

# An Intersectional Approach to Family Life: Reflections on Same-Sex Marriage, Familisation Risks, and Defamilisation Risks in Mainland China

Emma H. Liu\*, Iris Po Yee Lo\*\*  and Jack Wai Chik Yue\*\*\*

\*The University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

\*\*The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

\*\*\*The University of Wollongong College Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

**Corresponding author:** Iris Po Yee Lo; Email: [iris-py.lo@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:iris-py.lo@polyu.edu.hk)

---

*This article focuses on how the policy on same-sex marriage and a person's social locations impact upon Chinese lesbians' life chances and welfare. Bringing the familisation and defamilisation literature, which has predominantly focused on heterosexual populations and families, into dialogue with an intersectionality perspective, we map the ways in which gender, sexuality, and class intersect in shaping lesbians' experiences of defamilisation and familisation risks. The findings, drawn from interviews conducted in Beijing, China, reveal that the absence of legalised same-sex marriage, coupled with a lack of familial and societal recognition of same-sex relationships, exposes lesbians to both defamilisation and familisation risks, leading to difficulties in choosing whether and how to participate in the family. The intersectionality lens guides us to move beyond the heterosexual/homosexual boundary and to rethink the possibility of welfare alliances that can improve the welfare of not only lesbians but also other groups of women and minorities.*

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+, same-sex marriage, familisation, defamilisation, intersectionality.

## Introduction

A growing number of studies about same-sex marriage have emerged in the last few decades (Peel and Harding, 2008; Jeffreys and Wang, 2018; Tang *et al.*, 2020). While same-sex marriage has been legalised in over thirty countries, it remains legally unrecognised in many others, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) rights remain uneven worldwide (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). In China, there are an estimated seventy million LGBTQ+ individuals (Fullerton, 2017). In terms of policy, however, there is currently a lack of legal or welfare support for LGBTQ+ communities. As discussed below, recent decades have witnessed individual and community efforts advocating same-sex marriage in China. Little is known, however, about how individuals view and respond to state policy on same-sex marriage, or what kinds of welfare risks are generated due to the absence of legalised same-sex marriage in China.

Focusing on Chinese lesbians, who identify as *lalas*<sup>1</sup> in Mainland China, provides an important window onto individuals' strategies for and difficulties in handling

defamilisation and familisation risks. This group of sexual minority women, who are doubly marginalised due to their non-normative sexual identity (as lesbians) and non-heterosexually married status (as women) (Lo, 2020, 2024), is worthy of additional attention. Moreover, compared with gay men, they have received much less academic or public attention (Kong, 2016). Adopting the theoretical lens of intersectionality, this article examines the ways in which gender, sexuality, and class intersect in shaping lalas' experiences of defamilisation and familisation risks. In welfare studies, defamilisation risks refer to a lack of opportunities to secure an acceptable standard of living independently of participation in the family, while familisation risks refer to a lack of opportunities to choose to perform a certain role in the family while simultaneously maintaining a socially acceptable standard of living (Chau and Yu, 2021; Yu *et al.*, 2022; Yu and Lo, 2023). Extending the defamilisation and familisation literature and bringing it into dialogue with the perspective of intersectionality, this article addresses two research questions: To what extent can same-sex marriage represent new ways of participating in the Chinese family and potentially reduce lalas' defamilisation and familisation risks? In what ways can discussions on same-sex marriage question the institution of marriage and help to form queer alliances that enable people to pursue their preferred family life?

This article is organised into four sections. We start by providing an overview of the ongoing debates on same-sex marriage in Mainland China and illustrating our intersectional approach to understanding family life. We then describe our methods, before discussing the interview data. The third section presents the study's findings. We conclude by summarising the key insights generated from lalas' experiences of family life and their views on same-sex marriage.

#### *Debates on same-sex marriage in China: Queering the institution of the family*

In China, the family is considered the foundation of social and regime stability and of selfhood (Kam, 2013; Santos and Harrell, 2017; Lo, 2023a). At the macro level, the Chinese government continues to control people's personal lives through state-led propaganda and the *hukou*<sup>2</sup> household registration. It defines the heterosexual family – in which a child grows up with the presumed love and care of a married couple consisting of a man and a woman as parents and is expected to take care of those parents in their old age – as the backbone of a harmonious society (Lo, 2023a, 2023b; Santos and Harrell, 2017). Same-sex couples are denied legal access to marriage, adoption, or assisted reproductive technology (ART) and are given no place in the Marriage Law (Lo, 2023a; Yu *et al.*, 2018). At the micro level, women are still expected to fulfil their prescribed roles as wives and mothers, give birth to children, and undertake care work to maintain harmony in the family sphere (Engbretsen, 2014). Furthermore, by tightening censorship of the media and Internet (Lo, 2022; Liao, 2019; Tan, 2016), the government has been silencing the experiences of people whose families do not fit the conventional notions of family, including those of lalas and gay men. While homosexuality per se has never been criminalised in China, lalas and gay men continue to face social exclusion. In particular, lalas are doubly marginalised due to their non-normative sexual orientation and their identity as single women. As further shown in the findings, it is within this context that the legalisation of same-sex marriage remains a distant hope for many same-sex couples in China.

Recent decades have witnessed individual and community efforts advocating same-sex marriage in China. Li Yinhe, a prominent sociologist and activist, proposed

the Chinese Same-Sex Marriage Bill to the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference on at least seven occasions between 2003 and 2016 (Jeffreys and Wang, 2018). Despite failures, her proposal has drawn media and public attention. Li Yinhe (2015) highlighted six benefits of legalised same-sex marriage for the country: (1) it will offer all Chinese citizens equal rights; (2) it will reduce the spread of HIV by encouraging monogamy; (3) it will revive China's traditional cultural acceptance of same-sex eroticism; (4) it will enhance the country's international image as a promoter of human rights; (5) it will discourage 'fake marriages' and 'contract marriages'<sup>3</sup>; and (6) it will improve social harmony by preventing clashes between minority and mainstream groups. Lin Xianzhi, a retired government official and member of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) China, also advocated legal protections for same-sex couples at the NPC in 2015. Notably, he showed public support for his gay son, who was a finalist in the 'Rainbow Love' campaign launched by Taobao, one of the largest online shopping platforms in China (Doland, 2015; Zhang, 2015). Encouraging same-sex couples to make videos documenting their love stories and reasons for desiring to get married, the campaign, in partnership with two other companies and three local LGBTQ+ organisations, offered ten Chinese same-sex couples an all-expenses-paid trip to California to get married. Over 400 couples joined the campaign, 1,000,000 people viewed the event page, and over 75,000 people voted (Jeffreys and Wang, 2018). Furthermore, some lesbian and gay couples organised high-profile wedding ceremonies in China, despite the lack of legal marital status within the country (Tungol, 2013; Linder, 2016).

These examples of advocacy for same-sex marriage demonstrate efforts by individuals, activists, businesses, and alliances formed by different sectors to challenge the heteronormative institution of marriage and the family. Heteronormativity, as conceptualised by Berlant and Warner (1998: 548), refers to 'the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations' that privilege heterosexuality and render one kind of heterosexual life the most natural and ideal way of living. These efforts and alliances queer/question heteronormativity and open up new ways to make sense of marriage and family life, raising public awareness of alternative ways of living.

It is also noteworthy that the discourses underpinning advocacy for same-sex marriage centre around traditional family values associated with monogamy and support for familial and social harmony. The emphasis on the merits of long-term monogamous relationships and the associated stability can be seen as a strategic move by the pro-same-sex-marriage camp to garner wider support from the public (Huang, 2017). Some scholars have drawn attention to the potential pitfalls of assimilationist politics, which integrates LGBTQ+ people into mainstream institutions and normative social relationships and risks obscuring difference in the pursuit of normalcy or equality (Duggan, 2002; Huang, 2017). From a feminist perspective, scholars have discussed the oppressive nature of marriage as part of a patriarchal system oppressing women (Jeffreys, 2004; Nair, 2010). Queer scholars have also questioned pro-same-sex-marriage politics by arguing that it may be complicit in reinforcing the heteronormative institutions of marriage and family and that it fails to address the precarious reality of marriage itself (Duggan, 2002; Beam, 2018). This form of 'queer thinking' critiques oppressive norms and categories and functions as a reflection upon sexuality that can help to 'map power' (Butler, 1997: 25). It has been useful in questioning assumptions about what families should look like and expanding the definition of family (Acosta, 2018). Extending this line of inquiry, we ask: To what extent can same-sex marriage represent new ways of participating in the Chinese family and

potentially reduce lalás' defamilisation and familisation risks? In what ways can discussions on same-sex marriage question the institution of marriage and help to form queer alliances that enable people to pursue their preferred family life?

*An intersectional approach to queer family life: familisation risks, defamilisation risks, and the challenges of alliance building*

This article examines how lalás' social locations, heteronormative social expectations, and policy impact upon lalás' life chances and render them at risk. Focusing on defamilisation and familisation risks is important because it highlights the diverse challenges involved in people's organisation of their family lives. Defamilisation risks refer to a lack of opportunities to secure an acceptable standard of living independently of participation in the family; familisation risks refer to a lack of opportunities to choose to perform a certain role in the family while simultaneously maintaining a socially acceptable standard of living (Chau and Yu, 2021; Yu *et al.*, 2022; Yu and Lo, 2023). In welfare studies, the concept of 'defamilisation' was developed by Lister (1994) as a counter-concept to and feminist critique of Esping-Andersen's (1990) concept of decommodification. Esping-Andersen (1990) raises concerns that people's welfare can be undermined by labour-market risks, which are caused by a lack of freedom to choose whether or not to take part in the work economy. Nevertheless, his idea has been criticised for being insufficiently sensitive to the diverse ways in which people organise their family and working lives. Defamilisation and familisation studies emerged in response to this criticism (Lister, 1994; Israel and Spannagel, 2019), drawing attention to whether, and if so how, people can freely determine their participation in the family.

Bringing this body of literature, which has predominantly focused on heterosexual populations and families, into dialogue with an intersectionality perspective, this article takes the inquiry one step further and maps the ways in which gender, sexuality, and class intersect in shaping lalás' experiences of defamilisation and familisation risks. Intersectionality is the examination of the complex interplay between social locations and systems of oppression with which social relationships, belief systems, policies, and institutions are imbued (Crenshaw, 1991; Few-Demo and Allen, 2020). As shown in the findings, lalás tend to encounter different difficulties in both the labour market and the family due to their identities as single women and lesbians, as well as their socio-economic status. These defamilisation and familisation risks reflect multiple and intersecting systems of power that limit their life chances. More importantly, these risks highlight the need for coalition work to bring together those with shared experiences of marginalisation (e.g., not only sexual minorities but also heterosexual women) and to change the values and policies associated with the heteronormative institution of marriage. Adopting an intersectional lens enables us to map people's differing relations to dominant and normalising power and to reflect upon how potential alliances can be formed.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative methodology to gain access to participants' personal accounts of family-related experiences from their own perspectives and to understand their experiences within the context in which the meanings of participants' lived experiences are socially constructed (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014). Participants were invited to

share their views on issues related to the main research questions during semi-structured interviews. Topics discussed included: lalas' self-perceptions of their identities and relationships, relationships with family members and significant others, lived experiences of social exclusion and other challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions of the wider environment (such as government policies, local and international policies on same-sex marriage, and perceived attitudes towards homosexuality among different sectors and the general public). The interview process was kept flexible to encourage participants to freely share their views, concerns, and experiences.

All twenty participants identified themselves as lalas. They were recruited through the researcher's personal networks, referrals by local lala organisations in Beijing, and participants' referrals. The researcher deliberately recruited participants aged under thirty, based on previous studies documenting the predicament of unmarried Chinese heterosexual/lala women who remain single in their late twenties and are stigmatised as 'leftover women' (Ji, 2015). This study thus focused on the subset of lalas who were most likely to be experiencing intense familial and societal pressure to enter opposite-sex marriage and give birth to children. This focus enabled us to examine their experiences of handling the pressure to conform to the heterosexual family model while attempting to pursue their own desired family life. Each participant was fully informed of the research purpose and procedures and was asked to provide written consent before the interview began. The length of interviews ranged between two and three hours. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, which was the native language of all the participants. Ethical approval was granted by Hong Kong Baptist University.

Participants were aged between twenty and thirty. All of them were living in Beijing at the time of the interview. Most had a full-time job, and they worked in a variety of industries, including IT, design, public relations, and NGOs. Two were self-employed. Thirteen had a bachelor's degree, six had a master's degree, and one was studying at university at the time of the interview. As all of them belonged to the post-80s or post-90s generation, most had enjoyed better opportunities than previous generations to enter university and were generally well-educated, largely due to expanded government support for both basic and university education (Li, 2019).

Given the small size of the sample, which is composed largely of relatively young members of the middle class with a university education, we do not seek to generalise the findings to the whole lala population of China. As in many other parts of the world, census data identifying non-heterosexual populations remains unavailable in China. Rather than being concerned with questions of quantity or frequency, this qualitative study is concerned with lalas' perspectives on same-sex marriage and their experiences of family life. It provides a context-sensitive and nuanced analysis of how gender, sexuality, and class intersect in shaping family lives and experiences of defamilisation and familisation risks.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To facilitate data analysis, a six-step thematic analysis method was adopted based on the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method searches for themes, which then emerge to become the major categories for data analysis. In the first phase, the search was conducted through careful reading and re-reading of the whole dataset. In the second phase, 423 initial codes were generated. These initial codes remained descriptive and as close as possible to the language used by the participants, such as 'being pressurised to find a boyfriend' and 'parents' rejection of sexual identity'. The third phase involved carefully

reviewing, comparing, and contrasting different initial codes and sorting them into potential themes. For instance, a large number of initial codes clustered around the theme of 'handling family relationships', which involved heteronormative expectations from families of origin, ways of handling parental disapproval of homosexuality, and difficulties in having children. Similarly, another set of codes with common patterns of meaning, namely 'benefits associated with same-sex marriage' and 'legal recognition of a relationship', were categorised into one theme, named 'material (in)security'. In the fourth phase, these potential themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they were internally coherent, accurate, and distinctive. In the fifth phase, themes were re-named and further refined to present systematic analytical work in relation to the research questions. In the final phase, quotes were translated into English in order to be included in this article. The end result, presented below, reveals the key constellations of meanings present in the dataset.

## Findings

### *'I just want to have a family': Handling family relationships in the face of defamilisation and familisation risks*

All the participants reported a greater or lesser degree of difficulty in handling family relationships. These difficulties mainly arose from parents' disapproval of their non-normative sexual identity, the pressure to conform to social norms, and parents' expectations that they would enter (opposite-sex) marriage. These external expectations were significantly different from the participants' own ideals of family life, which they envisioned with their same-sex partners. Previous studies have suggested that Chinese LGBTQ + politics is often not concerned with a direct challenge to the authorities or the fight for human rights, but with more pragmatic ways of maintaining good relationships with families of origin (Kong, 2019; Lo, 2022). The following examples demonstrate how participants handled rejection by their families of origin and by the state, which, in turn, imposed both defamilisation and familisation risks on them.

It was common for participants to recall negative views of homosexuality expressed by their parents and to differentiate their own family values from those of older generations. From their parents' perspective, entering heterosexual marriage was the only path towards happiness and security. Xin was one of the few participants who had chosen to come out to her parents and 'educate' them, but her disclosure was seen as 'shameful' to the family and consequently dismissed.

My mother keeps saying I should find a boyfriend. Deep in her heart, she thinks every woman should find a guy to marry. That's the life goal. I've told her many times that I like girls. I just want to educate her. But she still hints that I can find a boy from time to time. To her, being a lala is just a phase.

Most of the other participants hid their sexual identities from their families of origin. Anna shared her view:

My family is very conservative. When coming out to friends or even colleagues, you can choose to do so. Even if they're homophobic, you can just cut ties with them, unfriend them. It's less stressful. But you can't choose your parents. So this is where the biggest pressure comes from.

Parental rejection of a lala/lesbian identity and same-sex relationship had a profound impact on lalas' chances of developing their preferred family lives. Similarly to Anna, some participants felt stuck in an unsupportive relationship with their family of origin, while not wanting to confront their parents with their sexual identity and risk losing financial support. Ning had been in a stable relationship with her same-sex partner for many years, but she kept it secret from her family of origin. She reported that her parents were firmly against homosexuality and saw same-sex relationships as 'abnormal'. This was why she was planning to engage in a contract marriage with a gay man in order to please her parents and satisfy their expectations for her to marry a man and 'live a good life'. Nevertheless, these heteronormative expectations put Ning in a disadvantaged position from which she could not freely decide her own family and fertility plans. She shared the challenges she faced:

My [same-sex] partner loves children so much and wants to have one. As lalas, if we want to have children, it's so complicated that we need to go overseas, like to the USA. The whole process is very expensive. Because local hospitals only allow heterosexual married couples to have the surgery. If you're a single woman or a *tongzhi* [a gender-neutral term referring to a sexual minority person], you're not allowed to do it. So we have to save money to go to the USA or Thailand. And legal guardianship is another issue. Only the birth mother is recognised as a parent. The other mother isn't recognised. There was a lawsuit about the non-birth mother fighting for custody after a break-up. It's such a nightmare that as a mother you're not legally recognised. If same-sex relationships were recognised, this wouldn't have happened. If I have children in the future, I don't want to have to worry about all these things. I just want to have a family. I want to have a child. It's taxing that I need to deal with all these issues.

Ning's experience highlights the different defamilisation and familisation risks faced by lalas. For many participants who wanted to have children, the huge cost of ART overseas remained an insurmountable obstacle. It generates a financial burden even for those, like Ning, who can afford it. This familisation risk resonates with previous studies suggesting that access to ART remains highly segregated along lines of class and cultural capital (Mamo, 2018; Lo, 2023a). Even in contexts where same-sex partnership/marriage is legalised, research has shown that same-sex couples continue to face hurdles to parenthood due to the high costs associated with ART and a lack of fertility services that are sensitive to their needs and able to offer a visibly welcoming environment for diverse families (Ross *et al.*, 2006; Yee *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, in China, compared to their heterosexual counterparts, lala couples are less likely to secure support from their families of origin for family formation and childrearing, including financial assistance or practical support (e.g., childcare), let alone from the state. It remains difficult for same-sex parents to outsource their childcare responsibilities to either the formal or informal sectors. This defamilisation risk can be attributed to the lack of legal and societal recognition of same-sex relationships and parenthood and the persistent stigma attached to homosexuality in Chinese society. Furthermore, as pointed out by several participants, entering a contract marriage with a gay man puts lalas in a precarious position facing defamilisation risks, where they might have to deal with potential divorce lawsuits over property division, or even custody and the associated financial costs at a later stage.

*Views of same-sex marriage: Material reality of insecurity faced by lalas in China*

Same-sex marriage was a common topic raised by the participants. They believed that the absence of legalised marriage made same-sex relationships and family-building very challenging. They also found it unfair that lala (and gay) couples are not entitled to the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts. Almost all participants stressed that marriage was about more than just social recognition, but also provided the functional benefits and welfare they needed in a legally protected relationship. For instance, Fang regarded same-sex marriage as the 'safety net' she desired:

The fact is that the LGBT community is huge and it does exist. But the government keeps avoiding it as if it doesn't exist. Like, if they don't address it, don't face it, then it doesn't exist . . . This attitude directly affects the policies and welfare for same-sex couples. They don't recognise same-sex relationships so we can't get married. It's so troublesome. If the relationship is good, it's fine. But if there's any incident, there'll be a lot of legal issues, like ownership of property, custody, etc.

Sally expressed similar thoughts about the importance of legal protection and welfare. She said:

For me, the welfare I'm concerned about is at the legal level, which is about the right to make medical decisions and tax reductions as a couple. These two are the main reason for me to get married. Some people may think that getting married is romantic. The couple can live happily ever after. I don't think marriage has anything to do with a high-quality long-term relationship. The most crucial thing is that, if one partner is in hospital, the other one can't legally sign the papers as a married heterosexual couple does. They can't make medical decisions, or even visit their significant others.

In addition to the medical rights and entitlement to spousal tax reductions, Le was concerned about long-term care and the inheritance of property and described her hope of migrating to another country where same-sex marriage is legal:

I don't want to get married in the USA or Canada, then when I come back to China, my relationship still isn't recognised. I know that getting married doesn't mean you'll never get divorced. But if I drop dead one day, there's nothing my partner can do. She can't inherit my property. It's for real. So I want to live overseas where same-sex relationships are recognised and not stigmatised.

These remarks from participants show that, rather than embracing the (hetero) normative ideal of a good life associated with a happy marriage, some lalas may question the taken-for-granted stability of marriage. What concerned participants most was the material reality of insecurity, which denies the existence of same-sex relationships and families and puts same-sex couples into a precarious position in different life circumstances, ranging from family-building or the need to care for a sick partner, through divorce, to death. The absence of legalised same-sex marriage can lead to both defamilisation and familisation risks as it limits same-sex couples' access to the financial resources and protection that are accorded to married heterosexual couples.



*'Even being single is strange': Identifying common identities on the fringes and the possibilities of potential alliances*

When discussing current policy, participants were aware that some local activists and organisations were fighting for same-sex marriage, but they also expressed no hope that the Chinese government would legalise such marriage in the foreseeable future. Echoing recent studies documenting tightened government control over LGBTQ+ communities, both in society and on the Internet (Bao, 2018; Lo, 2022), our participants expressed concern about the limited visibility and welfare of LGBTQ+ people. Emily said:

The state is so powerful and dominated by straight men. There were some representatives submitting bills about same-sex marriage and related rights to the National People's Congress, like Li Yinhe, but there's no result. They won't give you any chance. . . . I feel like it's tightened its control in recent years. . . . The media authorities even proposed a ban on explicit content about homosexuality, extra-marital affairs, divorce, and whatnot. . . . LGBTQ+ is just too strange for them. They'll never understand us. Even being single is strange.

This remark highlights the common struggles and exclusion faced by those who fall short of the ideal heterosexual family model, including not only sexual minority people but also single and divorced individuals. Our participants complained that being a single woman was seen as 'abnormal' and 'problematic' and that they were discriminated against in the workplace due to traditional gendered expectations. It was not uncommon for participants to reflect upon gender inequality when discussing the challenges facing the lala community. For instance, Lily firmly believed that enhancing the welfare of lalas was connected with improving gender equality. She said:

Many people still think it's a woman's responsibility to take care of the family and children. Women are still not expected to have good career achievements. Almost all successful women are self-driven rather than being expected to be successful. All the expectations on them are about family life instead of work. For example, if you're a girl, you have to act in a certain way, dress in a certain way, learn how to cook, how to do domestic chores, and so on and so forth. I really hate people setting rules about what women can or cannot do. This is why, in the heterosexual world, women in general earn less and have lower social position than men. In the LGBTQ+ world, the overall living situations and spaces of lalas are also poorer than those of gay men.

As Lily points out, the gender inequality and differences between lalas and gay men reflect how defamilisation and familisation risks constitute common obstacles for both heterosexual and lala women. According to the participants, it was important to introduce policy measures to enhance gender equality, such as measures prohibiting discrimination on grounds of gender identity or marital status, and to recruit more women and sexual minority people to leadership positions. Some participants talked about family-friendly and LGBTQ-inclusive policies implemented in some overseas companies. For example, Guo shared her views of family life and described what she deemed a 'win-win situation' for different families, businesses, and society:

I always want to have a happy family, get married, and have a child. If I meet someone, if I have the money and the ability, I'll do it. But the current environment isn't friendly at all. I heard there

are some companies in other countries providing financial support for female employees to freeze their eggs and for LGBTQ+ employees to use fertility services, which is really good. Their employees create a lot of value for companies, then the companies give back to their employees. It's a win-win situation. Female employees can freely choose when they want to have children and focus more on work, especially when they're in their late twenties and early thirties. It's good for the economy, good for women, and good for birth rates.

Guo's comments highlight the importance of respecting and enhancing women's autonomy, regardless of their sexual identity, to decide whether and how to participate in the family while also gaining a foothold in the labour market. Being a lala, however, created extra obstacles for her to realise her family and fertility plans because she had to face political and class barriers to ART and state policies that do not recognise or protect same-sex partnerships/marriage, let alone parenthood.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

By adopting an intersectional approach to understanding family life, this study has revealed that lalas may face various difficulties, due not only to their sexual identity but also to their single status as women and their socio-economic status. It is reasonable to believe that some lalas may be vulnerable to multiple jeopardies due to society's negative responses to women, people of lower socio-economic status, and LGBTQ+ communities. In principle, lalas may have some potential allies in their fight against the unfair distribution of power and resources between men and women, between rich and poor, and between heterosexuals and LGBTQ+ people. However, it is uncertain whether these potential alliances can actually be formed. Based on the interview data, this final section summarises the insights generated from lalas' experiences of family life and their views on same-sex marriage.

The findings show that heteronormativity in the family sphere and the policy system exposes lalas to different kinds of defamilisation and familisation risks, and that lalas' social locations and material constraints intersect in shaping both their experiences and their responses to these risks. Without legal or societal recognition of same-sex partnership/marriage, participants encountered challenges on every step along the path towards family formation and development, ranging from coming out to parents, forming a family, having a child, to even include death arrangements (e.g., the partner not being allowed to inherit property). While the existing literature has explored debates about whether the desire for same-sex marriage represents assimilation into heterosexual norms, what Duggan (2002) terms homonormativity, our findings reveal the material reality of insecurity faced by lalas and the need to find practical ways to reduce the defamilisation and familisation risks they face. These risks can be heightened as lalas (and other sexual minorities) age because being denied entitlements to spousal benefits, such as tax deductions, medical benefits from a spouse's employer, and property rights, can generate huge financial costs for same-sex couples in the long run.

Meanwhile, it is evident that, lalas, being pushed to the margins of society, may actively question the established heteronormative institution of marriage. By bringing queer lives into the marriage debate, the institution of marriage can potentially 'become queered by the presence of queer people' (Gregory and Matthews, 2022: 606). Many participants challenged the idealised picture of a stable, lifelong, and impeccable

marriage that was constantly being preached by their families of origin, people of the older generation, and the government. Such a challenge demonstrates a queer way of thinking that challenges taken-for-granted norms and calls for diverse ways of participating in the family. Nevertheless, the extent to which LGBTQ+ people can achieve their ideal family lives beyond the heterosexual family model largely depends on their material conditions and resources (Mamo, 2018; Lo *et al.*, 2022). While our participants, most of whom had a middle-class background and a university education, expressed their hopes of conquering defamilisation and familisation risks through individual means, such as pursuing parenthood through ART or migrating to other LGBTQ-friendly countries, it is noteworthy that these risks may take a heavy toll, especially on those who are economically disadvantaged and lack the material and cultural resources necessary to resort to individuals means of changing the status quo.

Related to the previous point, another contribution of this article lies in its discussion of potential welfare alliances based on shared experiences of marginalisation. By examining the defamilisation and familisation risks faced by *lalas*, this study calls for more attention to be paid to the welfare needs of this group of minority women, and other minorities who fall short of heteronormative expectations. Given the imperative of heterosexual marriage, especially as imposed on women, it is possible that single or divorced heterosexual women experience similar struggles as *lalas*. Participants made it clear that it was important to be concerned about not only LGBTQ+ welfare but also the welfare of women in general. Women who fit into the normative category of the heterosexual continue to face defamilisation and familisation risks because traditional gender norms make it difficult for them to juggle their family life and career development. Meanwhile, it is important not to overlook the fact that gay men and some *lalas* with higher socio-economic status, despite being socially marginalised due to their sexual identity, may enjoy certain class privileges and better resources. As suggested by Cohen (2020: 219), the radical potential of queer politics is more than just institutionalised politics; rather, it should be organised on the basis of an intersectional understanding of 'where our potential allies can be found'. In a similar vein, our discussion of the importance of marriage equality extends beyond the recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, and also serves to ignite a deeper reflection upon how different identities interconnect and interact with each other in people's experiences of marginalisation and struggles for welfare and rights. Future studies should continue to explore the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and other social locations that shape people's life chances and to identify inclusive policies that can be implemented by different sectors in order to improve coalition work and the welfare of different groups of minorities, such as LGBTQ+ people of colour, those with disabilities, and those from lower-class backgrounds. While these different marginalised groups experience different forms of social exclusion in different spaces, their unique vantage point of being 'misfits' foregrounds the everyday operation of social institutions that perpetuate inequalities, namely those associated with whiteness, able-body-mindedness, middle-/upper-class-ness, and heteronormativity (Beagan *et al.*, 2022). As suggested by Garland-Thomson (2011: 603), misfits can become 'agents of recognition who by the very act of misfitting engage in challenging and rearranging environments'. They can point us to limitations of current policies that remain invisible to those who fit in.

Applying an intersectional lens to policymaking would be beneficial because different social identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, and class) and experiences need to be considered simultaneously in policy design. For instance, in terms of encouraging an

inclusive working environment, as suggested by some participants, it is important for employers and policymakers to address the fact that different groups of employees (e.g., heterosexual and LGBTQ+ women) may share common struggles related to their marital/family status, while certain groups (e.g., ethnic minority LGBTQ+ women) may occupy multiple marginalised positions. Possible ways to facilitate collaboration between different groups include challenging established diversity-management initiatives that focus on a single dimension of diversity (e.g., gender or ethnicity) (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012), developing allyship networks aimed at addressing different forms of privilege and marginalisation that sustain inequalities within organisations (Dennissen *et al.*, 2020), and offering training programmes and public education that encourage individuals to recognise and confront their unconscious biases (Dickens *et al.*, 2019). In the Chinese context, however, it is noteworthy that the government has tightened control over LGBTQ+-related communities and activism since 2017 (Liao, 2019). Meanwhile, recent years have witnessed a rising pink economy, where businesses target LGBTQ people as potential consumers in their products, services, and/or marketing campaigns (Wang, 2023). While these business approaches can provide more consumption options (e.g., overseas wedding planning and photography services) for some LGBTQ people, particularly those from the middle class, and enhance LGBTQ+ public visibility at large, they tend to further marginalise less privileged members of the LGBTQ+ community (Peñaloza, 2013; Lo *et al.*, 2024). Without policy support from the state, the transformative potential of these business approaches remains limited and uncertain. In short, if we are to address the systemic barriers that expose people, especially those from marginalised groups, to defamilisation and familisation risks, it is crucial to (re)design policies and practices that can take into account intersectionality and address multiple inequalities and different forms of discrimination. Close collaboration is needed between scholars, policymakers, and business practitioners.

To summarise, addressing the family experiences and defamilisation and familisation risks faced by lalas in Mainland China enables us to rethink the heteronormative assumptions embedded in society and in the policy system. The intersectionality lens guides us to move beyond the heterosexual/homosexual boundary and to rethink the possibility of welfare alliances. These alliances can be composed of different groups of people, regardless of their gender and sexuality, who may be pulled together by individuals, LGBTQ+ organisations, and/or other NGOs and corporations. To create more favourable conditions for these alliances to enhance the welfare of minority groups, there is a need to seek support not only from the government but also from other sectors, such as the family and the business sector.

## Notes

1 The term 'lala' has been used in previous studies about Chinese women with same-sex desires (Kam, 2013; Engebretsen, 2014). It is pronounced 'la-la' (Pinyin transliteration) in Mandarin Chinese. We use this term in this article for two reasons. Firstly, 'lala' is a widely known identity category used by Chinese women with same-sex desires for self-identification in urban China (Kam, 2013; Engebretsen, 2014). Secondly, all the participants in this study identified themselves as lalas. Instead of borrowing Western terms, it is preferable to use this Chinese term to describe participants' lived experiences.

2 Hukou refers to the household registration system in China. Under this system, each Chinese citizen is designated as having either an urban or rural hukou (registration status) based on his/her parent's

(either father's or mother's) place of origin. An urban or rural hukou entitles a citizen to access different state-provided welfare, including education, housing, healthcare, and social services (Lui, 2017).

3 'Fake marriage' generally refers to a marriage fraud in which a heterosexual spouse is kept in the dark about his/her spouse's non-heterosexual identity before (and during) marriage (Zhu, 2018). 'Contract marriage' refers to a strategy deliberately used by a lala and a gay man to enter a marriage in order to keep their non-normative sexual identity secret and appear heterosexual (Engelbrechtsen, 2014; Lo, 2020).

## References

- Acosta, K. L. (2018) 'Queering family scholarship: theorizing from the borderlands', *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 10, 2, 406–418.
- Bao, H. (2018) *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Beagan, B. L., Sibbald, K. R., Pride, T. M. and Bizzeth, S. R. (2022) 'Professional misfits: "you're having to perform... all week long"', *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 10, 4, 1–14.
- Beam, M. (2018) *Gay, Inc.: The Nonprofitization of Queer Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Berlant, L. and Warner, M. (1998) 'Sex in public', *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 2, 547–566.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 2, 77–101.
- Butler, J. (1997) 'Against proper objects', in Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (eds.), *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1–30.
- Chau, R. C. and Yu, S. W. (2021) 'Familization risks, defamilization risks and older women', *Journal of Women and Aging*, 33, 3, 312–327.
- Cohen, C. J. (2020) 'Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens: the radical potential of queer politics?', in Carole R. McCann, Seung-kyung Kim and Emek Ergun (eds.), *Feminist Theory Reader*, New York: Routledge, 311–323.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 6, 1241–1299.
- Dennissen, M., Benschop, Y. and van Den Brink, M. (2020) 'Rethinking diversity management: an intersectional analysis of diversity networks', *Organization Studies*, 41, 2, 219–240.
- Dickens, D. D., Womack, V. Y. and Dimes, T. (2019) 'Managing hypervisibility: an exploration of theory and research on identity shifting strategies in the workplace among Black women', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 113, 153–163.
- Doland, A. (2015) 'For Valentine's day, Alibaba helps gay Chinese couples get married in the U.S.' *Advertising Age*, <https://adage.com/article/global-news/alibaba-helps-chinese-gay-couples-married-u-s/297108> [accessed 08.02.2023].
- Duggan, L. (2002) 'The new homonormativity: the sexual politics of neoliberalism', in Castronovo R. and Nelson D. D. (eds.), *Materializing Democracy: Towards a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 173–194.
- Engelbrechtsen, E. L. (2014) *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography*. New York: Routledge.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, London: Princeton University Press.
- Few-Demo, A. L. and Allen, K. R. (2020) 'Gender, feminist, and intersectional perspectives on families: a decade in review', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82, 1, 326–345.
- Fullerton, J. (2017) 'The pink yuan: how Chinese business is embracing the LGBT market', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jan/05/the-pink-yuan-how-chinese-business-is-embracing-the-lgbt-market> [accessed 08.02.2023].
- Garland-Thomson, R. (2011) 'Misfits: a feminist materialist disability concept', *Hypatia*, 26, 3, 591–609.
- Gregory, L. and Matthews, P. (2022) 'Social policy and queer lives: coming out of the closet?', *Journal of Social Policy*, 51, 3, 596–610.

- Huang, A. (2017) 'Precariousness and the queer politics of imagination in China', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 58(2), 226–242.
- Human Rights Campaign (2023) 'Marriage equality around the world', <https://www.hrc.org/resources/marriage-equality-around-the-world> [accessed 08.02.2023].
- Israel, S. and Spannagel, D. (2019) 'Material deprivation in the EU: a multi-level analysis on the influence of decommodification and defamilisation policies', *Acta Sociologica*, 62, 2, 152–173.
- Jeffreys, E. and Wang, P. (2018) 'Pathways to legalizing same-sex marriage in China and Taiwan: globalization and "Chinese values"', in Winter, B., Forest, M. and Sénac, R. (eds.), *Global Perspectives on Same-Sex Marriage: A Neo-institutional Approach*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 197–219.
- Jeffreys, S. (2004) 'The need to abolish marriage', *Feminism and Psychology*, 14, 327–331.
- Ji, Y. (2015) 'Between tradition and modernity: "leftover" women in Shanghai', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77, 5, 1057–1073.
- Kam, L. Y. L. (2013) *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China (Queer Asia)*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kong, T. S. (2016) 'The sexual in Chinese sociology: homosexuality studies in contemporary China', *The Sociological Review*, 64, 3, 495–514.
- Kong, T. S. (2019) 'Transnational queer sociological analysis of sexual identity and civic-political activism in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 70, 5, 1904–1925.
- Li, P. (2019) *Urbanization and its Impact in Contemporary China*. Springer.
- Li, Y. (2015) 'Li Yinhe proposes same-sex marriage again at this year's Liang Hui', <https://chinadevelopmentbrief.org/reports/li-yinhe-proposes-same-sex-marriage-again-at-this-years-liang-hui/> [accessed 08.02.2023].
- Liao, S. (2019) '"# lamGay# What about you?": storytelling, discursive politics, and the affective dimension of social media activism against censorship in China', *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 2314–2333.
- Linder, A. (2016) 'Gay couple holds high-profile wedding after Chinese court rules against their right to marry', *Shanghaiist*. [http://shanghaiist.com/2016/05/18/gay\\_marriage.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2016/05/18/gay_marriage.php) [accessed 08.02.2023].
- Lister, R. (1994) 'She has other duties: women, citizenship and social security', in Baldwin, S. and Falkingham, J. (eds.), *Social Security and Social Change: New Challenges to the Beveridge Model*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 31–44.
- Lo, I. P. Y. (2020) 'Family formation among lalas (lesbians) in urban China: strategies for forming families and navigating relationships with families of origin', *Journal of Sociology*, 56, 4, 629–645.
- Lo, I. P. Y. (2022) '(Dis)Engagement with queer counterpublics: exploring intimate and family lives in online and offline spaces in China', *British Journal of Sociology*, 73, 1, 139–153.
- Lo, I. P. Y. (2023a) 'Dialectical family imaginaries: navigating relational selfhood and becoming a parent through assisted reproduction in China', *Sociology*, 57, 3, 642–658.
- Lo, I. P. Y. (2023b) 'Violence in the "double closet": female same-sex intimate partner violence and minority stress in China', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 27, 1, 137–145.
- Lo, I. P. Y. (2024) 'The interplay between intimacy and commodification: queer agency and vulnerability amid neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics', *The Sociological Review*, 72, 1, 118–136.
- Lo, I. P. Y., Liu, E. H. and Yu, S. W. K. (2022) 'Family and work lives of lesbians in China: implications for the adult worker model', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19, 11, 1–15.
- Lo, I. P. Y., Yu, S. W. K., Ho, G., Ng, I. and Lee, S. M. (2024) 'The cross-regional impact of Taiwan's same-sex marriage legalisation: the queer economy of welfare mix', *Social Policy and Society*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746424000083>
- Lui, L. (2017) 'Hukou intermarriage in China: patterns and trends', *Chinese Sociological Review*, 49, 2, 110–137.
- Mamo, L. (2018) 'Queering reproduction in transnational bio-economies', *Reproductive Biomedicine and Society Online*, 7, 24–32.

- Nair, Y. (2010) 'Against equality, against marriage: an introduction', in R. Conrad (ed.), *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Marriage*, Lewiston: Against Equality Press, 1–10.
- Peel, E. and Harding, R. (2008) 'Editorial introduction: recognizing and celebrating same-sex relationships: beyond the normative debate', *Sexualities*, 11, 6, 659–666.
- Peñaloza, L. (2013) 'We're here, we're queer, and we're going shopping! A critical perspective on the accommodation of gays and lesbians in the U.S. marketplace', in Jacobsen, J. and Zeller, A. (eds.), *Queer Economics: A Reader*, Oxon: Routledge, 304–329.
- Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., McNaughton Nicholls, C. and Ormston, R. (2014) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Ross, L. E., Steele, L. S. and Epstein, R. (2006) 'Lesbian and bisexual women's recommendations for improving the provision of assisted reproductive technology services', *Fertility and Sterility*, 86, 3, 735–738.
- Santos, G. and Harrell, S. (2017) *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty-first Century*, Washington: University of Washington Press.
- Tan, J. (2016) 'Aesthetics of queer becoming: comrade Yue and Chinese community-based documentaries online', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33, 1, 38–52.
- Tang, D. T. S., Khor, D. and Chen, Y. C. (2020) 'Legal recognition of same-sex partnerships: a comparative study of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan', *The Sociological Review*, 68, 1, 192–208.
- Tatli, A. and Özbilgin, M. F. (2012) 'An emic approach to intersectional study of diversity at work: a Bourdieuan framing', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 14, 180–200.
- Tungol, J. R. (2013) 'Elderly chinese gay couple have wedding ceremony, post pictures online(photos)', *The Huffington Post*. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/03/elderly-gay-chinese-couple-get-married-wedding-pictures\\_n\\_2590531.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/03/elderly-gay-chinese-couple-get-married-wedding-pictures_n_2590531.html) [accessed 08.02.2023].
- Wang, S. (2023) 'Transgressive play and the inherent limits of business growth for China's LGBTQ platforms: the case of a social game in Aloha', *Social Media + Society*, 9, 2, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177964>
- Yee, S., Mamone, A. A., Fatima, M., Sharon-Weiner, M. and Librach, C. L. (2024) 'Parenthood desire, perceived parenthood stigma, and barriers to achieving parenthood in childless sexual minority men', *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics*, 41, 1739–1753. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10815-024-03098-6>
- Yu, S. W. K., Foster, L. and Chau, R. C. M. (2022) 'The missing group? Situating transnational contacts in defamilisation research', *International Social Work*, 65, 5, 941–954.
- Yu, W. K., Liu, E. H. and Lo, I. P. Y. (2018) 'The difficulties faced by lalas in China in securing defamilisation and familisation', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 38, 11/12, 1086–1100.
- Yu, S. W. K. and Lo, I. P. Y. (2023) 'Defamilisation, familisation, and LGBTQ+ studies', *Social Policy and Society*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746423000325>
- Zhang, Y. (2015) 'Gay marriage advocates ask legislators to present their proposals at the two sessions', *Global Times*, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/912260.shtml> [accessed 22.01.2023].
- Zhu, J. (2018) "'Unqueer" kinship? Critical reflections on "marriage fraud" in mainland China', *Sexualities*, 21, 7, 1075–1091.