitution of themselves as competent teachers can even afford queer teachers the power to act transgressively (Msibi, 2019). For example, it enables some participants in Msibi’s (2019) study to perform ambiguous sexual identity, positioning themselves as both not being out of the closet, while simultaneously not being in the closet. However, taking on a perfect teacher persona creates lots of stress and can be exhausting for queer teachers (Jackson, 2007).
Identity management is often a dilemma for queer teachers. Closeted teachers can find themselves at a crossroads between staying in the closet and being out to challenge heteronormativity, as they desire to come out to make some change but simultaneously have to be closeted because of potential negative consequences (Bennett et al., 2015; Gray, 2013, 2014; Hardie, 2012; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Melvin, 2010; Mizzi, 2015). Despite potential risks of disclosing sexual identity, many queer teachers choose to come out to fulfill a desire for openness, honesty, and authenticity (DeJean, 2007; Neary, 2013; Nielsen & Alderson, 2014; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Prock et al., 2019). Being out and visible also serves as an important political strategy from which queer teachers can challenge stereotypes, counter heteronormative culture and engage in activism (Neary, 2013; Wells, 2017). A range of educational activism engaged in by out queer teachers is documented by researchers, ranging from personal and institutional activism which focuses on inclusive curriculum and organisational policy, to judicial activism which directly challenges the educational system (Grace, 2017; Smith, 2004; Wells, 2017).

However, visibility of queer identity can put queer teachers in a vulnerable position in a discriminatory environment (Toledo & Maher, 2021). Out teachers describe a sense of isolation as the “only one” in their institution (Beagan et al., 2020). Being few in numbers also leaves out teachers open to tokenism, as they are often expected to represent and advocate for diversity, and experience both invisibility and hyper-visibility (Beagan et al., 2020; LaSala et al., 2008; Pitcher, 2017; Prock et al., 2019). Furthermore, coming out does not eliminate self-censorship and out teachers still need to manage their identity. Even in the working environment that queer teachers identify as accepting or “gay-friendly”, out teachers are pressured to tone down their queerness and be as “normal” as the heterosexual (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Branfman, 2015; Neary, 2014; Ozturk & Rumens, 2014). A “normal” queer teacher often means conforming to heteronormative expectations by dressing conservatively, not “flaunting” queer sexuality, or avoiding engaging in overt forms of queer activism (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Wei, 2020). For example, as an out gay academic in China, Wei (2020) exercises control over his sexuality on campus, by building an image of a loving and committed relationship with his partner, but not disclosing sexual identity all the time.

Research that praises out teachers for their “radical honesty” (DeJean, 2007) and advocates coming out implies that closeted teachers’ agency is lacking (Barnard, 1994; Harbeck, 1992; Sears & Williams, 1997). However, instead of portraying closeted queer teachers as fearful and powerless victims who merely conform to the heterosexual norms, an emerging body of work highlights how closeted teachers have the agency to exercise power and actively challenge normative discourses (Brockenbrough, 2012; Ferfolja, 2007b, 2014; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2018, 2019). It shows that fear is not the only way in which queer teachers experience the closet. Passing as heterosexual can grant queer teachers significant protection, respect, and power, leading at times to the disruption of heteronormativity (Brockenbrough, 2012; Msibi, 2019). For example, in Msibi’s (2019) study of black male “same-sex desiring” teachers in South Africa, the adoption of excellence and professionalism enables them to teach about same-sex issues. This thesis extends existing research by offering rich empirical findings which showcase closeted queer teachers’ agency in the Chinese context. It is shown that under
the protection of the closet, Chinese gay academics could support queer students (Chapter 5), address queer issues in the classroom (Chapter 6), and undertake queer research (Chapter 7).

The agency expressed by queer teachers in their identity management can take subtle forms. Australian lesbian teachers in Ferfolja’s (2007b) study use heterosexual relations and motherhood to pass as heterosexual, while their lesbian performances, such as masculine appearance and overt disinterest in men, transgress the boundaries of normalised sexuality. These shifting subjective positions trouble the constructed “naturalness” of heterosexuality and contest the notion that to have agency one must be “out and proud” (Ferfolja, 2007b). Similarly, some closeted gay academics in my research explicitly refused colleagues’ attempt of matchmaking, or self-positioned as neither in nor out of the closet (Chapter 4). These experiences regarding closeted teachers’ identity management echo Ferfolja’s (2007b) argument that “silence, although complex, does not necessarily mean oppression, that passing does not equate to failure and that one does not necessarily have to be ‘out’ to have agency” (p. 583).

Queer teachers’ experiences of supporting queer students

Informed by the discourses of “queer teacher as role model” (Khayatt, 1997; Russell, 2010) and the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004) outlined above, queer teachers often find themselves obligated to act as an openly out role model for the benefit of queer students (Henderson, 2019). By interviewing former students he taught as an out queer teacher, Macgillivray (2008) provides empirical evidence that an out teacher can make queer students more comfortable with their sexuality. Much literature documents queer teachers’ efforts to support queer students by coming out and providing a role model (DeJean, 2007, 2010; Linley et al., 2016; Neary, 2017; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Russell, 2014; Russell, 2020; Thomas-Durrell, 2020). However, this is not easy for closeted teachers who have to negotiate a dilemma between their responsibility of supporting queer students and the risks of being visible in a heteronormative environment (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Henderson, 2019). Consequently, closeted teachers may feel frustrated or guilty for failing in their professional obligation to queer students by not being open about their queer identity (Henderson, 2019; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Neary, 2013). Even out teachers can still express a reluctance to take the risk to engage freely with queer students as role models, to avoid being perceived as a threat to children (Russell, 2010). As such, Russell (2010) argues that the conflicting discourses of “queers-as-a-threat” and “teacher-as-role-model” generate a sense of unresolved dilemma for queer teachers.

Some researchers complicate conventional understandings regarding queer teachers’ support of queer students by providing experiences that diverge from the dominant discourse of “queer teacher as role model”. It is demonstrated that queer teachers do not necessarily need to come out to support queer students (Mayo, 2008). Despite working in a heteronormative environment and staying in the closet, queer teachers can respond to queer students’ needs and offer support in various ways (Mayo, 2008). This may mean, for instance, giving queer students
advice, or keeping a watchful eye (Mayo, 2008). Such an approach to supporting queer students troubles the dominant discourse of the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004). However, compared with well-documented experiences of out teachers’ support of queer students (DeJean, 2007, 2010; Linley et al., 2016; Neary, 2017; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Russell, 2014; Russell, 2020; Thomas-Durrell, 2020), closeted teachers’ support of queer students is still underexplored. Consistent with the critique of the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004), this research explores various ways that closeted gay academics in China supported queer students without broadly coming out on campus, for instance, via gay “dating apps” (Chapter 5).

Khayatt (1997) also questions the assumption about coming out and role models, by showing that queer teachers’ disclosure of sexual identity is not always a positive experience for queer students. For instance, closeted students may feel threatened by an out teacher and be fearful of being outed (Jackson, 2007; Khayatt, 1997). Echoing Khayatt (1997), this research shows that some Chinese gay academics supported queer students but deliberately avoided coming out, in order not to “scare” closeted students (Chapter 5). Furthermore, Khayatt (1997) interrogates the concept of “role model” which assumes that “by coming out to my class I am teaching my students something, that I represent an ideal of some behavior, identity, or possibility” (p. 136). However, Khayatt does not provide any empirical evidence for this argument, which is the gap this research aims to bridge. By highlighting how gay academics’ interactions with queer students can be heteronormative and marginalising, I extend Khayatt’s (1997) interrogation of the discourse of “queer teacher as role model” and argue that queer teachers should not be assumed as necessarily supportive of queer students based on shared identity (Chapter 5).

Queer teachers’ interactions with queer students are also complicated by queer teachers’ perception of queer students. Scholars have identified that queer students are conventionally presumed as a population that is always at risk and needs support (Allen, 2015a; Quinlivan, 2002). Such victim framing of queer students is often used to justify their need, and queer teachers’ responsibility for supporting queer students (Allen, 2015a). Russell’s (2014) research, however, offers an alternative narrative about a lesbian teacher’s support for queer students who refused to connect with her and be supported. Reflecting on this dilemma, Russell (2014) suggests that queer teachers avoid always seeing themselves as role models and queer students solely as victims. Echoing Russell (2014), this research shows how Chinese gay academics perceived their queer students as vulnerable, and thus provided unnecessary support (Chapter 5). Furthermore, by showing gay academics’ experiences of being harassed and informed on by their queer students, I also trouble the typical binary of “powerful teacher/powerless student” and argue that queer teachers can also be constructed as the recipients of support (Chapter 5).

Queer teachers’ experiences of teaching in the classroom
A key theme in queer teacher studies that overlaps with their identity management is their teaching experiences. Queer teachers’ consideration of identity management is more complicated in the classroom, particularly in their teaching about queer issues. Many scholars reveal a range of queer teachers’ decisions about their sexual identity in teaching, including being closeted, coming out, and performing purposeful ambiguity. I now unpack the considerations of each of these decisions.

Queer teachers can choose to be closeted in their teaching for various reasons. Informed by the dominant discourse of professionalism, which often means keeping what is personal away from the workplace, many queer teachers argue their sexuality has no place in the classroom and thus deliberately construct an asexual image (Amoor, 2019; Connell, 2015). Another reason that queer teachers avoid coming out in class is hostility from homophobic students (Khayatt, 1997; Wolfe, 2009). Indeed, out queer teachers’ teaching about queer issues can be considered by students as agenda pushing or biased (Mizzi, 2015; Nielsen & Alderson, 2014). Queer teachers can also stay in the closet for pedagogical reasons (Bennett et al., 2015). For example, a lesbian teacher in Bennett et al.’s (2015) study did not reveal her sexual identity to overseas students to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings and culture shock, which may have undermined the pedagogical aims of her course, and to ease the process of cultural adjustment.

While sexual identity can be a burden on some closeted teachers in their teaching, it can be a useful perspective and pedagogical tool for other queer teachers. Informed by their experiences of marginalisation, queer teachers can be particularly sensitive to issues of prejudice and difference (Rensenbrink, 1996). As such, queer teachers can promote marginalised perspectives and adopt a critical approach to their teaching which encourages students to question taken-for-granted social norms (Skelton 2000). For those out teachers, their openness about sexuality allows them to use their sexuality to enrich their teaching when addressing queer issues (Bennett et al., 2015; Neary, 2017; Reinert & Yakaboski, 2017; Skelton, 2000; Wolfe, 2009). One way is sharing and probing autobiographical queer life narratives of queer teachers to connect the personal, the political, and the pedagogical in classroom spaces (Grace, 2006; Grace & Benson, 2000). Queer teachers’ disclosure of sexual identity and personal experiences challenges the notion that the personal is irrelevant in the classroom. It also makes the classroom a safe place where students feel comfortable questioning the dominant culture and taking an active stand (Jackson, 2009; Rensenbrink, 1996).

Being closeted or coming out are not the only two options for queer teachers. They can also refuse to present an evident sexual identity, or deliberately perform ambiguous identities in their classroom to prompt critical thinking (Crawley, 2009; Khayatt, 1997; Kopelson, 2002; Willman, 2009). For instance, Willman (2009) uses students’ discovery of her sexuality as a “teachable moment” (p. 205) to challenge their perceptions of gender and sexuality. As she articulates, “pondering my sexuality before knowing it can engage student reflection on stereotypes, appearances, and justifications leading them to believe I am heterosexual or not.” (p. 206) To demonstrate “purposeful ambiguity” (p. 206), she did not publicly declare her lesbian identity, and used “partner” during classroom discussions. Similarly, Crawley (2009), after coming out
as transgender in her course, refuses to let students know if she had physically transitioned to avoid students solving the riddle of her real body and gender. By performing queer ambiguity, Crawley interrupts the essentialist relationship between body and gender, and unsettles students' belief in fixed identity.

Aligned with queer theory, which seeks to trouble normative identities and notions (McCann & Monaghan, 2020), many queer teachers' teaching practices are constructed by researchers as queer pedagogy (Alexander, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Kopelson, 2002; Reimers, 2020; Vicars, 2006). For example, queer teachers can enact queerness in their teaching via non-conforming gender performance and teach students to reflect upon unquestioned gender norms (Reimers, 2020; Rofes, 2000; Skelton 2000). For gay teachers, this may mean “camping it up” (Skelton, 2000), or bringing both butch and femme performances into the classroom (Rofes, 2000a). As an out gay teacher who needs to navigate how gay he should be in the classroom, Branfman (2015) strategically covers his gender performance to gain students' respect, and later explicitly points out the covering tactics to help students deconstruct social norms. Besides through non-conforming gender performance, Rofes (2000) also challenges students’ normative assumptions by disclosing his open relationship with his partner. Furthermore, if queer theory aims to put into question the normalcy, queer teachers’ practices of queer pedagogy are not necessarily about queer sexuality. For instance, in Alexander’s (2005) writing class, he deconstructs the constitution of normative lives by prompting students to reflect on how one’s straightness is constructed and maintained.

Although it is found that both out teachers and closeted teachers can see a relationship between their teaching and their sexuality, out teachers have more opportunities to practice queer pedagogy, and are explicitly able to use their queer experiences in teaching (Jackson, 2009). The teaching experiences of out queer teachers are well documented in existing literature as outlined above, while little is known about whether, or how, closeted teachers challenge heteronormativity in their classroom. The struggles of closeted teachers about identity management in the classroom seem to imply that they only conform to heteronormativity in teaching and thus cannot empower queer students. As Wolfe (2009) argues, “I owe it ... to all my students to come out in every class I teach, for my own self-actualization ... is the foundation for teaching that empowers students. If I do not claim my identity, how will those students marginalized at this university ... find their voices?” (p. 184) Such sentiment perceives that only by coming out in the classroom can queer teachers challenge heteronormativity and empower students. However, this thesis offers alternative narratives about queer teachers’ teaching. It is shown that despite heteronormativity and political control in Chinese universities, closeted gay academics employed various strategies to lower the risks and enact queerness in the classroom (Chapter 6). By focusing on closeted gay academics’ classroom experiences, this research aims to bridge the gap of closeted teachers’ teaching experiences and enrich the understanding of their pedagogical agency.
Queer academics’ experiences of conducting queer research

Within the literature on queer teachers, a body of research focuses on queer academics’ experiences in the context of higher education (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Clarke & Braun, 2009; Nielsen & Alderson, 2014; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Prock et al., 2019; Rothmann, 2017). Many scholars have examined queer academics’ experiences of conducting queer research. Existing research shows that queer research conducted by queer academics is marginalised and underrated in their institution (LaSala et al., 2008; Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Prock et al., 2019; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Wei, 2020). For example, many queer academics are discouraged from conducting queer research and have difficulties in getting their work funded, published, and acknowledged (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Prock et al., 2019; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Pugh, 1998). Queer research conducted by queer academics can be discredited by questioning it on scientific grounds, characterising it as less meaningful and objective, or underrating it as mere activism rather than serious scholarship (LaSala et al., 2008; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). Such marginalisation of being queer and engaging with queer research means queer academics conducting queer research are “doubly stigmatized” (Javaid, 2020a, p. 136). As such, they often feel compelled to conceal information about their research, abandon their research interest, or even leave academia - either voluntarily, or because of being denied tenure (Javaid, 2020a; Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995).

Despite barriers to queer research, it is also documented that it is possible for queer academics whose research exclusively focuses on queer issues to achieve tenure (LaSala et al., 2008). Queer academics who conduct queer research can legitimise their research by framing it within mainstream discourses (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Wei, 2020). For instance, to legitimise LGBT organisational studies, gay academics in UK business and management schools in Ozturk and Rumens’s (2014) study mobilised discourses of “corporate social responsibility” and “organizational outcomes such as performance and efficiency” (p. 512). Similarly, to create and expand the institutional space for LGBTQ studies in China, Wei (2020) adopted two interrelated research strategies to normalise his research - “mainstreaming the queer” and “queering the mainstream” (p. 338). The former “projects a notion that sexual minorities are as normal as their heterosexual fellow human beings” (p. 338), while the latter is an intended engagement with mainstream research fields and an intervention through the queer lens. However, given that Wei is an openly out researcher, his research experiences might be different from those of closeted researchers who need to cautiously manage their sexuality and avoid being outed by their queer research. Little is known about closeted academics’ strategies to lower the risks of conducting queer research. This research bridges this gap by showing a range of strategies adopted by closeted gay academics to keep a low profile and protect them from potential risks of conducting queer research in China (Chapter 7).

Many queer academics provide valuable reflexive accounts about methodological and ethical issues when researching queer participants. Identity management lies at the heart of their
experiences of conducting queer research, which involves consideration about coming out, as well as boundaries between the participant and the researcher. Queer researchers have expressed the benefits of disclosing their queer identity in their study of queer people (LaSala, 2003; Pitman, 2002; Roberts, 2014). Major benefits include easy access to target groups, as well as increased trust and rapport achieved through a shared identity (LaSala, 2003; Pitman, 2002; Roberts, 2014). However, queer academics’ interactions with queer participants can also be ethically challenging. For example, queer researchers can be sexualised and need to respond to sexual advances from participants, which involves a consideration of ethical boundaries between the researcher and the participant (LaSala, 2003; Roberts, 2014; Walby, 2010). In Walby’s (2010) research on male-for-male escorts, not only was he often propositioned to receive sexual favours but was also invited to confess something about himself. A first question often posed to him at the start of interviews was: “Are you gay?”, which Walby deems deviates from established researcher-participant roles. Like other queer researchers (LaSala, 2003; Roberts, 2014), Walby (2010) positions himself as a professional researcher by declining any advances and being clear about the research relationship boundaries. However, queer researchers can also challenge conventional ethical and methodological rules by blurring the boundary “between the ‘value free’ researcher and ‘respectful participant’” (Javaid, 2020a, p. 139). Javaid (2020a) provides honest accounts about how he “failed” to sustain “objectivity” and adhere to the “professional” role by establishing close relationships and falling in love with participants. In doing so, he built rapport and obtained rich and detailed data, but was also subjected to emotional hurt. By showing his research experiences of eroticism, he argues that the romantic and sexual relationship that emerges from interviews should not be viewed as a failure; interviews can be spaces where emotions are involved and formed. However, little is known about how such interactive and emotional nature of interviews influences closeted queer researchers in their research with queer participants. This research shows that research interviews between closeted queer researchers and queer participants can be a great concern for some closeted gay academics, who face a dilemma of whether to disclose their sexual identity to their participants in a heteronormative environment (Chapter 7).

Theoretical development of queer teacher research

Around three decades of research on queer teachers demonstrates different theoretical approaches to understanding and constructing queer teachers’ experiences. Early research in the 1990s draws mainly on theoretical perspectives from the discipline of sociology (Griffin, 1991, 1992; Sparkes, 1994; Woods & Harbeck, 1992). For instance, Griffin (1991) employs labelling theory to examine how gay and lesbian teachers are labelled as deviants and are stigmatised to maintain the power imbalance. As she indicates, labelling theory “is concerned with the way that dominant groups in society impose standards of acceptable behaviour and identity onto subordinate groups in a society” (p. 189). Similarly, Woods and Harbeck’s (1992) study of lesbian teachers adopts oppression theory which “focuses on the majority groups’ ideological domination and institutional control, and the promulgation of the oppressor group’s ideology, values, and culture on the oppressed group” (p. 145). However, such work focusing on the oppression of the subordinate groups might imply that queer teachers are inherently passive, powerless and lack agency.
Scholars’ theorisation of queer teachers’ experiences reflects various ways of understanding sexuality and identity, as well as the consequent political approach to activism. Some research is based on identity politics and identifies institutional discrimination faced by queer teachers (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Wolfe, 2009). For instance, reflecting on her teaching as a lesbian teacher, Wolfe (2009) argues that “claiming a lesbian identity establishes a clear vantage point from which the dual ideologies of sexism and institutionalized heterosexuality can be challenged.” (Wolfe, 2009. p. 184) Taylor and Raeburn’s (1995) research reveals career consequences suffered by out LGB teachers who engage activism “in the 1970s mid-1980s when identity-based organizing, ethnic-essentialist ideas, and assimilationist strategies dominated gay and lesbian politics” (p. 268). They argue that identity politics is, thus, a form of high-risk activism for LGB teachers (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). Following the logic of identity politics, queer teachers’ sexuality is constructed by researchers as fixed and stable, and coming out is highly celebrated as a pedagogical and political tool (Barnard, 1994; Harbeck, 1992; Sears & Williams, 1997). For instance, DeJean’s (2007) study of out gay and lesbian teachers acknowledges these teachers as practising “radical honesty by conducting their professional responsibilities in a way that consistently revealed the truth about their lives” (p. 63). In this vein, however, closeted teachers might be seen as dishonest and lacking in agency. As such, the theoretical assumptions of identity politics might contribute little to understanding the complexity of closeted teachers’ agency.

Instead of theorising queer teachers’ experiences based on identity politics, a rich body of research connects their work to poststructuralist, feminist, and Foucauldian theories (Ferfolja, 2007b, 2010, 2014; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Gray, 2013; Gray et al., 2016; Lander, 2018; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Reinert & Yakaboski, 2017). Key theoretical concepts in these studies include subjectivity, discourse, and power. Unlike previous research predominantly focusing on oppression, this theoretical framework acknowledges that individuals have the agency to resist and challenge. This means that queer teachers can exercise agency to mobilise discourses to contextually constitute particular positions of subjectivity. Such framing of power provides insight into queer teachers’ navigation of dominant discourses and constitution of various subjectivities, thus is particularly useful to reveal closeted teachers’ agency. For instance, Ferfolja (2007b, 2014) shows that queer teachers do not need to come out to have agency and remaining in the closet does not necessarily equate to failure and oppression. Australian queer teachers in her research actively and strategically use silence and invisibility to foreground the professional subjectivity and enhance their power as legitimate subjects in their institution (Ferfolja, 2014). Positioning in heterosexual discourse not only enables queer teachers to pass as heterosexual, but simultaneously to trouble the constructed “naturalness” of heterosexuality (Ferfolja, 2007b, 2014).

Recent years witness an emerging body of research informed by queer theory (Alexander, 2005; Bennett et al., 2015; Crawley, 2009; Mizzi, 2013; Msibi, 2018, 2019; Neary, 2017; Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Reimers, 2020; Rothmann, 2017; Russell, 2010; Toledo & Maher, 2021). In line with queer theory’s recognition of the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, some studies demonstrate queer teachers’ shifting subjectivities that problematise the essentialist and fixed
notions of sexuality (Crawley, 2009; Msibi, 2019). For instance, queer theory is used to understand the experiences of “same-sex identifying teachers” in Msibi’s (2019) study, the majority of whom engaged in relations with both men and women and did not label themselves. Similarly, drawing on her own “heterosexual, lesbian and queer history” (p. 214), Crawley (2009) seeks to show the fluidity of gender and sexuality in her class and trouble students’ notion of a fixed identity. Another way to adopt queer theory is exploring how queer teachers navigate the heterosexual norms in educational contexts. Heteronormativity is employed as a key theoretical concept to unpack the constitution of heterosexuality as the normative identity in queer teachers’ institutions (Bennett et al., 2015; Mizzi, 2013; Toledo & Maher, 2021). For instance, in Mizzi’s (2013) study of gay educators in postconflict Kosovo, he examines how the dominant discourse of professionalism constructs participants’ experiences and sustains heteronormative values in their workplaces. Perspectives of queer theory also enable queer teachers to implement queer pedagogy, which interrogates dominant identities and notions in the classroom (Alexander, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Kopelsey, 2002; Reimers, 2020).

Informed by the broader context of the anti-racism movement during recent years, intersectionality or critical race theory is increasingly used as a theoretical tool by scholars to examine the complex and overlapping ways that multiple identities shape the experiences of queer teachers of colour (Bracho & Hayes, 2020; Melvin, 2010; Msibi, 2018, 2019; Powell, 2020). This trend is evidenced by a special issue about queer teachers of colour in the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education in 2020, entitled “Gay voices without intersectionality is White supremacy” (Bracho & Hayes, 2020). This body of work captures how the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality contribute to the marginalisation of queer teachers of colour on multiple levels. Informed by intersectionality, queer teachers of colour can implement critical pedagogy which exposes multiple sources of oppression to disrupt white supremacy and heteronormativity (Aguilar-Hernández, 2020).

Conclusion

This literature review demonstrates queer teachers’ professional experiences predominantly in western countries. Normative discourses that shape the workplace climate for queer teachers are identified, including discourses of heteronormativity (Bennett et al., 2015; Mizzi, 2013), professionalism (Mizzi, 2013, 2016), childhood sexual innocence (Connell, 2015), as well as the coming out imperative (Rasmussen, 2004). Within a heteronormative working environment, queer teachers often need to cautiously manage their sexuality (Griffin, 1991, 1992). This literature review shows that identity management lies at the heart of queer teachers’ experiences of interacting with students, teaching, and conducting queer research. Although much research portrays closeted teachers as passive, and celebrates queer teachers’ coming out (Barnard, 1994; DeJean, 2007; Harbeck, 1992; Sears & Williams, 1997), theoretical development in queer teacher studies increasingly highlights the nuances of closeted teachers’ agency in relation to heteronormativity (Ferfolja, 2007b, 2009, 2014).

Within the current research landscape, an exploration of gay academics’ experiences in China has the potential to extend existing literature in two main ways. First, this research particularly
demonstrates closeted gay academics’ experiences, as well as their agency in relation to heteronormativity and political control. By highlighting the ways in which gay academics stayed in the closet and simultaneously challenged heteronormativity, this thesis aims to extend an emerging body of research that unpacks closeted queer teachers’ agency in a more nuanced way (Brockenbrough, 2012; Ferfolja, 2007, 2014; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2018, 2019). Secondly, it illuminates how gay academics’ professional experiences are affected by the repressive politics of a nondemocratic country where the Party-state power is institutionalised in universities and dominates every aspect of social lives. This unique context enables this research to complicate the understanding of the power operation of heteronormativity which is embedded in China’s Party-state system. In this way, this research fills the gap of existing research about queer teachers predominantly based in the western context. The unique experiences of Chinese gay academics are significant not only for sexual equity and diversity in China, but also for the enrichment of global knowledge production. As Endo et al. (2010) suggests, “societies around the world may have issues that are unique to their queer teachers … Revealing these issues would only further the cause for greater change for educators everywhere.” (p. 1029)
Chapter 3

Methodology

This research employs methodological approaches informed by queer theory. In this chapter, I begin by discussing how queer methodology is applied in this research, followed by an account of the methods used to generate and analyse data. The ethical considerations and reflections on my researcher positions are also detailed.

Queer methodology

The term methodology refers to the “theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (Harding, 1987, p. 3). This research is developed from existing work on queer methodologies (Browne & Nash, 2010; Compton et al., 2018; Das, 2020; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019; McCann, 2016; Rumens, 2018; Treharne & Brickell, 2011), particularly within educational studies (Allen, 2011b, 2015; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Britzman, 1995; Burford & Allen, 2019; Dilley, 1999; Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014; Ingrey, 2018; Pinar, 1998; Rasmussen & Allen, 2014; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Building on postmodernism, queer theory interrogates positivist approaches to research that draw upon notions of neutrality, objectivity, and binary systems (McCann & Monaghan, 2020). Queer research does not aim to search for a truth and capture the real already out there. Instead of a universal truth about the social world, queer researchers tend to view knowledge as historically situated, and “trouble” conventional ways of understanding things. For instance, queer theory is concerned with resisting the tendency to essentialise identity and highlighting the incoherence and instability between sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1990; Valocchi, 2005). In this way, it opens new possibilities of being - “a sociality unhinged from the dominant conceptual order” (Britzman, 1995, p. 165). Queer theory consequently “offers methods of critiques to mark the repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as a pedagogy” (Britzman, 1995, p. 153). As McCann (2016, p. 236) suggests, “queer methodology is about troubling the subject, employing a queer reading approach, and drawing from multiple perspectives and traditions, all in order to challenge ‘dominant logics’.”

This thesis is an attempt of applying queer insights in the Chinese context. Its methodological approaches can be viewed as queer in three ways. First, informed by queer theory which “offers methods of imagining difference” (Britzman, 1995, p. 154), this research is concerned with disassembling and disrupting the normal in Chinese higher education, by exploring how gay academics navigate heteronormativity on campus. Secondly, this thesis troubles dominant notions about queer teachers who are conventionally perceived as agentic only by coming out (Barnard, 1994; Harbeck, 1992; Sears & Williams, 1997). Drawing on Butler’s (1990, 1997b) formulation of agency, I aim to illuminate alternative ways of understanding gay academics’ agency. Thirdly, following Halberstam’s (2003) call for “queer public intellectuals” who “can try to bring activism to the university and theory to the ‘community’” (p. 363), this research refuses
the boundary between activism and research, and is a simultaneous process of activism. Now
I will unpack these principles underpinning queer research methodologies.

In this thesis, a queer methodology means deconstructing dominant notions and institutional
practices that are regarded as normal in educational settings. The adoption of queer insights in
education can be disruptive, as education is often “a highly conservative and often reactionary
field” (Pinar, 1998, p. 2). Renn (2010) thus suggests that “the juxtaposition of queer theory with
nonqueer higher education contexts casts new light on existing questions and problems” (p.
137). Although queer educational research is not new in the western scholarship (Mayo, 2007;
Renn, 2010), it remains rare in the Chinese context. Allen (2015) proposes that, in countries
where a consideration of LGBT identities is relatively new, “the naming and identification of
injustices … is an important initial step in the field of queer possibilities” (p. 682). This thesis
responds to this call by exploring gay academics’ experiences in Chinese universities from a
queer perspective. It seeks to expose and interrogate normative meanings in Chinese higher
education that privilege heterosexuality and marginalise homosexuality.

To undertake this task, heteronormativity is employed as a key theoretical concept (Chapter 1).
In this research, a focus on heteronormativity means revealing the pervasive social forces and
policing activities that normalise and reinforce the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary and
hierarchy in Chinese universities. As Quinlivan and Town (1999) articulate, “heteronormativity
is like the air we breathe” (p. 510). Drawing on gay academics’ narratives, it is demonstrated
that heteronormativity operates both formally and informally on Chinese campuses. A range of
institutional practices and interpersonal interactions are identified and problematised as
heteronormative, such as classroom surveillance and censorship by the university authorities
(Chapter 6), university departments’ marginalisation of queer research as problematic and risky
(Chapter 7), and even gay academics’ support of queer students (Chapter 5). One contribution
this thesis can make to understanding of heteronormativity in educational settings might be the
role that the Party-state power plays in heteronormativity’s operation in a repressive political
context. It is shown that the political control endorsed by the top-down Party-state power
reinforced the institutional heteronormativity in Chinese universities. This work is dangerously
queer, given that the revelation and critique of heteronormativity as institutional oppression and
state violence is hugely risky in the current political climate of China.

A queer methodology also means an attempt that “shakes and unsettles sedimented knowledge”
(Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 333). This research troubles some conventional
understandings about queer teachers by posing questions like: Do closeted teachers lack
agency and merely conform to heteronormativity? To be specific, do closeted queer teachers
just “hide” in the closet? (Chapter 4) Do queer teachers necessarily need to come out to support
queer students? (Chapter 5) Are queer teachers always supportive of queer students based on
shared sexual identity? (Chapter 5) Are queer teachers just powerless victims when their
teaching and research about queer issues are subjected to surveillance and censorship in
Chinese universities? (Chapter 6 & 7) Queer theory is useful here because, as Rasmussen and
Gowlett (2015) indicate, it can “highlight fissures and cracks in the dominant logic at play and
by doing so, question the utility of what is deemed common sense” (p. 204). The disruption to
taken-for-granted meanings around queer teachers illuminates the possibility of exercising agency differently. It is demonstrated that closeted gay academics in China adopted various strategies to challenge heteronormativity in their identity management (chapter 4), interactions with queer students (chapter 5), as well as teaching (chapter 6) and research (chapter 7) about queer issues. These experiences capture “how lives are lived queerly – at odds with and beyond the reach of heteronormativity – in the workplace” (Rumens, 2018, p. 103). Such possibility of “doing life differently”, as Gowlett and Rasmussen (2014) argue, “is extremely political” (p. 333). This is because that “foregrounding the fissures, cracks and in Butlerian terms, moments of ‘resignification,’ creates the potential to (re)circulate ideas in new and often unforeseen ways, thus shifting meaning and inspiring new ontological possibilities” (Gowlett, 2015, p. 162).

One method offered by queer insights to subvert conventional notions is rejecting dualisms. Following Derrida and relational understandings of meaning, queer theorists indicate that power operates through the imposition of conceptual binaries such as male/female, gay/straight, masculine/feminine (Allen, 2011b; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). Queer critique seeks to highlight the social construction of binary concepts and challenge conventional understandings based on them. As Ghaziani and Brim (2019) state,

… queer worldmaking and livability require us to embrace multiplicity and pluralism, not binaries and dualisms. Because existing categories imperfectly map onto many of our lived experiences, queer methods reject a close-fit assumption across categories, identities, attraction, arousal, and sexual behavior. Multiple categories, new categories, and continua are among a number of innovative possibilities that emerge from queer methods. (p. 12)

Such challenges to dualisms can be applied to binary thinking beyond gender and sexual identities, such as human/nonhuman (Allen, 2018b), victim/perpetrator (Allen, 2019b), escape/coercion (Gowlett, 2014), pleasure/danger (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013). In this vein, this research highlights the instability of a range of binary thinking about queer teachers. For instance, some gay academics’ identity management can be framed as neither inside nor outside the closet (Chapter 4). By performing shifting subjectivities and blurring the boundary of the closet, these participants troubled binaries such as “in/out”, “secrecy/disclosure”, and “visibility/invisibility”. It is also demonstrated that by passing or covering (Griffin, 1991, 1992) as heterosexual, the closeted subjectivity enabled many participants to challenge heteronormativity. In other words, closeted teachers could live queerly within a heteronormative and repressive environment. Such agency exercised by gay academics involves a simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to the constraining forces on campus. By re-reading apparently passive queer teachers’ choice of staying in the closet as a form of agency, this research challenges the dominant conception of agency within the binary framework of coercion or escape. This queer recognition of closeted teachers as agentic and anti-heteronormative troubles normative logics of identity politics that use coming out and queer visibility as political tools.
A queer methodology also inspires me to engage with activism in the research process, or, explicitly translate my research into activism. Seeking to trouble the foundations of dominant social attitudes and practices, queer methodology is intrinsically political. As Stein and Plummer (1994) note, “at its widest, tallest, and Wilde(st), queer theory is a plea for massive transgression of all conventional categorizations and analyses … and a plea for dissidence” (p. 182). Queer researchers thus have the potential to play a vital role in activism. Presenting recommendations for future researchers, Levy and Johnson (2012) encourage queer researchers not to limit their voice within the research. As they suggest, “advocacy begins with the queer research project, but it does not end there” (p. 139). Likewise, Halberstam (2003) indicates the need to take queer studies beyond the university and into public arenas, and approves of a “queer pedagogy” engaged by an emerging group of “queer public intellectuals” (p. 363). As Halberstam states:

Queer public intellectuals are people who refuse the boundaries between community and campus, activism and theory, classroom and club. And queer public intellectuals are committed to multiplying the sites within which queer studies happens and to recognizing cultural producers as theorists and theorists as contributors to the circulation of ideas beyond the university. (p. 363)

Such a public and activist role is what I am committed to playing during my research process. After my data collection, I have presented participants’ lived experiences via conference presentations and a series of media articles (Cui, 2019, October 18; 2019, November 12; 2020, January 6; 2020, January 8; 2020, May 7; 2020, May 17; 2020, September 14; 2020, September 15). These media engagements led to coverage in influential Chinese and international platforms (Allnow, 2021; express, 2021; Inkstone, 2020, 2021; PinkNews, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2020b; The University of Auckland, 2021). In doing so, I “bring queer voice to the forefront” (Levy & Johnson, 2012, p. 139) and break the silencing and exclusion of queer existence in China.

The media engagement was conducted along with my thesis writing, thus has been a part of my considerations about presenting and analysing data. In the public writing and media coverage, my own experience as a former academic who is openly out in China was often presented together with participants’ experiences (Inkstone, 2020, 2021; PinkNews, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2020). In a sense, I could be regarded by the audience as one “participant” of the representation of Chinese gay academics, rather than a typical “valve free” or “objective” researcher who keeps a distance with the “abnormal” other. The exposure of my sexuality, research, and opinions, including my critique of Chinese education and governments, is extremely queer in the political context of China. This queerness was evidenced by the homophobic comments provoked by my writing, the media censorship I encountered, as well as potential risks from the Chinese authorities. Two of my media articles about participants’ and my own experiences were deleted by the media platforms, although the editors had already censored sensitive contents before publishing them. I was even concerned that whether I, as well as my family in China, would be negatively affected by my media visibility and queer activism. However, these are the risks I chose to take in this queer journey. Such endeavour
informed by queer methodology obscures the boundaries between a range of binaries such as “activism/research”, “personal/public”, “media/academia”, and “researcher/participant”.

Data collection

Informed by my own identities as a gay man and a former academic in Chinese universities, this research focused on gay academics instead of lesbian, bisexual, transgender teachers whose experiences are unique and worth researching separately. I began to recruit participants after the research was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Appendix C). A poster (Appendix B) was circulated on the platforms of WeChat and Blued, to recruit gay academics who were working, or had previously worked, in Chinese universities. Participant recruitment was facilitated by my social network as an “insider” (Allen, 2010) in the Chinese queer community (see the following section). Many Chinese queer activists offered to spread the poster. I also recruited participants via snowballing (Ritchie et al., 2003, pp. 94). A total of 40 participants were recruited during 2018 and 2019. Participant recruitment stopped when the data that had been collected could “offer rich, detailed and complex accounts of the topic” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 98).

Among the participants, 27 (68%) participants were totally closeted and had not disclosed their gay identity to anyone on campus; 10 (25%) participants disclosed their gay identity to selected people on campus; and three (7%) participants reported to be totally out on campus. Regarding participants’ age, 28 (70%) were in their 30s; nine (23%) in their 40s; and three (7%) in their 20s. In terms of their professional title, 24 (60%) participants were Lecturers; six (15%) were Associate Professors; six (15%) were Tutors, and four (10%) were Professors. A total of 21 (53%) participants had a Ph.D. degree, 16 (40%) had a Master's degree, and three (7%) had a Bachelor's degree. The fields they worked in covered pure sciences, humanities, and social sciences, in disciplines including sociology, linguistics, philosophy, law, economics, management, physics, medicine, and computer science. Participants’ locations covered all the regions of mainland China, as the following map shows. Most participants were working, or had worked, in universities in big cities in East China (16), Southwest China (10), and South China (7). These participant characteristics might have influenced the research findings, which largely reflected experiences of young and junior gay academics living in prosperous areas of China.
Participants received one semi-structured interview which lasted one or two hours. All the interviews were conducted online via WeChat in Mandarin. Participants were given the interview questions in advance to aid reflection and recall (Appendix D). Topics of the interview broadly covered important aspects of their workplace experiences, such as considerations of coming out, interactions with students and colleagues, and experiences of teaching queer issues. All the interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent (Appendix E) and transcribed. Interview transcriptions were edited and confirmed by participants before being analysed.

**Data analysis**

The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is, as Braun and Clarke (2006) define, “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). A theme represents some level of patterned meaning in the data and captures something important about the data in relation to the research question. This process involved first reading and re-reading the data to familiarise myself with the data and then generating some initial codes (Appendix F). These codes were collated into potential themes and data were assigned to each potential theme (Appendix G). This finally led to reviewing, defining, and naming themes. This analysis was not a linear process and moved back and forth as needed.
Regarding the specific forms of thematic analysis, this research adopted both an inductive approach and a theoretical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive thematic analysis was data-driven; a process of coding the data without trying to fit into the researcher’s analytic preconceptions. This approach enabled the generation of key themes across the whole dataset that captured participants’ experiences of heteronormativity on campus. In contrast, the theoretical thematic analysis was theory-driven and provided a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data, instead of a rich description of the data overall. This theoretical approach to thematic analysis is particularly evident in the data chapter about participants’ experiences of supporting queer students (Chapter 5). Informed by queer methodology, which seeks to disturb and unsettle (McCann, 2016), participants’ narratives that diverge from conventional accounts about queer teachers were highlighted to interrogate some normative discourses. For instance, one theme identified was named “participants’ ‘supportive and heteronormative’ interactions with queer students”. These nuances of participants’ experiences were teased out to trouble the dominant discourse of “queer teacher as role model” (Khayatt, 1997), which perceives queer teachers as the ones who can best support queer students based on their “similarity”.

Ethical consideration

Ethical consideration has significant importance for queer research in the Chinese context. Although homosexuality was decriminalised in China in 1997 and removed from the official list of mental disorders in China in 2001 (Mountford, 2010), it is still culturally and politically sensitive in Chinese society. Participants often needed to cautiously stay in the closet and keep a low profile to avoid potential consequences of sexual identity exposure. Disclosure of queer teachers’ sexual identity, activism, and political views involves different levels of risk in an increasingly repressive climate. As such, confidentiality is of key ethical concern.

Confidentiality of participants was guaranteed in the participant recruitment in several ways. For instance, participation in this research was completely voluntary and the recruitment of participants did not involve any organisation or university department, to ensure participants’ safety and privacy. When participants were recruited via snowballing, some participants wanted to provide contact information of other gay academics they knew. To avoid outing these gay academics against their will, this information was always refused to avoid outing these gay academics against their will. Instead, it was suggested that they send the participant recruitment poster on to any potential participants to make contact on their own initiative. This ethical consideration in snowballing strategy was not unnecessary. In Connell’s (2018) study of American gay and lesbian teachers, for example, her direct contacting of potential participants constituted a threat to the privacy of one participant who was “angered and offended that someone had outing him by recommending him for the study” (p. 127).

Confidentiality was also guaranteed in the interview process. All the interviews were conducted online, usually following participants’ choice of turning off the camera to protect their identity. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded that they do not need to mention their name, their institution’s name, or other information that may expose their identity. Some
participants asked for other participants’ contact information to broaden their network, or because they wanted to make friends with other participants. Such requests were always refused to avoid outing other participants. Confidentiality was also guaranteed during the process of data analysis, as well as within conference presentations, teaching and publications. For instance, interview audios were transcribed by the author only to ensure data security. All the data, in digital form or hardcopy, were carefully stored in secure locations. Pseudonyms are used in this study to protect participants’ identity. Different pseudonyms could be used to refer to one participant, in order not to expose too much information about the participant. Some data and participant descriptors were also changed slightly, or intentionally blurred, to protect anonymity. Also, this thesis does not provide a table of individual descriptions, which is usual in qualitative research, to protect participants’ privacy.

Other ethical considerations included the guarantee of participants’ right of informed consent, as well as the researcher’s attempt to make participants relaxed and comfortable in the interview. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from this research, and any of their data, at any time before the data collection was completed without having to provide a reason. Participants did not have to answer questions they are uncomfortable with. They were informed that, in a very unlikely situation they might experience psychological distress during the interview, they can choose to stop the interview. Participants were encouraged to feel free to say anything, as well as ask any questions. Considering the potential power imbalance between the researcher and the participant (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009), the researcher aimed to offer a less hierarchical and more reciprocal atmosphere in which participants were willing to share personal experiences.

Queer reflexivity of the “insider/outsider” binary

The first question that many people asked after knowing my research topic is: “Is it difficult for you to find them?” or even, “Are there any gay teachers in China?” I usually replied that it is not difficult for an “insider” (Allen, 2010; Cui, 2015; Paechter, 2013), which can be understood as a disclosure of my sexual identity to my interlocutors. In this way, the research process always accompanied the disclosure of my own sexual identity, whether it be to participants or to anyone interested in my research. Facilitated by my identities as an out gay man and a former academic in China, the process of data collection was quite smooth. As an “insider”, I already knew ten gay academics in China before recruiting participants. It was also easy for me to have access to many gay groups in WeChat and Blued, where I circulated the poster for participant recruitment. During the process of participant recruitment, many of my friends in queer community actively helped me to spread the poster and introduced my research to gay academics they knew. When I had interviewed 40 participants, the data was rich enough. That is, as Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 98) define “good data”, it offers detailed and complex accounts of the topic, instead of providing a surface overview or a commonsense account. Since then, I had to refuse gay academics who continued to contact me wanting to participate in the research. The benefit of being an insider researcher in data collection of queer research echoes other queer researchers (LaSala, 2003; Pitman, 2002; Roberts, 2014).
Despite sharing sexual identity and professional identity, the difference between me and the participants is evident. The participants were still living in China and governed by their institution and Chinese culture, while I had temporarily escaped from the heteronormative and repressive constraints in Chinese society by leaving my job. My mobility to live in a queer-friendly, democratic, western country could be a privilege compared to many participants. Another difference between me and the participants was our relation to the closet. Most participants were closeted and needed to carefully conceal their sexual identity, while I had been openly out on domestic and international media platforms. Such a difference regarding outness contrasted sharply before the interview: Information about my real name and gay identity was provided in the poster for participant recruitment (Appendix B) and participant information sheet (Appendix H), while participants were guaranteed confidentiality. Informed by the emerging gay identity politics in China, the interaction between an out researcher and the closeted participants could generate power dynamics where being out is normative and being closed is considered as lacking. However, just like the closeted participants, I was also hiding some aspects of my sexual identity. I was penalised by my previous institution after coming out and had to cautiously censor myself in teaching and public speech. For a long time before I left China, being out did not mean being "proud". I had never publicly shared my "wounded identity" (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004) until I felt ready in New Zealand (Inkstone, 2020; PinkNews, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2020b). During the research interview, I was often expected by participants to share my own experiences or offer suggestions about coming out. I often hesitated to share my experience of being penalised, in order not to "scare" participants and make them further cautious in the closet. These differences between me and the participants trouble my research identity as an insider.

At times, I even felt like an “outsider” in the process of recruiting participants. I encountered hostility and verbal abuse from the gay community when I circulated the poster for participant recruitment in some online gay groups. Some group members said I was just showing off my education and privileged life in a western country; some underrated the academic rigour of my research method, although all they knew about my research was from the poster; and some suspected that all their conversations in the group would be monitored and exploited by me for the research. These encounters always ended in me voluntarily quitting those groups.

The feeling of being an outsider also emerged in my interview with some participants. For example, to pass (Griffin, 1991, 1992) as heterosexual one participant, Jin, one participant, married a heterosexual woman and later became the father of his child. He had to keep a distance from his colleagues and wife, and conceal his sexual identity both on campus and at home. Only in his university dormitory could he receive my online interview (Chapter 4). The constant vigilance and cautiousness that Jin experienced, on a daily basis, contrasts sharply with my outness, breaking the assumed “sameness” based on sexual identity. I intended to recruit more participants like Jin, the only participant who chose to marry a heterosexual woman, to present their unique experiences. This intention was driven by queer methodology which “leads to exploring multiple and conflicting experiences as opposed to coherent, stable, and linear narratives” (McDonald, 2017, p. 141). However, I failed to recruit others who were involved in marriage with a heterosexual woman, although existing research shows that this
kind of marriage is a prevalent choice for Chinese gay men (Cheng, 2016; Tang et al., 2020; Zhu, 2018). A main reason could be that gay men who marry a non-complicit woman to pass as heterosexual are prevalently condemned as “gay liars” or “gay frauds” by people both within and outside the gay community (Ouyang, 2020; Zhu, 2018). Revelation or exposure of their gay identity and “marriage fraud” (Zhu, 2018) can put their private and professional life at considerable risk. This difficulty in recruiting a particular subgroup of the gay community, despite my deliberate intention and “insider” identity, shows the diversity of queer experiences, as well as “the illusion of sameness” (Pitman, 2002, p. 285).

By providing the above reflexive accounts, I engage in what McDonald (2013, 2006) terms “queer reflexivity” - the practice of researcher reflexivity informed by queer theory. The practice of queer reflexivity, as McDonald (2006) suggests, entails reflecting on the politics of enacting (non)normative identities, as well as the ways identities shift over the course of research. My reflexive accounts show that my position as an openly out researcher - a normative identity in relation to contemporary LGBT identity politics - constructed me as both an insider and outsider in various contexts. “Insider/outsider” can be shifting positions informed by power dynamics that are related to multiple forms of difference. This fluidity of researcher identity means that queer researchers should not assume a necessary and strong connection with queer participants solely based on their identification of an “insider” position. Following McDonald (2013, 2006), my practice of queer reflexivity shows the need to question the categories researchers use to identify people and recognise the shifting nature of researcher identity over the course of the research process.

Conclusion

Inspired by the invitation of “queering the academy” issued by Allen (2015. p. 681), this research can be seen as contributing to broader conversations that have drawn on the queer insights in educational research (Allen, 2011b, 2015c; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Burford & Allen, 2019; Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014; Rasmussen & Allen, 2014). Having described my methodological orientation and the methods of data collection and analysis I employed in this study, the next chapter explores participants’ experiences of managing their sexual identity in Chinese universities.
Chapter 4

“I have to get married to protect myself”: Gay academics’ experiences of managing sexual identity in China

This chapter explores gay academics’ experiences of managing sexual identity as closeted gay men in Chinese universities. It aims to examine how gay academics navigate the heterosexual norms on Chinese campuses. Existing literature shows that identity management lies at the heart of queer teachers’ professional experiences (Ferfolja, 2009; Griffin, 1991, 1992). International scholars have documented queer teachers’ strategies of managing their sexuality in various contexts of their professional life (Connell, 2015; Gray, 2013; Hardie, 2012; Msibi, 2018, 2019; Neary, 2013), showing schools and universities are heteronormative spaces. However, these studies are largely based in western contexts, and little is known about how the social and political climate in China shapes queer teachers’ experiences. To bridge this gap, this chapter extends the literature on queer teachers by conducting research in the Chinese context.

Almost all participants in this research were closeted on campus. For many of them, the closet was a site of fear and stress. To perform straight, most participants regularly adopted strategies that American scholar Pat Griffin (1992) terms as “passing” (i.e., lying to lead others to believe they are heterosexual) or “covering” (i.e., hiding their sexual identity without lying or intentionally leading others to assume they are heterosexual). Many participants distanced themselves from colleagues and students on campus, in order to avoid conversations which constantly involved talking about their private life. Such self-distancing was practiced so rigorously that it even applied to interactions with their gay colleagues for fear of being outed by them to more people. However, it is also demonstrated that concealment of sexual identity is not the whole picture of closeted participants’ campus experiences. Some participants refused to position themselves in heterosexual relationships by, for instance, showing an aversion to others’ attempts to introduce a girlfriend. Instead of isolating themselves, strong and trusted relationships were built by some participants with their queer colleagues, which led to support and professional cooperation such as planning a gender course together. By showing professional excellence, some participants reduced their stress of identity management and increased outness of their gay identity.

Theoretically, exploration of participants’ lived experiences is informed by queer theory (Jagose, 1996; McCann & Monaghan, 2020), particularly a body of queer scholarship which seeks to unsettle the dominant identities and understandings in education (Allen, 2015c; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). Responding to the call of “queering the academy” to disrupt the status quo (Allen, 2015c), this chapter interrogates heterosexual norms in Chinese universities. Heteronormativity (Warner, 1993) is
drawn on as a key theoretical concept to expose a variety of interpersonal interactions and institutional practices which privilege heterosexuality and cast homosexuality as deviant on campus.

Use of queer theoretical tools also enables “space for ‘thinking otherwise’” (Gowlett, 2015, p. 161). This means unsettling ideas about queer teachers that have seemingly become obvious. A pervasive idea about queer teachers is that they should come out to challenge heteronormativity (Barnard, 1994; Harbeck, 1992; Sears & Williams, 1997), implying that queer teachers in the closet just succumb to the heterosexual norms. This understanding of closed queer teacher constitutes the normal in existing literature on queer teachers. Closeted queer teachers in international studies are typically portrayed as “wounded” victims (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004) who are subjected to marginalisation, discrimination, and harassment (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Irwin, 2002; Pugh, 1998; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). By contrast, queer teachers who are openly out are acknowledged as empowered (Griffin, 1992), radically honest (Bennett et al., 2015; DeJean, 2007), authentic and supportive (Prock et al., 2019), pedagogically enlightening (DeJean, 2007; Leal & Crookes, 2018; Reimers, 2020; Rensenbrink, 1996), and politically pioneering (Grace, 2017; Smith, 2004; Wells, 2017). This striking contrast between closeted teachers and out teachers implies that the closet is seen as a site where agency is lacking. In this way, queer teachers’ agency is often understood within a binary framework of, as Butler (2006) identifies, “the coercion, on the one side, and escape, on the other” (p. 533).

Yet, participants’ experiences in this research show that closeted teachers can be change agents, and that being closeted can be a strategic positioning to challenge heteronormativity. I argue that the closet might enable gay academics not only to pass or cover as heterosexual but also to disrupt heteronormativity. This subjectivity of queer teacher positioning both in the closet and simultaneously outside heteronormativity is still underexplored in existing literature on queer teachers. Drawing on Butler’s (1990, 1997a, 1997b, 2006) theorisation of subjectivity and agency, a focus on this subjectivity also extends a body of literature that already rethinks teachers’ or students’ agency in educational contexts, which involves a double-edged process of mastery and submission (Allen, 2008; Davies, 2006; Gowlett, 2014; Niesche & Gowlett, 2019).

In this chapter, I show three strategies that participants employed to manage their sexuality. The first strategy is positioning themselves in a marriage or heterosexual relationship. This is followed by how participants managed their sexuality by distancing themselves from people on campus. I then demonstrate the third strategy, which involves gaining power by showing outstanding academic or professional performance. I particularly highlight the ways participants disrupted heteronormativity in their identity management, to tease out how closeted teachers exercised agency in relation to the heterosexual norms.

Passing via marriage and heterosexual relationships

Most participants drew on marriage or heterosexual relationships to pass or cover (Griffin, 1991, 1992) as heterosexuals in their universities. Several participants were married, either to a
heterosexual woman or a lesbian. For instance, Jin married a heterosexual woman who did not know his gay identity:

_I got married in the fourth year of my work. I feel guilty about hiding my gay identity from my wife. It was a protection for my life, including in the workplace. Before I got married, my leaders and colleagues constantly introduced girlfriends to me. I didn't know how to refuse and attended the match-making meetings sometimes. After marriage, no one introduced girlfriends to me anymore. I faced other people’s curiosity about my private life more calmly. After having my kid, I finally kept up with my colleagues’ life stage and got along better with them. All my colleagues have children and they are always talking about parenting topics in the office. (Jin Zhe, 35, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)_

The heteronormative nature of Jin’s institution was demonstrated in his colleagues’ frequent attempt at introducing girlfriends to him, as well as heterosexual relationships and parenting as constant topics of conversation. As a closeted gay man, Jin was subjected to sexual identity exposure in those contexts. Like queer teachers in international studies (Ferfolja, 2007; Griffin, 1991, 1992), Jin drew on heterosexual marriage and parenthood to pass as a heterosexual. In doing so, he avoided the bother of being introduced to girls, could face people’s curiosity about his private life “more calmly”, and got along better with colleagues. Jin’s marriage with a heterosexual woman is a common choice for Chinese gay men, leading to tens of millions of Chinese women being in a marriage with a gay man (Cheng, 2016; Tang et al., 2020; Tsang, 2021).

Some participants passed as heterosexuals on campus via what Wang (2019) terms as “cooperative marriage” - a marriage arrangement between a gay man and a lesbian woman that permits them to cope with the social pressure of heterosexual marriage (Chen, 2009; Fu, 2012; Fu & Zhang, 2013; Kam, 2013; Liu, 2013; Wang, 2014, 2019). For Chen, marriage pressure in his institution was not only from his colleagues’ involvement in his personal life, but also from the university leadership and climate that he considered hostile to gay people. He thus chose to marry a lesbian woman to pass as heterosexual on campus:

_My marriage pressure was partly from my university. Before I got married, some colleagues introduced girlfriends to me almost every day. But after marriage, this had never happened again. If someone asked about my relationship status, I would tell them I am married. Now my colleagues sometimes ask me when to have a baby. The campus climate is hostile to gay people. I was required to delete the content of homosexuality in my teaching by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) leader in my faculty. I had to obey the order. Some student activities I supervised involved gay issues and were censored by the university leadership. My research also involves gay issues. So I have to get married to protect myself, in order not to expose my identity. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)_

This narrative shows that heteronormativity in Chen’s university operated both individually and institutionally. The power operation of heteronormativity was manifested not only in everyday social interactions between colleagues, but also in the censorship of teaching and student activities by the university CCP authorities. As a teacher whose teaching, research and student
supervision all involved gay issues, Chen thus ran a high risk of exposing his sexuality in the heteronormative environment. However, marriage provided a heterosexual protection for him to engage in work relating to gay issues. In doing so, Chen exercised agency which involved both mastery and submission. He challenged heteronormativity by engaging in teaching, research, and student supervision about gay issues. Simultaneously, he submitted to heteronormativity and the Party-state power by passing as a heterosexual and obeying the CCP leader’s order of censoring teaching content about homosexuality.

Like Chen, Huang also married a lesbian woman to pass as heterosexual on campus. As an academic whose main duty was university administration, his consideration behind his cooperative marriage was removing the obstacle to career promotion. Being unmarried was considered by his leaders as “a lack of personality and ability, and perhaps even leadership”.

I worked in the teaching administration office. Once the university was selecting an office director. Coincidentally, I happened to pass an office to get some water. I heard three leaders next door talking about who is the best for this position. When mentioning me, a leader said that I was still not married in my thirties, which showed a lack of personality and ability, and perhaps even leadership. Other leaders acquiesced. I was deeply hurt and made my decision to marry a lesbian. (Huang Hui, 37, Lecturer, Anhui province)

Huang’s narrative shows that heteronormativity was enacted by the university leadership in their practices regarding career promotion. Such experience of institutional heteronormativity is consistent with Ning and Poon’s (2021) research of Chinese gay men and lesbians. Their research shows that marital status is an important factor in determining promotion because marrying at an appropriate age represents compliance with social norms, which is appreciated by the employers. As such, like participants in Ning and Poon’s (2021) research, Huang felt compelled to conform to the predominant heteronormative expectations to avoid being evaluated poorly in the workplace.

Huang’s marriage with a lesbian did not mean an end of identity management in his university. Rather, the heterosexual performance entailed constant effort. He went on to narrate how he passed on campus after marriage.

After marriage, I have never introduced her to my colleagues. I only posted a marriage certificate on social networks. My university organises a holiday tour every year. My colleagues asked me why I had never brought my wife. I deliberately made up reasons such as “she likes to stay at home”. She has only been to my university once. I asked her if she minded showing up together on campus, because many colleagues said that we had never appeared together. So we hugged and kissed on campus, and deliberately let my colleagues see. (Huang Hui, 37, Lecturer, Anhui province)

Huang’s strategy of identity management involved both combination and separation of private life and professional life, as well as a tension between the two. On one hand, he made an effort to perform heterosexuality and prevent gossip by performing romance with his wife on campus. On the other hand, these performances were only symbolic and superficial, and still could not completely take the pressure off. For instance, he only posted a marriage certificate on social
networks and refused to introduce his wife to colleagues, in case the “cooperative” (Wang, 2019) nature of his marriage would be exposed. This separation of private life from professional life inevitably resulted in colleagues’ gossip. As such, his identity management was a constant process, even after marriage.

For those unmarried participants who did not have a wife to perform heterosexuality like those married participants, one common strategy to pass as heterosexual was to make up a girlfriend.

When I entered this university, the chairman of the labour union noticed me and tried to introduce a girlfriend to me. I found it troublesome and politely refused several times. Now when colleagues ask me if I have a girlfriend, I just say yes. (Bu Liu, 29, Lecturer, Yunnan province)

The labour union once collected information about who is unmarried, in order to introduce a boyfriend or girlfriend. I’d already thought about how to deal with it before I entered this university. It’s inevitable. My strategy is to make up a girlfriend. (Fei Ming, 31, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

My colleagues often ask me why I haven’t been married or found a girlfriend. I always say I have a girlfriend in my hometown which is located in another province. (Da Da, 30, Lecturer, Shandong province)

Like Jin and Chen’s experiences before their marriage, most unmarried participants frequently experienced others’ attempts to pry into their private life and introduce a girlfriend, and considered it “inevitable” and “troublesome”. This captures a (heterosexual) marriage imperative in Chinese culture, which constitutes a unique social and cultural pressure faced by Chinese gay men (Li, 1998). This emphasis on marriage and family reinscribes heteronormativity in educational settings and the workplace. As such, heteronormativity in Chinese universities constitutes the mundane experience of gay academics. It not only operated in informal interactions with colleagues but was also institutionalised in the work of departments like the labour union. These ubiquitous heterosexual norms produced formally and informally on campus echo the paradoxical notion that “sexuality is both everywhere and nowhere” in the educational context (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 108). The presence of heterosexual discourses and absence of queer visibility presume heterosexuality as the default on campus, positioning gay academics in vulnerable and risky positions.

In contrast to the above participants who passed as heterosexual, some participants did not position themselves in heterosexual relationships. Instead, they explicitly refused to conform to the heterosexual norms by having a girlfriend or getting married.

When people introduce girlfriends to me, I tell them I don’t want to have a girlfriend or get married. (Du Xing, 43, Lecturer, Shanghai)

The head of my department said that people should do what they should do at that age and get married before 30 years old. He likes to persuade colleagues to conform to
traditional values. But I still insist on not getting married. Gay man’s marriage with a woman is a lie itself. (Bu Liu, 29, Lecturer, Yunnan province)

However, in an environment where heteronormative expectations regarding marriage and family were imposed on participants by colleagues and leadership, resistance to heterosexual relationships could harm interpersonal relationships.

My leader intended to introduce a girlfriend to me. I was repulsed and directly turned him down. He is a conservative person and said that marriage and parenting should be the only path of life. So he was a bit angry. He felt that my lifestyle of being unmarried and pursuing individual freedom didn’t match with his and told me not to spread my values. (Teng Wen, 39, Lecturer, Shanghai)

By explicitly refusing and showing a strong dislike of his leader’s attempt at introducing a girlfriend, Teng performed an alternative lifestyle without heterosexual relationships. Such agency exercised by closeted teachers resonates with those in Ferfolja’s (2007b) study of Australian closeted lesbian teachers. For example, one lesbian teacher rejected advances from male staff members and explicitly demonstrated no interest in men, which troubled the constructed “naturalness” of heterosexuality. The rejection of the heteronormative lifestyle is particularly political in the Chinese context where dominant notions that “people should do what they should do at that age”, or “marriage and parenting should be the only path of life”, constitute the normal. The importance of family is a striking feature in China and is emphasised by the Party-state as the foundation of social stability and harmony (Guo, 2010; Sigley, 2002, 2006; To, 2013, 2015). Ideal sexual citizens in 21st century China “do their duty to their families and nation by marrying and producing … children” (Ho et al., 2018, p. 495). This can largely account for the fact that gay men and lesbians in China take two major routes to cope with the pressure to marry: marriage with a heterosexual, or “cooperative marriage” between a gay man and a lesbian (Choi & Luo, 2016; Engebretsen, 2014, 2017; Fu, 2012; Fu & Zhang, 2013; Kam, 2013; Liu, 2013; Wang, 2014, 2019; Wei & Cai, 2012). In contrast, some participants, like Teng, disrupted heteronormativity by refusing to adhere to the regulatory norms regarding marriage and family. Meanwhile, they conformed to heteronormativity by staying in the closet to avoid potential risks of identity disclosure. Therefore, their action of agency involved simultaneous mastery and submission.

Self-distancing from others

Another strategy adopted by gay academics was distancing themselves from colleagues, leaders and students who might show an interest in, pry, or gossip about their private life. For Jin, the participant who needed to conceal his gay identity from his heterosexual wife, this self-distance involved both people on campus and his wife at home. Consequently, he experienced both university and home as exhausting places. He could “relax and catch a breath” only in his university dormitory where he could be alone, or with his boyfriend.

Jin: I try my best to avoid meeting colleagues and students, and come to campus only when I have class. Because conversations with colleagues always involve topics about
marriage and relationships. Students also want to show kindness by asking about my private life. Although I share more topics with colleagues after marriage, I still cautiously keep a distance from them and they have never met my wife. Fortunately, my home is far away from the campus, and I rarely meet colleagues.

Cui: Will you go home late if you do this interview at the university today?

Jin: I will sleep in the teachers’ dormitory on campus tonight. The reason why I don’t want to move my home near the campus is that I can apply for a dormitory, where I can relax and catch a breath occasionally. This is the only place I feel safe to do this interview. I feel more exhausted at home, because my wife is close to me and I need to be careful when contacting gay guys. I feel better in the teachers' dormitory where I can be alone or meet my boyfriend. (Jin Zhe, 35, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

This narrative shows the limitation of the strategy of marrying a heterosexual woman, which entailed a constant effort to sustain the marriage. Such a marriage was not easy for either party of the marriage. Existing research has shown that wives of gay men in China suffer from a multitude of challenges in their marriage, often without knowing the reason (Cheng, 2016; Tang et al., 2020; Tsang, 2021; Zhu, 2018). For Jin, the concealment of sexual identity necessitated a distance from people, both on campus and at home. Jin’s experience complicates the typical narrative of “double lives” queer teachers live (Ferfolja, 2007, 2009; Griffin, 1991, 1992; Woods & Harbeck, 1992), which involves a separation between sexual identity and professional identity. This “double lives” implies that outside the campus queer teachers have a secret queer life and do not need to manage their sexual identity anymore. However, for Jin, home was a more exhausting place to conceal his sexuality. By deliberately not moving near to campus and applying for a teacher dormitory, he managed to create a queer space on campus where he could stay alone, meet his boyfriend, and received my interview. Later I will unpack how he exercised agency via Butler’s (1990) conceptualisation of subjectivity and agency.

Self-distancing also meant not developing a work relationship into a close friendship, to avoid a situation of having to coming out, or in case colleagues damaged their work by exposing their gay identity.

I don’t make friends with colleagues and refuse their invitations to have tea or drink together. They like to gossip about private life. There is competition among colleagues. They may use my sexuality to harm my career. (Meng Chi, 40, Lecturer, Jiangsu province)

Such concern about colleagues resonates with experiences documented in international studies (Beagan et al., 2020; Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009). For example, Canadian LGBTQ academics in Beagan et al.’s (2020) study isolated themselves from colleagues and described some degree of discomfort and isolation in their heteronormative institution. One participant in Bilimoria and Stewart’s (2009) research on American LGBT faculty reported that a colleague attempted to disrupt a collaboration by “outing” her to a third party (p.92).
Some participants deliberately stayed away from university leaders. For instance, Du perceived the leaders in his university as “closer to the bureaucracy” and more likely to be “sexist and homophobic”.

I especially keep a distance from the leaders. Those leaders are closer to the bureaucracy. Male leaders over 40 years old are generally sexist and homophobic. (Du Xing, 43, Lecturer, Shanghai)

Du’s narrative echoes existing research, which shows that the educational leadership plays an important role in setting the tone of campus culture, as well as in queer teachers’ identity management (DeJean, 2007; Gray, 2013; Hardie, 2012; Jackson, 2007). Queer teachers can be supported by the leadership that values diversity, while they could also be inhibited from being able to come out by the conservative leadership (DeJean 2007; Gray, 2013).

Some participants particularly distanced themselves from students who might joke or gossip about their sexuality. For Ling, students’ joking about his attention paid to male students made him feel as though he was “under surveillance”.

I subconsciously keep a distance from students. They joked about homosexuality to amuse themselves and get closer to me. Some students joked about why I paid more attention to male students. I don’t want to be associated with homosexuality. I feel I am under surveillance and my secret can be exposed at any time. (Ling Hu, 38, Lecturer, Shanghai)

Ling’s sentiment of being “under surveillance” echoes the Chinese gay men and lesbians in Ning and Poon’s (2021) research. Their research shows that Chinese gay men and lesbians in the workplace are subjected to “a close micro-surveillance that enabled people to pry into each other’s lives” (p. 64). Participants’ narratives show that such surveillance faced by gay academics in their institution involved their interactions with both colleagues and students.

Self-distancing even applied to their interactions with people who share the same sexual identity. For example, Teng refused to have any connection with gay students and teachers at his university for fear of being outed by them to more people.

I don’t want to have any connection with gay students and teachers in my institution in case of being outed. Once I step into the university gate, I never use gay apps in case I might be identified by other gay guys on campus. (Teng Wen, 39, Lecturer, Shanghai)

Those participants who attempted to connect with other gay colleagues, often expressed disappointment or frustration at being kept at a distance.

One colleague in the gay app said he doesn’t want to have any connection with me. As gay teachers, we are already isolated and should hope to find a peer. But he was scared of being outed. (Xiao Gang, 35, Tutor, Guangdong province)

I have a gay colleague and hope we can be trusted and close friends. But he doesn’t think so. He’s too cautious. (Xiao Han, 33, Lecturer, Guangdong province)
These narratives show a tension in gay academics’ interactions with their gay colleagues. They hoped to connect with gay colleagues, but these interactions risked them being outed by their colleagues to more people. As such, many participants distanced themselves from even colleagues who share the same sexual identity. This rigorous identity management demonstrates the powerlessness of heteronormativity in Chinese universities and stands in stark contrast to the American openly out faculty in Prock et al.’s (2019) study. In their study, participants’ outness connected them to other members of the LGBTQ community in universities, and this connection led to a sense of safety and promoted advocacy (Prock et al., 2019).

However, the “trusted and close” friendship with queer colleagues that Xiao desired did exist in some other participants’ narratives. For instance, Ao regarded one closeted gay colleague as a family member, while Nong felt “a natural affinity” with a closeted lesbian colleague.

*I am so close with a gay colleague that we talk about everything. We guess whether a male colleague is gay or not, discuss social phenomena about homosexuality, and plan our life choices as a gay man. I have regarded him as a family member.* (Ao Si, 31, Lecturer, Jilin province)

*I plan to teach a gender course with a lesbian colleague, to show students the diversity of gender and sexuality. We both belong to the queer community and seem to have a natural affinity with each other. We are happy to do something together.* (Nong Li, 30, Lecturer, Hainan province)

These narratives about friendship between participants and their queer colleagues demonstrate a positive picture regarding their sexual identity. Instead of isolating themselves, they formed solid bonds with queer colleagues and enjoyed their interactions. This “affinity” based on sexual identity not only functioned as peer support but also had political effect. It disrupted the heteronormative forces on campus, which negated and erased the existence of queer subjects, and created the potential for challenging heteronormativity such as planning a gender course. By being closeted and engaging in queer interaction and disruption, these participants exercised agency that involved simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to the heterosexual norms.

**Showing outstanding professional performance**

For several participants, gay identity was an incentive to work hard and excel in their university. The professional excellence could grant power, which facilitates their interaction with heterosexual peers, or mitigates the potentially negative effects of gay identity exposure.

*Gay identity makes me more strict with myself and work better than colleagues. So that I would be confident to interact with colleagues and have an equal status if my sexual identity were exposed.* (Ma Bulan, 42, Professor, Guangdong province)

*Gay identity affects my career positively and motivates me to work harder. I don’t need to consider marriage and family like the heterosexual. So I have more time to focus on*
my career. People who have power have more freedom. I’ll come out one day when I am successful. (Xiao Han, 33, Lecturer, Guangdong province)

I have to ensure the quality of my work. If I couldn’t do an excellent job, once people knew my sexual identity, they would think I couldn’t do well because of my gay identity. (Xiao Gang, 35, Lecturer, Guangdong province)

These narratives show that gay academics’ sexuality motivated them to perform excellently to gain more power in the workplace, as Xiao perceived, “people who have power have more freedom”. This motivation for outstanding work performance informed by sexual identity echoes the adoption of excellence and professionalism by queer teachers in international studies (Jackson, 2007; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2019; Rudoe, 2010). For example, American gay and lesbian teachers in Jackson’s (2007) research built a “super-teacher” identity, for fear their gayness would be viewed as a flaw. Similarly, South African “same-sex desiring” teachers in Msibi’s (2019) research positioned themselves as more competent teachers compared to their peers, granting them significant respect and power in their school. Yet, the above narratives also show that this subject position could be stressful to occupy ("I have to ensure the quality of my work"). It was perceived safe to be a gay academic only when their professional performance was excellent enough.

Outstanding professional performance also helped reduce the stress of identity management and increase the outness of one’s gay identity. For instance, Song did not mind being gossiped about by his colleagues, because the substantial research funding he contributed to his institution increased his professional safety.

I’ve never been married. My colleagues probably guess I’m gay. Just guess. I don’t think it's a big deal. I obtain research funding every year and contribute so much to my university. I’m sure the leaders wouldn’t fire me. (Song Song, 35, Lecturer, Sichuan province)

Similarly, Ma was confident about his academic strength and was fine to let people “suspect” his sexual identity. As an unmarried academic who conducted gay research, Ma was more likely to expose his sexual identity. He passed as heterosexual on campus, while contextually disclosing his gay identity when interacting with community organisations or attending conferences. He perceived himself as “not exactly in the closet”.

I made up a Hong Kong girlfriend when people ask about my relationship. I bought myself a ring and wore it on my middle finger so that people would think I was engaged. When I taught my class and held the microphone in my hand, students could see the ring. But I’m not exactly in the closet. I do gay health research. When I cooperate with gay community organisations or attend conferences, I don’t hide my gay identity. My graduate students knew my gay identity when they did my projects in gay community organisations. I am 42 years old, unmarried and do gay research. People may suspect I am gay. Just suspect. I have academic strength. Even if I’m fired, I can find other jobs. (Ma Bulan, 42, Professor, Guangdong province)
Song and Ma’s attitude of letting others “guess” or “suspect” their sexual identity positioned themselves as neither “in”, nor “out” of the closet. This positioning echoes the identity management of South African “same-sex desiring” teachers in Msibi’s (2019) study. The adoption of a highly professional stance enabled them to act transgressively and assume ambiguous social positions - “I am not in the closet; I am not out either”, as one of his participants noted (p. 398). By deliberately performing an ambiguous sexual identity, or contextually disclosing gay identity, Song and Ma transgressed the boundary of the closet and blurred the binary understanding of sexuality. In doing so, they disrupted the operation of heteronormativity which relied on the fixed binary of “heterosexuality/ homosexuality”.

Yet, this strategy only applied to those who could show their outstanding professional values, particularly research output. Those who adopted this strategy usually obtained their Ph.D. in western universities and published internationally, which was highly valued in Chinese universities in their pursuit of international competitiveness (Ministry of Education of China, 2018; The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015). However, for those who could not achieve outstanding research performance, gay identity could mean unbearable stress. Hui, for instance, had no research output and could not envision any prospect of promotion. He felt so stressed in the closet that he finally resigned.

Academic research isn’t my strength. So it’s unlikely I will be promoted. I didn’t dare to come out without academic performance; otherwise, I would be at the mercy of others after coming out. So many people in the university were monitoring and managing me, which was overwhelming for me. I finally resigned from the university and went to a private educational institution in Beijing, where the environment is freer than that of a university. (Hui Huang, 47, Lecturer, Hunan province)

Hui’s career change from a state-owned university in a provincial city to a private educational institution in a metropolis like Beijing freed him from professional pressure and strict control in the workplace. His resignation resonates with experiences of the “quitters” in Connell’s (2015) studies of American gay and lesbian teachers. This group of teachers either quit education or moved into administration in search of a more supportive working environment. Hui’s career trajectory shows the exclusionary effect of the “demonstrating professional excellence” strategy. Gay academics who failed to excel suffered from stress due to sexual identity management, which could ruin their career development.

Agency of closeted teachers

Gay academics’ experiences of managing sexuality on campus show that Chinese universities are highly heteronormative spaces, and the closet can be a site of fear and stress. To conceal their gayness, most participants married a woman or made up a girlfriend. Many participants distanced themselves from people on campus or felt pressured to work harder. Although these strategies provided gay academics with acceptability and professional safety in their institution, each strategy had its limitations. Despite performing heterosexuality in line with the expected social norms, participants’ performance did not always take the pressure off. Rather, it required constant effort to keep up with the performance and resulted in much stress. Self-distancing from people, including gay colleagues, reinforced participants’ feeling of isolation. The mental
burden of showing excellence at work could be so overwhelming that some participants quit their jobs.

The heteronormative culture in Chinese universities is reinforced by the political context of China. Led and controlled by the CCP, Chinese universities are expected to conform to and promote Party-state ideologies (Scholars at Risk, 2019; Tenzin, 2017; Xiaoxin, 2018; Yan, 2014, 2017). Participants’ narratives show the role that university leadership played in the operation of heteronormativity in Chinese universities. For example, in Chen’s university, CCP leaders censored his teaching and students’ activities involving queer issues. Due to being unmarried, Huang was underrated by his leaders as lacking in ability and leadership, which hindered his career promotion. Many participants were monitored and pressured by their leaders to get married, which impelled some participants to deliberately distance themselves from the university leadership. These experiences in relation to the university leadership demonstrate how heteronormativity is, both officially and unofficially, entangled with the Party-state power exerted by the authorities in Chinese universities, which puts gay academics in a further vulnerable position.

However, participants’ narratives show positive moments regarding their identity management. For example, marriage and fatherhood enabled some participants to face people’s curiosity about their private life “more calmly”, as well as “get along better” with colleagues. Passing as heterosexual thus could be seen as a strategic position where gay academics could gain acceptance by following the “norms of intelligibility” in the workplace (Butler, 1990, p. 17). Furthermore, some participants enjoyed their friendship and cooperation with queer colleagues. Some felt that they were positively motivated by their gay identity to focus on career and excel at work. These moments show that negative experiences are not the only picture of queer teachers’ experiences, echoing Reimers’ (2020) call for “positive narratives about and for LGBTQ teachers” (p. 113) and “a shift in the tale(s) ... so that they are presented as subjects rather than victims” (p. 113).

Another aspect that participants’ narratives diverge from dominant understandings about queer teachers is that the closet could be a position to disrupt heteronormativity. Closeted teachers are conventionally considered as ones who “cower cowardly in the closet” (Sears & Williams, 1997, p. 4). This oversimplified view of closeted teachers is informed by what Rasmussen (2004) conceptualises as a discourse of the “coming out imperative” faced by queer teachers. As she explains, “when coming out discourses are privileged, the act of not coming out may be read as an abdication of responsibility, or the act of somebody who is disempowered or somehow ashamed of their inherent gayness” (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 146). However, like most gay men in contemporary China (Wang, 2011), participants in this study accepted their gay identity and were not ashamed of it. Rather, under the protection of the closet, closeted participants expressed their agency in their support of queer students (Chapter 5), teaching about queer issues in the classroom (Chapter 6), and academic research about queer issues (Chapter 7). These moments of promoting queer visibility and normalising queer identities disrupted the operation of heteronormativity in Chinese universities, from within the closet.

Closeted teachers’ agency can take subtle forms. By refusing to be involved in and showing no interest in heterosexual relationships when others introduced girlfriends, several participants performed heterosexuality differently and troubled the naturalness of heterosexuality. When
some participants connected to, and built relationship with their queer colleagues, they challenged the regulatory forces that suppressed queer existence on campus. Another way several participants subtly disrupted heteronormativity was positioning themselves as neither inside nor outside the closet. The power granted by outstanding professional performance was drawn on to contextually employ different identity management strategies and perform fluid and shifting subjectivities. By confusing people with ambiguous sexual identity, they destabilised heterosexuality as the default of sexuality. Like queer teachers in Ferfojia’s (2014) study who were “neither in nor out but present” (p. 29), such subjective self-positioning troubled binaries regarding the closet such as “queer/straight”, “in/out”, “secrecy/disclosure” and “invisibility/visibility”.

Such agency exercised by gay academics is beyond typical understanding of agency within a framework in which only two options exist: submission or flight, as only being out is marked as agency. Judith Butler’s (1990, 1997a, 1997b, 2006) formulation of agency in between the extremes of conforming and fleeing provides insights into queer teachers’ agency. For Butler, agency is located in the process of subjecthood and involves a simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to norms (see Chapter 1). The alteration of norm takes place in the process of subject constitution within multiple and varying discourses. As she explains:

_The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. Further, the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment… (Butler, 1990, p. 145)_

Following Butler’s analysis, agency can be revealed even in those seemingly totally passive participants. Take Jin, the only participant who married a heterosexual woman, for example, he was caught up in a complex web of discursive positions. These included the subjectivities as a teacher, a husband, a father, a gay man, a boyfriend of his partner, as well as a participant in this research. Thus, the performative constitution, as Butler (1990) acknowledges, can be complicated and messy. This messiness of subject formation within competing discourses provides opportunity for the “manoeuvres” (Gowlett, 2014, p. 414) made by individuals to recraft the regulatory norms.

In Jin’s case, his closetedness, as well as performance as a husband and a father, signalled his conformity to the heterosexual norms, or “cultural intelligibility” (Butler, 1990). Being constrained by rules enabled him to be acceptable and recognisable as a teacher and a man, and simultaneously opened possibilities of mastering and resignifying them. By deliberately refusing to move nearer to campus and applying for a teacher dormitory, he created a safe space to keep his distance from his wife and form his subjectivity as a gay man who has a boyfriend. Only in this space could he receive my interview as a participant of queer research to reveal his lived experiences (“This is the only place I feel safe to do this interview”).
The agency exercised by Jin in his subjectivity as a research participant, lies in the fact that he needed to overcome the shame and fear of the risks of talking about his experiences (“I feel guilty about hiding my gay identity from my wife”). Chinese gay men who marry a non-complicit woman are prevalently condemned as “gay liars” or “gay frauds” by people both within and outside gay community (Ouyang, 2020; Zhu, 2018). As such, revelation, or exposure of their gay identity and “marriage fraud” (Tsang, 2021; Zhu, 2018) can put their private and professional life at considerable risk. This may explain why this research failed to recruit more participants involving such marriage, despite it being the prevalent choice of Chinese gay men (Cheng, 2016; Tang et al., 2020; Zhu, 2018). In this sense, Jin’s subjectivity as a research participant challenged the heteronormative forces that compelled him to conceal his gay identity in professional and private life. By unpacking how Jin’s agency was exercised in his performative constitution of a multitude of subjectivities, I unsettle the conventional understanding of closeted queer teachers, as well as gay men in heterosexual marriage, as only victims and conformists. Echoing international studies of queer teachers (Brockenbrough, 2012; Ferfolja, 2007b, 2014; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2018, 2019), this chapter demonstrates that performance of heterosexual subjectivities enabled closeted academics not only to pass, but simultaneously to disrupt heteronormativity. Such agency involving both conformity and disruption to heteronormativity troubles the dominant conception of agency within the binary framework of coercion or escape.

Conclusion

This chapter examines how gay academics managed their sexuality in Chinese universities. Three identity management strategies adopted by participants are identified: passing (Griffin, 1991, 1992) via marriage and heterosexual relationships, self-distancing from people on campus, and demonstrating outstanding professional performance. These experiences capture the power operation of heteronormativity on Chinese campuses in both individual and institutional ways. However, it is also demonstrated that the closet might enable participants not only to pass or cover as heterosexuals, but in some instances to disrupt heteronormativity. By highlighting participants’ subject positions as both closeted and anti-heteronormative, I challenge the conventional representation of closeted queer teachers as simply “wounded identities” (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004) and frame their agency beyond the binary of escape or coercion. Drawing on Butler’s (1990, 1997a, 1997b, 2006) analysis of agency, my theorisation of gay academics’ agency troubles the dominant conception of agency within the conventional framework that sets up binaries such as “conformity/subversion”, “mastery/submission”, “coercion/escape”, or “determinism/free will”. The following three chapters demonstrate more moments of agency in their interactions with queer students (Chapter 5), classroom teaching (Chapter 6) and research about queer issues (Chapter 7). The next chapter will focus on their interactions with queer students, particularly how they supported queer students.
Chapter 5

“I am tolerant of gay people”: Gay academics' heteronormative support for queer students in China

This chapter explores closeted gay academics’ interactions with queer students in China, with a focus on their support for queer students. It employs data collected in China to “queer” (Jagose, 1996; McCann & Monaghan, 2020) some dominant ideas found in the western literature. I use queer here, in the sense of a turning, bending, and twisting of the conventions that structure how the stories of queer teachers and queer students are routinely told. A highly pervasive idea in the literature is epitomised by Jenning’s (1994) claim: “A school with an openly lesbian or gay teacher is a better school ... where isolated students at last have a place to turn for support” (p. 14). This thinking is founded on an assumption that queer adults are necessarily the ones who can best support queer young people, based on their “similarity” alone. This idea is evidenced in much literature documenting queer teachers’ support for queer students by coming out and providing a role model (DeJean, 2007, 2010; A. Gray, 2014; Linley et al., 2016; Neary, 2017; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Russell, 2014; Russell, 2020; Thomas-Durrell, 2020). A normalising effect of this belief is that queer teachers are expected and pressured to come out and model for queer students. As Barnard (1994) justifies it, queer students need to see real-life queer teachers standing in front of them and to have adult queer role models in their lives. As such, Barnard suggests that “queer teachers should come out to their students” (p. 28). Similarly, in DeJean’s (2007) study of American out gay and lesbian teachers, he describes these teachers as “radically honest” (p. 66) and suggests teachers’ coming out to help and model for students. Consequently, closeted teachers who worry about potential negative consequences of coming out in a heteronormative environment can feel guilty about their “failure” to be a role model for queer students (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021).

A set of discourses underpinning these beliefs are identified by queer scholars as the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004), “queer teacher as role model” (Khayatt, 1997) and “queer student at risk” (Allen, 2015a; Quinlivan, 2002; Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004). In this study, many closeted gay academics proudly recounted how they supported queer students. These narratives are drawn on to interrogate the above discourses and expand existing literature by demonstrating whether or how these discourses work in the Chinese context. To pursue this aim, this chapter asks: How do gay academics interact with, and particularly support, queer students in China? Queer students in this framing include those perceived by participants to be queer, despite no actual confirmation that they are. The following sub-questions respond to each of the three discourses:

1. How do gay academics manage their sexual identity when supporting queer students?
2. What does support look like and what are its effects?
3. How do gay academics perceive queer students in terms of their needs and sexual identity?

Exploration of these questions ultimately leads to a discussion about who/what should provide what kind of support to whom in Chinese universities.

This work is informed by queer theory, which "shakes and unsettles sedimented knowledge" (Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 333). Inconsistency between participants' narratives and dominant discourses is foregrounded to trouble conventional understandings about queer teachers and queer students. For instance, instead of being an openly out role model, many closeted participants supported queer students in other ways. However, in many cases, participants’ interactions with queer students were heteronormative, or simultaneously marginalised queer students. Also, the students that some participants perceived as queer and in need of support might not necessarily need support or identify as queer. These interactions diverge from the typical narrative, which is framed between an out supportive teacher and a closeted vulnerable student, and are seldom addressed in existing literature. These “slippages, fissures, breaks and cracks” (Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 333) have the potential to deepen our understanding of heteronormativity’s operation and open possibilities of addressing queer issues in Chinese universities.

In this chapter, I argue that the pervasive idea that queer teachers are the ones who can best support queer students, by coming out and providing a role model for them, should be interrogated. To unpack this argument, I first show how and why participants supported queer students without publicly coming out on campus. Then, contradictions in participants’ narratives are highlighted. For instance, some participants” perceived “support” of queer students was heteronormative. Participants could hold both supportive and discriminatory attitudes towards their queer students. Next, I examine participants’ perceptions of queer students in terms of students' need and sexual identity. The last section interrogates the expectation regarding queer teachers’ responsibility for supporting queer students and calls for rethinking who/what should provide what kind of support to whom.

Supporting queer students without publicly coming out

This section demonstrates gay academics’ ways of supporting their queer students in China. Although most participants were closeted in their university, they managed to support queer students in various ways without publicly coming out to people on campus. For instance, Xia personally disclosed his sexual identity to a gay student whose religion conflicted with his sexuality, and in doing so, helped him to accept his identity.

I saw one of my international students on Blued. Everything he posted on it was about me. For example, “He asked me what I was doing today. I was nervous and touched.” So I knew he had a crush on me. I disclosed my identity to him and we promised to keep our gay identity confidential. Initially he was shocked, and asked why I told him this. He meant that I should keep a good image in his heart, and it’s not good to be gay. As a Muslim, he didn’t accept his gay identity. He once sent me a video about how people in
his country used witchcraft to cure homosexuality. He wanted to go back to his country to do it. I told him that witchcraft was superstition and shouldn’t be believed at all. I advised him to face up to and accept his sexual identity. (Xia Longchuan, 27, Tutor, Guangdong province)

As the teacher whom the student had “a good image in his heart” and “had a crush on”, Xia’s disclosure of sexual identity demonstrated the positive aspect of gay identity, and thus helped the student accept his sexual identity. Here, the discourse of “queer teacher as role model” demonstrates how a queer teacher had the potential to provide a role model for a queer student who struggled with his sexual identity.

Diverging from the discourse of the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004), Xia’s narrative also shows that queer teachers did not necessarily need to come out publicly to support queer students. By personally disclosing his sexual identity and mutually promising to keep sexual identity confidential, Xia managed to support his student without risking coming out more broadly. Notably, this support was facilitated by Blued, the gay “dating app”. Working with GPS, such an app connects users to others in close geographic proximity and allows users to interact with each other to reach multiple goals (Wu & Ward, 2018). In Xia’s case, Blued allowed him to connect with and support his gay student, without risking publicly coming out. This virtual reality of gay lives means that queer teachers do not need to be openly out on campus in order to reach and support queer students.

In some participants’ support of queer students, coming out was deliberately avoided, in case the student might not be ready to face a queer teacher. For instance, Song supported a student he perceived as gay but did not disclose his sexual identity, to avoid a potential negative reaction from his student.

Some students are obviously gay, and I particularly care about them. I am sure one of my students is gay, because he drew his eyebrows. He was always sitting in the classroom alone, while other students sat with their friends. This reminded me of my own experiences as a gay college student. I isolated myself due to difficulty in accepting myself. I experienced this stage myself, so I felt heartbroken when I saw him. Sometimes I specially asked him questions to make him focus on class. Because he might struggle with gay identity and couldn’t concentrate on learning. My teaching was flexible. Usually after assigning some tasks, I left students to complete tasks. Then I sat next to him and talked a little with him. I asked him gently: “Hi. You’re distracted. What are you thinking of?” But I have never talked to him about sexuality as a savior. If I suddenly asked: “Are you confused about your gay identity”, that would be too weird. He might not want anyone to know his sexuality. I didn’t mind coming out, but I didn’t want to scare him. Students are usually in awe of teachers. If the teacher suddenly mentioned a topic he deeply cared about, he might be frightened and shrink back. So it was enough to just let him feel that someone cares about him. (Song Song, 35, Lecturer, Sichuan province)

Song’s empathy with, and support for, his student stemmed from his own negative experiences as a gay student. This echoes Canadian LGBTQ teachers in Amy Gray’s (2014) study, whose
experiences as minorities made them better prepared to work with minority students. As one of her participants said, “I am a displaced teacher because of being Queer, so I understand my kids, my students, how they feel to be displaced because of marginalization. I get it, I get it.” (p.46) This particular teacher-student connection provides some reasoning for the notion that queer teachers are the best supporters of queer students. However, based on the “similarity” alone, a queer teacher who projected their own experiences onto queer students could misinterpret students’ experiences or needs. I will unpack this point later via other participants’ narratives.

Unlike Xia, Song deliberately avoided coming out to his student in case he might “scare” the student. The sentiment that closeted queer students can feel uncomfortable or threatened to interact with openly out teachers is also evidenced in international studies (Jackson, 2007; Khayatt, 1997). For instance, an American lesbian teacher in Jackson’s (2007) study expressed: “I know for some kids I am a threat. Because I am so out, I might remind them of who they are.” (p. 138) In this sense, queer teachers’ coming out is not always positive for queer students; nor is it necessarily a prerequisite, or the best way of supporting queer students.

Considering the traditional teacher-student power relations in China (“Students are usually in awe of teachers”), Song also avoided providing support “as a saviour”. Instead, his considerate and gentle approach to supporting his student - asking him questions or sitting next to him and talking - echoes American gay teachers in Mayo’s (2008) study. Mayo’s participants “reported making an effort to extend themselves in a caring and understanding manner” (pp. 3-4), such as watching over gay students with a protective eye from afar. These supportive approaches, without sexual identity disclosure, trouble the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004).

Like Xia, Wen also only selectively disclosed his sexual identity to queer students he supported, instead of coming out broadly on campus. This selective way of coming out and supporting queer students was determined by the heteronormative campus climate, as well as a social environment where public support for queer students and institutional change were perceived to be “almost impossible”.

_I support gay students individually and use my own experience to help them cope with problems they encountered, such as whether gay dating apps are useful, how to make gay friends, how to cope with pressure from family. This way of supporting queer students is because of the hostile campus climate. The university doesn’t allow queer students to establish a queer society or advocate for equal rights collectively, while teachers are discouraged from speaking for them. It’s almost impossible for the university to support queer students. This is also the way Chinese governments treat the queer community. As long as the authorities still govern the country and maintain social stability in this way, it is difficult for the queer community to speak out and challenge the administrative system. So personal interactions are the only thing I can do to support them, rather than institutional change._ (Wen Yao, 40, Associate Professor, Fujian province)
Using his own experience, Wen supported queer students to cope with a range of everyday problems faced by his gay students, such as making gay friends. As a queer adult, Wen might offer the queer youth helpful advice on issues that straight adults are not familiar with. In this vein, the similarity based on shared sexual identity between Wei and his gay students enabled him to serve as a role model.

Wen’s narrative also shows a top-down operation of heteronormativity on Chinese campuses where the university prohibited queer students from organising, and constrained teachers from publicly supporting queer students. This institutional heteronormativity in universities was consistent with, and was determined by, the way the Chinese authorities “govern the country and maintain social stability”. This social and political context within and beyond campuses affected gay academics’ identity management and approach to supporting queer students. Within such a repressive climate, where collective mobilisation and advocacy on campus meant high political risks (Scholars at Risk, 2019; Tenzin, 2017; Xiaoxin, 2018; Yan, 2014, 2017), coming out publicly on campus to support queer students could be a highly risky option for gay academics in China. The approach to supporting students in this context therefore needs to be different from what western literature often proposes - a shift of focus from individuals to social structure in addressing homophobia and supporting queer students (Airton, 2013; Allen, 2018, 2019; Formby, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2012, 2013; Walton, 2011). As such, individual support might be a reasonable, and often the only, choice for gay academics in China.

Narratives presented in this section reveal gay academics’ agency in relation to heteronormativity and the institutional control in Chinese universities. By refusing to come out broadly on campus and supporting queer students in an individual approach to avoid challenging the educational/political system, participants conformed to heteronormativity and submitted to the authority of the Party-state and their institution. Simultaneously, participants disrupted the power operation of heteronormativity by connecting with and supporting queer students. Therefore, their action of agency was a double-edged process of mastery and submission, rather than moments of freedom from dominating forces.

**Supportive and heteronormative**

While many participants proudly accounted their experiences of supporting queer students, some contradictions emerge in the examination of the intention, practice, and effect of their support for queer students. For instance, in many cases, although participants perceived themselves as supportive, their “support” was actually heteronormative and marginalising. Another contradiction in some participants’ narratives was that although they wanted to, they simultaneously refused to support queer students, due for instance to discriminatory attitudes towards “flamboyant” students.

Paradoxically, one way several participants affirmed students’ queer identities was by making fun of queer student couples.

*I make fun of gay students occasionally in class. When I saw two boys who might be a couple, I would joke: “What’s the matter with you two?” Many students would laugh.*
Everyone knew what I meant. I was just kidding. I think students would think I accept gay couples. (Ming Tian, 24, Tutor, Shandong province)

Sometimes I saw two students holding hands or leaning on each other in class. I perceived they might be a queer couple, maybe not. I would smile and joke: “You two are so intimate. Why don’t you guys get a room? You are not listening to class carefully.” Students would all laugh. (Zhang Zhijie, 43, Associate Professor, Sichuan province)

One of my students must be a lesbian and loves playing basketball. Once she was with her girlfriend, which was quite obvious. I was kidding: “Are you two wearing lover’s clothes?” She was embarrassed and shy. I just wanted to express it’s good and brave to be a lesbian couple like that. But she was too afraid of me and might think I was teasing. (Song Song, 35, Lecturer, Sichuan province)

Problematic language use by teachers and students targeting queer students, such as name-calling, ridicule, mocking or banter, is well documented in existing literature (Allen, 2019b; Formby, 2015, 2017; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Pascoe, 2007; Taulke - Johnson, 2010; Winberg et al., 2019). Compared with typical anti-gay comments, the joking expressed by participants was more difficult to interpret as “homophobia” or “discrimination”. This complexity lies in participants’ good intentions, the friendly way joking was expressed (“I would smile and joke”), as well as sexual identity of speakers as queer. In a heteronormative environment where publicly supporting queer identities involves multiple risks, joking was perceived by participants as an implicit and ambiguous way to convey a supportive attitude. To a certain extent, participants who engaged in these comments did affirm same-sex desire and identity (“Why don’t you guys get a room?”).

However, it was unlikely that this was always supportive for students. For instance, queer students might consider it as “teasing” or feel “embarrassed”. These negative interpretations and feelings might be reinforced by unequal power relations between the teacher and the student in the Chinese context (Wong, 2016; also see Song’s words above: “Students are usually in awe of teachers”). In the process of joking and laughing, queer identities were marked, sexualised, questioned, and blamed (“What’s the matter with you two?” “Why don’t you guys get a room? You are not listening to class carefully”). In contrast, students who are heterosexual couples “holding hands or leaning on each other in class” would appear too “normal” to notice. As such, like the use of humour among male pupils in UK as a regulation and performance of masculinities (Kehily & Nayak, 1997), participants’ joking could function as a regulation of queer visibility. This heteronormative effect contradicted their intention to affirm and support queer students.

Compared with the ambiguity and subtlety of joking, heteronormativity was more evident in Fei’s interaction with his gay student. When a student disclosed his gay identity in an assignment, Fei asked for confirmation of his sexual identity, and expressed “tolerance” towards him.

There is a brave gay student in this semester's online course. In the acknowledgment of his assignment, he thanked his ex who was referred to as "he". I was curious and asked
him whether the pronoun was wrong and should be "she". He said there was no mistake. I couldn't disclose my gay identity. To support him, I said, "Although I have a girlfriend, I am tolerant of gay people, and wish you happiness." Next semester this online course will move to the classroom. I'm worried whether he will tell my gay identity through clues in the classroom. I would be more stressed to act straight. Now I really don't dare to come out. The university is strict with teachers and it is easy to be reported by students and lose their jobs. That's why I want to keep closeted and keep a distance from gay students. Some students are curious about my relationship status and I am always telling them I have an Italian girlfriend. (Fei Ming, 31, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

Facing his gay student, Fei made up a girlfriend to pass (Griffin, 1991, 1992) as heterosexual, but still worried about identity exposure in the upcoming offline teaching. This example between a closeted teacher and an openly out student diverges from the typical narrative about openly out teachers modelling for closeted students (DeJean, 2007; A. Gray, 2014; Linley et al., 2016; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Russell, 2014). The conventional expectation for queer teachers to be an out role model for queer students was too risky an option for Fei. Concerns about identity exposure and professional safety prevented him from coming out to his student. Furthermore, this student confidently confirmed his gay identity ("He said there was no mistake") and did not seem to need any support. Fei's narrative shows that the assumption that queer students always need support from teachers might not only homogenise queer students' experiences, but also overlook the possibility that queer teachers could also be people who need support.

This narrative also troubles the dominant notion that queer teachers are always supportive of queer students. Although Fei expressed his intention of supporting his student, his interaction with the student was actually heteronormative. Heteronormativity operated in Fei's interaction with his student in at least three ways. First, when Fei questioned the pronoun that his student used to refer to a same-sex relationship as "wrong", he adhered to a heteronormative assumption which others gay relationships as abnormal and illegitimate. Secondly, in his reply to the student's identity disclosure ("Although I have a girlfriend, I am tolerant of gay people"), the word "although" indicated a tension between heterosexuality and acceptance of homosexuality, assuming heterosexuality as inherently homophobic. Such discursive construction essentialised heterosexual identity and reinforced a homosexual/heterosexual binary. Thirdly, Fei's "tolerance" toward his student echoes the notion of "homotolerance" conceptualised by Røthing (2008). As she suggests, the message of tolerating the homosexuals, although with good intentions, reproduces a binary by communicating that "the heterosexual 'we' are in a privileged position that gives us the right to tolerate" (p. 262). The ways heteronormativity was embedded in Fei's perceived "support" trouble the notion that queer teachers can necessarily best support queer students solely on the basis of shared sexual identity.

Another contradiction in some participants' accounts was that they wished to but refused to support queer students. For instance, Xia deeply empathised with his gay student who was excluded by the university for being HIV-positive, and then suffered from failing to support him due to the heteronormative campus climate. However, he also refused to interact with this student in private because "he is the kind of flamboyant boy".
Xia: I have a gay student who was tested HIV positive in the university physical examination. The faculty CCP secretary and teachers wanted to expel him. He would be recorded as absent from class even if he had asked for leave. If the faculty had something on him, he would be expelled. The faculty leadership thought he had a bad influence due to his “promiscuous” life. I didn’t expect they openly expressed discrimination at the faculty meeting. This university is hostile to gay people and people living with HIV. It’s pathetic. I am scared. As a gay teacher, I couldn’t object to the way they treated this student, to avoid exposing my gay identity and offending leaders. I was really suffering.

Cui: Did you talk to him personally?

Xia: No. I have never talked to this student in private, because he is the kind of flamboyant boy. I saw his picture in women’s clothes. I can’t accept this type of guy. I would never make friends with such guys. (Xia Longchuan, 27, Tutor, Guangdong province)

Xia’s narrative shows that the heteronormative campus climate was a barrier for him to openly support this queer student, as it might expose his sexual identity and offend university leadership. The influence of queer teachers’ identity management on queer students’ access to support echoes American gay and lesbian teachers in Griffin’s (1992) study, carried out around three decades ago. To avoid identity disclosure, participants in her study avoided interactions which might suggest affiliation with gay issues, such as “speaking out about discrimination against lesbians and gays, and talking to gay or lesbian students who approached the participants for counseling” (p. 180).

What is rarely addressed in existing literature is how queer teachers’ personal values hinder their support for queer students. Xia refused to interact with his student due to his negative attitude to the student’s gender expression. The distance Xia kept from his “flamboyant” student and his refusal to offer personal support, functioned as ways of marginalising gender non-conforming students (“I saw his picture in woman’s clothes”). One explanation of Xia’s behaviours might be that, as existing literature finds, gay men who conform to gender norms are less interested in interacting with, and distance themselves from, feminine gay men (Hunt et al., 2016). Xia’s policing of gender expression reinforced gender binaries such as “male/female” “man/woman” “masculine/feminine” which scaffold heteronormativity. Such intersectional effects of gender and sexuality break an oversimplified imagination of “similarity” between queer teachers and queer students based solely on sexual identity.

Gay academics’ perceptions of queer students

Understanding queer teachers’ interactions with queer students necessitates an examination of the other side of this relationship dyad - queer students. Queer scholars in education have provided a critique of the conventional representation in most of the literature of queer students as wounded victims who are always at risk or in need of help (Airton, 2013; Allen, 2015a; Quinlivan, 2002; Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004; Rofes, 2004). Some queer students in participants’ accounts indeed align with this victim portrayal, such as the Muslim student who
intended to “cure” his homosexuality, and the student who was excluded from university due to being HIV positive. Song’s own negative experience as a gay student made him empathise with his gay student who was always sitting alone in the classroom, which Song perceived as self-isolation due to a difficulty in accepting himself.

However, some queer students appeared comfortable with their sexual identity and campus life, and some were even proud and happy. In some participants’ joking about queer couples who publicly showed their intimacy by holding hands, leaning on each other, or wearing lover’s clothes, these students seemed proud of, or at least accepting of, their identity. Despite being excluded from university for being HIV-positive, the “flamboyant” student in Xia’s narrative could still indicate a sense of pride. When Fei questioned his student as to whether the pronoun indicating a gay relationship is “wrong”, the student confidently affirmed “there was no mistake”, making Fei’s “tolerance” for him almost redundant.

The image of queer students as positive and in no need of support was particularly evident in Fei’s account. He encouraged a lesbian student who confidently disclosed a wonderful memory of her same-sex attraction and “didn’t express any confusion”.

*Fei: I am a class adviser for freshmen every year. I usually invite them to write something personal to me, such as their dream or confusion. One girl wrote that she had a crush on another girl. I replied that “I encourage you to pursue your true love”.*

*Cui: How did she feel about her sexuality?*

*Fei: She wrote a wonderful memory of her same-sex attraction and didn’t express any confusion. I think she was quite relaxed, confident and optimistic.* (Fei Ming, 31, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

Unlike the typical portrayal of “wounded identities” (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004), this lesbian student was “relaxed, confident and optimistic” in her writing about same-sex attraction. Fei’s encouragement of “pursuing true love” seemed to imply that she would restrain herself from developing same-sex relationships. His “support” might not only be redundant, he also underestimated the student’s agency. A similar tension is also documented in Russell’s (2014) study of a lesbian teacher who supported queer students who did not necessarily want to be supported. As such, Russell suggests that queer teachers should work against viewing queer students solely as victims.

Another limitation of the conventional portrayal of queer students as victims is that it implies they are always powerless in their interactions with teachers. Zuo’s experience of being harassed, and then informed on, because he did not help his gay student, offered a counter narrative.

*I got to know a student on Blued and we became friends. Later, he asked me to lend him money, help him apply for a scholarship and change his major. He even touched me once in my office. I began to keep a distance from him, but the campus is so small and I always met him. Moreover, I couldn’t stop him from enrolling in my course. Later, he*
reported to the university CCP commission for discipline inspection (大学中共纪律检查委员会) that I played movies in class. The university checked the Internet records under my IP address through the computer centre, and found my chat records on a gay chatroom. The leader blamed me for “chatting foolishly and carelessly”. I made an excuse about doing a research on gay issue. (Zuo Zhi, 36, Associate Professor, Jiangsu province)

In Zuo’s account, the gay student intended to make use of Zuo to pursue personal ends and sexually harassed Zuo. When Zuo kept his distance and refused to help, the student took advantage of the university authorities to punish him, which put Zuo in a very vulnerable position. As a result, Zuo was investigated and blamed by the university authorities, and risked being sexually exposed in his institution. Zuo’s experience echoes heterosexual and queer teachers’ experiences of being harassed by students (Ferfolja, 2010; Lahelma et al., 2000), as well as American pre-tenured LGB professors’ experience of remaining silent about sexual harassment in case of identity exposure (Pugh, 1998, p. 102). These experiences challenge the conventional narratives that are structured within the frame between the powerful teacher and the powerless student.

Participants’ accounts demonstrate the diversity of queer students, far from a homogenous picture of “wounded” victim (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004). Those positive experiences of queer students support existing literature which acknowledges the alternative and non-victimised accounts of queer students and provides a richer understanding of their lives (Taulke-Johnson, 2008). This continuum of experiences of queer students echoes similar findings in western contexts. For instance, the university could be a place for LGBT+ students to both escape to, and escape from (Formby, 2017). LGBTTIQA+ students could feel simultaneously “safe” and “unsafe” on campus (Allen et al., 2020a; Allen et al., 2020b). In this research, intersecting aspects of identities, such as gender, ethnicity, social class, and religion, contributed to the diversity of campus experiences. This intersectionality was manifested in participants’ accounts about the Muslim international student intending to “cure” homosexuality by witchcraft, the flamboyant student who was HIV-positive, as well as the gay student asking for financial support. As such, queer students should not be considered a homogenous group who shares the same experiences, including their need for support.

Another heteronormative aspect of participants’ accounts was their perceptions of whether students are queer. For example, in Song’s support for the student who was always sitting alone in the classroom, Song strongly perceived this student as gay, simply because “he drew his eyebrows”. When Ming and Zhang made fun of students in the classroom, they perceived their students as queer couples on the grounds of intimacy, such as “holding hands or leaning on each other”. Another example was Ma’s support for perceived queer students, according to their gender expressions, in postgraduate admission interview.

**Ma:** Sometimes I help queer students and give them a chance in postgraduate admission interview. Some students were almost near the entry score. If I helped to say something, they could be admitted; if I marked them a low score, they wouldn’t be admitted. Of
course, their academic ability should meet basic requirements. Then I may be a little partial to queer students.

Cui: How can you tell those students are queer? From their gender expressions?

Ma: Exactly. A girl I helped in interview was easy to tell as lesbian. (Ma Bulan, 42, Professor, Guangdong province)

Ma’s hidden support for perceived queer students can be particularly controversial in terms of sexual identity and educational equity. Is it fair to be “partial” to queer students in postgraduate admission interviews? Considering that there is not necessarily any relationship between gender expression and sexual identity, what if the students Ma supported were not really queer?

By showing the possibility of supporting students who might be wrongly identified as queer, I intend to problematise some participants’ perception of sexual identity. Their conflation of gender and sexuality is in line with Butler’s (1990) notion of the heterosexual matrix which assumes “the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire” (p. 6) and thereby scaffolds the operation of heteronormativity (see Chapter 1 the definition of “queer”). Existing literature in education shows those who experience homophobia may not necessarily identify as queer, and homophobia is often targeted at difference rather than sexual identity exclusively (Allen, 2018a, 2019b, 2020; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Pascoe, 2007). As such, it may be more accurate to say that what some participants supported was actually difference, rather than queer students as they perceived. However, without confirming with the students themselves, it is not possible to know.

The intention of supporting differences of any category, even beyond sexuality, was consciously expressed by Zhang. Unlike those participants who particularly cared about queer students, Zhang broadly supported students “whatever minority group they belong to”.

I don’t pay special attention to queer students. Instead, I broadly build an open-minded and trustworthy image for all students. Any student, who may be gay, or engage in kinky practices, or suffer depression, can ask me for help. I support students whatever minority group they belong to. (Zhang Zhijie, 43, Associate Professor, Sichuan province)

Zhang’s support for students was not limited to queer students, it also reached those who did not conform to various normative categories. This echoes Airton’s (2013) call for a shift of focus “from queer to queerness” (p. 547) in education. Making space for queerness, as Airton suggests, means to “foreground queerness as excess and possibility” (p. 548), and “welcome queerness, whatever it is or will be” (p. 549).

Whose responsibility to provide what kind of support to whom?
I have shown gay academics’ diverse experiences of their interactions with students in China. These experiences in various ways diverge from conventional narratives about queer teachers and queer students (DeJean, 2007; A. Gray, 2014; Linley et al., 2016; Orlov & Allen, 2014). By teasing out these nuances and complexities, I propose to rethink queer teachers’ responsibility, and lift their burdens of coming out, modelling for, and supporting queer students. This idea can be unpacked in four ways.

First, gay academics’ accounts show a multitude of barriers for queer teachers to support queer students in China. In the highly heteronormative campus climate, explicit support for queer students might expose gay academics’ sexual identity. Consequently, participants’ interactions with queer students often involved careful identity management. The strategies of identity management included disclosing identity individually and exclusively (“we promised to keep each other’s sexual identity confidential”), keeping a distance from queer students (“I want to keep closeted and keep a distance from gay students”), and making up heterosexual relationships (“Although I have a girlfriend” “I am always telling them I have an Italian girlfriend”). Also, supporting queer students might risk offending university leadership (“I couldn’t object to the way they treat this student, to avoid ... offending leaders”).

Compared with their western peers, China’s political context added another layer of concerns in queer teachers’ consideration of supporting queer students. China’s repressive governance and the consequent university administration (Tenzin, 2017; Yan, 2014, 2017) accounted for Wen’s individual approach to supporting queer students, which meant avoiding collective activism and institutional change. In Xia and Zuo’s accounts, the CCP leadership in their university played a decisive role in expelling the HIV-positive gay student, and investigating and blaming Zuo after he was reported by his student. Fei’s worry about his university’s strict control of teachers and possibility of being reported by students and losing job (“The university is strict with teachers and it is easy to be reported by students and lose job”), mirrored the impact of political control on higher education in China (Hao & Guo, 2016; Xiaoxin, 2018; Scholars at Risk, 2019).

These concerns about identity exposure and professional and political repercussions resulted in some participants’ failure to support queer students, as well as emotional burdens regarding queer identity (“I am scared”; “I would be more stressed to act straight”; “I was really suffering”). Therefore, it could be a double injustice for queer teachers to endure heteronormativity and take risks to support queer students. Queer teachers should not be constructed only as a provider of support. Rather, it might be more necessary to treat queer teachers as a recipient of support, particularly in the Chinese context.

Second, the various strategies that gay academics employed to support queer students showed that coming out publicly on campus was not a prerequisite for supporting queer students. For example, Xia and Wen managed to support their students by disclosing their sexual identity to students on an individual basis. Song deliberately avoided coming out and supporting his student “as a saviour”, in case the student “might be frightened and shrink back”. Instead, he kept a watchful eye and implicitly cared about the student. Gay dating apps were used by some participants to connect with gay students on campus, thus a queer teacher did not need to
broadly come out to be seen by gay students. This individual approach to supporting queer students employed by participants echoes American lesbian teachers who supported queer students “in one-to-one situations” in highly heteronormative school environments three decades ago (Woods & Harbeck, 1992, p. 157).

Third, the understanding of queer teachers as the ones who can provide queer students with an ideal of behaviour, underrates the complexity of their interactions and overestimates their “similarity” based on sexual identity. Several participants’ perceived “support”, such as making fun of queer couples and “tolerating” queer students, actually reproduced heteronormativity and marginalised queer identities. Some participants refused to interact with queer students who failed to conform to gender norms. Participants might also misinterpret queer students’ experiences and position queer students within a victimised framework, thus provide unnecessary support. These examples, which contradict conventional representations of queer teachers in existing literature, reveal the instability of the “supportive teacher/ supported student” binary that typically structures accounts about queer teachers and queer students. To put it simply, queer teachers are not always supportive for queer students. Neither do they necessarily disrupt heteronormativity. Instead, queer teachers’ practices might reproduce and reinforce the heteronormative culture on campus, which troubles a pervasive assumption between queer identity and anti-heteronormative practice. This finding echoes a lesbian teacher in Allen’s (2006b, 2010) research who reinscribed heteronormativity in her lesson. Therefore, queer identity does not determine the anti-heteronormative practice. Participants’ heteronormative practices in their interactions with queer students capture the complexity of heteronormativity’s operation among queer subjects and can be understood “as a consequence of the ongoing power and pervasiveness of heteronormativity” (Allen, 2010, p. 161).

Fourth, a focus on queer teachers’ responsibility for providing support for queer students might overlook the responsibility of heterosexuals and the institution. This idea is inspired by a body of literature on homophobia and LGBTQ bullying in educational contexts (Airton, 2013; Allen, 2019b; Formby, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2012, 2013; Walton, 2011). These studies interrogate the narrow focus on the bully/victim binary and understand these issues as evidence of heteronormative social structure that privileges some and marginalises others. These scholars thus propose examining the role that institutions play in the reproduction of social relations and norms. This means teasing out how heteronormativity operates “through the mundane and day-to-day processes and practices of educational institutions” (Youdell, 2006b, p. 13). Following this thinking, a focus on queer teachers’ responsibility for queer students not only fails to address the cultural root of problems that queer students may face on campus, but also shifts the responsibility for fostering a supportive environment to, and within, queer people.

A more ethical and effective approach to supporting queer people on campus, as Formby (2017) argues, “should be institutional and not individualist” (p. 217). This structural change, as she suggests, can be conducted in aspects such as curriculum, facilities, and service provision on campus (Formby, 2017). However, this might be particularly difficult in the Chinese context. Given that Chinese universities serve as political instruments for the Party-state (Scholars at Risk, 2019; Tenzin, 2017; Xiaoxin, 2018; Yan, 2014, 2017), a structural change of the institutional heteronormativity inevitably challenges Party-state power held by the authorities to
maintain existing governance and ideologies. As such, an institutional approach appealed to by western scholars can be too risky an option for educators in China. By contrast, an individualist approach can be personally and politically safer for Chinese queer teachers. In this sense, gay academics’ individual support of their students should be recognised as feasible and strategic.

Echoing the critique of the dominant “coming out” discourse in education (Rasmussen, 2004), this chapter shows that queer teachers do not need to come out to have agency. Closeted gay academics’ support of queer students challenges the oversimplified understanding of closeted teachers as passive, in relation to the heterosexual norms. Rather, gay academics could exercise agency to build relationships with queer students and help queer students navigate heteronormativity. However, their action of agency was not moments of freedom from the constraining forces. When participants cautiously managed their sexual identity and refused to adopt an institutional approach to supporting queer students to avoid political risks, they conformed to heteronormativity and the Party-state power. Therefore, gay academics’ expressions of agency involved a simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to heteronormativity and political control on Chinese campuses. By teasing out this double-edged process of gay academics’ agency in the Chinese context, this study extends the literature that explores closeted teachers’ agency (Brockenbrough, 2012; Ferfolja, 2007b, 2014; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2018, 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter has shown gay academics’ interactions with queer students in Chinese universities, particularly their support for queer students. These experiences are drawn on to trouble several normative discourses in education, including the “coming out imperative”, “queer teacher as role model”, and “queer student at risk” (Rasmussen, 2004; Khayatt, 1997; Allen, 2015a). I argue that the normative notion that queer teachers can best support queer students by coming out and being a role model should be interrogated. This idea is unpacked by teasing out the inconsistency between participants’ narratives and dominant discourses. For instance, I demonstrate that the expectation that queer teachers should come out to support queer students underestimates the agency of closeted queer teachers who can support queer students in various ways without publicly coming out. By showing that queer teachers’ perceived “support” of queer students could be heteronormative, marginalising, or unnecessary, I also interrogate the pervasive idea that queer teachers are the ones who can best support queer students based on their “similarity”. The expectation regarding queer teachers overlooks the responsibility of the institution, and unethically imposes double injustice on queer teachers who not only need to endure heteronormativity but also are expected to interrupt heteronormativity. Unlike many western scholars who propose an institutional approach to addressing queer issues in education (Allen, 2019b; Formby, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2012, 2013; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Walton, 2011), I suggest that gay academics’ support for queer students on an individual basis is an effective strategy in the social and political context of China. It is also argued that gay academics’ expression of agency in their interactions with queer students was a double-edged process of mastery and submission in relation to
heteronormativity and political control on Chinese campuses. The next chapter will focus on Chinese gay academics’ experiences of addressing queer issues in the classroom.
Chapter 6

“Mention it only in passing”: Gay academics’ experiences of addressing queer issues in the classroom in China

This chapter explores gay academics’ experiences of addressing queer issues in the classroom in Chinese universities. Despite being closeted, many participants addressed queer issues in class. These teaching moments often accompanied their intense concerns about sexual identity exposure and the risk that any supportive expressions about queer people might provoke students’ negative reactions. Furthermore, the increasingly repressive political climate constrained participants from addressing queer issues in the classroom where a range of speech surveillance and censorship techniques were operated by the authorities. Despite these concerns and risks, many participants adopted various strategies to address queer issues in their classroom. Some teaching moments could be constructed as queer pedagogy (Britzman, 1995) which seeks to interrogate normative identities and ideas.

This chapter asks: How do gay academics address queer issues in the classroom in China? More specifically, what concerns about addressing queer issues do they have? What strategies do they employ to cope with these concerns? How, if possible, do they interrupt heteronormativity in the classroom? Exploration of these questions is informed by queer theory (Jagose, 1996; McCann & Monaghan, 2020), particularly queer scholarship in education (Allen, 2015c; Allen & Rasmussen, 2015; Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). This theoretical framework enables an interrogation of normative identities and discourses in Chinese higher education. A range of institutional practices are exposed as constraining Chinese gay academics from addressing queer issues in the classroom and thereby sustaining the heteronormative culture on campus.

Drawing from a body of literature on queer pedagogy (Allen, 2015; Britzman, 1995; Luhmann, 1998; Shlasko, 2005), I will also explore how participants queered their heteronormative classroom. Guided by queer theory, queer pedagogy is concerned with a radical practice of deconstructing normalcy in teaching and learning (Britzman, 1995). As Luhmann (1998) suggests, “it encourages an ethical practice by studying the risks of normalization, the limits of its own practices, and the im/possibilities of (subversive) teaching and learning” (p. 131). To demonstrate a Chinese version of queer pedagogy in a repressive political climate, I uncover a range of queer meanings in some participants’ teaching. By revealing how these queer moments in the classroom were shaped by the social and political constraints in China, I seek to join the discussion about the limits of queer pedagogy (Allen, 2015b). That is, what is possible
for queer pedagogy to achieve in highly heteronormative and politically repressive institutions like Chinese universities?

This chapter shows that, despite the heteronormative and repressive campus climate, many participants adopted a variety of strategies to interrupt heteronormativity in their classroom. I argue that the queerness of their teaching lies in its potential tension with the social and political constraints in Chinese universities. By unpacking the power operation in participants' teaching, it is also argued that participants exercised agency involving a simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to heteronormativity. To unpack these ideas, I first demonstrate participants’ concerns about addressing queer issues in the classroom. Given the unique political climate participants faced on Chinese campuses, I highlight the impact of university authorities' surveillance and censorship on their teaching. Next, I explore how participants employed various strategies to cope with their concerns and lower the risks. Examples of participants’ teaching moments are provided to showcase how they interrupted heteronormativity in Chinese universities. The final section analyses two pedagogical approaches employed by participants when addressing queer issues and unpacks the queerness of their teaching and its limit in the Chinese context.

Concerns about addressing queer issues

This section examines Chinese gay academics’ concerns about addressing queer issues in the classroom. Three categories of concerns were expressed by participants involving their sexuality identity, students’ reaction to teaching, as well as the institutional constraints on classroom teaching. Participants' concerns about addressing queer issues in Chinese universities manifested the operation of heteronormativity on campus, as well as the risks of queering their classroom.

Sexual identity exposure

Most participants in this study were closeted on campus. They were concerned about exposing their sexual identity by addressing queer issues in the classroom.

*If I say a lot about queer issues, it's easy to expose my gay identity.* (Fei Ming, 31, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

*I am worried that students might suspect my sexual identity if I address queer issues seriously.* (Xiao Gang, 35, Tutor, Guangdong province)

*My teaching about queer issues was not obvious, so that students wouldn't suspect my sexual identity.* (Teng Wen, 39, Lecturer, Shanghai)

These narratives show the highly heteronormative nature of the campus climate in Chinese universities where gay academics had to cautiously conceal their sexuality in the classroom. Such concern about sexual identity exposure inhibited some participants from addressing
queer issues which added to their mental burden in the classroom. Thus, they were “worried” and felt the need to avoid addressing queer issues “obviously” or “seriously”, or saying “a lot” about queer issues (see below for strategies in detail). These experiences echo American gay and lesbian teachers in Griffin’s (1992) study carried out almost three decades ago. Participants in her study believed that the speculation about their sexual identity among students would increase when they taught classroom lessons on issues about homosexuality. This concern queer teachers faced constitutes a unique challenge of addressing queer issues in the classroom, compared with their heterosexual peers.

Students’ negative reaction to queer issues

Some closeted participants worried that addressing queer issues “too much” in class, or expressing support for queer people, would cause students’ negative reaction to their teaching.

*I am not sure whether students are interested in queer issues. If some students might feel disgusted, I’d better not say too much.* (Li Yuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

*I am concerned about students’ aversion if I express support for same-sex marriage.* (Zhang Dong, 30, Tutor, Zhejiang province)

*It’s troublesome to discuss queer issues in a class with more than 100 students. I’m afraid of resistance from students.* (Xiao Zang, 33, Lecturer, Tibet)

These narratives show some participants’ concern about students’ negative reaction to their teaching about queer issues. This concern can be contextualised in the campus climate of Chinese universities where many students hold a negative attitude toward homosexuality (Tian et al., 2011; Yan et al., 2002; Zhang, 2019; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). As a recent survey of 9,355 heterosexual students from 26 Chinese universities shows, almost half of the students considered homosexuality as abnormal, or were unsure whether homosexuality is normal (Zhang & Zhang, 2020). This heteronormative campus climate has a significant impact on some participants’ teaching about queer issues. Thus, they were “not sure” about, or “afraid” of the repercussions of discussing queer issues or expressing support for queer people in the classroom.

This concern about students’ negative reaction to sexuality issues in the classroom echoes some western sexuality scholars (Allen, 2015b; McCormack, 2014; Philaretou, 2005/2006). For instance, Philaretou (2005/2006) received several formal complaints from students, due to his teaching about sexuality which conflicted with students’ moral values. Allen (2015b) indicates that the potential controversy about queer issues in sexuality class might incite homophobia and cause offence to some students. As such, in many cases, sexuality professors intentionally veiled or omitted sensitive issues from the curriculum, to protect themselves from anticipated repercussions (Allen, 2015b; Philaretou, 2005/2006).

Surveillance and censorship by university authorities
Participants’ experiences of addressing queer issues in the classroom were significantly impacted by the political climate in Chinese universities. Speech surveillance and censorship was a primary concern when participants addressed queer issues in class. A range of techniques of surveillance and censorship imposed by university authorities emerged in their narratives, including CCTV surveillance, teaching inspection, teaching content censorship, along with the student informants.

Fei worried about the CCTV surveillance in the classroom when addressing queer issues.

I just mentioned it and didn’t say much. There is a camera in the classroom. The teaching may be under surveillance. You can be blamed for even finishing class one minute earlier. (Fei Ming, 31, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

Such concern resonates with the Israeli teachers as the object of CCTV surveillance in elementary and secondary schools in Perry-Hazan and Birnhack’s (2019) research. Teachers in their research referred to the feeling of being constantly “followed”, “careful”, and “limited” (p. 198). Within the Chinese context, academics faced high-tech surveillance such as CCTV, facial recognition technology, and internet surveillance on campus (Scholars at Risk, 2019). Fei’s narrative shows that such high-tech surveillance inhibited the teaching about queer issues in the classroom.

Some participants censored themselves in their teaching about queer issues, due to inspections by the supervisors and university leaders.

Teaching supervisors often came to listen to my class. Maybe because my course involved subculture such as gay culture. So I couldn’t use gay movies as teaching materials. I’m sure it’s not allowed. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)

Some leaders came to my classroom and sat in the back to listen to what I was teaching. So I had never addressed this topic in class. (Ling Hu, 38, Lecturer, Shanghai)

These narratives show that teaching inspection constrained participants from addressing queer issues and they had to censor their teaching content to conform to the expectation of their supervisors or leaders. Such concerns about teaching inspection echo teachers in the western contexts (Perryman, 2007, 2009). It is shown that school inspection could “invite a school to fabricate a performance” (Perryman, 2009, p. 628), which meant that “lessons are taught in a particular way” and teachers “lose their sense of professional independence” (Perryman, 2007, p. 176). Teachers’ fear of failing the inspection led to “stress and negative emotions of fear, panic and loss of self” (Perryman, 2007, p. 177).

Some participants were required by their leaders to submit their teaching material for inspection. For instance, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary in Chen’s faculty required him to delete his teaching slides relating to homosexuality and join the Party.

All the teachers are required to submit their teaching slides. The CCP secretary in my faculty asked me whether I support homosexuality. I was asked to delete slides relating
to homosexuality and join the Communist Party. So I think homosexuality conflicts with the Party-state ideologies. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)

This narrative is consistent with broader investigations into the classroom censorship by university authorities in China (Scholars at Risk, 2019). Chen’s experience shows that heteronormativity was institutionalised via the teaching surveillance and censorship in his university. Such practice ruled out the possibility of addressing queer issues in the classroom and constituted heterosexuality as the default of sexuality. In addition, Chen was asked to join the Party, which meant that he would be subjected to stricter discipline according to the Party regulations as a Party member. Such experience shows that the Party-state power exerted by the CCP leadership in Chinese universities served to consolidate heteronormativity in the classroom.

Some participants’ concerns about addressing queer issues were that they might be reported by student informants to the leadership, which could lead to administrative penalty. To avoid this potential risk, they censored themselves in teaching, or just cancelled their course.

Student informants can report me to the leadership if I teach about queer issues. Those anonymous students appointed by the university mainly pay attention to teaching relating to political ideologies, which may include queer issues. The first item in students’ teaching evaluation form in my university is that there should be no “inappropriate” content in teaching. They may report the teacher if they oppose teachers’ views on queer issues. I eventually cancelled my course about gay subculture. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)

Some students once reported that a teacher made ideologically incorrect remarks in class. I subconsciously censored myself and seldom mentioned queer topics. (Ling Hu, 38, Lecturer, Shanghai)

These narratives show how the Student Informant System served as an instrument of surveillance in Chinese universities (Aftergood, 2011; Calabresi, 2011; Scholars at Risk, 2019; The New York Times, 2019). Reporting on teachers was not just an act that was undertaken by individual students, it was also facilitated by institutions to restrict academic freedom. This means of surveillance induced self-censorship and teachers’ vigilance against students, and silenced queer issues in the classroom.

Several participants complained that they were ordered to use and adhere to designated official textbooks that had been censored by the authorities and propagated the Party-state ideologies. Thus, they felt it was difficult to include queer issues, or it forced them to teach in line with official textbooks.

We are not allowed to choose textbooks. We are ordered to use the “Marxist Theory Research and Construction Project Key Textbooks”, a series of official textbooks promoting the Party-state ideologies. Those textbooks don’t involve queer issues at all. I can’t teach what I want. (Huang Long, 30, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)
When I teach queer issues, I don’t agree with some ideas in the textbooks. But, of course, I mainly teach contents in the textbooks. According to the university’s teaching regulations, I must adhere to the official textbooks. (Li Yuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

These narratives show that some participants felt constrained to address queer issues and simultaneously adhere to the official textbooks and university regulations. In this way, the authorities’ ideological control through university textbooks (Ministry of Education of China & CCP’s Department of Propaganda, 2013; The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2012) hindered the inclusion of queer issues in teaching on Chinese campuses.

To recap, participants’ narratives reveal various forms of surveillance and censorship that constrained them from addressing queer issues in their classroom. Means of surveillance and censorship included high-level technology, teaching inspection, submission of teaching materials, orders to use official textbooks, as well as the student informants. These findings on teachers’ experiences of surveillance in Chinese universities extend the body of literature that examines teachers as the object of surveillance in educational contexts (Bushnell, 2003; Hassrick & Schneider, 2009; Page, 2015, 2017; Perryman, 2006, 2007, 2009; Perryman et al., 2018). By intimidating Chinese academics into censoring queer issues and conforming to the Party-state ideologies, the overwhelming surveillance had a chilling effect on classroom teaching and reinforced heterosexuality as the only legitimate sexual identity on campus. This top-down version of heteronormativity manifested the operation of the Party-state power in the campus climate of Chinese universities.

Strategies to cope with the concerns

Despite various concerns revealed above, a range of strategies were adopted by participants to cope with these concerns. For instance, some participants avoided drawing students’ attention to their teaching about queer issues, by mentioning queer issues only in passing, or hiding queer issues within a broader topic. In order not to expose their sexual identity, several participants addressed queer issues as a heterosexual. To legitimise their teaching about queer issues, some participants deliberately chose official texts as teaching material. Another way to lower potential risks of addressing queer issues was avoiding revealing a supportive standpoint.

“I mentioned it only in passing”

A most common strategy that emerged in participants’ narratives about addressing queer issues was mentioning queer issues only in passing. This involved paying cautious attention to the teaching content and time – “Just mention it briefly and soon finish”.

I controlled the time carefully. I mentioned it only in passing. Students reacted like “Wow”, and soon I moved to another topic. (Fei Ming, 31, Lecturer, Jiangsu province)
I don’t go into it deeply. Just mention it briefly and soon finish. Only one or two slides are about queer issues. I won’t expand it. (Li Yuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

I use at most five minutes to talk about this topic in the 40-minutes class. Just a passing comment. (Huang Hui, 37, Lecturer, Anhui province)

Although many participants only minimally addressed queer issues in limited time, these teaching moments contained significant inner tension. They wished to, and deemed they should, address queer issues more, but they dared not.

I feel conflict in my heart. I want to say more, but I can’t find a way to address these issues in class. (Li Yuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

The way I talked about it was not obvious and specific. But I do think I should mention it, even just in a few words. (Teng Wen, 39, Lecturer, Shanghai)

I added queer issues in my slides. I cannot bear myself not to mention it at all, but I didn’t spend much time on it. (Han Wuji, 33, Lecturer, Beijing)

These narratives show a tension between their strong will to address queer issues and worry about potential risks. Consequently, they opted to limit the way they addressed them. Such experiences echo those of Canadian LGBQ teachers in Amy Gray’s (2014) study, who needed an ongoing “risk-benefit analysis” (p. 48) in teaching about sexual orientation.

Hiding queer issues in broader topics

Another strategy to cope with participants’ concerns was “hiding” queer issues within a broader topic. For example, Zhang addressed the support for queer students when introducing western universities where queer students can secure institutional support.

I often share my experience as an international student in Australia. On the orientation day, students can receive a bag with condoms, lubricants and a student handbook. The handbook informs you of your rights and support you have access to. For instance, the places where you can address needs and secure legal aid relating to sexual orientation. (Zhang Zhijie, 43, Associate Professor, Sichuan province)

In Zhang’s introduction to western universities, he portrayed a picture to students that queer students are visible and supported by universities. This is in deep contrast to the status quo of queer students in China who are largely invisible on campus (Common Language, 2016; United Nations Development Programme, 2016; Wei & Liu, 2015, 2019; Zhang & Fu, 2019). The institutional support for queer students in western universities might be beyond the perception of Chinese university students, many of whom know little about homosexuality or consider it abnormal (Tian et al., 2011; Yan et al., 2002; Zhang, 2019; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). In this way, Zhang’s teaching might provoke students to rethink of what constitutes the (ab)normal in universities.
Similarly, Xiao Gang had never specifically addressed queer issues in the classroom. However, when discussing intimate relationships and life choices, he always ended with: “No matter what sexual orientation, I am always taking this standpoint.”

I hide queer issues in broader topics, and mention it in a smooth way. I address issues such as love, life choices and marriage in class. These issues involve sexuality. I always give comments in the end: “No matter what sexual orientation, I am always taking this standpoint”. (Xiao Gang, 35, Tutor, Guangdong province)

Xiao’s mention of “sexual orientation”, although appearing as an add-on, challenged heteronormative assumption in discussion about relationships, and destabilised heterosexuality as the default of sexuality. In doing so, he opened up possibilities of non-heterosexual identity, desire and practice. A similar strategy of the “incorporation of ‘sensitive’ topics into less sensitive ones” (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020, p. 160) is employed by Swedish teachers to challenge sexual norms. For example, “vaginal sex” was deliberately used to imply that there are other ways of having sex by different sexual identities, rather than treating queer sexuality as a topic on its own (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020). By contrast, the incorporation of queer issues into broader topics by my participants was primarily a stealth strategy to protect themselves from potential risks.

Addressing queer issues as a heterosexual

Teaching about queer issues might expose closeted participants’ sexual identity. One strategy to avoid identity exposure was positioning themselves “as an outsider”, i.e., as heterosexual.

If my teaching might expose my sexual identity, I would try to pretend that although I am straight, I don’t think being queer is bad. (Fei Ming, 31, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

When I teach queer issues, I just teach as an outsider. I seldom talk about my personal experience, in case of sexual identity exposure. (Du Xing, 43, Lecturer, Shanghai)

These narratives show participants’ identity management (Griffin, 1991, 1992) as a closeted gay teacher in their classroom. Unlike many of their western peers who disclosed their queer identity and personal experience in the classroom (Bennett et al., 2015; Clarke & Braun, 2009; Crawley, 2009; DeJean, 2007; Jackson, 2007, 2009; Law, 2017; Nielsen & Alderson, 2014; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Rensenbrink, 1996; Seal, 2019; Vicars, 2006), these participants chose to “pass” or “cover” (Griffin, 1992, p. 176) as heterosexual when addressing queer issues. For instance, Fei passed by pretending to be straight in his classroom, while Du covered his sexuality by “seldom talking about” his personal experiences. Although these strategies avoided potential sexual identity exposure, the identity management carried emotional weight.

I feel ashamed. I don’t teach as an openly out teacher. I don’t position myself as queer. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)
Chen’s feeling of shame as a closeted teacher resonates with what Rasmussen (2004) conceptualises as the discourse of “coming out imperative” (p. 145) in education. As she articulates, “... teachers who fail in their duty to come out may be marked as lacking, while those who do come out may be celebrated as role models promoting tolerance and inclusivity, empowering themselves and others” (p. 145). Chen’s narrative shows that such a discourse could be internalised by closeted teachers and added emotional burden in their teaching about queer issues.

Gay academics could also deflect students’ suspicion of their gay identity with deliberate homophobic performance. Ao contextually adjusted his performance in class according to his perception of students’ acceptance of homosexuality. For example, a decade ago he performed homophobic attitudes when discussing western gay culture, while now he would not.

Ten years ago, I mentioned gay culture in my course on western culture. I pretended western gay culture is incompatible with Chinese culture. I forced myself to say the word “gay”. I felt my face was red, my heart beat fast, but I pretended to be indifferent. I pretended a look of incredulity, so that students wouldn’t suspect my sexual identity. But if I mention gay culture in class now, I would mention it just as a cultural phenomenon and wouldn’t show prejudice. Or else, I might offend many students. (Ao Si, 31, Lecturer, Jilin province)

This narrative shows that Ao’s teaching about queer issues was contingent on students’ perception of queer issues in different periods. Consequently, he performed shifting subjectivities to protect himself from identity exposure and students’ resistance. Like many western closeted queer teachers who experienced the stress of constant vigilance and caution against identity exposure (Griffin, 1991; Amoor, 2019; Rudoe, 2010), Ao’s identity management carried significant mental burden. His homophobic performance involved various embodied emotions such as nervousness, indifference, and fear.

Importantly, Ao’s narrative also shows that queer visibility in the classroom did not necessarily mean a challenge to the heterosexual norms. Rather, queer academics’ teaching could sustain and reinforce heteronormativity. Such a finding echoes one lesbian teacher in Allen’s (2006b, 2010) research who perpetuated heteronormativity in her lesson on puberty. This teaching moment is employed by Allen (2010) to interrogate a pervasive assumption that identity dictates practice. She suggests that there is no necessary relationship between sexual identity and anti-normative practice. In this vein, Ao’s heteronormative teaching can be constructed “as a consequence of the ongoing power and pervasiveness of heteronormativity” (Allen, 2010, p. 161).

Using official texts as teaching material

One strategy to lower risks and enhance the legitimacy of addressing queer issues was selecting teaching texts from official sources. In Zhang's Chinese language class for international students, he deliberately selected a news report about same-sex marriage from China Central Television (CCTV), the state television station, as a teaching text.
I deliberately selected a news report about same-sex marriage from CCTV, to avoid potential troubles. Even if someone thinks it's inappropriate, it's from the state television, rather than tabloid or foreign press. (Zhang Dong, 30, Tutor, Zhang province)

Zhang’s considered use of a media source as a teaching text had significant implications of (il)legitimacy for texts for educational purposes. China’s record on press freedom is among the world’s worst, according to the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (2019). The media is influenced by the CCP to serve political ends (Zhang, 2011). This media control has been progressively tightened under Xi Jinping’s presidency, which is captured by Singh (2016) as three Cs: command, control and censor. As the only national television network in China, CCTV is an important Party propaganda apparatus and plays the role of mouthpiece (Hong et al., 2009). Foreign media, meanwhile, is restricted or blocked by Chinese authorities, aimed at limiting critical coverage of the authorities from reaching Chinese citizens (Eades, 2014). In line with the Party-state ideologies, Chinese scholars and ordinary people often perceive western media as demonising China (Li, 1997; Tian, 2003). Given this political context regarding media, Zhang’s strategy of selecting a teaching text from CCTV drew on the Party-state power to enhance the legitimacy of his teaching. In doing so, he submitted to the Party-state power, and simultaneously disrupted the heterosexual norms by bringing visibility to same-sex marriage.

Avoiding revealing a supportive standpoint

In spite of being gay themselves, many participants avoided revealing a supportive standpoint on queer people in the classroom. They adopted this strategy by maintaining an “objective and neutral” standpoint, or selecting teaching texts with an ambiguous standpoint, or choosing a noncritical perspective in addressing queer issues. For instance, many participants refused to share their personal perspective on queer issues, in order to avoid potential risks from their students and institution.

I don’t comment about whether homosexuality is right or wrong. I just show the facts. Students can judge on their own. (Xiao Zang, 33, Lecturer, Tibet)

I just analyse the fact objectively from the perspective of gender studies, and don’t show whether I support gay rights or not. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)

I address queer issues with an objective and neutral attitude. There is no obvious tendency in my teaching. After all, I am in a government-sponsored institution. (Ling Hu, 38, Lecturer, Shanghai)

Students didn’t have negative feedback on my teaching, because I took a neutral standpoint. I can’t express my personal views freely in China, because I work in an insecure social environment. (Meng Chi, 40, Lecturer, Jiangsu province)

A number of contextual factors that affected participants’ teaching emerge from the above narratives, such as students’ perception, institutional climate, as well as the broader social
environment in China. These factors hindered participants from disclosing personal views on queer issues in the classroom. This refusal to reveal a personal standpoint was also manifested in some participants’ consideration of teaching texts. For instance, in order to be “neutral”, Zhang deliberately selected a news report about same-sex marriage with an ambiguous standpoint as teaching text in his Chinese language course.

The headline of the news report shows that the discussion about same-sex marriage provoked controversy in Taiwan and not everyone supported the LGBT movement. The standpoint of the news report I select should be ambiguous. My teaching should be neutral. (Zhang Dong, 30, Tutor, Zhang province)

Although the standpoint of the news report was ambiguous, Zhang successfully brought up same-sex marriage issue in his class. This teaching moment provided an opportunity for students to see the LGBT movement in a democratic Chinese society. As such, it might open a space for thinking about the possibility of identity politics in China.

Another way to avoid revealing a supportive standpoint was choosing a noncritical perspective when addressing queer issues. For instance, in Zhang’s management course, he addressed sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace from the perspective of company interests, instead of “advocating gay rights”. Similarly, Ma addressed gay marriage by only showing its effect on reducing negative consequences.

I address sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace from the perspective of managers and company interests. A lack of anti-discrimination policy in company can lead to image and economic losses, as well as legal risks. I emphasise these negative consequences of discrimination, rather than advocating gay rights. (Zhang Zhijie, 43, Associate Professor, Sichuan province)

When it came to the issue of gay marriage, I said that international research shows that in areas where gay marriage is legal, gay people have fewer mental diseases, lower HIV infection rate and fewer suicides. (Ma Bulan, 42, Professor, Guangdong province)

By selecting a noncritical perspective to address queer issues, Zhang and Ma avoided critiquing the sexual injustice regarding workplace discrimination and marriage. Thus, they avoided any potential risks of explicitly revealing a supportive standpoint on gay rights. However, such an approach inevitably portrayed queer people as “wounded identities” (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004), by emphasising the negative aspects of sexuality such as discrimination, mental disease, HIV infection, and suicide. This emphasis on danger and risk of sexuality echoes American scholar Michelle Fine’s (1998) conceptualisation of a “missing discourse of desire” in education. Inspired by Fine, a body of literature has examined the representations of pleasure and danger in sexuality education (Allen, 2006a, 2011c, 2012, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Allen & Carmody, 2012; Allen et al., 2014; Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013). In Zhang and Ma’s class, a focus on the potential risk and danger of queer sexuality limited the critical edge of their teaching, while it also lowered the potential risks of addressing queer issues in university classrooms. Despite an emphasis on negative aspects of sexuality, these teaching moments could imply positive
and legitimate aspects of queer identity such as equal rights in work and marriage. In this sense, their teaching had the potential to disrupt heteronormativity.

While many participants claimed to teach with an “objective and neutral” standpoint, some participants implicitly or strategically conveyed their supportive standpoint. For example, Chen showed the marginalised status quo of Chinese queer community, while Li expressed his support for same-sex marriage “via other people’s voices”.

I implicitly show my standpoint. I just show students the hidden, invisible and stigmatised status quo of queer people in China. Students can make judgments themselves. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)

When it comes to the same-sex marriage, I show photos of some prominent activist scholars on the slides who support the same-sex marriage. I express myself via other people’s voices. (Li Yuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

These implicit ways to reveal a supportive standpoint, as well as various ways to avoid revealing a supportive standpoint, show the difficulty of addressing queer issues in Chinese universities. Disclosure of teacher’s personal views in social education has been well examined by educational scholars in existing literature (Conrad, 2019; Cotton, 2006; Kelly, 1986; Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Sondel et al., 2018; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Various positions are adopted by teachers, ranging from not expressing views, to waiting until the end of a discussion to reveal their opinion, to embracing the disclosure of personal views (Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Washington & Humphries, 2011). This research captures the complexity of expressing a gay academic’s view on queer issues in the Chinese classrooms. To protect themselves from potential risks, many participants concealed, or avoided explicitly showing, their supportive standpoints on queer people, despite being gay themselves. This strategy shows the impact of the heteronormative and repressive campus climate on teaching in Chinese universities.

This section demonstrated a variety of Chinese gay academics’ strategies to cope with their concerns and lower the risks of addressing queer issues in their classroom. By concealing their sexuality in the classroom, addressing queer issues only minimally or stealthily, or failing to reveal their critical view on sexual injustice, participants conformed to heteronormativity. Simultaneously, by bringing visibility to queer issues, showing the marginalised status quo of queer people, or challenging the heteronormative assumptions of relationships, their teaching had the potential to disrupt the power operation of heteronormativity on campus. Therefore, in coping with the social and political constraints of teaching, participants exercised agency that involved both mastery and submission.

Addressing queer issues in the classrooms

This section provides several teaching examples to show how participants normalised queer identity, or enacted queerness in their classroom. One way that some participants brought up queer issues in class was talking about prominent figures who are gay in the subject they were
teaching. For example, both Teng and Xiao talked about the English computer scientist, Alan Turing, in their course on computer science.

*I told students that Turing is gay and made great contribution. It is precisely because of his gay identity that he was unfairly treated and finally committed suicide.* (Teng Wen, 39, Lecturer, Shanghai)

*When I taught the history of computer development, I introduced Turing’s tragic life. He was subjected to sentence and hormone injection for being gay.* (Xiao Yu, 36, Lecturer, Beijing)

It could be thought-provoking to juxtapose Turing’s groundbreaking contribution to computer science, with the brutal persecution he experienced due to sexual identity. By showing Turing’s personal tragedy, Teng and Xiao offered an opportunity for students to critically reflect on the oppression queer people have historically experienced. Similarly, Da pointed out the gay identity of some famous designers in his design course.

*Pictures of famous designers hang on the wall in the classroom and some are gay, such as British designer Alexander McQueen and the Italian couple designers of brand D & G. I told students that these figures are gay and I see gay people as normal.* (Da Da, 30, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

Pictures of prominent figures hanging on the wall represented important curriculum and constituted mundane material space in Da’s university. By pointing out some figures’ gay identity, Da revealed queer meanings from the curriculum and normalised queer identity. Queer meanings could also be explored in the reading of classic texts, which are conventionally considered “straight”. In Xiao’s course on Chinese ancient literature, he introduced students to an interpretation of classic Chinese literature from a queer perspective.

*My teaching of the Chinese literary classic “A Dream of Red Mansions” (红楼梦) involves a queer perspective. I encourage students to think: does the relationship between Jia Baoyu and Qin Zhong, as well as the relationship between Jia Baoyu and Jiang Yuhan, involve same-sex desire?* (Xiao Zang, 33, Lecturer, Tibet)

*A Dream of Red Mansions* carries a high status in Chinese literature. By interpreting characters as possibly queer and encouraging students to read queerly, Xiao challenged the heteronormative assumptions about relationships and unsettled conventional understandings of this novel. Such endeavour is in line with queer pedagogy, as one of its approaches suggested by Britzman (1995) is “to stop reading straight” (p. 164). This approach aims to seek out potentially queer meaning in a text. The effort of reading queerly is particularly disruptive when it applied to texts like the Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, which is a classic and appears to have no queer characters. As Shlasko (2005) suggests, “an adventuresome queer educator might even tackle a text that seems blatantly straight, that intends to support normalcy, and read it queerly for internal contradiction or other potentially queer understanding” (p. 129). The queerness of Xiao’s reading practices lay in its disruption to the heteronormative thinking and sedimented knowledge regarding the Chinese classic literature. In this way, Xiao
implemented a queer pedagogy that “might well read all categories as unstable, all experiences as constructed, all reality as having to be imagined, all knowledge as provoking uncertainties, misrecognitions, ignorance, and silences.” (Britzman, 1995, p. 164)

Another way that some participants’ teaching aligned with queer pedagogy was troubling dominant ideas about gender and sexuality. For instance, Ma guided students to think critically about the oversimplified relationships between AIDS, anal sex, and homosexuality.

> Many people link AIDS with homosexuality. I tell students that the spread of AIDS isn’t caused by a certain sexual orientation. Unprotected anal sex between men, compared to other sexual behaviours, can increase the probability of HIV infection. So does unprotected anal sex between male and female compared to vaginal sex. It’s not the sexual orientation that matters. (Ma Bulan, 42, Professor, Guangdong province)

A national survey shows that anal sex is the most unacceptable sexual behaviour in contemporary China and is pervasively considered as perverted and conflicting with traditional Chinese culture (Pan & Huang, 2013). However, the AIDS epidemic in China offered opportunity for public and explicit discussion of anal sex (Pan & Huang, 2013), which was the broader context of Ma’s teaching. By showing that it is the unprotected anal sex, no matter if it is conducted by queer people or heterosexuals, that matters in AIDS infection, Ma challenged some dominant notions regarding anal sex, AIDS and homosexuality. These misconceptions include that AIDS is caused by homosexuality, only gay men conduct anal sex, and vaginal sex is heterosexual people’s only way of having sex. The presence of anal sex in the classroom not only broke the taboo and silence, but also blurred the boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality by “showing the ‘queer’ in what is thought of as ‘normal’” (Pinar, 1998, p.14). This is disruptive because, through a queer lens, straightness does not exist separately from gayness but is defined by it. Furthermore, despite addressing the negative aspects of sex, this teaching moment could imply a “missing discourse of desire” (Fine, 1998). Anal pleasure, particularly men’s anal receptivity, as Branfman and Ekberg (2012) argue, disrupts the centrality of penis-vagina intercourse, as well as binaries such as “male/ female”, “masculine/ feminine”, “straight/queer” which scaffold heteronormativity.

Queer pedagogy implemented by participants could also mean a shift of attention from the margin to the centre to trouble the social norms. For instance, Mu, an academic in political philosophy, integrated a queer perspective in all his courses, with an aim of “interrogating the mainstream from the margins”.

> No matter what course I teach, for instance globalization, or political philosophy, I use one lecture to specially discuss queer issues. It’s not to satisfy students’ curiosity about an unknown group. Instead, it should be addressed from a broader perspective of social structure. By interrogating the mainstream from the margins, we can find how the norms related to gender and sexuality limit us and cause inequality. (Mu Xi, 36, Associate Professor, Shanghai)

Mu refused to address queer issues to “satisfy students’ curiosity about an unknown group”. Instead, he encouraged students to interrogate the normative effect of social norms on
everyone. In this way, Mu did not confine his pedagogy to “teaching as, for, or about queer subject(s)” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 128). His educational philosophy of moving beyond a queer-subject focus in addressing gender and sexuality could engage all students, queer or heterosexual, in reflection on social norms. This pedagogy echoes those pedagogues who draw attention to heterosexuality as a category that is constituted, privileged, and normalised by society (Allen, 2011a; Blumer et al., 2013; Dessel et al., 2013; Winans, 2006). To deconstruct the naturalness of heterosexual identity may involve a process of “risking the self” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 129) because it means interrogating normative discourses that constitute the self. This queer deconstruction is demonstrated in Mu’s invitation of thinking how the norms “limit us and cause inequality”. For heterosexual students, it opened up the possibility of “undoing the heterosexual self” (Allen, 2011a, p. 90).

Queerness in the Chinese context

I have shown a plethora of teaching experiences of addressing queer issues in Chinese universities. This section examines participants’ pedagogical approaches in addressing queer issues and unpacks the queerness in their teaching. It is demonstrated that these diverse teaching moments were not always anti-heteronormative, which is evidenced by Ao’s self-protective homophobic performance. Despite the possibility of heteronormative teaching, many participants sought to normalise queer identities or interrupt heteronormativity in various ways. These ways can be largely categorised into two pedagogical approaches, namely, an inclusion-based approach and a queer approach.

The inclusion-based approach sought to “provide information and ‘true’ images of LGBT lives” (Seal, 2019, p. 61). Examples of this approach in participants’ narratives include Zhang Dong’s teaching of a news report about the Taiwan LGBT movement in his Chinese language course, Zhang Zhijie’s introduction about queer students in western universities, Ma’s teaching about gay marriage, as well as several participants’ teaching about prominent gay figures in their subject, such as the scientist, Turing, and gay designers. Such an approach illuminates diverse experiences of queer people, such as oppression, marginalisation, resistance, or just their existence in a learning topic. However, its limitation is critiqued by queer scholars in education (Alexander, 2005; Britzman, 1995; Luhmann, 1998; Nelson, 1999, 2002; Seal, 2019; Shlasko, 2005; Winans, 2006). As Luhmann (1998) argues, in line with assimilationist politics, an inclusion-based approach seeks to expand the definition of “normal” to include the queer, but contributes little problematisation of the process of normalisation and marginalisation. Although this approach may encourage tolerance of queer identities, as Seal (2019) notes, heterosexual, and some “good” queer students “can distance themselves from acknowledging their privilege and avoid responsibility” for queer people (p. 61). As such, Alexander (2005) suggested that teachers “should not focus solely on introducing our many straight students to queer lives and stories; rather, working queerness ... should be an invitation to all students – gay and straight – to think of the ‘constructedness’ of their lives in a heteronormative society” (p. 375).

In line with Alexander’s (2005) call, several participants adopted a queer approach which sought to interrogate dominant identities and notions. This approach enabled them to shift the
focus from learning about, appreciating, or tolerating queer people, to problematising sexual identities and cultural norms. For instance, heteronormative assumptions about relationships and sexuality were challenged when Xiao Zang invited his students to read classical literature queerly, as well as how Xiao Gang commented on relationships - “No matter what sexual orientation, I am always taking this standpoint”. When Ma offered the possibility that the heterosexuals can engage in anal sex, he troubled conventional understandings about heterosex, and blurred the boundary between queer and normal. Mu’s teaching philosophy of “interrogating the mainstream” aligned with the queer positionality which is “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). These teaching moments manifest an approach of queer pedagogy that moves beyond an aim of inclusion and legitimisation of the subordinate sexual identities. As Nelson (1999) notes, the issue of a queer pedagogy “is not whether a particular sexual identity is natural but how it has been made to seem natural (or unnatural)” (p. 378). She argues that this queer approach is actually more “inclusive” than an inclusion-based approach, “because it allows for a wider range of experiences and perspectives to be considered” (Nelson, 2002, p. 48).

The dual categorisation of pedagogical approaches I have unpacked seems to create a binary that implies one approach is “queerer” than the other. However, this is not my aim. The above two approaches often have ambiguous boundaries, and participants, such as Ma, adopted both approaches in different teaching moments in their classroom. To capture the queerness in participants’ teaching necessitates an examination of the contexts. This contingency reflects one of queer’s constituent characteristics - “its resistance to definition” (Jagose, 1996, p. 1). Such constant indeterminacy is because “to pinpoint queer is to dilute its essence and curtail its possibilities” (Allen, 2015b, p. 681). As such, understandings of queer pedagogy “do not rely on any broadly agreed-upon definition” (Shlasko, 2005, p. 123). As Winans (2006) put it,

*Queering our pedagogy depends on recognizing that the world outside the classroom and the strategies of normalization that operate there must be considered as we conceptualize our classroom approaches: thus a queer pedagogy is, by definition, always impacted by the local.* (p. 107)

Given that queer pedagogy is always contingent and relational, its queerness varies contextually. Taking Allen’s (2015b) classroom in a New Zealand university as an example, she attempts to disrupt heteronormativity in popular culture by playing students the video *Same love* – an American hip-hop music addressing gay and lesbian rights and same-sex marriage. Articulating the queerness of this teaching moment, she argues that “while recognizing that rights to same-sex marriage have been critiqued as homonormative (Duggan, 2002), within the context of hip-hop culture, this act might be construed as queer” (Allen, 2015b, p. 770).

Within the context of this study, many teaching moments can be construed as queer, given the highly heteronormative climate in Chinese universities, as well as political risks their teaching could involve. The normative and silencing effects of the campus culture were revealed in participants’ worry about repercussions of addressing queer issues, such as sexual identity exposure, students’ aversion, as well as surveillance and censorship imposed by university authorities. This heteronormative culture was also evidenced by the destabilising
effect of participants’ teaching even when queer issues were only mentioned in passing (“I mention it only in passing. Students reacted like “Wow””). Considering China’s political control of academic expression in higher education (Scholars at Risk, 2019; Tenzin, 2017; Xiaoxin, 2018; Yan, 2014, 2017), the queerness of some participants’ teaching also lay in the potential tension between their teaching and the Party-state ideologies. This is particularly evidenced by Chen’s experiences of being censored by his CCP secretary and being asked to join the Party. These social and political constraints constitute “the limits of queer pedagogy” (Allen, 2015b, p. 765) which significantly shaped what is possible for it to achieve in university classrooms in China. In accordance with queer theory which “is rooted in contesting the worlds that have sought to expunge it” (Greteman, 2018, p. 10), participants’ queer pedagogy can be glimpsed in their careful navigation of, and strategic resistance to, the constraints of heteronormativity and political control in China.

Many participants’ teaching moments of addressing queer issues in Chinese universities demonstrate what Liew (2014) terms “pedagogical agency”. As he explains, “policy and curriculum are never strictly implemented according to script, but always contingently contested and creatively negotiated in the process of enactment. Between a curriculum script and its pedagogical enactment, then, lies a gap occupied by teachers’ pedagogical agency” (pp. 714-715). Indeed, the heteronormative curriculum in Chinese universities, although reinforced by the institutions and Party-state, were not faithfully implemented by many participants. Instead, by positioning themselves in the closet and adopting various strategies to lower the risks and legitimise their teaching, they managed to integrate queer issues into the curriculum and interrupted the silencing of queer identity on Chinese campuses. These “manoeuvres” (Gowlett, 2014, p. 414), made by individuals to work through and recraft the heterosexual norms, lead to teaching moments of “unsettling the sediments of what one imagines when one imagines normalcy, what one imagines when one imagines difference” (Britzman, 1995, p. 165). This subjectivity position of “inhabit[ing] the norms in order to mobilize the rules differently” (Butler, 2006, p. 532) exemplifies the agency exercised by gay academics in China. Expressions of such agency are not moments of freedom from the constraining regulations imposed by heteronormativity and the university authorities. Rather, gay academics’ agency is located in between the extremes of conformity and subversion. Such agency captures queer subjects’ experiences in a context where radical action is hugely risky and gives hope. As Gowlett (2014) suggests, “for the most vulnerable, where the stakes of livability are high, a version of agency that functions within the system that constitutes it, provides possibility” (p. 417).

Conclusion

This chapter has shown gay academics’ experiences of addressing queer issues in university classrooms in China. A range of participants’ concerns were identified to show social and political forces that constrained them from addressing queer issues. Given the unique context faced by Chinese academics, I demonstrated particularly the various techniques of surveillance and censorship imposed by university authorities in participants’ classrooms. These restrictions manifest how the top-down Party-state power is institutionalised in Chinese universities and reinforced heteronormativity on campus. However, various strategies were adopted by
participants to lower the risks and enhance the legitimacy of addressing queer issues. I unpacked participants’ two approaches to addressing queer issues: an inclusion-based approach which seeks to affirm and validate the subordinate sexual identities, as well as a queer approach that problematises dominant identities and notions. I argue that the queerness of their teaching was manifested in its potential conflict with the social and political constraints in the heteronormative and repressive context of Chinese universities. The constraints faced by participants not only enabled them to queer their classroom, but also constituted “the limits of queer pedagogy” (Allen, 2015, p. 765) in China. This Chinese version of queer pedagogy implemented by participants revealed an agency that inhabited within and simultaneously disrupted heteronormativity and political control. The next chapter will focus on a smaller group of participants – those who conducted queer research. Compared with the teaching experiences demonstrated in this chapter, some participants’ experiences of conducting queer research involved both similar and unique risks. I will show how they adopted various strategies to conduct queer research in the heteronormative academia in China.
Chapter 7

“Keep a low profile”: Gay academics’ experiences of conducting queer research in China

This chapter explores gay academics’ experiences of conducting queer research in China. It seeks to examine the operation of heteronormativity in research activities in Chinese academia, such as journal article editing and reviewing, conference organisation, and funding applications. It also explores some participants’ navigation of heteronormativity in their research experiences. In this study, nine participants conducted queer research in various disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, public health, and linguistics. Their interest in queer issues varied in importance in their research, ranging from a peripheral research area to a main research area to their only research focus. No matter how important it was for their research profile, they all had concerns about conducting queer research. For example, those closeted participants were worried about potential sexual identity exposure due to their interest in queer issues. Many participants encountered difficulty in publishing or receiving funding for their queer research. Within their institution, queer research was often discouraged by colleagues and leaders due to its sensitivity and political risk. Despite potential negative repercussions, which could jeopardise their career and personal life, these participants adopted various strategies to lower the risks and enhance the legitimacy of conducting queer research.

By focusing on some participants’ experiences of researching queer issues, this chapter also aims to extend existing literature on experiences of sexuality research. Drawing on experiences of American sexuality scholars, Irvine (2014) conceptualises sexuality research as dirty work, “an occupation that is simultaneously socially necessary and stigmatized” (p. 632). Informed by Irvine’s work, a body of research has documented experiences of sexuality research in international contexts (Allen, 2019a; Dowsett, 2014; Epprecht, 2014, 2018; Fahs et al., 2018; Irvine, 2014; Javaid, 2020a, 2020b; Keene, 2021; McCormack, 2014; Msibi, 2014). By highlighting the unique experiences of conducting queer research in the Chinese context, this chapter can add knowledge to the constitution of sexuality research as dirty work in repressive politics.

To enrich understandings about queer teachers and sexuality researchers, this chapter asks: How do gay academics conduct queer research in China? More pointedly, what concerns do they have? What strategies do they employ to cope with the concerns? Is conducting research about queer issues constituted as dirty work (Irvine, 2014) in China? How is queer research constituted as dirty work in China? Exploration of these questions is informed by queer theory which seeks to destabilise normative identities and ideas (Jagose, 1996; McCann & Monaghan,
A queer perspective enables me to unpack the power operation of heteronomativity in the institutional practices in Chinese academia. From a queer lens, a range of seemingly “neutral” academic practices will be problematised as perpetuating the heterosexual norms, such as the processes involved in reviewing and editing journal articles, funding allocation, employment, and academic conference organisation. This work not only reveals Chinese gay academics’ research experiences, but also endeavours to queer Chinese academia by disrupting the status quo that normalises heterosexuality and marginalises queerness. In doing so, I will also unsettle a conventional idea about research censorship in Chinese academia which is typically structured within the binary of “powerless researcher/powerful censor” (Scholars at Risk, 2019). By highlighting the nuances in participants’ narratives, I will show how the participants challenged the constraints on queer research, as well as the complexity of the constitution of queer research as dirty work. I argue that positioning participants as only victims fails to capture their agency and the power dynamics at play in Chinese academia.

In this chapter, I will first demonstrate the personal and institutional challenges faced by participants in conducting queer research. Then I show three strategies participants employed to cope with these challenges and enhance the legitimacy of queer research. The final section of this chapter is a discussion on the constitution of queer research as dirty work in the Chinese context by focusing on the nuances of participants’ experiences of research censorship.

Concerns about conducting queer research

This section analyses some participants’ concerns about conducting queer research. These concerns include sexual identity exposure, difficulty in publishing research and receiving funding, and marginalisation by university departments. By highlighting how queer research was constituted as dirty work (Irvine, 2014), via a range of institutional activities in Chinese universities, I demonstrate the operation of heteronomativity in Chinese academia.

Sexual identity exposure

Most participants were closeted in their institution due to the heteronomative campus climate. For the closeted participants, the main concern about conducting queer research was gay identity exposure. For instance, Li had once researched the marriage choice of gay people in China and was still interested in queer issues at the time of this study. However, he had already abandoned queer research and shifted his research area to mainstream sociological issues to avoid potential sexual identity exposure.

*If I do too much queer research, I will expose my identity. I feel that whoever does this research should be a person in the queer circle. People outside the queer circle may also think so.* (Li Yuan, 31, Lecturer, Gansu province)

This narrative shows Li’s belief that there should be a relationship between a researcher’s queer identity and conducting queer research. Based on this belief, he was concerned that conducting
queer research could lead to his own sexual identity exposure. This concern echoes American sociologists of sexuality in Irvine’s (2015) study where more than 70% reported assumptions made about their sexual identity. These assumptions were so prevalent that some American LGBT academics opted to let their LGBT-related work out them instead of coming out directly (LaSala et al., 2008). However, for closeted Chinese gay academics like Li, such assumptions prohibited them from conducting queer research. Such a concern shows the heteronormative nature of Chinese academia, where queer identity and queer research were still considered abnormal and, thus, queer researchers had to self-censor their sexuality and research on queer issues.

While some participants abandoned queer research to avoid sexual identity exposure, some courageously chose to conduct queer research. Han, a first-year Lecturer, would not consider coming out until promoted to Associate Professor. However, he decided to conduct queer research at the beginning of his career, despite the potential risk of sexual identity exposure before he was tenured.

*If I were an Associate Professor and had secured the tenure, the risk of coming out would be less. However, it may take me several years to be promoted to associate professor. Isn’t it a waste of time if I don’t do queer study until then? If I don’t do it because of the fear of identity exposure, what if I died before tenured? Then I will have a huge regret in my life. So I think I need to be brave.* (Han Wuji, 33, Lecturer, Beijing)

This narrative shows Han’s consideration of two important choices as a junior academic: when to come out and when to conduct queer research. His decision of coming out after being tenured echoes Pugh’s (1998) study of LGB academics in the USA decades ago. He finds that the vulnerability of a pre-tenured professor position generally calls for a certain level of caution in coming out, and the increase in job security once tenure is granted allows them the freedom to be more out (Pugh, 1998). Such an impact of job security on queer academics’ decision about coming out is also evidenced by Han’s concern about coming out in Chinese universities. However, Han’s narrative also shows that being closeted did not mean being passive in relation to heteronormativity. The other decision Han made was conducting queer research before being tenured. These two decisions were based on his evaluation of potential risks: coming out was riskier than doing queer research. This is opposite to one American LGB sociologist in Taylor and Raeburn’s (1995) research who remarked “it’s definitely considered more acceptable to be gay than it is to write about it (p. 266).” Although Han was aware of the potential risk of sexual identity exposure in conducting queer research, he showed a strong commitment to undertaking queer research at an early stage of his academic career. In doing so, he expressed an agency that both conformed to and disrupted heteronormativity.

Closeted queer researchers’ concerns about sexual identity exposure emerged not only in their interactions with people in their institution, but also in their interactions with queer participants of their research. Such concerns involved methodological and ethical considerations. Han faced an ethical dilemma of whether to disclose his sexual identity to his queer participants.
Han’s struggle demonstrates the barriers that closeted academics confronted when conducting queer research in a heteronormative environment. There is a tension between being honest about sexuality to research participants and the potential risks of identity disclosure. Han thus could occupy a vulnerable position if being asked about sexuality by his research participants. Such vulnerability as a closeted queer researcher echoes other qualitative researchers who share their vulnerability, due to the emotional burden of conducting interviews with their research participants (McClelland, 2017; Suen, 2015). In Han’s case, it can be imagined that his hesitation or denial to respond to participants’ curiosity about his sexual identity could be interpreted by participants as hiding his gay identity. Han perceived “hiding” his sexuality as unethical if he expected his queer participants to share their experiences honestly. This ethical dilemma, rarely confronted by the heterosexual, complicates queer academics’ experiences of conducting queer research.

In addition, Han’s narrative can enrich understanding of insider perspectives of researchers (Allen, 2010; Cui, 2015; Paechter, 2013; Pitman, 2002). Western gay and lesbian researchers have reported many advantages of revealing sexual identity to gay and lesbian participants as an insider, such as gaining access to the target group, communicating empathy, and establishing rapport (Homfray, 2008; Lambevski, 1999; LaSala, 2003; Roberts, 2014; Weston, 2004). Despite all these advantages, Han struggled with coming out to his queer participants (”I can’t come out to participants”). As Han worried, sexual identity disclosure to participants can leave queer researchers open to potential discrimination in a heteronormative environment. For instance, if Han’s participants were to out him to his colleagues or leaders, his career might be negatively affected. Thus, Han’s concern adds another layer to the discussion on research identity as insiders: not all insiders can take these advantages. The outness of queer researchers affects how they take the insider advantages in undertaking research on queer people.

**Difficulty of publishing research**

Many participants were concerned about the difficulty of publishing queer research in Chinese journals. Queer research conducted by some participants was perceived as sensitive or politically problematic by editors and reviewers.

*Chinese academia would not be tolerant of my research about gay porn. It’s too sensitive.*

*I have never considered publishing my research in Chinese journals.* (Luo Jie, 34, Lecturer, Guangdong province)

*I once submitted an article on the transgender issue to a domestic journal. A reviewer provided feedback that the de-pathologisation of transgender identity by the World Health Organization is “far-left”.* (Han Wuji, 33, Lecturer, Beijing)
Some participants were required by editors to redact sensitive words or remove content that shows explicit support for queer people.

The journal editor asked me to replace all the words like “gay” in my article with “marginalised people”. I had to agree, in order to publish my research in this high-ranking journal. (Tang Li, 33, Lecturer, Guangdong province)

I proposed suggestions on how to improve the status quo of transgender people in China, ranging among family support, educational support and social support. But the editor might be transphobic and deleted all my suggestions. I had to compromise because I really wanted to publish queer research in this mainstream disciplinary journal. (Han Wuji, 33, Lecturer, Beijing)

The journal editors could also underrate or reject queer research due to its sensitivity.

I once submitted my paper to a top disciplinary journal in China and received negative feedback. Chinese academia does not attach any importance to queer issues and even try to avoid addressing them. (Wen Yao, 40, Associate Professor, Fujian province)

My article got positive feedback from reviewers, but was finally rejected by the editor who thought queer research was too sensitive to publish. (Da Lang, 45, Professor, Shanghai)

These narratives show barriers faced by many participants in publishing queer research. Queer research lacked disciplinary recognition in China and could be considered ideologically inappropriate or too sensitive. The sentiment about the difficulty in publishing queer research in mainstream journals is shared by international studies (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). For example, gay academics in UK business and management schools “were confronted by assumptions of LGBT research being insubstantially rigorous and unable to find a home in the top business journals” (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014, p. 512).

These barriers to publishing queer research in mainstream journals have political effects on sexual knowledge production. The journals in the above narratives are usually “high-ranking”, “mainstream”, or “top” disciplinary journals. The power of top-tier publication, as Irvine (2014) indicates, can “shape the parameters of disciplines, legitimate or marginalize subject areas and methodologies, and define what forms of knowledge count as important” (p. 645). The challenges encountered by these participants could be conceptualised as marginalising practices by the power of mainstream journals. These academic practices, including problematising, underrating, censoring, and rejecting queer research, imposed stigma on queer research and constructed it as dirty (Irvine, 2014). In this way, queerness was cast as deviant, and heterosexuality was reinforced as the legitimate norm in Chinese academia.

Difficulty of receiving funding

Another concern articulated by some participants was the difficulty of receiving funding for queer research.
Compared with research on mainstream issues, queer research is constrained from receiving funding due to its sensitivity. (Huang Long, 30, Lecturer, Zhejiang province)

Such difficulty was deeply informed by the academic control of the authorities because official funding in China is often controlled by the Propaganda Departments of the CCP political system. As some participants revealed:

I have applied for national funding three times but all failed. I don't think my research ability is poor, because I have published many papers on queer issues. I think it's because of the government's academic control. (Da Lang, 45, Professor, Shanghai)

The National Social Science Fund of China is under the administration of the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee. It is almost impossible to receive funding for queer research. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)

It is difficult to receive government funding. Research projects funded by the Beijing Social Science Fund are under censorship by the Propaganda Department of the Beijing CCP Committee. Queer research can be censored due to political reasons. (Han Wuji, 33, Lecturer, Beijing)

These participants’ research experiences echo existing research on Chinese academia, which shows that Chinese academics often felt forced to research officially sanctioned topics to improve their prospects in the competition for government funding (Hao & Guo, 2016; Tenzin, 2017). These narratives also echo American sexuality researchers in Irvine’s (2014) studies who reported similar difficulties in receiving funding. However, unlike western sexuality scholars, my participants particularly highlighted political censorship by the Chinese authorities which restrained queer researchers from receiving funding. This repressive political control on academic research constitutes a unique challenge faced by sexuality researchers in China.

The funding opportunities mentioned by participants in the above narratives, such as The National Social Science Fund of China, are highly reputable and are often crucial for the career promotion of Chinese academics. The difficulty of receiving government fundings thus put queer researchers in a disadvantaged position. Furthermore, funding opportunities, particularly national funds, as Irvine (2014) notes, play an important role in discipline development and knowledge production. The lack of funding for queer research reflected its marginal position in Chinese academia. From a queer lens, the institutional practices in funding reviewing and allocation that constrained queer research reinforced heteronormativity in Chinese academia.

Marginalisation by the university departments

Some participants reported the marginalisation of queer research within their institutional contexts, such as colleague interactions, employment, and academic conference organisation. For instance, Su was asked by his leader to change his research area from queer issues to mainstream fields.
The associate dean kindly suggested I change my research area from queer issues to mainstream topics, to avoid potential risks in career development. (Su Le, 32, Lecturer, Guangdong province)

Similarly, in Luo’s application for a postdoctoral position, his supervisor suggested him change his proposal for a gay porn study, and obscure a queer focus in case the proposal was rejected by university departments.

When I was applying for the postdoctoral position, both the proposal and writing sample I sent to my supervisor were about gay porn. My supervisor personally supported my research. But to help me get the job, he suggested changing the topic. Because it wouldn’t be permitted by university departments. I replaced the proposal with a historical study of gay media. My supervisor suggested emphasising the development of media and only taking gay media as a case. Actually, I think these are all self-censorship of departments. I didn’t care and didn’t revise much, because I can quit at any time. I saw this postdoctoral job as a transition to my next job abroad. (Luo Jie, 34, Lecturer, Guangdong province)

The “self-censorship of departments” perceived by Luo echoes Tan’s experience. When Tan was organising a queer research conference, his institution restricted the conference organisation in terms of size, eligibility and publicity.

I organised a queer research conference in my institution. It was permitted after so many procedures and explanations. The university had no excuse to prevent me from holding this conference. Because my international publications and government funding about queer research were acknowledged by the university. But the conference was limited to only 20 people, and it was not allowed to be open to students, or be reported publicly. I can understand that the leadership worried about possible political risks. I am grateful for my institution’s permission and support. (Tan Xiao, 45, Professor, Shanghai)

These narratives show that some participants’ queer research was not valued or supported by their institution. Queer research was perceived by university leaders as risky for both the individual’s career development and the institution. Consequently, queer researchers were subjected to departmental pressure to downplay or change the queer focus of their research. Such research experiences of lack of institutional recognition echo international researchers on queer or sexuality issues (Irvine 2014; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). For example, American LGB sociologists in Taylor and Raeburn’s (1995) study reported being strongly discouraged by graduate advisers, mentors, and colleagues from researching gay and lesbian topics.

Those unsupportive practices engaged by leaders and supervisors in participants’ institutions had significant implications for knowledge production in Chinese academia. By discouraging or restricting queer research, the institutions shaped queer research as trivial, sensitive and illegitimate. In doing so, heteronormativity, as well as the dirtiness (Irvine 2014) of queer research, was institutionalised and reinforced as the normative culture in Chinese academia.
Such marginalisation of queer research experienced by some participants seems to imply them as only victims of decisions of powerful institutions. However, this is not my aim. The following sections will show participants’ strategies to conduct queer research in the heteronormative and repressive context of Chinese universities. I will unpack a more complex relationship between participants and their institution by highlighting the nuances in participants’ narratives about research censorship.

**Strategies to conduct queer research**

Despite a multitude of challenges to conducting queer research, several participants adopted various strategies to lower potential risks and enhance the legitimacy of queer research. For instance, some participants deliberately kept a low profile and avoided drawing attention to their queer research. Several participants with a western educational background published their queer research in English in international journals, which avoided research censorship in Chinese journals and legitimised their research in their institution. Another way to legitimise their research was positioning their research within a mainstream framework that is in line with the official policies and discourses.

“Keeping a low profile”

To lower potential risks, some participants avoided undertaking “too much” queer research. For example, Meng regarded queer research as a sideline instead of the main research field.

*When you have 50 articles published and only 5 articles are related to queer issues, never mind. Nobody will suspect your sexual identity. (Meng Chi, 40, Lecturer, Jiangsu province)*

Also, Meng only conducted queer research by cooperating with others and co-authoring in publication.

*I aim to become a Professor in linguistics. So my representative publications should be single-authored and related to linguistics. Publications about queer research only help to increase my publications and are co-authored with my students or colleagues. For example, I can use students’ data and be the first author, or be the second author to help my students publish their research. (Meng Chi, 40, Lecturer, Jiangsu province)*

Co-publishing could lower the risks of queer research in two ways. As Meng perceived, co-authored publications were not as “representative” as single-authored publication, which lowered the importance of queer research in his overall publications. Such a strategy could also “share” the risks, so Meng alone would not be the only target of potential disciplining forces.

Another way to keep a low profile is avoiding exposure of one’s queer research. Chen did not present queer research at conferences, or apply for funding for it, to avoid drawing attention to it. He also carefully selected the wording of his academic writing and research profile.
It’s better to keep a low profile. I don’t present queer research at conferences or apply for funding for it. I just quietly do my research. I don’t use the word “gay” (同性恋) in papers and profile. That’s too obvious. I use “ku’er” (酷儿). I don’t think people will go deep into it. (Chen Cheng, 34, Lecturer, Hubei province)

As a Chinese transliteration of “queer”, “Ku’er” mainly circulates within the intellectual and activist communities in China (Bao, 2018. p. 30) and is seldom known to mainstream society. Its literal meaning “a cool kid”, “often conjures up an association of youthfulness, playfulness, joy and rebelliousness, thus devoid of its stigmatized history and association in the Anglophone context” (Bao, 2020, p. 5). Such a strategy of obscuring language in research resonates with American sexuality researchers in Irvine’s (2014) studies who reported “closeting practices, such as stealth framing of sexuality research” (p. 649) and censoring their use of “‘trigger’ words - i.e., anything directly related to sex or sexuality” (p. 649).

In the repressive political climate in China, keeping a low profile necessarily meant avoiding sensitive research topics that might conflict with Party-state ideologies.

I am careful about the political sensitivity in queer research. I censor myself and only study issues that aren’t politically sensitive. Anyone who conducts queer research in China might have a certain degree of self-censorship. (Tan Xiao, 45, Professor, Shanghai)

Tan’s navigation of political sensitivity in his queer research had to be “careful” because the line between what is permissible and what is not is often ambiguous in China (Scholars at Risk, 2019). Such ambiguity prompted pervasive self-censorship among “anyone who conducts queer research in China” as Tan said. In this way, heteronormativity in Chinese academia was reinforced by China’s repressive politics. This research self-censorship was not limited to queer researchers but was shared by Chinese academics broadly (Hao & Guo, 2016; Xiaoxin, 2018). It avoided negative repercussions in an environment where academic freedom was restricted by increasing surveillance and censorship by the authorities (Scholars at Risk, 2019; Tenzin, 2017; Yan, 2014, 2017). Inevitably, as I will show later, the self-censorship of researchers blunted the critical edge of queer research in China.

Publishing queer research internationally

Considering the barriers to publication of queer research in domestic journals, some participants, mostly with a western education background, tried to publish queer research in international forums. This was a purposeful strategy to gain legitimacy for conducting queer research in China.

I’ve always been conducting queer research since my PhD study in Europe. It’s more difficult to publish queer research in domestic journals. I build the legitimacy of queer research by offering good publications in international journals. If I can’t provide what the university wants and the university only takes risks of queer research, it will be troublesome. (Da Lang, 45, Professor, Shanghai)
Conducting queer research, as Da perceived, might put him in a “troublesome” situation where “the university only takes risks of queer research”. However, by offering international publications, Da built legitimacy to conducting queer research in his institution. The strategy of enhancing legitimacy via international publications is enabled by the global hierarchy of academia where Chinese scholarship occupies a marginal position (Qian, 2018). As the Chinese government promoted the internationalisation of higher education (Ministry of Education of China, 2018; The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015) and the overseas impact of Chinese scholarship (Ministry of Education of China, 2011), Chinese universities attached more importance to international publication. Consequently, international publication is regarded by universities as a more important index than domestic publication in academic employment, professional promotion, and performance assessment (Xu & Jiang, 2018). As such, by publishing queer research internationally, Da not only avoided the barriers to publication in China, but also provided “what the university wants” and enhanced the legitimacy of queer research. This legitimacy is endorsed by the power of China’s official policies and the hegemony of western knowledge production. In this way, he opened more institutional space for queer research in China and thus queered Chinese academia.

Yet, the limitation of this strategy lies in its need for researchers to have a high level of academic and linguistic competence. Not every Chinese academic can, or is willing to, publish their research in a foreign language (Xu & Jiang, 2018). Participants who have international publications of queer research usually obtained their Ph.D. from western universities. This is consistent with existing research which shows that Chinese academics with an overseas education background have more linguistic advantage for international publication than those with domestic degrees (Xian, 2015; Xu & Jiang, 2018; Zweig, 2006; Zweig et al., 2004). As such, publishing queer research internationally can be considered a privilege of those participants with overseas educational background.

However, not all participants with this privilege opted to publish their queer research internationally. Rather, some participants who have the academic and linguistic competency to publish internationally still chose to publish their queer research in Chinese, aiming at reaching the Chinese audience and changing Chinese society.

How many Chinese people can read English papers? English papers may have a less social impact in China. Although English publications contribute more to career promotion, I hope my research can reach more Chinese people and promote social progress in China. I intend to publish research with great social significance in Chinese, while publishing research with more theoretical discussions in English. (Han Wuji, 33, Lecturer, Beijing)

This narrative shows that Han saw the need to balance the pursuit of international publication and domestic social impact. By publishing his queer research both in English and Chinese, Han fulfilled his needs of career promotion and social commitment. In doing so, he expressed an agency that resisted both heteronormativity and the normative rules about academic publication. By publishing his research in English, which contributed more to career promotion, Han conformed to the rules that privilege international publications in Chinese academia (Xu & Jiang,
Simultaneously, he challenged the rules by opting to publish his research in Chinese as well. This act of agency thus involved a double-edged process of submission and mastery.

Mainstreaming queer research

Another strategy that some participants adopted to enhance the legitimacy of queer research was positioning their research within a mainstream framework that aligns with the official policies and Party-state ideologies. For instance, Han framed his queer student research within the “psychological crisis intervention of college students” and drew on official discourses to demonstrate its legitimacy.

When I apply for government funding for my research on queer students, I frame it within the psychological crisis intervention of college students. I also integrated the queer community into research on broader marginalised populations. So the queer community can be part of it. The CCP General Secretary Xi instructed that: “A moderately prosperous society is one to be enjoyed by each and every one” (全面建成小康社会，一个不能少). So any marginalised group should be paid attention to, including the queer community. (Han Wuji, 33, Lecturer, Beijing)

Three ways to lower the risks and mainstream queer research can be identified in this narrative. First, like some participants who “hid” queer issues in broader topics when addressing queer issues in the classroom (Chapter 6), Han obscured the queer focus by integrating it into broader research on marginalised populations. Second, he legitimised his queer research by framing it within the mainstream research on college students who need psychological crisis intervention. This strategy echoes a dominant discourse of “queer student at risk” which constitutes queer students as always vulnerable and in need of protection (Quinlivan, 2002). This normative constitution in the western literature has been identified and critiqued by educational scholars as limiting the understandings of queer students’ diverse experiences (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004). Meanwhile, depictions of queer students as wounded, as Allen (2015a) suggests, have important strategic value in drawing attention to queer issues in education and highlighting need for change. In this vein, Han’s framing of queer student research within a “crisis intervention” agenda can be seen as strategically mobilising the power of the “queer student at risk” discourse. Third, Han also mainstreamed his queer research by highlighting its alignment with the instruction of the CCP top leader according to his interpretation. This justification for his research can be seen as accepting and appropriating the Party-state power. In adopting these three ways to lower the risks and mainstream his research, Han expressed agency that involved a simultaneous mastery and submission. He submitted to heteronormativity by not coming out as shown above, yet he disrupted heteronormativity by mobilising various forms of power to legitimise his queer research.

Similarly, drawing on the cultural legitimacy of “family” in Chinese tradition, Wei mainstreamed his research on queer families by framing it into Chinese family studies.

My latest research is about queer parents, as well as parent-child relationship in queer families. Many queer people are parents. They raise children. They are also children of
In the heteronormative Chinese society where same-sex marriage is illegal, queer families are still “abnormal” and invisible. However, by presenting queer families as almost “the same as the heterosexual”, Wei validated and normalised queer families as a form of Chinese families. This legitimacy can be contextualised in the Chinese cultural tradition. As a significant institution and cultural value in Chinese society, family is given importance by Chinese governments as the foundation of social stability and harmony (Guo, 2010; Sigley, 2002, 2006; To, 2013, 2015). “Family” discourse, as well as its connotation of “home” or “kinship”, can be employed as a powerful strategy, or moral resource in the mobilisation and development of social movements in contemporary China (Chen, 2010; Wei, 2015). As Chen (2010) notes, compared with the legal and political implications of the concept of “citizenship”, the concept of “family” in Chinese culture has ethical legitimacy that can confront the state. In this vein, Wei’s engagement of queer research within Chinese family studies mainstreamed the queer. Furthermore, Wei positioned his research within a mainstream framework which is in line with the official agenda and serves the needs of the government (“the parenting problem is a great concern to the governments”).

Wei’s research strategies revealed an act of agency which involved a simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to heteronormativity. By drawing on the power of Chinese cultural tradition and normalising the queer families as “the same as the heterosexual”, he cantered and conformed to the heteronormative family values. At the same time, by submitting to the Party-state power and highlighting the research significance for the governments, Wei mainstreamed his queer research and thus disrupted heteronormativity. His strategies proved to be effective. Although queer research occupied a marginal position in receiving government funding in China, Wei was approved national funding for his research.

Public health was another framework that was employed by some participants to mainstream their queer research. For instance, as a scholar in medical science, Ma positioned his research within the “sexual health” framework, rather than conducting “pure queer research”.

Pure queer research is not supported by the university. The university leadership avoids addressing queer issues unless it’s within the area of sexual health education and research. The governments have attached great importance to AIDS prevention and STI (Sexually transmitted infections) control. I have published many articles in international journals and was awarded government funding for my research on the sexual health of the queer community. The results of my research on infection control have been adopted by some clinics, which can effectively improve the detection rate of AIDS in the queer community. (Ma Bulan, 42, Professor, Guangdong province)

The institutional heteronormativity in Ma’s university was evidenced by the leadership’s avoidance of addressing queer issues, as well as negative attitude towards “pure queer
research. However, positioning research within the “sexual health” framework enabled Ma to secure institutional acceptance and government funding. He also transformed his research to positive social impact, which in turn, built legitimacy for his research. This strategy can be situated in the broader social context of China. Due to the AIDS epidemic, the queer community was recruited for HIV surveillance by the Chinese government in 2003, hence gaining official recognition of their “existence” (He & Detels, 2005, p.826). Consequently, a prominent trend in the study of homosexuality has emerged since the 2000s in China (Kong, 2016). The dominant model of homosexuality studies in China shifted from a pathological biomedical science to a national public health framework (Kong, 2016). This reconceptualisation significantly opened space for research. As Kong (2016) indicates, “homosexuality can be openly discussed, examined, and researched as long as it is framed under ‘public health’.” (p. 504) In the global contexts, a similar facilitating impact of HIV/AIDS on sexuality research is also identified by international sexuality scholars (Dowsett, 2014; Epprecht, 2014; Msibi, 2014). Australian scholar Dowsett (2014), for instance, notes that “much health research and scholarship in the name of HIV/AIDS…have provided further legitimation for sexuality as a field of academic and policy inquiry” (p. 660). Drawing on this legitimacy, Ma published his research in international journals.

Ma’s research strategies expressed agency that involved both mastery and submission. He submitted to heteronormativity in his university by not conducting “pure queer research”. Instead, he mainstreamed his queer research within a sanctioned framework, by mobilising and submitting to various forms of power. These included the Party-state power by meeting the domestic needs for AIDS prevention and STI infection control in China, as well as the power of western knowledge production by engaging with important global issues in international journals. In so doing, he simultaneously disrupted the power operation of heteronormativity in his university which constrained queer research.

Echoing international queer academics’ experiences of legitimising their queer research (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014), I have three examples of shown participants’ mainstreaming queer research. The strategy of structuring queer research within a mainstream framework was not without limitation. When Han framed queer student research within “psychological crisis intervention”, he might reinforce the discourse of “queer student at risk” (Allen, 2015a; Quinlivan, 2002; Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004). This portrayal of queer students as “wounded identities” (Rasmussen & Crowley, 2004) might fail to represent diverse experiences of queer students and underrate their agency. When Wei sought to normalise queer families by showing that queer families are “the same as the heterosexual”, heterosexuality was still centred and non-normative ways of life were marginalised. In Ma's case, framing queer research under public health, as Kong (2016) notes, “played down the radical edge of (homo-)sexuality studies that link sex, desire and identity to ‘politics’ and ‘human rights’, which are highly sensitive terms in China” (p. 504). This conformity with the rules imposed by the authorities marked the limit of queer research in China.

Constitution of “dirty work” in the Chinese context
In this section, drawing on the key findings of this chapter, I unpack the constitution of dirty work (Irvine, 2014) in the Chinese context. To trouble the conventional perception that power is held by the authorities and denied to the gay academics, I highlight the nuances inherent in participants’ agency. This examination enables an understanding of gay academics that moves beyond victim presentations as the typical portrayal of “powerful censor/powerless researcher” power relations might imply.

In participants’ narratives, a plethora of institutional practices constructed queer research as problematic and risky, and thereby reinforced heterosexuality as normative identity in Chinese academia. These included editorial practices of covering sensitive words, deleting contents, rejecting queer research, reviewing practices that underrated queer research or deemed it ideologically inappropriate, hiring practices that would reject queer researchers, the administration that restricted conference on queer issues, as well as supervisors’ or leaders’ discouragement of queer research. This marginalisation of queer research experienced by participants seems to imply a relationship between powerless researcher and powerful editors, journal and funding reviewers, or university leaders. However, this oversimplified thinking may overlook participants’ agency in relation to the restriction of queer research and underestimate the complexity of queer research’s constitution as dirty work.

Rather than simply being passive, participants navigated the “dirtiness” of queer research in various ways. As junior researchers who were vulnerable in their need for queer research publications in mainstream disciplinary journals, Han and Tang compromised with editors on the requirement of deleting contents or covering words. Echoing Allen (2019a), these participants’ submission to the constraints of their research were mediated by their career stage and extent of dependence on publishers. By contrast, Luo, also as a junior researcher, showed less obedience to the restriction of queer research. Following his supervisor’s suggestion about changing the research topic, he replaced his proposal for a gay porn study with a gay media study - a less sensitive one but still with a queer focus. When his supervisor suggested he only includes gay media as a case within a broader study to obscure the queer focus, Luo “didn’t care and didn’t revise much”. This resistance was enabled by his mobility and career plan of working abroad, which was a luxury for other participants. In terms of publication, given the sensitivity of his research topics, Luo refused to publish queer research in Chinese journals and only published his research in English. In Tan’s case, he accepted institutional restrictions on the queer research conference, but was grateful for his institution’s permission to hold the conference after “so many procedures and explanations”. His negotiation with the institution about conference organisation was legitimised by his reputation as an established queer scholar.

Participants’ narratives also show the complexity of research censorship which resulted from various causes. It could be caused by personal discrimination towards queer people or research. For instance, Han’s article reviewer considered the de-pathologisation of transgender identity “far-left”, while Han suspected the editor “might be transphobic”. However, many narratives also show that the restriction of queer research did not always appear discriminatory. Su’s leader “kindly” suggested he change his research area for better career development. Similarly, the
reason Luo’s supervisor suggested he change or downplay queer research was actually that he supported Luo’s queer research and helped him to get the job. This finding echoes New Zealand scholar Allen’s (2019a) interaction with publishers about censorship of sexuality research publications. She finds that these decisions were often not discriminatory towards sexuality researchers but made in the best commercial interests of their business (Allen, 2019a). However, unlike the western context, this research shows that the censorship of queer research in China is deeply informed by the Chinese political system which restricts academic freedom and demands political loyalty. For instance, Luo perceived the institutional barriers to his research as “all self-censorship of departments”, which implied that the leadership was also under pressure from the higher-level authorities. Similarly, the institutional restriction of the queer research conference in Tan’s university was because “the leadership worried about possible political risks”. This power hierarchy in the educational/political structure that informed the (self-)censorship was particularly evident in the process of funding review. Chen and Han’s narratives show that the funders are under the control of higher authorities such as CCP propaganda departments.

These nuances in participants’ experiences of research censorship diverge from the typical representation which is structured by a “powerful censor/powerless researcher” binary in Chinese academia (Scholars at Risk, 2019). The restriction of queer research could result from discrimination against, protection of, or even support for queer researchers. Those institutions that restricted queer research, including universities, journals, and funders, exerted power over researchers and simultaneously submitted to the higher-level power. Researchers who were subjected to censorship could compromise with censorship, partially resist censorship by ignoring its expectation, play with the rules by mainstreaming queer research, or refuse to publish research in Chinese. These diverse experiences are important for capturing the complexity of power operation in the constitution of queer research as dirty work, which was far from a one-way relationship of exerting power over researchers. While Chinese gay academics submitted to heteronormativity and the Party-state power by keeping a low profile and censoring themselves, they also mobilised various forms of power to mainstream their queer research. The power that was strategically drawn on by participants to legitimise their research included the Party-state power, the power of international publications, and the power of dominant discourses, such as Chinese cultural tradition and “queer student as risk”. As such, gay academics’ expressions of agency in conducting queer research were not moments of freedom from the constraining regulations imposed by heteronormativity and the authorities. Rather, their agency involved a simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to heteronormativity and academic control in Chinese academia. Therefore, positioning them as only victims of censors fails to acknowledge their agency in navigating the constraints of conducting queer research. It also attributes censors too much power and overlooks the responsibility of the overarching political structure in the constitution of queer research as dirty.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown participants’ experiences of conducting queer research in Chinese academia. A range of challenges of conducting queer research were revealed in participants’
narratives. For instance, many closeted gay academics worried about potential sexual identity exposure by undertaking queer research. In conducting queer research, participants encountered obstacles to publishing, funding, employment, and departmental support. To lower the risks and enhance the legitimacy of their queer research, participants “kept a low profile”, or published their research in international journals, or positioned queer research within a mainstream framework that is in line with dominant discourses and Party-state needs. Informed by Irvine’s (2014) seminal research on sexuality research experiences, I unpacked the constitution of queer research as dirty work in the Chinese context by focusing on participants’ experiences of research censorship. A multitude of institutional practices of actors such as editors, reviewers, funders, supervisors, and the university leadership were demonstrated as means of marginalising queer research and reinforcing heteronormativity. This research censorship was informed by a broader political climate which imposed constraints on Chinese queer researchers and complicated the constitution of queer research as problematic and risky. By highlighting the instability of the “powerless researcher/powerful censor” binary which dominates the understanding of academic censorship in China (Scholars at Risk, 2019), it is argued that positioning queer researchers as only victims does not adequately capture their agency and the power operations at play. In conducting queer research in Chinese academia, gay academics expressed agency that involved a simultaneous mastery and submission in relation to heteronormativity.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

This thesis has examined key aspects of gay academics’ experiences of heteronormativity in Chinese universities. This final chapter looks back on this research and brings it to a conclusion. It begins by identifying and discussing the key findings and contributions offered by this thesis overall. Considering the unique context of this research, I highlight, in particular, how the findings in the Chinese context add knowledge to the understanding of heteronormativity and complicate discussions about the approaches for addressing queer issues in education. Following this, I conclude this chapter by considering the limitations of the present research and offer recommendations for future research in related fields.

Summary of findings

Drawing on interview narratives from 40 gay academics in China, this research explores their lived experiences of heteronormativity on Chinese campuses. In chapters 4 to 7, I examine participants’ navigation and disruption of heteronormativity in four different contexts, including their sexual identity management (Chapter 4), interactions with queer students (Chapter 5), teaching (Chapter 6) and research (Chapter 7) about queer issues. In what follows, I summarise the key findings of each data chapter and then discuss the overall findings of the thesis.

Existing literature shows that identity management lies at the heart of queer teachers’ professional experiences (Connell, 2015; Ferfolja, 2009; Griffin, 1991, 1992; Msibi, 2018). Filling a research gap on the focus of queer teachers’ identity management in the Chinese context, Chapter 4 explores gay academics’ experiences of managing sexual identity in Chinese universities. Governed by pervasive heteronormativity on campus, most participants were closeted in their institution and adopted various strategies to pass or cover (Griffin, 1991, 1992) as heterosexual. A main strategy was positioning themselves in heterosexual discourses by marrying a woman or making up a girlfriend. Identity management also involved distancing themselves from people on campus, in order to avoid colleagues’ attempts of matchmaking, as well as conversations which constantly involved family, marriage and parenting. Several participants made efforts to show excellent performance at work, to mitigate potential negative consequences of sexual identity exposure. However, each of these strategies has its limitations. Acting straight required constant effort to keep up the performance. Self-distancing from people, including their gay colleagues, reinforced their feeling of isolation. The stress of maintaining an outstanding professional performance could be so overwhelming that some participants left their jobs. The closet thus proved to be a site of fear and stress. However, this does not mean that closeted gay academics just submitted to heteronormativity and lacked agency. It is demonstrated that the closet might enable gay academics not only to pass as heterosexual, but also to challenge heteronormativity on campus.
To show that the closet also served as a site of agency, I highlight closeted gay academics’ expression of agency in subtle forms. For instance, some participants refused to occupy heterosexual subjective positions by showing overt disinterest in colleagues’ attempts of matchmaking. Thus, they troubled the naturalness of heterosexuality by performing alternative ways of being heterosexual. Instead of distancing themselves from people on campus, several participants connected and built relationships with their queer colleagues, and thereby challenged the heteronormative forces that isolated and erased queer existence on campus. Another way that some participants disrupted heteronormativity was contextually positioning themselves as neither inside nor outside the closet and just letting others “suspect” their sexual identity. By performing shifting subjectivities, these participants blurred the boundaries within binaries such as “gay/straight”, “in/out”, “visibility/invisibility” that scaffold heteronormativity. These subjective positions occupied by gay academics were political in the Chinese context, where the importance of marriage and family is emphasised by the traditional Chinese culture and the Party-state as the foundation of social stability and harmony (Guo, 2010; Sigley, 2002, 2006; To, 2013, 2015).

Chapter 5 examines gay academics’ interactions with queer students, with a focus on their support for queer students. Informed by queer theory which “shakes and unsettles sedimented knowledge” (Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 333), participants’ narratives are used to interrogate some dominant discourses in education found in western literature. This work extends a body of queer research in education that provides a critique of normative notions about queer teachers and queer students, including the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004), “queer teacher as role model” (Khayatt, 1997; Russell, 2010), and “queer student at risk” (Allen, 2015a; Quinlivan, 2002). Inconsistency between these discourses and participants’ narratives is foregrounded to interrogate a pervasive idea that, queer teachers are the ones who can best support queer students by coming out and providing a role model (Barnard, 1994).

Unlike many western queer teachers who are visible and serve as a role model for queer students (DeJean, 2007, 2010; A. Gray, 2014; Linley et al., 2016; Neary, 2017; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Russell, 2014; Russell, 2020; Thomas-Durrell, 2020), many participants in this research supported queer students without publicly coming out on campus. Their approaches to supporting queer students included personally disclosing sexual identity to queer students via gay “dating apps” - to help them accept their gay identity - or caring about queer students without coming out - in order not to “scare” closeted queer students. I suggest that such support of queer students on an individual basis should be acknowledged as strategic and feasible, considering the social and political context of China, where coming out publicly or an institutional approach to addressing queer issues can be too risky as options for queer teachers.

Moving beyond the typical image of a supportive queer teacher, Chapter 5 demonstrates that gay academics did not always support queer students or challenge heteronormativity on campus. Some participants’ interactions with queer students, such as making fun of queer couples, “tolerating” queer students, and refusing to interact with “flamboyant” students, were heteronormative and marginalising. Several participants positioned queer students within a victim framework and might misinterpret their needs and provide unnecessary support. Therefore, the notion that queer teachers are the ones who can provide queer students with an ideal of behaviour and best support them, underestimates the complexity of their interactions.
and overestimates their “similarity” based on sexual identity. Rather, queer teachers’ practices may reinforce the heteronormative culture on campus, which troubles the pervasive assumption between queer identity and anti-heteronormative practice. It is also argued that a focus on queer teachers’ responsibility for supporting queer students could impose double injustice on them, as they need to endure heteronormativity and are tasked to challenge heteronormativity. This unethical expectation overlooks queer teachers’ needs as recipients of support on heteronormative campuses, as well as the responsibility of the institution to provide an equitable and queer-friendly environment.

Chapter 6 explores gay academics’ experiences of addressing queer issues in the classroom in China. Various concerns about addressing queer issues in the classroom are identified by participants. For instance, closeted participants were constrained from addressing queer issues in class by the potential risk of sexual identity exposure. Some participants worried that expressing support of queer people would result in students’ negative reaction to their teaching. Furthermore, gay academics’ teaching about queer issues was subjected to speech surveillance and censorship by the university authorities. A range of techniques of classroom surveillance and censorship informed by the increasingly repressive politics were revealed, such as CCTV surveillance, teaching inspection, teaching content censorship, as well as the Student Informant System. The chilling effect induced by these political control techniques in gay academics’ classrooms captured how the top-down Party-state power consolidated heteronormativity in Chinese universities.

Despite a variety of concerns, many participants adopted various strategies to lower the risks and enhance the legitimacy of addressing queer issues in class. These strategies included “mentioning it only in passing”, “hiding” queer issues in broader topics, addressing queer issues as a heterosexual, as well as avoiding revealing a supportive standpoint. Participants’ pedagogical approaches to addressing queer issues could be largely categorised into two: an inclusion-based approach that sought to appreciate, tolerate, and validate subordinate sexual identities; and a queer approach that interrogated normative identity and notion. I unpack the queer meanings in some participants’ teaching which could be constructed as queer pedagogy (Allen, 2015b; Britzman, 1995; Shlasko, 2005), such as queer reading practices of classic Chinese literature, and disruption to heteronormative assumptions in social norms. I argue that the queerness of their teaching manifested in its potential conflict with the social and political constraints in the heteronormative and repressive context of Chinese universities.

Chapter 7 explores gay academics’ experiences of conducting queer research in China. Participants reported various concerns about conducting queer research in Chinese academia. For instance, some closeted participants worried that they might be outed by their queer research, and they might face an ethical dilemma of whether to disclose their sexual identity to their queer participants. Conducting queer research in China also meant obstacles to publishing, funding, and departmental support. A range of institutional practices are identified as means of marginalising queer research and reinforcing heteronormativity in Chinese academia. These include journal article review and editing processes, funding allocation, conference organisation, and employment. To lower the potential risks of conducting queer research, some participants “kept a low profile” and avoided drawing attention to their queer research. Several participants...
with western education backgrounds enhanced the legitimacy of conducting queer research by publishing queer research in international journals. Another strategy to legitimise queer research was positioning their queer research within a mainstream framework that aligns with official policies and Party-state ideologies. In these ways, gay academics opened up space for queer research in Chinese academia.

Drawing on gay academics’ experiences of conducting queer research, I also unpack the constitution of queer research in China as *dirty work*, “an occupation that is simultaneously socially necessary and stigmatized” (Irvine, 2014, p. 632). To demonstrate the complexity in the constitution of dirty work, I highlight the nuances in participants’ experiences of research censorship that diverge from the typical representation within a binary framework of “powerful censor/powerless researcher” (Scholars at Risk, 2019). For example, the restriction of queer research could result from colleagues’ protection, or even support of, queer researchers. Those censors that restricted queer research, including the university leadership, journal editors and reviewers, funding reviewers, exerted power over queer researchers and simultaneously submitted to the Party-state power imposed by the higher-level authorities. Some participants did not obey, or just ignored, the restrictions to their queer research. I argue that positioning queer researchers as simply victims does not adequately capture their agency and underestimates the complexity of power operation at play. It attributes censors with too much power and overlooks the responsibility of the overarching CCP political structure in the constitution of queer research as problematic and risky.

In response to the question Butler (2006) has posed: “Is it possible to inhabit the norms in order to mobilize the rules differently?” (p. 532), this thesis can be seen as an empirical example of such agency. By demonstrating gay academics’ experiences of navigating and challenging heteronormativity in Chinese universities, this research captures their subjectivities as both closeted and agentic. That is, gay academics conformed to the heterosexual norms and political control by staying in the closet and practising self-censorship at work, while they simultaneously actively and strategically challenged the constraining forces imposed by heteronormativity and the university authorities. Such expression of agency unsettles the typical victim representations of Chinese gay men (United Nations Development Programme, 2016) and Chinese academics (Scholars at Risk, 2019) that might imply a lack of agency. The agency exercised by gay academics was not moments of freedom from the dominating regulations of norms and power. Rather, their agency involved simultaneous mastery and submission. This framing of agency is enabled by Butler’s concept of subjectification (Butler, 1990, 1997b; Davies, 2006). In a Butlerian analysis, agency is situated in the performative constitution of the subject where the regulatory norms can be recited and reworked (Gowlett, 2014). This formulation of agency troubles the dominant conception of agency within the binary framework of either coercion or escape. In this way, this thesis offers a critique of the dominant discourse of the “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004) and extends existing literature that documents closeted queer teachers’ agency (Brockenbrough, 2012; Ferfolja, 2007b, 2014; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2018, 2019).

**Contributions of the study**
Heteronormativity in Chinese education

Echoing existing queer scholarship in education (Allen, 2006b; Epstein et al., 2003; Gray et al., 2016), this research confirms that educational institutions are heteronormative spaces. Using heteronormativity (Warner, 1993) as a key theoretical concept to analyse Chinese higher education, this thesis complicates the understanding of heteronormativity’s power operation in the educational settings. By capturing gay academics’ experiences of heteronormativity, I join a discussion issued by Herz and Johansson (2015, p. 1011): “What power structures and forms of relations are intended to investigate and criticize under the heading of heteronormativity?” The scope of this discussion is beyond sexuality, as heteronormative notions and lifestyles are connected to broader societal institutions and perpetuated by political structures. As they explain, “when we use the concept of heteronormativity, we are consequently investigating not only how sexualities are expressed and performed but also how a more extensive societal system is organized, structured, and maintained.” (Herz & Johansson, 2015, p.1012). In this vein, research on Chinese gay academics offers insights into heteronormativity’s manifestation and mechanism in a non-western and non-democratic context.

The particularity of the Chinese context lies in that heteronormativity is perpetuated and consolidated by traditional Chinese culture which historically emphasises heteronormative lifestyles such as marriage and parenting (Li, 1998; Sigley, 2002, 2006; To, 2013, 2015), as well as repressive politics which propagates Party-state ideologies and mutes non-normative voices. Unpacking how heteronormativity works in Chinese universities, this thesis combines what Herz and Johansson (2015) identify as two ways of approaching heteronormativity in empirical studies: a bottom-up version and a top-down version (Chapter 1, see the explanation of heteronormativity). It is shown that heteronormativity operates at both individual and institutional levels on Chinese campuses. For instance, the heteronormative nature of campus culture in Chinese universities is demonstrated by the fact that heteronormative lifestyle such as marriage and parenting was the constant topic of daily conversations between colleagues, and many participants often had to deal with colleagues’ attempts at matchmaking (Chapter 4). The heteronormative forces were so pervasive that they even operated in gay academics’ interactions with queer students (Chapter 5). Heteronormativity could be so powerful that it was even internalised by some gay academics and manifested in their “homotolerance” (Røthing, 2008) of queer students, which troubles the pervasive notion that queer teachers must be the ones who can best support queer students (Chapter 5). From a top-down perspective, heteronormativity was embedded in Chinese universities via a range of institutional practices, such as the university labour union’s work at matchmaking for teachers (Chapter 4) and the absence of institutional support for queer students and teachers (Chapter 5).

Importantly, the institutional heteronormativity in Chinese universities is scaffolded and reinforced by the Party-state power. Led and controlled by CCP authorities, Chinese universities are required to conform to and propagate the (hetero)normative Party-state ideologies (Scholars at Risk, 2019; Tenzin, 2017; Yan, 2014). For instance, the CCP leadership censored teaching and student activities involving queer issues (Chapter 4 & 6), excluded a gay student living with HIV (Chapter 5), blamed a participant who was reported by his student
and thereby exposed his sexuality (Chapter 5), and constrained queer research from being supported and funded in Chinese academia (Chapter 7). The naming and identification of government endorsed sexual injustice demonstrated in detail in this thesis suggests an urgent need to promote sexual equity and diversity in Chinese higher education. In line with the top-down analysis of heteronormativity in broader Chinese context (Ning & Poon, 2021; Song, 2021), the heteronormative regulation on campus constitutes political control and state violence in Chinese society. This significant role of the Party-state in the power operation of heteronormativity in education extends a slim body of research that examines heteronormativity in education in non-democratic contexts such as Iran (Kjaran, 2020; Naeimi & Kjaran, 2021) and Singapore (Liew, 2014). Such a top-down operation of heteronormativity embedded in educational institutions contrasts sharply with the power operation of heteronormativity in western contexts. By applying the theoretical concept of heteronormativity in a different context, and unpacking its power operation in a manner different to what is commonly expected, this research destabilises conventional understanding of heteronormativity in education.

Queer research/politics in China

By interrogating what is “normal” and mundane in Chinese universities as problematic and heteronormative, this research is an attempt to apply queer insights in the Chinese educational context. It is inspired by Allen’s (2015c) call for queering the academy as a new direction in LGBT research in higher education. A queer lens enables this research to identify a range of institutional practices and interpersonal behaviours as means of privileging heterosexuality and policing homosexuality, thereby capturing the pervasive operation of heteronormativity on Chinese campuses. This work also involves teasing out the invisible queer meanings in the professional lives of seemingly compliant gay academics. For instance, one contribution this research can make to queer studies in education might be the manifestation of queer pedagogy (Britzman, 1995) in the Chinese context. As Chapter 6 shows, some participants’ educational practices unsettled normative discourses which were in line with queer pedagogy. These gay academics’ enactment of queerness in university classrooms in China broadens existing documentation of queer pedagogy in the western context (Allen, 2015b; Luhmann, 1998; Shlasko, 2005; Staley & Leonard, 2020). As what is queer is always contingent and relational, this shift of pedagogical context from the west to China means the ways that queer pedagogy acts vary. As Allen (2015) indicates, “the constantly mutating nature of queer means what is queer one moment, may not be the next” (p. 773). The queerness of gay academics’ teaching lay in its tension with constraining forces in the Chinese classrooms where non-normative expressions were highly risky (Chapter 6). What these participants’ queer pedagogy challenged was not only heteronormativity, but also the surveillance and censorship that inhibited any non-normative voices in Chinese universities. Such subversion of normativity scaffolded by the Party-state power echoes Allen’s (2015b) call for queer pedagogy’s potential beyond gender and sexuality. As she suggests, “the normal” that queer pedagogy can trouble “might refer to any normative action, text, movement, place, sound, smell, sight and materiality” (p. 773). In this vein, this research offers an empirical example of exploring queer pedagogy’s potential for unsettling normativity of repressive politics in China.
One may wonder whether queer theory can be conceptually applied in the Chinese context, given the huge contextual difference between China and the West. Indeed, queer theory is often adopted as an anti-identity political stance which is developed from the reflection of the western gay liberation movement. As Allen (2015) indicates, “queer theory is unlikely to have emerged without a prior identity politics to deconstruct” (p. 681). In contrast with the west, where coming out has become an “imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004), queer people still have extremely low visibility in Chinese society (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). According to a linear and developmental mindset of “catching up” with the West, the political approach that is in need in China seems to be identity politics instead of queer politics. However, this research shows that collective activism and public advocacy could be options too risky for gay academics in Chinese universities. Instead of coming out, the typical political tool of identity politics, gay academics could work "queerly" to challenge heteronormativity on campus.

Therefore, although queer theory/politics have been critiqued by some scholars as less effective in the organisation of social movements in contesting oppression (Connell, 2010; Rasmussen et al., 2014), the individual approach to transgression can more feasibly open queer possibilities in China. As I have discussed in Chapter 5, unlike many western scholars who propose an institutional approach to addressing queer issues in education (Allen, 2019b; Formby, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2012, 2013; Walton, 2011), I suggest that queer disruption on an individual basis should be acknowledged as strategic and daring in the increasingly repressive climate under Xi’s presidency. This role that queer theory can play in China echoes Russian queer scholar Kondakov’s (2016) argument in the repressive context of Russia. Considering the political repression of homosexuality, as well as fluid subjectivities of Russian queer people, he argues that “queer theory is particularly important for Russia, where identity politics and identity paradigms in social science make little sense, whereas ways of exploring practices and the fluidness of sexualities and relations provide a better understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves.” (p. 114) A refocus on queer politics from identity politics means a shift of expectation and understanding of queer teachers. That is, queer teachers’ coming out and being a role model, which are often expected and celebrated in the western context (Barnard, 1994; DeJean, 2007), might not be the only mark of agency for queer teachers in China. It also means rejecting the pervasive notion that being closeted is just submissive to heteronormativity and revisiting the closet as a queer site where a range of transgression can actively happen.

Limitations and future research

This section draws attention to the limitations of this thesis and suggests future research. Although the 40 participants of this research have shown a range of demographic diversity, most of them are in their 30s, lecturer level, and from big cities in relatively prosperous areas of China. This might be because it was more difficult to recruit gay academics who might risk more if they participated in this research. For instance, gay academics in their 40s or 50s, or in a senior position in their institution, or in rural areas, might be under more pressure to pass as heterosexual. Some of them might have married a woman (Wang, 2019; Zhu, 2018), which means exposure of their sexual identity could damage their professional and personal life.
Therefore, although this research has presented rich and diverse experiences of gay academics in China, it largely reflected young and junior gay academics’ experiences in developed areas of China and the participant recruitment approach limited its potential for exploring more marginalised experiences.

Furthermore, even within the data this research collected, many themes have not been presented or expanded, due to the length of Ph.D. research. These themes include: participants’ experiences of constructing masculinity; participants’ assessment of sexual culture on campus; participants’ experiences of using gay “dating apps” on campus; participants’ consideration about intimate relationships with gay students; participants’ experience of working with HIV; participants’ perception of political control in universities; and participants’ experiences of AIDS education and prevention in Chinese universities. By listing these underexplored aspects of gay academics’ experiences, it is clear to see that lots of lived experiences and queer possibilities are still to be explored in queer teachers’ professional life and our knowledge is still limited.

As the first study of queer teachers in China, to the best of my knowledge, this research focused on gay academics’ experiences. Given the particular features of participants regarding gender, sexuality and educational institution, findings of this research cannot be generalised to queer teachers as a whole. For instance, a cisgender gay professor’s workplace experience might be quite different from that of a lesbian teacher in early childhood education, or a transgender teacher in an elementary school. Future research could be conducted to explore experiences of various queer identities in all spheres of Chinese education, including lesbian teachers, bisexual teachers, transgender teachers, as well as queer teachers in early childhood education, primary and secondary schools. Intersectional experiences of Chinese queer teachers can be explored to show how multiple identities such as sexuality, gender, race, class, and age, shape their professional life in China. Such work can extend existing literature on queer teachers informed by an intersectional perspective (Bracho & Hayes, 2020; Msibi, 2018, 2019; Powell, 2020).

One research topic that particularly fascinates me is overseas Chinese queer teachers’ experiences in global context. When I worked as a lecturer in a Chinese university in 2014, I was appointed to teach Chinese at a Confucius Institute in Yekaterinburg, Russia and worked there for one year. My work as an overseas teacher followed the enactment of the notorious Russian Federal law against “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” (The Guardian, 2013). This law was used by conservative activists to organise public campaigns against “propaganda” in the universities, forcing many queer scholars to leave their workplaces (Kondakov, 2016). In such a climate, I had to cautiously stay in the closet and censor my sexuality at work during that period. However, I did address queer issues with my Russian students in my class about Chinese language and culture (Cui, 2015, 2016, 2018). To date, there are over 500 Confucius Institutes around the world. As overseas teachers who are sent by Chinese universities, Chinese teachers in Confucius Institutes are governed by both local and Chinese institutions. Exploration of overseas Chinese queer teachers’ experiences thus necessitates contextualising queer teacher research in both Chinese and global contexts. Such contextual duality complicates queer teachers’ decision making about coming out and addressing queer issues in the classroom. For instance, even if teaching in a foreign university,
where the campus climate is queer-friendly, Chinese queer teachers may still have concerns about disclosing their sexual identity to their colleagues in the Confucius Institute. However, even in countries where the law or religion penalises or criminalises homosexuality, Chinese queer teachers might still be able to open queer possibilities in their teaching of Chinese language and culture (Cui, 2015, 2016, 2018). Such work can add knowledge to the slim body of literature on queer teachers’ experiences of teaching overseas that involve navigation of both national and social borders (Mizzi, 2013, 2015, 2016).

While this thesis draws on narratives of gay academics, most of whom were closeted on campus, it is also worth exploring the experiences of queer teachers who were openly out, or selectively disclosed their sexual identity to people on Chinese campuses. Considering the unique social and political climate in China, being out as a queer teacher on Chinese campuses may involve a navigation of fears and risks that are different from those documented in the western context (Connell, 2015; Griffin, 1991, 1992; Wei, 2020). As a former Chinese academic who was penalised by my institution because of my coming out and queer activism (Appendix A; Allnow, 2021; Inkstone, 2020, 2021; PinkNews, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2020), I feel obligated to write an autoethnographic account to fully document those dark days in my life, which are painful to recall but impossible to forget. As I wrote at the beginning of this thesis, my own identity and experience drove me to come to New Zealand to start this journey of queer teacher research. This thesis does not mean an end, but rather another beginning. The nature of the queer concept as “an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming” (Jagose, 1996, p. 131), means a queer journey will never end. This journey opens up more radical possibilities.
Appendices

Appendix A: The disciplinary notice I received in my former institution

This disciplinary notice shows that my teaching (about queer issues) in the classroom "caused harmful effect" and was perceived by the university as an “serious teaching accident”. To cover their discrimination against homosexuality, the university leadership did not mention anything about homosexuality in this disciplinary notice. However, in my meeting with two Vice-Chancellors, I was reprimanded for my coming out, as well as my teaching about queer issues, and was ordered to provide a written guarantee that I would never again talk about homosexuality in my classroom and on the internet.
【大学同志教师研究招雷参与者】说出您的故事！

您好。我是崔乐。我是一名男同志，也曾是广州的高校教师。现在我是新西兰奥克兰大学的一名博士生，我在为我的博士论文研究寻找参与者，我的论文选题是关于中国大学的同志教师。

如果您是一名男同志，而且现在或过去曾是国内的大学教师，我邀请您参与这项研究。您会在半年内被访谈1-4次，每次1-2小时。

研究将保证:知情同意、自愿参与、私密性。您的姓名、学校等个人信息将会抹去。

您的故事将成为重要的学术数据，帮助别人理解同志教师的生活，促进教育的多元与公正。谢谢！

更多信息，请联系我：
微信: atwoba 邮箱 cle617@aucklanduni.ac.nz

本研究获得奥克兰大学学术伦理委员会批准。
Appendix C: Ethics Approval

UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE (UAHPEC)

03-Oct-2018

MEMORANDUM TO:

Prof Louisa Allen
Critical Studies in Education

Re: Application for Ethics Approval (Our Ref. 022036): Approved

The Committee considered your application for ethics approval for your study entitled Gay Academics’ Lived Experiences of Heteronormativity in China.

We are pleased to inform you that ethics approval has been granted for a period of three years.

The expiry date for this approval is 03-Oct-2021.

If the project changes significantly, you are required to submit a new application to UAHPEC for further consideration.

If you have obtained funding other than from UniServices, send a copy of this approval letter to the Activations team in the Research Office at ro-awards@auckland.ac.nz. For UniServices contracts, send a copy of the approval letter to the Contract Manager, UniServices.

The Chair and the members of UAHPEC would be happy to discuss general matters relating to ethics approvals. If you wish to do so, please contact the UAHPEC Ethics Administrators at ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz in the first instance.

Please quote Protocol number 022036 on all communication with the UAHPEC regarding this application.

(This is a computer generated letter. No signature required.)

UAHPEC Administrators
University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee

cc. Head of Department / School, Critical Studies in Education
Additional information:

1. Do not forget to fill in the 'approval wording' on the Participant Information Sheets, Consent Forms and/or advertisements, giving the dates of approval and the reference number. This needs to be completed, before you use them or send them out to your participants.

2. At the end of three years, or if the study is completed before the expiry date, please advise the Ethics Administrators of its completion.

3. Should you require an extension or need to make any changes to the project, please complete the online Amendment Request form associated with this approval number giving full details along with revised documentation. If requested before the current approval expires, an extension may be granted for a further three years, after which a new application must be submitted.
Appendix D: Interview questions (English and Chinese)

What motivated you to participate in this study?

1. **Workplace experience**
   - Can you share some of your workplace experiences as a gay teacher?
   - Can you share some positive experiences in your university as a gay teacher?
   - Can you share some negative experiences in your university as a gay teacher?
   - Can you share some experiences related to students, including queer students?
   - Can you share some experiences related to colleagues or university leaders?
   - Can you share some experiences related to other gay teachers in your university?

**Navigating gay identity in the university**

- Have you come out to students, colleagues, or leaders in university? Why?
- Are you fully out or implicitly out, or only to certain people? Why?
- What is your approach to coming out? For example, how do you say or hint you are gay? In what context(s) did you choose to come out?
- What enables you to be out? What prevents you from being out?
- What positive or negative consequences occurred as a result of coming out/not coming out?
- Do you think your previous disclosure of your gay identity in the university was a good or bad choice?
- Have you been introduced to potential girlfriends by colleagues, or been asked what kind of girl do you like? How did you deal with this kind of situation?

2. **Marriage**

- What is your marital status? How did you respond to other people’s interest in your marital status in university?
- Did you experience pressure to marry by the university? How do you deal with it?
- Do you think marital status can influence your professional identity, for example, your profile as a university teacher, or your career development? Why/why not?
Many gay teachers in China choose to marry a heterosexual woman or a lesbian. What is your position on this?

Do you have any plans for marriage? With a woman, a man, or a transgender? Why?

What is your position on gay marriage?

3. **Sexual culture of the university**

Do you think the culture of your university is queer-friendly? Why/why not?

How do you evaluate whether the culture of your university is queer-friendly or not?

How does the sexual culture of your university affect your experience as a gay teacher?

Can you share some experiences related to university policy?

If you had a magic wand which could change your experience in your university as a gay teacher, what if anything would you change?

How do you think you can/or how did you change the sexual culture of your university?

4. **Identity dynamics**

Do you think for a gay teacher, there is a tension between sexual identity and professional identity? Why? How do you navigate this tension?

Do you think sexual identity may influence your professional identity? For example, your choice of this profession, or your career development? How?

Do you think your professional identity may influence your sexual identity? For example, does being a teacher facilitate gay identity disclosure or inhibit you from coming out in university? Does being a teacher affect your gender expression as a gay man at university? If so, how?

5. **Teaching**

Did you talk about queer issues in class? Why did you talk/avoid talking about queer issues in class?

How did you talk about queer issues in class? How did the students respond? Were there any positive or negative consequences resulting from your teaching about queer issues?

How do you think you can/did you change the sexual attitude of students by teaching? Are there barriers to doing this?

6. **Resistance**

In addition to teaching, do you think you can change the status quo faced by queer people in university? Is this something you are interested in?
In addition to barriers to teaching queer issues, are there any other barriers to changing the status quo faced by queer people in university? If you have one, what is your strategy to overcome the difficulty?

Have there been any positive or negative consequence resulting from what you did to change the status quo faced by queer people in university? For example, did resistance bring about fulfilment? What cost (if any) did you pay for your resistance? How did your resistance affect your life?
访谈提纲仅供参考，您的谈话不需局限于提纲，您会发现下面的有些问题可能很难回答，不要紧，这些问题不一定适合每个人，您可以选择地回答。访谈可以是我们双向的互动、分享，你同样可以问我问题。感谢！

访谈问题：

您的个人信息：年龄、在大学工作的时间、任教的学科、职称、学历、学校类型（不需透露校名）、学校所处的地域。（在之后审核访谈转录文字时可更改或模糊化个人信息，以免暴露身份）

您自我认同的性身份：同性恋、同志、gay、酷儿？为什么？

请问你为什么想要参与这项研究？

1. 职场经历
   - 作为一名同志教师，你能否分享一些你的职场经历？
   - 作为一名同志教师，你能否分享一些你的积极、正面的职场经历？
   - 作为一名同志教师，你能否分享一些你的负面、消极的职场经历？
   - 你能否分享一些关于学生，包括同志学生的经历？
   - 你能否分享一些关于同事或大学领导的经历？
   - 你能否分享一些关于你的大学的其他同志教师的经历？

在大学应对同志身份

- 你在大学向学生、同事或领导出柜了吗？为什么？
- 你在大学是完全公开同志身份、还是含蓄地表露同志身份，还是只向特定一些人出柜？为什么？
- 你用什么方式出柜？例如，你怎么说或者暗示你是同志？在什么样的情境下你选择出柜？
- 什么使你能够出柜？什么阻止你出柜？
- 你出柜或没有出柜导致了哪些积极或消极的结果？
- 你认为自己过去在你的大学公开同志身份是一个好的决定还是不好的决定？
你的同事给你介绍过女朋友吗？或者，你被问过喜欢什么类型的女孩吗？你怎么应对这类情况？

你在学校会使用同志社交软件吗？在上面会透露个人信息吗？通过社交软件会与同志学生有交流吗？如何交流？

你以后打算出柜吗？打算什么情况下出柜？你觉得怎样就算出柜的时机成熟了呢？

2. 婚姻

你目前的婚姻状况是什么？你在学校怎么应对别人对你婚姻状况的兴趣？

你经历过大学施加的婚姻压力吗？你怎么应对？

你认为婚姻状况会影响你的职业身份吗？比如，婚姻状况会影响你作为大学教师的形象，或者你的职业发展吗？为什么？

许多中国的男同性恋教师选择跟一个异性恋女人或女同性恋结婚，你怎么看？

你有结婚的计划吗？为什么？

你对同性婚姻的看法是什么？

3. 大学的性文化

你认为你的大学文化是同志友善的吗？为什么？

你怎样评估你的大学文化是否是同志友善的？

你的大学的性文化如何影响你作为一个同志教师的经验？

你能分享一些跟大学政策相关的经历吗？

如果你有一个魔法棒能够改变你作为同志教师在你的学校的生活，你希望发生什么改变？

你认为你可以做什么/你做过什么来改变你的大学的性文化？

4. 身份的互动

作为一枚同志教师，你是否认为性身份与职业身份之间存在一种矛盾或冲突？为什么？你如何应对这种矛盾冲突？中国很强调“为人师表、师道尊严”，作为同志教师，你怎么理解？

你是否认为性身份会影响你的职业身份？例如，性身份是否会影响你的职业选择或职业发展？怎样影响？

你是否认为你的职业身份会影响你的性身份？例如，身为一名教师是否有助于还是阻碍你在大学公开身份？教师身份会影响你作为一名同志在大学的性别表达吗？如果会有影响，是如何影响的？
5. 教学
   o 你有在课堂上谈论同志议题吗？为什么你会/避免在课题上谈论同志议题？
   o 你如何在课堂上谈论同志议题？学生们如何回应？你在课题上谈论同志议题是否导致了一些正面或负面的结果？
   o 你认为怎样通过教学来改变学生们的性态度？做这些存在哪些阻碍？
   o 在你的学术研究中，会涉及同志议题吗？

6. 反抗
   o 对于改变学校里的同志处境或争取平等权益，你认为阻力和困难是什么？如何应对或推动？
   o 除了教学之外，你是否认为自己可以改变大学里同志的处境？你对此感兴趣吗？
   o 除了教授同志议题的阻碍之外，改变大学里同志的处境还有其他阻碍吗？如果有，你克服困难的策略是什么？
   o 你为改变大学里同志处境所做的事是否产生了一些积极或消极的结果？例如，反抗是否为你带来成就感？你为反抗付出了什么代价？你的反抗如何影响了你的生活？
   o 我很希望访谈到与异性恋女人结婚的已婚同志教师，但很难接触到他们。你了解这个群体的生存状态么？你觉得他们为什么很少参与本研究？

有什么你觉得很重要但是我们没有谈到的问题吗？

多谢！
CONSENT FORM (CF)
(THE FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF SIX YEARS)

Project title: Gay Academics’ Lived Experiences of Heteronormativity in China
Name of Supervisors: Prof Louisa Allen and Dr John Fenaughty
Name of Student Researcher: Cui Le

I (participant) have read the Participant Information Sheet (PIS), and have understood the purpose and the method of the research. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that my participation in this research is completely voluntary (which means I do not have to participate if I do not want to). My participation or non-participation will not affect my relationship with any parties, including the person from which I get the advertisement for this study.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this research and withdraw my data at any time before the data collection is completed (1 May 2019) without giving reason.
- I understand that I do not need to reveal my identity if I do not want to. I can choose a pseudonym for myself in this study.
- I understand that data collected from me will be around the experiences of gay academics in China. Interviews will be conducted face-to-face or through instant messengers such as QQ or Wechat. Each interview will last approximately 1 to 2 hours. I may be interviewed up to 4 times over 6 months. As common themes emerge from different participants’ interviews, I may need to provide more information related to these. I can feel free to say anything; also, I don’t have to answer if I don’t feel comfortable.
- I understand that I may also be invited to add document information related to interviews such as written documents (e.g., my own academic publication relating to gender and sexuality and diaries about my life), and official documents (e.g., official regulation about sexuality in university, documents about administrative penalty from my university as a consequence of my activism). The diaries will be existing diaries about my workplace experiences as a gay academic that I have already written or are in the process of writing. The official documents will be university regulations about gender and sexuality and will be
obtained from me instead of third parties. Should the researcher use any information from these documents the identifying information will be changed.

- I agree / do not agree to be audio-recorded by digital voice recorder. Interviews will be transcribed by the researcher (Cui Le) if recorded.
- I wish / do not wish to receive a transcript of my interview for reading, editing, or withdrawing certain parts of the data within 2 weeks from receipt of the transcript.
- I understand that all data will be stored in a secure location for 6 years and then destroyed through a secure disposal service.
- I understand that in the unlikely situation that I experience psychological distress during my participation, I can choose to stop the interview and withdraw from the research and any of their data at any time before the data collection is completed (1 May 2019) without giving reason. I will be provided with locally available support services such as a sexuality counselling service, to use if I so wish.
- I understand that confidentiality will always be maintained by the researcher as best as possible to the best of his ability.
- I wish/do not wish to receive a summary of findings, which can be emailed to me at this email address: ________________________.

Name: _______________ Signature: _______________ Date: ___________
知情同意书（有效期六年）

项目名称：中国男同志大学教师应对异性恋正统性的生命经验

导师姓名：Louisa Allen 教授、John Fenaughty 博士

研究者：崔乐

我（研究参与者）已经阅读了研究参与信息，理解了研究目的与方法。我可以咨询与研究相关的问题，并得到满意的答复。

• 我同意参与本研究。
• 我明白我参与研究是完全自愿的（如果我不想参与，可以不参与）。
• 我的参与与否不会影响我与任何一方的关系，包括发给我研究招募广告的人。
• 我明白我有权退出研究，有权在数据收集结束（2019 年 5 月 1 日）前的任何时间无理由撤回数据。
• 我明白如果我不想公开我的身份就可以不公开，我可以选择一个化名。
• 我明白数据收集将围绕着中国高校同志教师的经验。访谈可以面对面，也可以通过 QQ、微信等即时通讯工具。每次访谈约持续 1-2 小时，我可能在六个月内被访谈不超过 4 次。当一些共同的主题从不同参与者的访谈中浮现后，我可能需要提供更多相关信息。我可以畅所欲言，如果我觉得不舒服的问题不需要回答。
• 我明白可能被邀请补充一些与访谈相关的文件信息，例如个人书写的文件（例如我与性别相关的学术发表、生活日志）、官方文件（例如，大学与性别相关的官方规定，因参与社会行动而受到的学校行政处分的文件）。日志是指我已写或正在写的，与同志教师职场经历相关的已有的日志。官方文件指大学与性别相关的规定，由我、而非第三方获得。如果研究者使用这些文件的信息，我的可识别信息将会被改变以保证私密性。
• 我同意／不同意 被录音。如果访谈录音，录音将被研究者（崔乐）转写。
• 我希望／不希望 得到录音的文字，并在收到文字两周内阅读、修改或撤回部分数据。
• 我明白所有数据会被在新西兰的安全位置保存六年，并以安全的方式销毁。
• 我明白即使可能性下，如果在参与过程中经受心理压力，我可以选择中断访谈、退出研究，或在收集数据结束（2019 年 5 月 1 日）前的任何时间无理由撤回任何数据。如果我愿意，我会得到当地可得的支持服务，如性别问题的咨询服务。
• 我明白研究者会尽最大可能性将私密性做到最好。
• 我希望／不希望收到一份简要的研究结果，可以发到我的邮箱或微信
姓名: _______________ 签名: _______________ 日期: ___________

本研究由奥克兰大学学术伦理委员会于 2018 年 10 月 3 日许可，有效期三年。编号 022036
Appendix F: Examples of coded interview transcripts

A. So, mathematics is something that I often teach, and I try to make it interesting for students. How do you feel about teaching mathematics?

B. I am teaching mathematics because it is interesting for me, and I think it is important to teach it well. Mathematics can be quite abstract, but it is also very useful in real life.

A. Have you had any previous experience teaching mathematics?

B. Yes, I taught mathematics in a junior high school for a few years before coming here. I enjoyed teaching there, but I also wanted to learn more about teaching at a university level.

A. What is the best way to prepare for teaching a course like this?

B. I think it is important to have a strong understanding of the material before you start teaching. You also need to be able to communicate effectively with your students.

A. How do you keep your students engaged in the course?

B. I try to make my lectures interesting and interactive. I use examples and real-world applications to help students understand the material.

A. Have you ever had to make any changes to your teaching style?

B. Yes, I have had to make changes in the past. For example, I used to lecture more, but I realized that students were not as engaged in that style. Now I try to use more interactive methods.

A. What advice do you have for someone who is new to teaching?

B. I would advise them to be patient and to be open to learning. Teaching is a challenging but rewarding profession, and it is important to be passionate about the subject you are teaching.
Appendix G: Examples of generating themes
Appendix H: Participant Information Sheet (English and Chinese)

Introduction
Hello! My name is Cui Le. I am a gay man, and was previously a university teacher in Guangzhou. Now I am studying towards my PhD in the School of Critical Studies, Faculty of Education and Social Work at The University of Auckland, New Zealand. My supervisors are Prof Louisa Allen and Dr John Fenaughty. My research topic is gay academics in China.

Description & Invitation
My study aims to explore gay academics’ lived experiences in Chinese universities. For example, whether you have come out at your university, your perception of the sexual culture of your university, your possible resistance to the dominant sexual culture, or other workplace experiences as a gay academic. I believe that these invisible experiences are important, and can contribute to sexual equity in education in China.

I would like to invite you to be part of my research. If you consider yourself a gay man and are currently or have previously been a teacher in a Chinese university, I welcome your participation.

Procedures
If you are willing to participate, please read and sign the consent form attached to l.cui@auckland.ac.nz. You do not need to tell me your real name if you do not want to, just choose a pseudonym.

Our interview can be conducted face-to-face or through instant messengers such as QQ or Wechat. You can choose where you would prefer to meet if interviewed face-to-face. This location will be somewhere both you and I feel safe and comfortable. Each interview will last
approximately 1 to 2 hours. You may be interviewed up to 4 times over 6 months. This will be dependent on your availability and research needs. As common themes emerge from different participants’ interviews, you may need to provide more information related to these. The topic of our interview will be around your experience as a gay academic. Feel free to say anything; also, you don’t have to answer if you don’t feel comfortable.

It will be helpful if you can provide documents related to our interview, including written documents (e.g., your own academic publication relating to gender and sexuality and diaries about your life), and official documents (e.g., official regulation about sexuality in university, documents about administrative penalty from your university as a consequence of your activism). The diaries will be existing diaries about your workplace experiences as a gay academic that you have already written or are in the process of writing. The official documents will be university regulations about gender and sexuality and will be obtained from you instead of third parties. Should I use any information from these documents the identifying information will be changed.

The interviews will be audio-recorded by digital voice recorder with your prior written consent, and transcribed only by me. After each interview I will email you all our previous interviews, so you can read, edit, or withdraw certain parts of the data within 2 weeks from receipt of the transcript if you wish. I will also ask whether or not you want to receive an email providing the summary of the findings that is written in non-academic language after I have finished the final report.

**Informed Consent & Right to Withdraw from Participation**

The Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form are sent to you for your permission to collect data. Your participation is completely voluntary, which means you only participate if you want to. Your participation or non-participation will not affect your relationship with any party, including the person from which you get the advertisement for this study. You may withdraw your participation and withdraw your data at any time before the data collection is completed (1 May 2019) without giving a reason.

**Confidentiality**

Confidentiality will be guaranteed during the whole process of my research, as well as within conference presentations, teaching and any subsequent publications. Pseudonyms will be used in this study. After each interview, I will save the conversations into password-protected computer files. Some data such as your institution (if you provide this information) and activism will be obscured or changed in my thesis so you will not be identified.

**Benefits & Risks**

Potential benefits for you include:
1. Having the opportunity to think, reflect, discuss, and write about your own experience in a safe and supportive environment may strengthen your confidence, self-worth, and self-understanding.

2. Your perspectives will be acknowledged as important academic data in a context where the voices of gay academics are rarely heard.

3. You will be contributing to research that aims to promote sexual equity in universities in China.

However, recalling and disclosing experiences related to sexual identity can be potentially embarrassing and distressing even when a supportive environment is provided by the researcher. Should any distressing issues arise unexpectedly, you can choose to stop the interview and withdraw from the research and any of their data at any time before the data collection is completed (1 May 2019) without giving reason. Contact details of locally available support services are listed below.

Beijing LGBT Centre
·   http://www.bjlgbtcenter.org.cn/  86-010-64466970

PFLAG China (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays of China)
·   http://www.pflag.org.cn/  86-020-38462399

Beijing Gender Health Education Institute
·   http://www.bghei.org/  86-010-52293801

Data Storage & Use

After the thesis is completed, all data will be stored on a pen drive and will be kept for six years in a locked cabinet in my supervisor’s office in New Zealand (see supervisor’s details below), and then destroyed through a secure disposal service. Data collected will only be used for this research thesis and subsequent conference presentations, teaching and publications. No data will be revealed for other purposes. No other party will have access to your data, including your institutions.

-  

Contact Details

If you have any questions, or wish to know more before deciding to participate or not, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you.

Cui Le   l.cui@auckland.ac.nz   Phone: 17073409098 (China)   Wechat: atwoba
My supervisors in this project are: Prof Louisa Allen, School of Critical Studies in Education, Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Auckland. +64 9 923 5140 le.allen@auckland.ac.nz

Dr John Fenaughty, School of Counselling, Human Services and Social Work, Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Auckland. +64 9 373 7999 ext 48513 j.fenaughty@auckland.ac.nz

The Head of School is: Prof Peter O'Connor, School of Critical Studies in Education, Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Auckland. Phone: +64 (0) 9 373 7599 ext 48477 p.oconnor@auckland.ac.nz

For any concerns regarding ethical issues you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Phone: +64 9 373 7599 extn. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on …… for three years. Reference Number 022036
研究参与信息

项目名称：中国男同性恋大学教师应对异性恋正统性的生命经验

研究者：崔乐

你好，我的名字是崔乐。我是一名男同性恋，也曾经是一名广州的大学教师。现在我正在新西兰奥克兰大学教育与社会工作学院攻读博士学位。我的研究选题是中国的男同性恋大学教师。

研究介绍与邀请

我的研究致力于探索中国高校里男同性恋教师的生命经验。例如，你是否在你的大学出柜，你对你的大学的性文化的认知，你对占支配地位的性文化的可能的反抗，或者其他作为同志大学教师的职场经验。我相信这些不被看见的经验很重要，能够推动中国教育领域的多元与公正。

我邀请你参与我的研究。如果你自认为是一名男同性恋，且目前或曾经在中国高校担任教师，欢迎你参与我的研究。

研究步骤

如果你愿意参与本研究，请阅读并签署知情同意书。如果你不想告诉我你的真实姓名，你只需要选择一个化名。

我们的访谈可以面对面进行，也可以通过QQ或微信等即时通讯软件。每次访谈将持续大约1到1.5个小时，你可能会在6个月的时间内被访谈不超过3次。这取决于你是否有时间以及研究需要。访谈话题将围绕着你作为同志大学教师的经历。你可以自由地说任何东西；同时，对于你觉得不舒服的问题，你不需要回答。

在得到你事先的同意后，访谈会被录音，只会由我转写录音。在数据收集结束后，我会通过电子邮件发送给你我们之前的访谈，你可以阅读、修改或根据你的意愿撤回部分数据。当我完成研究报告后，我会发邮件问你是否希望收到一份研究结果的梗概。

自愿参与与退出参与的权利

你的参与是完全自愿的，也就是说，只有当你想要参与的时候才参与本研究。你可以在数据收集结束之前退出研究并撤回数据。

私密性

整个研究过程都会保证私密性，这也会体现在学术会议展示、教学以及后续的学术发表中。研究将使用化名。每次访谈后，我会把访谈对话保存在受密码保护的电脑文档里。一些研究数据，例如你的大学和参与的行动会在论文中被模糊化或更改，这样你就不会被识别出来。
益处

本研究对你可能的益处包括:

1. 有机会在一个安全和支持的环境下思考、反思、讨论和书写你的个人经历，这有助于增强你的自信、自我价值感以及自我理解。

2. 在目前同志教师的声音很少被听到的背景下，你的视角将被视为重要的学术数据。

3. 你将对这一致力于推动中国大学的多元性别公正的研究有所贡献。

数据保存与使用

当论文完成后，所有数据都会存在一个随身存储器，并在新西兰导师的办公室里上锁的柜子里被保存六年(下面有导师的具体信息)，六年后将通过安全的处理服务被销毁。收集的数据只会用于本研究的学位论文，以及后续的会议展示、教学与发表。除此之外，数据将不会用于其他目的。不会有其他人可以获得你的数据，包括你的大学。

联系方式

如果你有任何问题，或希望在决定参与与否之前了解更多，请尽管联系我。多谢。

崔乐 cle617@aucklanduni.ac.nz 微信: atwoba

我的导师的联系方式：Louisa Allen 教授，奥克兰大学教育与社会工作学院批判教育研究系。le.allen@auckland.ac.nz; John Fenaughty 博士, 奥克兰大学教育与社会工作学院咨询、人类服务与社会工作系。j.fenaughty@auckland.ac.nz
References


Beijing News [新京报]. (2015). *Why did he come out publicly to support a homosexual student who sued the Ministry of Education [*他为什么公开出柜，支持同性恋学生状告教育部*].* https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NTUxOTc4Mw==&mid=210466819&idx=1&sn=e8c719aee7481f73f909816e4f4c8e30&chksm=2f88944b18ff1d5d5be6de9708c084d9503ee4f89b761b0a766f0048c7681370c3be2eba8ab2&mpshare=1&scene=1&srcid=0405MUGuOLMHV7iSrTkrbz&sharer_sharetime=1617582384883&sharer_shareid=c32d99b8077906837e2add51e02acbea5exportkey=AbNMeFb3URgr1qnSSpPZfk%3D&pass_ticket=LQVVw8l6Xc7KyyD8tzp7N8JxBGiNwvQ1WpQUJq%2FzXypWx0MGjamCh7yPB7s&wx_header=0#rd


Cui, L. [崔乐]. (2020, May 17). *After coming out as a gay teacher, I was punished by the university [作为高校教师公开出柜之后，我受到了学校的处分]. BIE [别的]. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NTc1NjYyMA==&mid=2651774756&idx=1&sn=0d62cbb9f2c62811e1ba010e4e16616e&exportkey=AelDCIWWIPdoowk&Og1igw%3D&pass_ticket=ToktnQSGrqmifJsENSMXejuA01f38jmC%2BYiZ92tfHjGCdghx6XN5IdmTxd11QBDQ

Cui, L. [崔乐]. (2020, September 15). *Homophobia textbooks are a part of institutional homophobia in Chinese universities [恐同教材是中国高校制度性恐同的一部分]. RainbowYouth [彩虹青年]. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzUzMzg5MDU2OQ==&mid=2247484327&idx=1&sn=6e856cf82e49e8e56e75a1d22ab96c&exportkey=AfgFKllef43soURGbKClwOvl%3D&pass_ticket=QvNu5yywDO2J0ZOBNxqhlzWiosoa%2FBDr1ry2P4dmIOASm6C8m%2FUyoWHDCLQCdlj3&wx_header=0


Cui, L. [崔樂]. (2016). *Observation of Chinese class in Ural Federation University, Russia from a gender perspective [俄羅斯烏拉爾聯邦大學漢語課堂的性別觀察]. Gender Equity Education Quarterly [性别平等教育季刊], (76), 115-120.


Cui, L. [崔乐]. (2019, November 12). *The plight and resistance of Chinese gay academics in ivory tower [象牙塔里中国同志学者的困境与抗争]. WeThinker [微思客]. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/oFOFLqmoG2Ne1QrgDm7uQ?fbclid=IwAR2LRPuS5kAkBJ2zGTuRZrEoR66qlxq8FM5s9kGjITkxt1YOEp0V9udby0
Cui, L.[崔乐]. (2020, January 8). Why do gay teachers in Chinese universities think they need to work harder than heterosexuals [中国高校的同性恋教师为什么认为他们需要比异性恋更努力]. Scholar 学人. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Qk4VhS_7NTPRIScwjOYFfQ?fbclid=IwAR1BArXKDBP9YWrylQ58n7gECKMqvg5hG0ErF7CLc1L8iKoTN1bGu67_pc


Neary, A. (2017). Lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers’ ambivalent relations with parents and students while entering into a civil partnership. *Irish Educational Studies, 36*(1), 57-72.


NGOCN. (2015). *University teacher came out to support Qiu Bai, a female student of Sun Yat-sen University who sued the Ministry of education* [高校教师公开出柜，支持起诉教育部的中大女生秋白]. https://ngocn.blog.caixin.com/archives/133071


Noon. [正午]. (2019). *Liu Wenli: Many women can't enjoy the pleasure of sex in their whole life, which is related to the lack of sex education in the early days* [刘文利：很多女性一生不能享受性的愉悦，这跟早期缺乏性教育有关]. https://www.sohu.com/a/349216204_550958


PinkNews. (2020). *This gay lecturer almost lost his entire career for daring to come out and teach that queer people exist*. https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/06/01/this-gay-lecturer-almost-lost-his-entire-career-for-daring-to-come-out-and-teach-that-queer-people-exist/


Sohu [搜狐]. (2020). *I've been studying homosexuality in China for 15 years* [我研究了15年中国同性恋]. https://www.sohu.com/a/420831693_788170


https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2021/07/rainbows-end-for-chinas-campus-lgbt-groups/


Wei, W. [魏伟] (2012). *Going public: The production and transformation of queer spaces in postsocialist Chengdu, China* [公开：当代”同志“空间的生产与变迁]. Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore [上海三联书店].


Zhang, A. (2019). The Trend of Legalization of Same-sex Marriage from the Perspective of Young People: A Survey Based on 415 Questionnaires [青年群体视角下的同性婚姻合法化趋
171


