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Moving with Precarity: Transnational Mobility of Chinese Queer “Single” Women

Abstract A central question of this chapter is—Do the aspiration and ability to move have something to do with the queer women’s presumed “single” status in a heteronormative society like China? “Single” is put in scare quotes here because the women I discuss in this chapter are regarded as single only in the sense that they are not in a heterosexual marriage or attached to men. I focus on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and singleness to explore the role of mobility (mainly transnational) in urban queer single women’s search for autonomy and respectability. I interviewed thirty-two “mobile queer women” in China and Australia, as well as, two women from Hong Kong who were residing in Europe at the time of the interview, between 2015 and 2018. The study of queer women highlights the neglected fact that singleness can be a form of public (mis)recognition or self-representation of queer women in a heteronormative society. The lives they lead can be very different from popular stereotypes of single women in a heterosexual context. Their experiences demonstrate the complexity of the meaning of “being single” and the internal diversity of the category of “single women” in Chinese cities.

Keywords queer single women; queer mobility; queer migration; Chinese lesbians; single women in China

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Jay is a thirty-seven-year-old queer woman who originally comes from northern China.[1] Now, she is a self-employed photographer based in Shanghai. Although she has lived there for half her life, she is still officially categorized as a temporary resident. She is active in Shanghai's *tongzhi / lala* 同志 / 拉拉 community.[2] In the past ten years or so, she has been traveling to a number of cities inside and outside of China for leisure, work, and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning, asexual, and other terms such as non-binary and pansexual) events. These domestic and international trips have gradually formed an integral part of her work and private life. She has made a conscious effort to keep her work and private life mobile and portable so that she can always pick up her MacBook and start a trip. Her current romantic relationship also requires her to be a frequent traveler, as her partner resides in Taipei. They travel to meet each other several times a year. The meeting places are usually Shanghai or Taipei, but occasionally they will travel to other countries for short holidays. The destinations are mostly determined by Jay's visa eligibility. As a passport holder of the People's Republic of China and a temporary resident of Shanghai (which means she is subject to more internal scrutiny when applying for visas to foreign countries, as compared to people with Shanghai *hukou* 户口, or, residency), her transnational mobility is restricted by administrative and structural barriers. Nonetheless, Jay leads a life that is much more mobile than that of her parents' generation and of most of her married counterparts in China.

During my field trips in China and my participation in China's urban *tongzhi* community over the past decade or so, I have met more and more *lala* women who share mobile lifestyles and transnational aspirations similar to those of Jay. Young and educated queer people from the single-child generation (born after 1979) desire to study and work abroad. Veteran *tongzhi* activists also aspire to go abroad to connect with the global and the regional LGBTQI+ communities in Western countries and in Asia more broadly. Geographical mobility has become a new homonormative value and aspiration of the *tongzhi* in China.[3] Although transnational mobility, or its local Mandarin term, *chuguo* 出國, literally meaning "to go abroad," is a general imperative in post-socialist China, where internationalization

1 The names of informants used in this essay are all pseudonyms. Their personal profiles are also partially altered to protect the informants' identities. All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.

2 *Tongzhi* 同志, literally meaning "comrades," is the Mandarin Chinese term commonly used in China (and in other Sinophone societies) to refer to people who identify as LGBTQI+. The term *lala* 拉拉 is developed from the Western term "lesbian." It is a local term used in China to refer to women with same-sex desires or relationships. In this chapter, I use *lala* to refer specifically to such women in China. I use "queer" to refer to established terms such as "queer migration" and as an umbrella term for non-normative sexualities and genders. I use *tongzhi* to highlight local LGBTQI+ communities and activism in China.

3 Lucetta Y. L. Kam, "Coming Out and Going Abroad: The *Chuguo* Mobility of Queer Women in China," in "Migrant and Refugee Lesbians: Lives That Resist the Telling," ed. Eithne Luibhéid, special issue, *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 24, no. 2 (2020).

and the pursuit of a global self is promoted by the state and realized by economic development, being queer and being mobile seem to have a connection that calls for further investigation. My study shows that queer women with mobility capital tend to obtain sexual and gender autonomy and social respectability through transnational movement. Transnational mobility has become a new model of homonormativity in China as international education, tourism, and global work opportunities have opened up new routes for queer people to achieve autonomy and respectability in a neoliberalist society. At the same time, mobility also exposes them to new uncertainties and precarity.

Most of the queer women in my study were not married (neither in heterosexual nor same-sex marriages) at the time of the interviews. Most women I met in the *tongzhi / lala* community in China were also not married. To the public, these women belong to the expanding group of urban single women. The stigmatization of single women and the cultural importance of marriage in post-socialist China have been widely studied and discussed.[4] The term "leftover women" *(shengnü)* was promoted by the All-China Women's Federation in 2007 and has since then been the subject of much media attention both inside and outside of China, in addition to attracting considerable academic interest. The term usually refers to women in their late twenties who are unmarried. Widely discussed and represented in popular media are the "leftover women" in China who are well-educated, with a good income and career. Since the label of "leftover woman" always depends on one's marital status, there is an assumption that such women are undoubtedly heterosexual. Indeed, the literature on single women in China is also overwhelmingly skewed towards heterosexual women and overlooks the fact that queer women constitute a part of the single women population in China. The experiences of queer single women are only to be found in the literature of *tongzhi* or queer studies, which discuss the pressure on queer women to marry and their corresponding coping strategies.[5] Most studies on single or "leftover" women in China do not include queer women. This is perhaps due to the fact that the dominating discussion of marriage pressure excludes the experiences of non-heterosexual women.

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4 Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014); Yingchun Ji, "Between Tradition and Modernity: 'Leftover' Women in Shanghai," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 5 (2015); Lucetta Y. L. Kam, *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013); Lynne Nakano, "Marriage and Reproduction in East Asian Cities: Views from Single Women in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo," in *Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia*, ed. Tiantian Zheng (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016); Sandy To, "Understanding *Sheng Nu* ('Leftover Women'): The Phenomenon of Late Marriage among Chinese Professional Women," *Symbolic Interaction* 36, no. 1 (2013).

5 Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Lucetta Y. L. Kam, *Shanghai Lalas*; Stephanie Yingyi Wang, "When Tongzhi Marry: Experiments of Cooperative Marriage Between Lalas and Gay Men in Urban China," *Feminist Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019).

Both single women and “leftover women” are assumed to be heterosexual, both in general perceptions and in academic studies. Many single informants, both from my previous study of *lala* women in Shanghai and from the present study, were very often identified by other people as unmarried heterosexual women. This perception hinders the exploration of the role of sexuality in the formation of the single women population in China, and of the ways in which queer women experience and negotiate with marriage pressure and other heteronormative demands.

A central question of this chapter is: Do the aspiration and ability to move have something to do with the queer women’s presumed “single” status in a heteronormative society like China? “Single” is put in scare quotes here because the women I discuss in this chapter are regarded as single only in the sense that they are not in a heterosexual marriage or attached to men. In this chapter, I will focus on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and singleness to explore the role of mobility (mainly transnational) in urban queer single women’s search for autonomy and respectability. Specifically, the study revolves around the following questions: Does the status of being single or an unmarried woman accelerate or restrict one’s mobility? In what ways does this happen? How do queer women relate their mobile life to their single status? How does their sexual and gender non-conformity relate to their geographical mobility? What leads them to live or aspire to a mobile life? How does mobility work as a regulating force in queer women’s quest for autonomy and respectability?

I intend to present the lives of women whose singleness is sometimes a result of public (mis)recognition, and other times, a self-directed identity to survive in a society where marriage is still regarded as a compulsory norm. The study of queer women highlights the neglected fact that singleness can be a form of public (mis)recognition or self-representation of queer women in a heteronormative society. Queer women are a part of the single women population in urban China, but they are always invisible to the mainstream society. The lives they lead can be very different from popular stereotypes of single women in a heterosexual context. Their experiences demonstrate the complexity of the meaning of “being single” and the internal diversity of “single women” in Chinese cities.

Mobility and respectability

As part of a research project on the queer mobility of Chinese women, I interviewed thirty-two “mobile queer women” in China and Australia, as well as, two women from Hong Kong who were residing in Europe at the time of the interview, between 2015 and 2018. The majority of the informants were citizens of the People’s Republic of China at the time of the interview. More than half of the informants were interviewed in Australia. Some were residing in Australia on student and work visas, while the others had permanent residency or citizenship. Among them, there were international

students, working holiday goers, recently arrived immigrants in Australia and Europe, transcontinental commuters between China / Hong Kong and Australia / North America, young urban women in China who planned to go abroad, and women like Jay, who frequently traveled domestically and internationally. The ages of the informants ranged from twenty-one to forty-seven years. Most of the informants from China were born after 1979 and belonged to the only-child generation. Most of them identified themselves as *lala* and lesbian. Some identified as bisexual and a few described their sexualities as "fluid," "pansexual," or "not yet decided." All of them were assigned female at birth and most identified as "female," though a few described their genders in terms of their roles in a lesbian relationship, such as "H" ("half," which is a local term for *lala* women who embody a more androgynous gender style and whose sexual preference is not defined or restricted by terms such as "butch" or "femme"), "P" ("*po* 婆," feminine *lala*), or "T" (masculine *lala*). The informants in this study belong to an emergent urban mobile population in China. Mobility formed a significant part of their everyday lives and long-term life course planning. In this chapter, I focus more on the experiences of those informants who were not in a heterosexual marriage at the time of the interviews.[6] In this section and the one that follows, I will briefly discuss the connection between mobility and privilege, singleness, and precarity. The last section discusses the transnational mobile experiences and aspirations of queer single women in my study. It is hoped that the experiences of urban queer (single) women can advance our understanding of non-heterosexual women's articulations and practices of autonomy, as well as, of how they use mobility to tackle sexual and gender marginalization within a culture that prioritizes marriage.

Chuguo, literally "the act of leaving one's country," has long been a synonym for success in socialist China. *Chuguo* refers to someone's ability to leave her or his destined life and assigned social or geographical position. The act of *chuguo*, whether it takes the form of short-term travel for leisure or long-term movement for education, work, or migration, constitutes both a personal and national project of embodying a new form of self in post-socialist China—a project which is usually imagined as global, cosmopolitan, and desirable. Rapid urbanization and uneven economic development since the reform era (after 1979) accelerated the movement of people within the country. Major cities have experienced a huge influx of migrant workers from rural or less developed parts of China. Frequent relocations between cities for jobs, families living apart, and living in precarity and on the margins characterize the everyday life of rural-to-urban migrant workers.

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6 My study also included women who were divorced or in a heterosexual marriage at the time of the interviews. In this group, a few were in a cooperative marriage, which is a mutually agreed-upon marriage between a lesbian woman and a gay man. There were also women in a registered same-sex marriage or same-sex de facto partnership.

In the cities, international tourism, study, work, or even migration have become facts of life for the emerging urban middle class and the new rich. For them, mobility has increasingly become a defining part of a preferred urban lifestyle. Transnational mobility, for these urbanites, is a new benchmark for success. The pursuit of a "global self," one that embraces cosmopolitanism and strives to transcend the local, as extensively discussed by Lisa Rofel in her study on young urban women in China in the 1990s,[7] has continued into the new millennium. Moreover, it has also become a project that is aspired to by women from all sorts of social classes and economic backgrounds. With the availability and proliferation of transnational mobility in recent decades in China, such as through international education, immigration, business ventures, tourism, and more recently, working holidays, geographical mobility and social mobility have been tied together even more tightly. After the market reform, the mobility of a person between cities and continents remains a privilege. Such movement is heavily defined and confined by one's gender, class, and ethnicity, as well as, by one's physical ability and cultural, economic, and network capitals. In particular, network capital, defined by Anthony Elliott and John Urry as "largely subjectless, communications-driven and information-based,"[8] determines one's geographical mobility.

Within the transnationally mobile Chinese population, the educational mobility of the single-child generation has attracted much attention from researchers in the past two decades.[9] The two typical characteristics of the younger generation of transnationally mobile Chinese people, namely that of being both an only child and an international student, are also reflected among the queer women informants of my study. Chinese international students are always understood as a privileged group who take advantage of China's booming economy and of being the only child to enjoy their family resources. The decision to support an only child in pursuit of international education depends on pooling together the family resources, and it is hence understood as a family investment.

Among the studies on international students from China, female students tend to be in the spotlight. The larger number of female Chinese international students contributes to the growing body of studies on this

7 Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

8 Anthony Elliott and John Urry, *Mobile Lives* (London: Routledge, 2010), 11.

9 Vanessa L. Fong, *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Anni Kajanus, *Chinese Student Migration, Gender and Family* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Fran Martin, *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Ming Tsui and Lynne Rich, "The Only Child and Educational Opportunity for Girls in Urban China," *Gender and Society* 16, no. 1 (2002); Mengwei Tu, *Education, Migration and Family Relations Between China and the UK: The Transnational One-Child Generation* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018); Mengwei Tu and Kailing Xie, "Privileged Daughters? Gendered Mobility among Highly Educated Chinese Female Migrants in the UK," *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 2 (2020).

group of mobile Chinese. Additionally, the growing number of female international students also draws attention to changing gender dynamics in the private and public domains in China and to how overseas education and mobility impact young women's aspirations and understanding of traditional gendered expectations. In the past sixty years, there has been a global trend of more female migrants moving independently for work and education (in addition to marriage-related migration).[10] Most of these women are international students, low-paid migrant workers, entertainers, and those migrating for marriage. There are also more female than male international students from China in Western countries.[11] However, the growing number of women in the global mobile population does not mean that traditional gender constraints from their home countries would disappear. Even if transnationally mobile Chinese women from the single-child generation are termed as the "privileged daughters,"[12] their position in the Chinese kinship network decides the possibility and the extent of their movement. In addition, their familial position and marital status regulate not only the space factor of their movement (how far and where) but also the time factor of their mobility (how long and when). The time and space constraints on Chinese women's mobility are well discussed by Rofel, in her work on young urban women in the 1990s, and Fran Martin, who has researched female Chinese international students in Australia.[13] Rofel finds that the women she talked to were struggling with "a split gender subjectivity: the single, free woman versus the respectable, married woman."[14] The desire to be global exposes these young women to the dilemma of personal freedom versus social and familial responsibilities. Martin also finds in her interviewees the paradox of the "autonomous and mobile identity"[15] that is nurtured by transnational education, and the gendered expectations of heterosexual women in China. The growth in opportunities for overseas travel does not solve but rather exposes the younger generation of Chinese women to the full effect of this paradox compared to their mothers' generation. Martin highlights the struggle and the importance of mobility for the younger generation of Chinese women:

> For the younger generation that is the subject of my study, the cosmopolitan imaginary and "deterritorialised subjectivity" that were already available to [their mothers'] generation have [further] deepened and consolidated as a result of the immense growth in opportunities for overseas travel. This produces in the daughter

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10 Migration Data Portal, accessed on January 14, 2020, http://migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender.
11 Kajanus, *Chinese Student Migration*; Martin, "The Gender of Mobility"; Tu and Xie, "Privileged Daughters."
12 Tu and Xie, "Privileged Daughters."
13 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility."
14 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 126.
15 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility," para. 29.

> generation a distinctive subjectivity based on awareness of one's potential for transnational mobility and a concomitant desire—sanctioned and encouraged by parents—to build mobility capital, especially in youth. For this generation, the self-animating subject is specifically one that animates across national borders.[16]

A mobile self, or a "portable personhood" as discussed by Elliott and Urry,[17] is a form of self that is desired by the younger generation of urban Chinese women and often actively supported by their parents. However, the pursuit of a portable personhood or a global self that is unrestrained by local forces or kinship structures, cannot survive the demand of the heteronormative female life course. As recounted by the international Chinese students interviewed by Martin in her study, the freedom or time to pursue a "free, independent and self-focused personhood" is limited.[18] Martin concludes from the stories of those female students that "one's twenties can be a time of mobility, but one's thirties are imagined to be a time of gendered stasis."[19] This echoes the "split gender subjectivity" observed by Rofel in the earlier generation of young urban women in China.[20] More recent studies of the privileged, only-child-generation women in urban China have revealed that educational mobility, professional advancement, and career accomplishments, in many cases, cannot challenge the traditional gender norms in the private sphere and women's traditional roles as wives and mothers.[21] The mobility of women is both informed, induced, and interrupted by the heteronormative life course. In other words, the time before marriage is the only legitimate period for a young woman to pursue a mobile life and a global self. Mobility in this sense seems to be a privilege granted to pre-marriage young women born in the post-socialist era. Mobility also seems to constitute a rite of passage for young women that enables them to grow into a kind of person or citizen that is encouraged by the neoliberal state. Transnational mobility elevates the cultural, social, and even economic status of the so-called "privileged daughters," but it seems that the privileges and the respectability enjoyed by young single women cannot be preserved in their later life stages. And, what about queer women? How can they negotiate their desire to be mobile and autonomous women when they are faced with heteronormative demands?

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16 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility," para. 14.
17 Elliott and Urry, *Mobile Lives*.
18 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility," para 25.
19 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility," para 33.
20 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 126.
21 Ji, "Between Tradition and Modernity"; Nakano, "Marriage and Reproduction"; Kailing Xie, "'Her China Dream': The Aspirations of China's Privileged Daughters," *Discover Society*, September 5, 2017. Accessed January 14, 2020. https://archive.discoversociety.org/2017/09/05/her-china-dream-the-aspirations-of-chinas-privileged-daughters/.

Singleness, precarity, and possibilities

Female singlehood generally carries negative connotations. Single women continue to be targets of mockery and condemnation in official discourses, at workplaces, in family gatherings, and in many media representations in contemporary China. Regardless of sexual orientation, staying single is not a preferred way of life. Moreover, in popular understandings, a single life for women is usually connected with economic insecurity, social stigma, health hazards, and personal failure. In other words, singleness is always associated with precarity when the subjects are female. This popular assumption serves as a regulatory force that puts single women in a discursively undesirable and vulnerable position and hinders the imagination of single lives that do not fit into this model of precarity. In this section, I will first look at this presumed connection of singleness and precarity in Chinese women's lives. Next, I will discuss how this presumption is reflected in queer single women's lives. Finally, I will address the ways in which mobility leads queer women to look for new possibilities and strategies to cope with precarity.

While a precarious life has increasingly become an everyday reality for people from all walks of life in post-socialist China, being single is widely believed to be undesirable and the most precarious form of life, especially for women, for whom marriage and motherhood are still considered to be essential components of their gender identity and family obligation. A study carried out by Xie Kailing on university-educated women in urban China shows that marriage and motherhood are still considered essential qualities of a "successful woman" in contemporary China.[22] Another study of "leftover women" in Shanghai shows that "institutional obstacles such as a weak social welfare system and the exclusive legitimacy of childbirth within marriage" contributed to the resurgence of patriarchal Confucian tradition and the difficulty of being a woman living outside of the institution of marriage in China.[23] On the other hand, marriage is understood to be or promoted as a type of anchorage. It helps to solidify one's life, and one's position in society and the kinship system. In some cases, marriage is a way to achieve social stability and personal security, such as the offer of an urban *hukou* (household registration) and a marital home through marriage, not to mention the assumed economic co-dependence and familial recognition of a married couple. The top-down stigmatization of single women in China is one of the many ways in which the state maintains social stability.[24]

The other side of marriage as anchorage is its incompatibility with a mobile life and a mobile self. With the increase in job opportunities in cities, generations of young people have moved from rural areas and small towns to look for jobs and a better life there. Emerging groups of migrant workers such as factory girls (*dagongmei* 打工妹), and mobile population

22 Kailing, "Her China Dream."
23 Ji, "Between Tradition and Modernity," 1059.
24 Fincher, *Leftover Women*.

in Beijing (*beipiao* 北漂) or Hong Kong (*gangpiao* 港漂) have formed a new landscape of internal movement of people in China. Most of the mobile workers in China start their journey at a young age, usually before marriage. The intensified mobility of people has led to the formation of new types of mobile families and intimate relationships in China. For educated young people, the few years during early adulthood and before marriage are the prime time to pursue individual freedom and transnational mobility. After marriage, people are expected to settle down in a relatively static marital life. This is especially true for women, who are expected to either return home after overseas education to follow the traditional life course that is assigned for women (such as being a wife and a mother), or to plan their after-marriage life around their husbands' life paths.[25]

The challenges faced by single women in urban China are not limited to marriage and reproduction. Their experiences of work and mobility, for example, require more research. Recent scholarship has started to look at other non-marriage-related aspects of single women's lives in China, such as their work life, self-care, and even the pleasure of staying single.[26] In my study, I try to direct the attention to the connection of singleness and mobility by focusing on queer women's aspiration to and experiences of moving through borders. Transnational mobility or, to some less privileged queer women, moving away from their hometowns and parental homes are common pathways to surviving heteronormative demands on single women. Being single and mobile is literally a rite of passage for many young educated queer women I interviewed in China. The desire to move or embody a global self has little to do with one's sexuality. It seems that to go abroad, either for leisure travel or for a longer stay, is a general desire in today's China. But for queer people, being mobile has another level of meaning. For some queer women I interviewed in China, Hong Kong, and Australia, mobility can be understood as an act of moving away from a predictable route or life routine, be it a geographical location or a normative way of existence. Mobility can also be a way to live out one's queer self, or one's preferred queer self. As publicly (mis)recognized single women, engaging in internal or international mobility allows them to detach themselves from the family and kinship network, which in most cases, constitutes the primary group exercising social control over their sexualities and gender. These women's aspirations to being mobile are partly nurtured in the same socio-economic and political context as those of other young people in China, and partly result from their specific experiences of being a non-conforming person in terms of gender and sexuality. In the following part, I will discuss how being single and queer inform and shape women's aspirations to and routes of mobility.

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25 Fong, *Paradise Redefined*; Martin, "The Gender of Mobility"; Tu and Xie, "Privileged Daughters."

26 Chow Yiu Fai, *Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Queerness and precarity

Jay, the woman I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, has moved many times during her stay in Shanghai, largely due to the fact that she does not have a permanent resident status, something which, in turn, affects her chances of finding a stable job. Permanent residency, job security, economic stability, and home ownership are all closely connected in an increasingly marketized China. Yet despite of the precarious life she leads in Shanghai, Jay refuses to return to her hometown in the north, where she had experienced hostility against her gender appearance since young. For Jay, mobility comes with and results from instability. After talking to many *lala* women in Beijing and Shanghai, it is not hard to sense the pervasive feeling of precarity. The fear of an unknown future and the perception of an unstable present are amplified by the fact that queer women are not part of the heteronormative kinship structure. The sense of precariousness in the *lala* community in China is eloquently expressed by Ana Huang: "A sense of precariousness pervades throughout *lala* culture, as people face temporal caps on their relationships. Without a future or a past, *lalas* float in a precarious temporal limbo, longing for anchorage."[27]

For Jay, the feeling of precarity is even more prevalent in her life because of her marginal position in Shanghai. Since she is not attached to any recognized work organization and it is impossible for her to obtain permanent residency (*hukou*) through marriage, she remains a temporary resident, even after twenty years of living in the city. Her legitimacy to stay in the city depends on the constantly changing policy towards the "mobile population," which is always unfriendly to internal migrants who are less educated or work in the informal sectors. Moreover, the policy is often subject to the manipulation of local officials. Jay's relatively vulnerable status in Shanghai as an outsider has, over the years, led her to travel overseas, seeking relief from the adverse effects of the internal social exclusion she suffers from. Transnational mobility and travel are, for her, ways to escape the internal scrutiny and social exclusion she is forced to endure in China as a person who does not have a permanent resident status in the city she lives in. She keeps her job mobile so that she can live a mobile life. At the time of the interview, she had started to plan to leave Shanghai for a city in China with a more affordable standard of living. "I do not want to settle down at this point, whether if it's in a city, to a certain condition, or with a woman," she told me. To queer women like Jay, who do not have a job from the formal sector or a permanent resident status in the city they live in, transnational mobility is a way to escape from the structural immobility—which includes both geographical and social dimensions—that she

27 Ana Huang, "Precariousness and the Queer Politics of Imagination in China," in "Queer Asia As Critique," ed. Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong, special issue, *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 227.

suffers from as a member of the marginal mobile population in China's affluent cities.

Jay was one of the few informants I talked to who did not have a university degree. Among the other queer mobile women I interviewed in China, Hong Kong, and Australia, the most typical reason given for going abroad was the desire to study. This partly reflects the trend of a growing number of female Chinese students in universities in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. It is also partly due to the age range of the informants in my project. Most of them were in their early twenties to late thirties. Overseas education is especially popular among younger people of middle-class background in China who wish to continue their undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

Pat's story represents this group of queer women from China. When I first interviewed Pat in Melbourne in 2015, she was a kindergarten teacher in her early thirties. At that time, she had been in Melbourne for about ten years. Her hometown was Sichuan in China, and she had come to Australia for her undergraduate study. She had already obtained permanent residency in Australia and seemed to have quite happily settled down in Melbourne. Like many other women from China in her age group, she was a single child. Her parents were highly educated, and studying abroad was a normative choice for her and her family. Her sexuality was, at first, not a factor in her going abroad. She had come out to her family before she left China. But heterosexual gender norms and the social expectation in her hometown that one should lead a heteronormative life were factors that she repeatedly mentioned in the interview. As she approached thirty, Pat gradually noticed how the pressure of marriage was being imposed on her and her female friends in her hometown whenever she visited.

> Turning thirty is a new beginning [to me]. In China it's like… getting to settle down is more important. Fewer people will try to get what they want. Perhaps there's more to lose if they do. They think they can't live a drifting and unstable life. Here, I can just work hard to get what I want. In China, if you want anything, you've got to first try very hard to change other people's values before you do anything. That's more tiring.

In addition, Pat is a T-identifying lesbian.[28] Her masculine appearance also made her a talking point in her hometown. Pat decided to stay in Australia after graduation. Other women from China I talked to, shared similar explanations for going to and then staying in Australia. First, the general aspiration in China to go abroad justified their decision to leave home to study. Sometimes, middle-class parents in China participated in a family decision to actively plan for their daughters' overseas education. For example, Hilary had just started her undergraduate study in Melbourne when

28 "T" is the masculine gender identity widely used in the *lala* community in China.

I first met her in 2015. Originally from a small city in Hunan province, she was then in her early twenties. As recounted by Hilary, her parents, who were in their early fifties, were very open-minded and liberal. Her bisexuality was not an issue for them. They actively planned for her to study overseas, and Australia was one of the destinations they had suggested. Hilary was studying literature in Melbourne. She planned to finish her doctoral studies in a country other than Australia before going back to China. This plan was also supported by her family. For other women I talked to, it was rare for parents in China to support their daughter's pursuit of a doctoral degree. Parents usually worry that, by the time their daughters finish their doctorates, they will be too old and too educated to find a matching husband. Hilary was lucky to have the support of her parents, both emotionally and financially. She could therefore, enjoy the privilege of being "single" and mobile much longer than other women from her generation.

Many other young women I interviewed in Australia avoided direct confrontation with their worrying (and sometimes dominating) parents in China over the issue of marriage. Some women tried to find a job and make a living in Australia after graduation. Others tried to find a job outside their hometown after they finished overseas education so as to live away from their parents and immediate family. A few older queer women I met in Australia were actively planning for migration to live together with their same-sex partner. For example, Jenny and Mercy started their relationship in Beijing in 2004. Both of their families were strongly opposed to their relationship. After they had been together for a year, they started to plan for their escape. Both women belonged to the well-educated elite professional class in Beijing. Mercy had a close family member who had already migrated to Australia. In terms of network capital, they were privileged to have transnational mobility. In the fourth year of their relationship, Mercy first migrated to Australia through her family connection. One year later, Jenny arrived in Australia with a student visa. At the time of our interview, they had lived in Melbourne for ten years and had registered for same-sex partnership. They were now in their late thirties and had survived the intense pressure from both families, who had urged them to get married heterosexually when they were younger and still living in China. After they migrated to Australia, the distance shielded them from direct intervention from parents on both sides. The new challenge for them at present, or in the very near future, was how to take care of their aging parents, and how to accommodate them into their same-sex relationship and household after such a long separation.

Mobility and possibilities

For the queer women I talked to in different Chinese cities and in Australia, their mobility was not initially caused by their sexuality or gender non-conformity. On the other hand, nearly all of them agreed that mobility made

their lives easier as queer women. Even for the few women I talked to from Hong Kong, a city that, compared to China and Taiwan, exerts less pressure to marry on both women and men—they found that transnational mobility helped them live a queer life apart from their home city.

For example, Ashley was born in Hong Kong. When I interviewed her, she was approaching thirty. She had just arrived in London from Hong Kong with a British passport, allowing her to stay in Europe without limitation. She was determined to start a new life in London, and told me that the move was related to her sexuality, but that she had not been discriminated against as a lesbian woman in Hong Kong.

> My queerness allows me to live a different life. Compared to my straight fellows, I feel less obligated to get married and live an ordinary life. [Heterosexual] social norms are not applicable to me. While most of my secondary school friends are getting married in a year or two, or having their first kid, I quit my job and moved to another city. Obviously, I have less of a social burden. Also, it's because of my class as well. I have no dependents and my mum is rich enough to sustain her retirement. Plus, given my dual nationality, my mobility is doubled. I don't think it would be possible if I didn't possess a British passport. Otherwise, I might be only able to do a working holiday for just a year or two.

From Ashley's case, we can see that queerness and mobility can be mutually constitutive. Being queer allowed her to imagine a life that was not restricted (or protected) by heterosexual norms. Her network capital as a dual passport holder possessing the essential cultural and language skills to live in a metropolitan city, also allowed her to plan for a mobile and flexible life. She was also driven by London's cosmopolitanism, and its LGBTQ-friendly policies and legal protection. Consequently, she was open about her sexuality in job interviews in London and believed that this would not damage her chances. I asked her if she would move again. She told me that she was not sure but would not mind if she had to. "I go wherever is important to me at the moment. I am spontaneous and less likely to plan for the future." My interview with her was conducted during the first few months of her stay in London. She was struggling to find a job and settle down in the new city. Nonetheless, she embraced the instability, or even, the precarity that was brought about by her transnational mobility. She knew very well that she would not be able to find the same kind of white-collar job that she had had in Hong Kong. Her mobility allowed her to explore the different possibilities of life as a queer woman and to live away from the life course that many of her heterosexual friends were following.

Mobility enhances one's possibility to lead a non-normative life. As we saw above, Jenny and Mercy had planned for their "escape" to Australia. Others use education as a means to obtain the freedom and global self they

hope to embody. Luce, as a China-born, single queer woman in her early thirties, demonstrates how transnational mobility shapes her queer self. Luce finished her undergraduate study in China before she departed to the United States for her graduate study. She was brought up in a middle-class family in a coastal city in China. Like many other women I talked to, and women or men of her generation and family background more broadly, overseas education was considered a desirable choice. Luce stayed in the United States until she obtained a doctoral degree. After graduation, she chose to find a job in an Asian city that was not far from China. The proximity to her family was an important factor in her choice of this Asian city for work. It is close enough for her to take care of her aging parents, but not so close as to threaten her individual space. When I asked her about whether her mobility was related to her queerness, she wrote me a very self-reflective response:

> I don’t think I have mobility because I am queer. Perhaps I can say that mobility does make my life easier as a queer, and I did realize, at an early age, that in order to become who I want to be, mobility is important. I guess for a lot of people, mobility entails personal success and achievement in a very heteronormative sense. Yet for me, and a lot of other queers, mobility is about the capacity to (choose to) be who we are.… Perhaps you can say that being queer did give me more incentives to earn mobility. So many sexual minorities are not “fitting in” in their society, and mobility is one way out. Sometimes I also wonder if I do not have the mobility that I have right now, what kind of queer will I be? In order to earn mobility, do I already submit myself to the mainstream notion of accomplishment? Sometimes I think mobility actually obscures queerness, as many gays and lesbian who have the resources to enjoy mobility are conservative in many other ways.

Several themes or keywords appeared in Luce’s response that were echoed in many other informants’ narratives of their mobile lives. Some of these keywords are: mobility and a (new) queer self and life, detachment or escape from established structures of power (family and the political regime), and mobility as a privilege. To Luce, mobility does not point to a sure future for queer life or any forms of life that are radically different from “traditional” ones. It is possible that she will have to submit to rules of respectability to achieve a mobile self and life. Paradoxically, while mobility helps privileged queer single women to craft new life possibilities, it can also act as a governing force subordinating queer single women to norms of respectability that are required to live in a neoliberal and heteronormative society.

As we saw above, one of the legitimate routes young Chinese women can take to achieve a temporary break from parental surveillance and gendered obligations before marriage, is to pursue an international education.

This course of action can also extend the freedom of a woman by prolonging the privileges she can enjoy as a single woman. The "split gender subjectivity" of women, as discussed by Rofel,[29] is also faced by queer women. In China, queer women with less power or with fewer resources to be mobile, are exposed to the same kind of social stigmatization or economic deprivation as heterosexual single women. As Jay's case demonstrates, without the necessary resources and network capital to go abroad for study, work, or a permanent stay, being "single" and queer in China often requires that women cope with immobility by detaching themselves from direct family networks and formal work structures. This usually leads to an even more precarious life. Being single and queer can be a double marginalization for women with less mobility or network capital, while at the same time, such a status also allows them the freedom to avoid the prescribed gendered roles of women in heterosexual relationships.

Queer, "single," and mobile

As demonstrated by the experiences of the informants in this study, mobility and queerness are interconnected and mutually constitutive. This does not mean that a queer life or self can only be accomplished through mobility, or that mobility is a prerequisite for a "single" woman in Chinese cities to pursue a queer life or self. Mobility, especially transnational mobility, is a privilege in contemporary China, inflected by class background and residential status. While mobility and queerness are interrelated, the former is a privilege that can elevate one's social status and respectability, and the latter is a denigrated quality in a heteronormative society. Some queer people, like most of the queer women in this project, possess the necessary cultural, economic, and network capitals to fulfill their desired life through mobility. Other queer people are relatively immobile or can only afford to have limited mobility. For some of them, living a mobile life and living away from a heteronormative way of life means a life detached from the established or recognized power structures or resources, such as the heterosexual kinship system, a job from the formal sector, and the interpersonal network (*guanxi* 關係) in their hometowns. Their mobility comes with losses, including the loss of family support which can be crucial in China, a society that places prime importance on personal relationships and networks. Loss of family support can adversely affect one's economic and emotional wellbeing and social respectability. While mobility brings autonomy and respectability to some queer single women, it also exposes them to a life that is unpredictable. Moreover, in order to build up mobility capital, queer people might need to submit to homonormative demands that serve the interests of a neoliberal society.

29 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 126.

The numerous stories of escape told by queer women in this project demonstrate the connection between queerness, singleness, and mobility. Being single and queer can both point to a precarious life. Interestingly however, although mobility can increase the instability in one's life, it also offers an exit route, allowing queer women to live away from the stigmatization and deprivation that are imposed upon them for being both single and queer in China. The stories of queer single women in this chapter show the complexity and diversity of the lives of single women in Chinese cities. In particular, their experiences highlight the roles of sexuality and mobility in shaping the life trajectories of single women, as well as the many possible ways to live with precarity.

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