LGBT and the Changing Moral System in Contemporary Chinese Society:

Formality Marriage and the Strife between Family-centered Values and Self-centered Individual Needs

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This study focuses on the phenomenon of formality marriage *xinghun* in contemporary post-socialist China. This practice is becoming more and more common among LGBT individuals, namely gay men and lesbian women. The research aims to unveil and inquiry the mechanism working behind such practice, focusing on the factors influencing the choice to undergo *xinghun,* the search for *xinghun* partner and the arrangements taken before the marriage. As theoretical framework, Yan Yunxiang's dissertations about the changing moral landscape of contemporary Chinese society will be taken in consideration in behalf of the nature of social relationships between individuals. Such analysis will be posed within the context of the ongoing process of individualization triggered by the market liberalization. Hence, the research will focus in particular on the pivotal moment of any Chinese individual, that is, marriage and its social significance. It will be shown how *xinghun* is a result of this changing social relations, especially those between the old generation and the one called post-80s generation.

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Introduction

Research background and relevance

Contemporary Chinese society have witnessed a dramatic change in several aspects since the opening of its economic system. Furthermore, such opening of the market triggered globalization trends of life style. Although the presence of Chinese Communist Party (hence, CCP) censorship and strict control of the flow of information from outside the national boundaries, transnational networking and linkage permitted the slow liberalization of social norms considered the most strict and anachronistic which were not dismantled during the Mao Era, such as demonizing overt sexual attitudes and prenuptial and

extra-marital sexual relations.

Considering what is mentioned above, one of strict social mores which underwent to drastic change is sexuality and its related issues.[1] Particularly connected to changing sexual mores, homosexuality and the LGBT issue have seen a recent progress towards a more liberal and tolerant attitude of both the government and society. Two events sign the opening attitude towards LGBT: first, under Jiang Zemin rule in 1997, when the crime of "hooliganism" was clarified and homosexuality was *de facto* decriminalized, and second, in 2001, when the Chinese Psychiatric Association lifted the label of mental disease on homosexuality.[2] The current position of the government towards LGBT falls into the reign of health security, as homosexuality and HIV/AIDS are seen as tightly intertwined. Several associations in China dealing with LGBT are working on HIV/AIDS prevention projects and are linked with international NGOs and governmental entities.[3]

Social mores have slower pace of change than political positions. Although sexual liberalization has been achieved and sex outside of marriage has no more social stigma and shame, being a homosexual in contemporary China is still a thorny condition. Traditional conceptions strongly influenced by Taoist and Confucian precepts conceive marriage and procreation as the main duty of adulthood.[4] However, a vast and consistent reference to same-sex love can be found in Chinese literature.[5] Generally, as far as an individual pursued the obligations of siring male heirs to the household, there was little interest about his/her erotic inclinations.[6] Nowadays, the double economic pace of rural and urban areas which characterize Chinese economy is also reflected in the perception of homosexuality. In the big cities, a more accepting and tolerant attitude is common, whereas in the countryside the chances of living openly one's sexual orientations are few and mostly leave no choice but conform to hetero-normative marriage and lifestyle.

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1 ZHENG, Weijun et al.; "Detraditionalisation and Attitudes to Sex Outside Marriage in China" in; *Culture, Health and Sexuality*; Vol.13, N.5; Routledge; 2011; p.498
2 LONG, Laurent; "China" in; *GLBTQ Social Science*; GLBTQ Inc.; 2015; p.10
3 LONG, Laurent; *ibidem*
4 ZHENG, Weijun et al.; "Detraditionalisation and Attitudes to Sex Outside Marriage in China" in; *Culture, Health and Sexuality*; Vol.13, N.5; Routledge; 2011; p.497
5 RUAN, Fangfu, TSAI, Yungmei; "Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Mainland China"; *Archives of Sexual Behavior*; Vol.17, n.2; MEDLINE, EBSCOhost; 1988; p.189
6 LONG, Laurent; "China" in; *GLBTQ Social Science*; GLBTQ Inc.; 2015; p.1

Social pressure to marry and have offspring lead LGBT individuals to consider hetero-normative marriage, as China has currently no legislation which allows same-gender civil union or any form of social protection for those who fall outside of the jurisdiction of heterosexual unionship. It has been found out that 80% of gay men are closeted (as in they do not openly live their sexual orientation but rather conform to a hetero-normative lifestyle) and thus marry with women who are unaware of their homosexuality.[7]

On the other side, a relatively new trend has gained momentum, that is, gay men and lesbian women seeking each other to marry. This marriage is called *xingshi hunyin* 形式婚姻 "formality marriage", for short *xinghun.*[8] This practice has started to be so popular that several online forums, blogs, web spaces, and lately, applications for phones serve as meeting point for lesbians and gays looking for the "perfect match". The *xinghun* phenomenon is particularly interesting if considered in relation to the ongoing change of Chinese social structure and moral landscape. Few scholars focusing on the LGBT studies in China have inquired about formality marriage. Furthermore, there is very few academic material which have explored the topic and interpreted *xinghun* as a way of bargaining between one's social and collective duty towards family and a individualistic pursue of one's needs. This research aims to inquire the underlying mechanisms which influence the *xinghun* practice and how this represents and reflects the ongoing change of moral landscape of Chinese society. Starting from Yan Yuxiang's article "The Chinese Path to Individualization"[9] and using its assumptions regarding the ongoing individualization of Chinese society caused by the economic liberalization consequences and its effects on traditional kinship ties to analyze *xinghun*, the research demonstrates how formality marriage can be considered a bargain: LGBT individuals choose to marry and fit the hetero-normative social format but at the same time try to maintain a certain degree of freedom by choosing a partner which has the same needs, that is, living their sexual orientation in a relatively open way. However, this does not mean that *xinghun* is the perfect solution for LGBT individuals and their families. Moreover, since marriage is not considered *per se* as the ultimate achievement of adulthood but generating offspring is, issues surge

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7 https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/chinas-tongqi-the-millions-of-straight-women-married-to-closeted-gay-men [Accessed 30/04/2017]

8 CHOI, Susanne, LUO, Ming; "Parental Influence over Adult Homosexual's Nominal Marriage in China", *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCO*host*., 2014

9 YAN, Yunxiang; "The Chinese Path to Individualization"; *The British Journal of Sociology*; Vol. 61, Issue 3; 2010; pp. 489 - 512

when the topic of having children arises.

The research was conducted with a qualitative approach, as at this point of this social development, part-secrecy and ethical consideration it is more suitable to the topic itself. Moreover, the previous researches and academic work on the topic have been conducted in a more qualitative rather than quantitative way.[10] Furthermore, since the aim of this research is that of disclosing the underlying mechanism and push forces which lead Chinese LGBT to conduct hetero-normative formality marriage, as Bryman states, the nature of the research itself leads to a qualitative approach, as it is about social perception and interpretation of certain social conditions.[11]

The research is relevant as it explores a social phenomenon which has been inquired in a limited way and aims to contribute to the knowledge about Chinese LGBT social studies. Furthermore, it shows that the slow acceptance of homosexuality in China reflects the changing moral scenario of Chinese society, whose changes have been triggered by economic development and the country's slow but gradual globalization and integration within the international community, though preserving a considerable degree of traditional values.

Research question

As the aim of this research is to disclose the hidden social mechanisms and reasons behind the practice of *xinghun*, the following research questions have been designed to tackle the topic. Furthermore, since the social actors are not just the LGBT individuals who are involved in marriage but also their respective households, the research questions also include the adult children parents and their perspective of the matter.

RQ1: Why is formality marriage or *xinghun* can be considered as the best solution for Chinese LGBT individuals and their parents?

RQ2: Which are the push factors that bring gay men and lesbian women to undergo *xinghun*? In which ways traditional family values play in these pushing factors?

RQ3: As marriage is one of the milestone of an individual's life in Chinese society, to which degree does *xinghun* represent

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10 SEE: Choi and Luo 2014, 2016; Rofel 1997, 1999, Hu and Wang 2013

11 BRYMAN, Alan; *Social Research Methods 4th Edition*; Oxford University Press; New York; 2012; p.380

a durable and acceptable compromise between gay men and lesbian women and their respective families? Do *xinghun* and heterosexual marriage follow the same pattern in the phase before marriage, that is, finding the "right" partner? Do traditional gender roles crucial for the matching process?

RQ4: In which degree the changing social landscape of post-maoist Chinese society influenced the liberalization of LGBT community and behavior? The economic reform and relative opening of Chinese society profoundly changed intergenerational relationships.[12] Does this affected the perception and reception of LGBT?

Contextualizing LGBT and marriage institution in contemporary China

It is relevant here to contextualize LGBT and homosexuality in China to have a deep understanding of the underlying mechanisms which are behind the *xinghun* phenomenon. First of all, analyzing and defining how the notion of queer identity is interpreted by Chinese LGBT and in which ways it differs from queer identity elsewhere is relevant since there is, or is perceived, that there is a difference between national and so-called "globalized" queer identity. Furthermore, the importance perceived by society to engage in marriage and bring up offspring has also a great role in defining LGBT and it is crucial for the *xinghun* phenomenon.

Queer identity has nowadays a strong transnational and globalized feature in its own definition.[13] Furthermore, this globalized queer identity has been argued to have a strong Western influence, not to say that the very word "queer" is English and thus molded on the Western experience of queer. On a side, the Chinese experience of queer is a bargain between national/traditional images and the globalized queer identity. Rofel argues that, although homoeroticism and same gender sexual relationship did and do exist among the previous generations, only those of the post-80 generation individuals define themselves and identify as gays or lesbians.[14] The construction of a queer identity around same-sex relationships is resulted from linkage and connection with the LGBT experience outside the national boundaries of China.[15] As many discourses upon politics and society, an "asianness" is argued to be applied also on queer identity. This assumed "asianness" could be clarified

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12 YAN, Yunxiang; "The Changing Moral Lanscape" in; KLEINMAN et al.; *Deep China: The Moral Life of a Person: What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell Us about China*; University of California Press; Berkeley, London; 2011
13 HILDEBRANDT, Timothy; "Development and Division: the Effects of Transnational Linkage and Local Politics on LGBT Activism in China"; *The Journal of Contemporary China*; Vol.21, Issue 77; Routledge, September 2012; p. 846
14 ROFEL, Lisa; "Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China"; *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*; EBSCO Publishing; 1997, p. 452
15 ROFEL, *ibidem*

by the following fact: the strive for gay rights which started with the Stonewall riots was seldom reported in China until the 1990s, and those few reports allowed inside the country were exploited to spread the idea of the "decline and evil of Western civilization".[16]

In Rofel's article, this assumed "asianness" in queer identity is not homogeneous and differences of perception do exist between individuals from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.[17] During the group discussions she witnessed in a gay café in Beijing, divergent opinions emerged. The discussion involved LGBT individuals of different social backgrounds, mainly of them Chinese with a small presence of foreigners, including the researcher herself. As relevant for this research, one of the discussions touched the topic of being gay and its consequences with family and kinship ties. Here, the researcher notices a quite peculiar aspect, if not two. First, the process of coming out, diversely from what it might signify in the West, is perceived as a selfish act that hinders the family's social status and respectability.[18] Furthermore, it is stressed the fact that parents would interpret their offspring being queer only in a negative way, and thus coming out with parents is a selfish move and totally against the Chinese interpretation of filial piety.[19] This is because coming out is seen as bringing grief to parents and so declaring one's queerness does not fit to Chinese culture.

In addition, as offspring's duty is to carry out the family line by generating themselves offspring, being queer is interpreted as the end of the family line, for it is impossible for two men or women to generate children. Here comes the second peculiar aspect of Chinese queerness, that is, the gendered feature which ties men more than women to hetero-normative marriage. Since the family name is carried from father to son, men feel a stronger and almost hopeless responsibility to get married more than women.[20] These two aspects relate to what the author calls *cultural citizenship*. By cultural citizenship she addresses the feature for which one's identity as belonging to a certain country is not merely a political issue but also cultural. Rofel's argumentation upon cultural citizenship is raised to point out how the perception of queer is influenced on a side by transnational linkage and trends, as called in Rofel's

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16 RUAN, Fangfu, TSAI, Yungmei; "Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Mainland China"; *Archives of Sexual Behavior*; Vol.17, n.2; MEDLINE, EBSCOhost; 1988; p.190
17 ROFEL, *ivi*, p.468
18 ROFEL, *ivi,* p.464
19 ROFEL, *ivi*, p.461
20 ROFEL, *ivi*, p.460

work universality of gay identities,[21] and by Chinese gay men longing of cultural belonging to China on the other. Consequently, it can be asserted that globalizing trends have a conforming push force which drags Chinese queer individuals to identify to a global queer identity while national cultural influence and the will to uniform to cultural citizenship prevent and act as a counterbalancing drive. Differently from other parts of the West, Chinese identity and the global queer identity have produced this peculiar phenomenon in Chinese LGBT individuals.

Another aspect has to be considered in this contextualization of Chinese queerness, that is, the image and perception of queer before the "global" queer identity was superimposed upon the national, or better said traditional, one. As Altman quotes from Niko Besnier, sexual intercourse or relationship between men were seen as mere optional consequences of gender liminality, and not a defining trait of one's gender or sexual identity.[22] Besnier's studies were focused on Pacific islands' society but yet the case is applicable also for the Chinese context. The gay identity is said to be a "modern invention", that is, a creation of an identity based on homosexuality.[23] This being considered, it can also be argued that homosexuality existed way before that queer identity came up. As example, Ancient Greece patron-disciple relationship involved sexual implications, without implying the fact that the two parts of such relationship were not involved in hetero-normative marriages. The same reasoning can be also applied to the Chinese history, where literary records of emperors since Han dynasty witness sexual relationship between men.[24] What the globalized queer identity has more is the fact that it implies a political consciousness dimension. In other words, modern gay identity has created a specific and complex institutional system which allows gays of different parts of the world to communicate with each other and thus nurture and support the gay community.[25] This boosts the creation of a so called gay subculture which has its common traits although in different places and contexts of the globe. Furthermore, these commonalities do not substitute the national or traditional images, but makes those who identify with queer identity feel part of a global LGBTQI community.

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21 ROFEL, *ivi*, p.454
22 ALTMAN, Dennis; "Global Gaze/Global Gays"; *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*; Vol.3; Overseas Publishers Association; Amsterdam; 1997; p. 422
23 ALTMAN; *ivi*, p.423
24 ALTMAN; *ivi*, p.430
25 TOTH, Laszlo; *The Development of Hungarian Gay Subculture and Community in the Last Fifty Years*; Unpublished paper, Budapest, 1994, p.1

Altman also takes into consideration the role that the spreading of HIV/AIDS had in the globalization process of Western molded gay identity.[26] HIV/AIDS has certainly shaped the queer consciousness of community and triggered faster and tighter transnational linkage in order to contain the spreading of HIV and rise awareness among those individuals who are more exposed than others to it. In fact, HIV/AIDS has created itself other transnational and globalized identities such as sex workers or people with HIV.[27] This explains partly the reason why the vast majority of LGBT civil society's organizations in China deal with HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness, with some degree of support from the government.[28]

Marriage in China has not had always the same value and mechanisms. Marriage before the 1949, especially during imperial times, had a very different nature from what is it nowadays. Marriage was a matter of two families establishing a connection rather than personal issue between two individuals. Also, the phase which precedes marriage itself was influenced by various factors, such as social status of both families, fortunetelling and compatibility between the spouses and wealth. Before the advent of socialism, matchmakers and the elders of the families were suppose to find to their offspring the right companion according to these criteria.[29] Nowadays, although in some rural areas the figure of matchmaker still exists, the Marriage Law issued in 1950 redefined marriage as a relationship between equals with shared responsibilities for children.[30] This milestone legislation posed an end to the social status inequality between men and women given by the Chinese traditional view of marriage. In fact, once a woman married a man, she was not considered any longer part of her natal household, but she belonged to that of her husband. This is exemplified by the fact that the groom's family paid what was called *bride price*, a sort of compensation to the bride's family for their "loss".[31] Such compensation was also a display of the family's wealth which had to show that the bride's new family was worthy of her and could actually afford her expenses. Nowadays, bride price payment still practiced but just as a sign of respect for ancient traditions and has a merely symbolic significance.

As the figure of the matchmaker may still play a crucial role in rural areas, its place has been taken by online apps and dating websites for the urbanites. Moreover, since marriage in Chinese culture is not a mere bond between two individuals,

26 ALTMAN, Dennis; "Global Gaze/Global Gays" in; *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*; Vol.3; Overseas Publishers Association; Amsterdam; 1997; p. 425
27 ALTMAN; *ibidem*
28 HILDEBRANDT, Timothy; "Development and Division: the Effects of Transnational Linkage and Local Politics on LGBT Activism in China"; in *The Journal of Contemporary China*; Vol.21, Issue 77; Routledge, September 2012; p. 852
29 ZHANG, Li; "Traditional Han Chinese Marriage Customs"; *China Today*; vol.65, n.3; Academic Search Complete, EBSCO*host*; 2016; p.76
30 ZHENG, Weijun et al.; "Detraditionalization and Attitudes Towards Sex Outside Marriage in China"; *Culture, Health & Sexuality*; Vol.13, n.5; Routledge; May 2011; p.498
31 ZHANG, Li; "Traditional Han Chinese Marriage Customs"; *China Today*; vol.65, n.3;Academic Search Complete, EBSCO*host*; p.77

but also ties together to households, the nuclear family has still a very influential role in finding the right partner in life. A common practice that shows parents' role in matchmaking can be seen in parks where parents gather in certain days to interchange their offspring information to find the right partner.[32]

Although the change of the conception of marriage triggered by the law reform, the practice still has kept its importance as core basis of society and, in a more pragmatic point of view, the main source of welfare provision.[33] Despite the social and political reforms brought by the communist regime had dismantled the humongous power and influence that the family unit had on its members, preventing behavior that could be labeled as "selfish", and promoted gender equality and individual freedom, it has been argued that the introduction of market-driven economy had *de facto* re-established the family as the only safe haven from the economy's fluctuations and unpredictability.[34] Consequently, marriage is considered also as a way of securing one's future, since the state welfare provision is not sufficient and elders' care is expected to be performed by the younger generations.

Besides from its socio-economic importance, marriage has a cultural weight that cannot be disregarded. Scholars have often emphasized the weight of filial piety value on adult children decision making process regarding marriage.[35] Filial piety can be summed up by two major features: obedience towards one's parents and preservation of the parents' face (*mianzi*) in the context of their larger family group and circle of colleagues and friends. Therefore, pressure to get married, in both cases of homosexual and heterosexual adult children, is seen as a inescapable duty of the son/daughter and it becomes heavier the more age advances.

Concluding, marriage in contemporary China has been deprived by the coming to power of Communism of those conservative and gender inequality-serving features that it had traditionally. Yet, it still preserve its importance as social institution which is a fundamental source of welfare provision. Although the practice has shifted from a settlement between families to a union between two consenting parts, parents have still a major role in influencing their adult children to marry. Moreover, offspring sense of filial piety restrains them to pursue their individual desires about marriage. Social pressure exerted by society on both parents and adult children also plays considerable role in the whole marriage question.

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32 ZHANG, Xueying; "Cyber Love and Marriage", *China Today*, Vol. 55, n.8, pp. 40-42, Academic Search Complete, EBSCO*host*, 2006; p.41
33 CHOI, Susanne & LUO, Ming, 'Parental Influence over Adult Homosexual's Nominal Marriage in China', *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCO*host*; 2014; p. 802
34 CHOI, Susanne, LUO, Ming, *ivi*; p. 804
35   See: Choi & Luo 2014, Zheng et al. 2011; Ruan &Tsai 1988

Overview

The *xinghun* phenomenon draws a light in a very peculiar and quite intimate aspect of Chinese society, that is, marriage. The literature chosen for this research considers mainly two areas. First, the academic works written about both the post-socialist Chinese society broadly, and more specifically those debating about *xinghun* and its mechanisms. Second, web spaces such as web blogs and smartphone apps will be considered and analyzed as virtual spaces where gay men and lesbian women find each other for arranging *xinghun.* Taking in consideration web spaces is relevant due to the fact that several sources mentioned the importance and the popularity of LGBT-serving apps.[36] The number of dating LGBT virtual spaces are increasing and the relative anonymity that internet offers suits quite well of the LGBT individuals in search of the "other half" to undergo the heteronormous marriage. Finally, the practice of *xinghun* will be analyzed in relation with the traditional Chinese social and moral values. It will be shown how formality marriage is a way to fit in those still deeply rooted gender norms and hetero-normative oriented practices and traditions which influence every day life of Chinese society. Therefore, *xinghun* also represents a try of mediating self-centered interests and traditional Chinese values such as filial piety and fulfilling the duty of continuing the family line.

Chinese queer: tongzhi or gay? Globalized and localized queer identity

Liu Min[37] analyses online advertisements posted on Chinese webpage *tianya.cn* of gay men and lesbian women seeking for a formality marriage partner. Furthermore, the author undertakes an inquiry of the social reasons behind the growing popularity of such practices within the LGBT community in China. According to Liu, there is a common factor recurring in the advertisements from both lesbian women and gay men looking for each other to arrange *xinghun*. The majority looks for highly educated (university level education), fitting into traditional Chinese gender roles and caring of Confucian values such as filial piety.[38]

Another article by Susan Choi and Ming Luo[39] conducted a survey in a unspecified city in Northern

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36 http://fortune.com/2017/01/11/china-lgbt-pink-dollar-gay-market-business/ [accessed 17/03/2017]
37 LIU, Min; "Two Gay Men seeking Two Lesbian: An Analysis of *Xinghun* (Formality Marriage) Ads on China's Tianya.cn"; in *Sexuality and Culture*; n. 17, Springer Science+Business Media; New York, 2013, pp. 494-511
38 LIU, Min; "Two Gay Men seeking Two Lesbian: An Analysis of *Xinghun* (Formality Marriage) Ads on China's Tianya.cn"; in *Sexuality and Culture*; n. 17, Springer Science+Business Media; New York, 2013,p.502
39 CHOI, Susan, LUO, Ming; *Performative Family: Homosexuality, Marriage and Intergenerational Dynamics in China*; The British Journal of Sociology; Vol. 67, Issue 2, John Wiley and Sons, London, 2016

China exploring the reasons why formality marriage is so popular and the reasons behind it. Moreover, the authors also explore the other side of the formality marriage, namely, parents. Several reasons are unveiled and it has been said that very often parents push their adult gay children to have a fake marriage to end the social pressure coming from the relatives, neighbors and friends of the family. The centrality of marriage and family in China, although the ongoing process of individualization, is still very significant in both parents and offspring. Furthermore, the authors also explore the current socio-economic environment in China as one of the factors that enhances strong family ties and intergenerational dependency. Another research conducted by the same authors is specifically about the parental influence on adult homosexual children to conform to hetero-normative marriage and detects five mechanisms through which this influence is exerted.[40] The researchers have conducted in-depth interviews with respondents met participating at LGBT related events organized by civil groups working for LGBT rights improvement and joining QQ chat groups of people actively looking for formality marriage partners.

Finally, another relevant research from Xiaowen Wu and Ying Wang[41] gives an insight of the role of the Confucian influence in Chinese traditional social values. The research primary data consists in online questionnaire directed to LGB students. Filial piety of adult gay children and the obligation of continuing the family line of parents have been discovered to play a strong role in the acceptance or not of the LGBT identity of the young Chinese people. Also, it has been found that there is a gendered feature that makes pressure heavier on gay men rather than lesbian women. The fact that in Chinese tradition the family name is brought by the son is pivotal.[42]

A constructionist perspective has been often used to analyze and understand the Chinese perspective on sexual minorities. Liu Min uses in her research of *xinghun* ads thematic approach which aims to target

40 CHOI, Susanne, LUO, Ming; "Parental Influence over Adult Homosexual's Nominal Marriage in China", *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCO*host*. p.801
41 WU Xiaowen, WANG Ying; *LGB Identity among Young Chinese: The Influence of Traditional Culture*; Journal of Homosexuality; Routledge, 2013

42   LIU, Min; "Two Gay Men seeking Two Lesbian: An Analysis of *Xinghun* (Formality Marriage) Ads on China's Tianya.cn"; in *Sexuality and Culture*; n. 17, Springer Science+Business Media; New York, 2013, p.501

recurrent language in the text.[43] Due to the nature of the text she's analyzing, her approach can be described as qualitative semiotic approach. Another example is Wei Wei's work about the gay men community in Sichuan province's capital city Chengdu. His methods included participant observation, in-depth interviews and media analysis.[44] The LGBT community in China has very different and peculiar social behavioral patterns from those of diverse Western societies. Wei Wei's article which explores Chengdu's gay men is an interesting piece about such perception.[45] The author describes the ongoing process of transformation of the gay men identity in Sichuan province's capital city and how the language to address gay men has changed with the social perception of those men. Also, it shows how Chinese gay men feel different from so-called "Western" gay and queer identities, using their own terminology to define themselves as the term "gay" does not fit to them. As Wei asserts in his article, the term "gay" is somehow perceived alien from the local Chinese gay men, preferring Chinese terms as *piaopiao* and *tongzhi*. Therefore, the use of *tongzhi* can be interpreted as a localized appropriation of the international term "gay".[46] Furthermore, it describes how the broader Chinese LGBT community has been using the term *tongzhi*, which means *comrade* and it was used during the Mao's Era by the communists to call each other. By using a term which is inclusive to the current socialist nature of China, the attempt is that of trying to be included in Chinese society as fully worthy members and not some kind of outcast social stratus. On a broader international scenario, the *tongzhi* activists are pushing to be included in the international LGBT community and seeking recognition for the national *tongzhi* identity.[47]

Web Spaces

The Internet has provided a virtually unlimited space for people to connect with each other despite the distances and express their own opinion about everything. Even though the censorship and limitations posed by the government, Chinese netizens are very active on virtual spaces, perhaps even more than in real life. Social pressure and the constant will to "preserve the face" are bypassed by the anonymity that

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43 LIU, Min; "Two Gay Men seeking Two Lesbian: An Analysis of *Xinghun* (Formality Marriage) Ads on China's Tianya.cn"; in *Sexuality and Culture*; n. 17, Springer Science+Business Media; New York, 2013, p.500
44 WEI, Wei; *'Wandering Men' no Longer Wander Around: the Production and Transformation of Local Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Chengdu, China*; Inter-Asia Cultural Studies; Vol.8, N.4; Routledge; 2007, p.573
45 WEI, Wei; *'Wandering Men' no Longer Wander Around: the Production and Transformation of Local Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Chengdu, China*; Inter-Asia Cultural Studies; Vol.8, N.4; Routledge; 2007, pp. 572-588
46 WEI, Wei; *'Wandering Men' no Longer Wander Around: the Production and Transformation of Local Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Chengdu, China*; Inter-Asia Cultural Studies; Vol.8, N.4; Routledge; 2007, p. 574
47 WEI, Wei; *'Wandering Men' no Longer Wander Around: the Production and Transformation of Local Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Chengdu, China*; Inter-Asia Cultural Studies; Vol.8, N.4; Routledge; 2007, p. 585

the web can give. Nonetheless, the Chinese LGBT community is not always faceless in the web, but due to the possibility to bypass national frontiers and barriers, many look for support and linkage with the international LGBT community.[48] Those few people advocating for more rights for LGBT people in the country are in touch with international NGOs and activists through the internet. Moreover, numerous blogs write about various personal stories of rare and daring demand for more rights. Lesbian mothers asking for parental recognition,[49] queer television celebrities promoting sexist values,[50] entrepreneurship target what is called "pink market economy",[51] overseas LGBT rights achievement, everything is meticulously reported by Chinese bloggers and even the language barrier of most of the Chinese people who don't speak English, is bypassed.

The web space is an interesting environment to look at to observe nowadays Chinese LGBT community expression and timid activism. After all, China is an authoritarian regime and activism has to bargain with the strict game rules for survival. Mass dissent and organized manifestation of rights advocacy have been absent since the hard repression of the student movement in Tiananmen in 1989. Since then, it seems that the CCP would not tolerate anything that would jeopardize the "social harmony" of the country and its legitimacy to rule.[52] Although this apparently hopeless scenario, individual and symbolically powerful demonstrations for LGBT rights have been tolerated and did not end in hard repression. Recent demonstrations for same gender civil union in front of the big cities town halls have been reported and no signs of open dissent from the government has been shown.[53]

In this peculiarly Chinese scenario lacking of public space for self expression, the internet provides such spaces which are scarce in real life. Furthermore, the anonymity offered by the web had the unexpected effect of leveling out and diminishing gender difference and the possibility of analyzing

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48 CLARK, Paul; *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens*; Cambridge University Press; Cambridge; 2012; p.143
49 http://www.sixthtone.com/news/lgbt-mom-asks-chinese-lawmakers-%E2%80%98single%E2%80%99-women%E2%80%99s-reproductive-rights [Accessed 15/02/2017]
50 https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/ting-guo/first-transgender-celebrity-in-china-is-now-hosting-sexist-dating-show [Accessed 10/02/2017]
51 http://fortune.com/2017/01/11/china-lgbt-pink-dollar-gay-market-business/ [Accessed 15/02/2017]
52 HOLBIG, Heike, GILLEY, Bruce; "Reclaiming Legitimacy in China", *Politics & Policy*, Vol.38, n.3, pp. 395-422, Political Science Complete, EBSCO*host*, 2010; p.397
53 CHOI, Susan, LUO, Ming; *Performative Family: Homosexuality, Marriage and Intergenerational Dynamics in China*; The British Journal of Sociology; Vol. 67, Issue 2, John Wiley and Sons, London, 2016, p.261

such differences.[54] The 'Net, as it is addressed by Clark, contributed and harvested a number of subcultures and trends involving the younger generation, or as it is called, the post-80 generation,[55] including connecting LGBT people with each other. As the Korean wave spread mainly by internet (e.g. the Korean pop stars' fan blogs which flourished on the internet), a number of virtual platforms for LGBT individuals sprung after the turn of the millennium. The dating app *BlueD* CEO Geng Le has stated that "pink economy" as a new driving force in Chinese economy and the LGBT clientele cannot be ignored anymore,[56] and he is planning to expand the application's services from the mere connecting individuals.

It can be said that the Internet had and currently has a pivotal role in LGBT individuals life. This role primarily consists in its connecting and networking feature. Many LGBT individuals have came to know about homosexuality through the internet and exchanged thoughts, opinions and experiences with others through the web.[57] On the other hand, online activism and raising general public's awareness towards LGBT has been proven ineffective if not sustained by traditional media coverage such as television and press.[58] Despite this, the Internet still provides a mighty instrument for networking, although so far one of the most popular purposes of LGBT online networking in China is that of dating apps such as *BlueD*. Thus, the resonance that the LGBT discourse can have in the great public sphere is limited and has to be cautious, as the line between what is acceptable and what is not is blurred or not drawn at all. Only with a cautious approach advancing by small steps and testing the limits is possible to define this boundary and consequently challenge it.[59] However, another recurrent practice is that of preventive auto-censorship, that is, online activists often filter themselves their material to avoid repression from the officialdom. An example is the Beijing based group Queer Comrades, which has produced several documentaries and video reports around LGBT life and experience. Queer Comrades' works are available on the group's website, although the main access to their video material are from popular Chinese networks such as Tudou, a Chinese counterpart of YouTube.

54 CLARK, Paul; *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens*; Cambridge University Press; Cambridge; 2012; p.8
55 CLARK, Paul; *ivi*, p.7
56 http://fortune.com/2017/01/11/china-lgbt-pink-dollar-gay-market-business/ [Accessed 04/04/2017]
57 CHASE, Thomas; "Problems of Publicity: Online Activism and Discussion of Same-Sex Sexuality in South Korea and China" in; *Asian Studies Review*; Vol. 36; Routledge, June 2012; p.151
58 CHASE, Thomas; *ivi*, p.154
59 CHASE, Thomas; *ivi*; p.157

It must not be forgotten the importance that the Internet has in nowadays globalizing trends, as building LGBT identities for instance. Although the presence of CCP's censorship, Chinese netizens are able to connect with the global scenario and bypass those limits imposed by national factors. This has a crucial role on molding and changing the society and its norms, especially among the young populace which is the greatest user of Internet.[60]

In conclusion, studying the use and the consumption of web spaces by Chinese netizens, not only regarding the LGBT community and its activities, is critical to comprehend post-socialist Chinese society. In particular, the younger population is a big consumer of internet, in a society that does not give much space to individual expression and bears heavy responsibilities, the Internet offers a free space where there's no need for the stiff Chinese traditional rules for social interaction.[61]

Contribution of the research

Formality marriage is a social phenomenon which hasn't been explored thoroughly in academia. This is due to several reasons, mainly involving the delicate nature of the question itself. First of all, as being said, China's policy of indifference towards the LGBT issue prevents the exposure to the public sphere of such matters. Furthermore, the main emphasis on the official LGBT discourse in Mainland China is strictly connected to that of HIV/AIDS issue, which triggers even more the trend of stigma and secrecy that the LGBT discourse itself had already. Liu's article is on one side unique in its genre, since it analyses web ads for formality marriage. On the other side, this research investigates the social reasons behind this practice, and it tries to show the link between traditional Chinese family-centered values and contemporary globalizing trend of self-centered ambition and aspirations. Many academic articles have inquired and analyzed the societal change in China since the opening up of the country in the mid 1980s on a side, and the LGBT experience of Chinese citizens since its removal from the list of recognized mental illnesses in 1997.[62] So far, nothing has been written about the phenomenon *per se* and the hypothetical push forces which are behind it.

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60 CHASE, Thomas; *ivi*, p.152
61 CLARK, Paul; *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens*; Cambridge University Press; Cambridge; 2012; p.170
62 LEUNG, Hannah; "Squeezed in the Closet" in; *Index on Censorship*; Vol.46, issue 1; Sage Publications; April 2017; p.26

This research also tries to bring to the light an intake upon LGBT issue very different from what it is experienced in the West. Formality marriage can be somehow considered a different shape of what was already a popular trend among Chinese gay men before (that is marrying heterosexual women unaware of their husbands' homosexuality). Marrying women despite of one's homosexuality is not a new trend at all, and it is not limited only to China, but also well-spread to all the "developed" world before and after the advent of the LGBT movement, signed by the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969.[63] The quantitative data available regarding marriage between closeted gay men and unaware heterosexual women in China is striking. According to Zhang Beichuan, a scholar of Qingdao university Medical School whose focus is on *tongqi* (namely "gay's wife), 80% of Chinese gay men population had conformed to traditional marriage due to pressure from family and society.[64] This has various implications for those women, such as, among others, contraction of sexually transmitted diseases and suicidal behavior. On a side, *xinghun* prevents and would lower the number of sham marriages, being both of the parts aware of each others' sexual orientation.

Moreover, this research tries to show that relatively new social factors, triggered by Chinese economic liberalization, such as higher education and economic affluence, had changed the perception and reception of the LGBT issue. Also, globalization and transnational cultural linkage, although strictly controlled and filtered by the official censorship, has some degree of influence in this process, as well as domestic and international mobility of Chinese citizens.

Analyzing formality marriage using the changing moral landscape and social norms is something yet not well explored in academia, and thus this research would contribute to depict this peculiar social circumstance. Yet, this is not an easy task, considering also the reasons aforementioned, there is little interest on the matter in Chinese academia, due also to the government position of indifference on the question. The most notorious Chinese scholar who is active on LGBT issue is sociologist Li Yinhe, a veteran and spokesperson of LGBT official recognition and rights' improvement. Apart from Li, the

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63 SHEPARD, Benjamin; "History of Myth? Writing Stonewall" in; *Lambda Book Report*; Vol.13, Issue1/2; Lambda Literary Foundation; 2004; p. 12

64 https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/chinas-tongqi-the-millions-of-straight-women-married-to-closeted-gay-men [Accessed 30/04/2017]

Chinese academia focusing on LGBT is mainly discussing the issue under a medical health point of view, ignoring the social and anthropological aspects of the matter.

In conclusion, this research explores an aspect of Chinese society which in academia has not been inquired thoroughly by disclosing the changing social norms and mores shaping the phenomenon itself. Also, Chinese LGBT can be said to be very peculiar in its own way, striving to find its place between a globalizing trend of queer identity and its traditional and own way of interpreting such queer identity.

Methodology

In this section, the methods of data collection and analysis will be disclosed. Furthermore, the epistemological and ontological stances of the research will be asserted. It will be explained how the research was conducted, the fieldwork experience and its limitations. In particular, the importance of ethical considerations of this research will be pointed out and why it is crucial for this specific research to observe ethical implications and self-reflexivity of the researcher.

Epistemology

This thesis takes an interpretivist epistemological stance with a peculiarly phenomenological feature. Phenomenological interpretivists emphasized the importance of the researcher to enter the social environment they are studying and undertake a certain degree of identification with the social actors. It must not be forgotten though, that the degree of identification must be controlled to avoid biases. Bryman warns social scientists who use ethnography of the danger of in-depth identification with the research actors due to the relationship between the researcher and the subject of his/her studies.[65] One fundamental assumption to be taken in consideration is that the social world is constructed and interpreted differently by who is looking at it, and thus also the researcher him/herself is affected by his/her own construction and interpretation of the phenomenon that is being studied.

Ontology

As this research assumes a constructionist ontological stance, there are some consideration to be made. First, the researcher is also embedded in the assumptions of social construction and interpretation of the social environment and its actors. This implies that the research itself is pure construction. Nevertheless, the attempts to connect to previous research on the matter and having found out that some features and results observed in this work have been also detected by other researchers strengthens its validity. The primary data generated for this research also reflects the outcomes of the previous inquires, meaning that, although that a peculiarity of quantitative research is that of the difficulty of replication,[66] there is a certain degree of consistency between the following research and the previous literature.

Research focus and fieldwork

The research focuses on a particular social phenomenon that is formality marriage between lesbian women and gay men. Thus, although there is secondary data from the previous academic research on the matter, it was critical to collect primary data to fully comprehend the mechanisms of *xinghun* and answer my research questions. The primary data that I collected is of two different nature, that is, impressions from participant observation and data retrieved by face to face semi-structured interviews. I spent seven months in China, first in Xiamen, a coastal city in Fujian province, and then in Beijing for the last

65 BRYMAN; Alan; *Social Research Methods 4ᵗʰ Edition*; Oxford University Press; New York; 2012; p.405
66 BRYMAN, *ivi*, p.405

two months, where I attended the applied fieldwork course in Peking University.

Being in China was useful to witness the several aspects that would have passed unseen and thus would have compromise the analysis process and my view and understanding of the LGBT condition and the practice of formality marriage. Furthermore, I came to realize that being an outsider/observer immersed in Chinese society and examine it by living in this specific context are crucial to comprehend those underlying elements which regulate Chinese society which are difficult to grasp without living the social context.

Ethical considerations

Due to the very nature of this research and the meaning of being LGBT in China, it is essential here to clearly state several ethical consideration. Bryman stresses out four main areas where ethical issues and the transgression of them concentrate the most.[67] These are:

- Harm to participants

- Lack of informed consent

- Invasion of privacy

- Deception

Throughout both ethnographical observations and face to face semi-structured interviews I have taken in consideration the aforementioned issues and complied to the requirements for an ethically respectful research.

In consideration of *harm to participants*, all the precautions were taken to avoid any physical and psychological distress to the participants. Physical harm was not a danger during the process, but psychological trouble could be expected. Before the interviews, I clearly stated and informed the interviewees that if they did feel unwilling to answer my questions they were welcome to not answer and they were free to express any emotional discomfort if any would occur. Furthermore, some questions regarded very intimate and personal facts of their life, such a coming out experience with one's family, and I have shared my own experience first to make the respondents at ease and make them aware of the fact that I experienced their similar conditions, although in a different context.

About *informed consent*, I declared to all my informants (key informants and interviewees) my role as Master student of Lund University, my thesis interest and purpose, the aim of my research and the way I would treat the information that I gain from the informants. Furthermore, I clearly stated that the vocal recordings of the interviews will be kept only for the purpose of social research, they will be stored for a maximum of two years and then destroyed. All the direct informants gave their consent in a verbal way and voluntarily accepted their participation to this research. Finally, I declared to the

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67 BRYMAN; *ivi*; p.135

participants that they will receive a copy of this thesis, if wanted.

To respect the *privacy* of the participants, I asked them how they wanted to be regarded in the research. They all choose to be called as their English names. Such names, used with the same fashion as nicknames, have no relevance in Chinese identification system and therefore there is no way that they could be identified. In addition, I hereby declared that the information acquired by the interviews are confidential and used only for research purposes. I asked the participant nothing that could make them identifiable or somehow traceable. If any detail that could endanger their privacy was said, I took measures to secure their identity without changing the meaning of their words in such a relevant way that would compromise the validity of this research.

Finally, regarding *deception*, I avoided any danger of it by clearly stating before any interview my role as researcher, my research purpose's as Master thesis of Lund University and guarantee that I will show them the research final product by sending a copy to them, if wanted.

Data collection and analysis

During my stay in Xiamen, I have been able to witness, playing a participant observer role, the life of LGBT people (mostly gay men) with which some of whom I established a close relationship of friendship. They were aware of research and its purposes, and helped me to network with the local LGBT setting. They can be considered my *key informants*[68] as it would have been difficult to access as a total stranger where the LGBT community revolve around. Access to outsiders is not complicated because Xiamen LGBT community is not open, but rather that the LGBT-related events were not advertised in encompassing and widely accessible way.

Regarding ethnographic observations, my role as a participating observer/researcher was concealed by the fact that I was with my key informants, which are active part of the LGBT environment of the city. In Xiamen, I came in acquaintance of the meaning of being LGBT in China and acknowledge some implicit aspects which I have not seen elsewhere. The ethnography I have conducted in Xiamen was useful in order to become familiar with basic assumptions of being LGBT in China and instrumental to later issue the semi-structured interviews that I had during the fieldwork in Beijing.

As a cosmopolitan city, Beijing LGBT community and its related events and social gathering were more overt than those in Xiamen, a relatively small city with little international population. This also affected the way the LGBT conduct their lives and related to society. Nonetheless, the behavioral patterns do not differ greatly from those living in Xiamen, as LGBT people living there use more discretion about them being LGBT because of the small community. In Beijing I contacted the LGBT group Queer Comrades which is active in several projects of HIV/AIDS awareness, but also deals with documentary projects with the aim of portraying LGBT life in China and improve the LGBT social visibility. I have exposed them the aims of my research and asked them to connect me with people currently in a formality marriage or actively looking for it.

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68 BRYMAN, *ivi,* p.439

The data collected is the result of a combination of seven months long ethnography and participant observation in Xiamen and Beijing and face to face semi-structured interviews conducted in Beijing and Tianjin. Face to face semi-structured or open interviews with individuals offer a broad and detailed insight of the formality marriage phenomenon. In addition, doing ethnographic observations first was useful to get acquainted with Chinese society and its customs so to interpret in the best way the outcomes of the interviews. Furthermore, it was beneficial to connect with the existing academic material on the matter to see if there are any discrepancies or features which have changed during the time.

Finally, as interviews would constitute the core of this research, is of primary importance to gather the right material and have the support of groups and NGOs while conducting the research. Also, the support of local groups enhance the quality of the material gathered and help to establish a personal relationship with the interviewees.

To begin, I interviewed one of the workers of Queer Comrades and inquired about the life of an NGO in one-party-state China, his opinions about the future of LGBT and of Queer Comrades in the country and the *xinghun* phenomenon. This was beneficial to get deep within the mechanisms which push individuals to conform to hetero-normative marriage. Also, it also counted as a valuable testing ground to verify concepts which came out from ethnographic observation understandings. Subsequently, I interviewed two students of Tianjin Foreign Studies University with an age around 20 years old and a 26 years old man working at an insurance company in Beijing. I met the interviewees through snowballing, that is, I was connected with them through friends who were aware of my research and told their circle of acquaintances about the research. Queer Comrades also has been very helpful in trying to network me with individuals who were actively looking for a formality marriage partner.

The interviews were conducted according to the assumptions of semi-structured qualitative interviews.[69] Qualitative interviews favor interviewee's point of view, rambling discussion, and do not have a fixed set of questions, but rather a *interview guide* which acts as a indicative outline to avoid major off-topics.[70] Moreover, the interviews were conducted in a quiet and amenable setting (cafeterias), while the medium language was English, which made the interviewees at ease to talk about

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69 BRYMAN; *ivi*; p.470
70 BRYMAN; *ivi*; p.471

the topics since it made them more confident that people around would not understand the speech content.

Name	Date	Duration	Location	Age	Employment
Alejandro	14/04/2017	43'	Tianjin	20	Student
David	12/04/17	50'	Beijing	26	Insurance company
Felix	14/04/2017	31'	Tianjin	21	Student

Table 1: Interviewees

Method: Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis stresses out the importance of the sense of temporal sequence in people's lives which affects them and the way they perceive the social world.[71] It has been also emphasized the capacity of narrative analysis to bring to light mechanisms underlying assumptions of interviewees by eliciting them to recall memories and construct connections between events and contexts.[72] Through narrative analysis, it is possible to disclose the system of reasoning which people use to account for their life events. In addition, narrative analysis perfectly fits into the epistemological and ontological stances of this research. However, it must be kept in mind the aspect that narrative analysis is not identical to autobiography, as this approach can be applied in various research methods, such as semi-structured interviews, but the researcher can reconstruct biographical details from the interviewees accounts. Moreover, this approach does not require long span of time narratives, as it could be for story life approach, but also can focus on specific events of peculiar significance, such as coming out experiences.[73]

By applying narrative analysis to the data gathered for this research, it is possible to unveil aspects of Chinese social mechanisms relevant to have a deeper understanding of the social norms and mores which pushes LGBT individuals to pursue formality marriage. Also, it gives a close insight of the interviewees perception of their lives events and the importance of such events for the formation of their own character. Mixing narrative analysis with some features of discourse analysis, such as emphasis on how people bring up their stories and the distinctive emphasis they apply to the economy of the narratives and how people choose on the base of their own unconscious prioritization of certain events over others, spring up a self-reflexivity process in the interviewees and trigger a mechanism of auto-evaluation which gives the researcher the ability to go deep into the psychological mechanism of choice.

Research limitations

This research has several limitations, some of which were hard to overcome. The nature of the questions and the topics of

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71 BRYMAN; *ivi*; p.582
72 BRYMAN; *ivi*; p.584
73 BRYMAN;*ivi;* p.585

the interviews are of very personal and intimate kind, therefore being an outsider of the social context was difficult in respect of finding interviewees. Although the NGO/group Queer Comrades and personal friends had interceded on my behalf to find potential interviewees through their acquaintance network, I could not find people who were actively seeking a partner for *xinghun* or who were currently in a marriage. In addition, the interviewees are only men, and women perspective represented here comes from the words of the male interviewees, consequently those elements of women experience exposed in this research present biases due to the indirect testimony of men.

Furthermore, the language also played a role in restraining the pool of choices I had for people to interview. Having a basic knowledge of Chinese language helped me to interact with people, but I could not assess the interviews in Chinese as my proficiency of the language is not sufficient to make the data reliable due to comprehension deficiencies. Therefore, I limited my interviews to those people who agreed to become part of the research and could speak English. This explains the young age range of the interviewees and probably affects their point of view as well. The language barrier also affected the access to those online network system which are made for *xinghun* seeking people. Certainly being fluent in Chinese and having a personal network with the LGBT community would have been beneficial and useful to find more interviewees.

For these reasons, I acknowledge the possibility that this research may present some biased views due to the small number of respondents and their representativeness is limited to the LGBT juvenile male strata of Chinese population. It must be considered also that all the interviewees have achieved or achieving high education (bachelor degree), have traveled or lived outside of China and were raised in urban areas. This entails the fact that this research does not include rural inhabitants' experience of LGBT life, nor intends to generalize the condition of Chinese LGBT population, but rather represents a very limited portion of urban LGBT community. To compensate these lacunae, referencing to previous academic works was instrumental to look for similar patterns or major discrepancies.

Theoretical Framework

In this section the theoretical framework of this thesis will be established and its consequent analysis' *modus operandi.* The formality marriage phenomenon will be analyzed through two major concepts: the transformation of the moral landscape and its influence on inter-generational relations and the ongoing process of individualization of the Chinese society.

The old versus the new: the changing moral landscape and its exerted influence on inter-generational relationship

Yunxiang Yan (2010, 2011) has analyzed deeply the transformation of Chinese society from an anthropological perspective focusing on how the economic liberalization and the turn to market-oriented economy has led to a very peculiar process of individualization.[74] The researcher departs from Ulrich Beck's analysis of individualization process in the developed Western Europe[75] and uses Beck's triple individualization to scrutiny the Chinese case. According to Beck, the four features of individualization are: *detraditionalization*, *institutionalized disembedding and reembedding*, *pursuit of "one's own life"* and *internalization of risks due to precarious freedom*.[76] Thus, Yan interprets the development of Chinese society individualization under the light of these features and draws a portrait of where Chinese society is now. He argues that an unexpected effect sorted by Maoist socialist

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74 YAN, Yunxiang; "The Chinese Path to Individualization"; *The British Journal of Sociology*; Vol. 61, Issue 3; 2010; pp. 489 - 512

75 BECK, Ulrich; *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*; Trans. Mark Ritter; Sage Publications, London; 1992

76 YAN, Yunxiang; "The Chinese Path to Individualization"; *The British Journal of Sociology*; Vol. 61, Issue 3; 2010; p. 502

modernization is the beginning of the individualization process still ongoing nowadays.[77] The opening up of Chinese economy under Deng further continued this process. Moreover, the increased mobility between rural and urban areas initiated what Yan calls "do-it-yourself" biography.[78] The temporary migration to the cities allowed young people to get detached by the various forms of collective groups such as family, kinship. Also, the economic reform induced people to pursue individualistic goals such as economic success and personal education. Taking Nicolas Rose's definition from Yan's work, institutional changes in China's socio-economic scenario brought the rise of the "enterprising self".[79] Of particular importance for this research, Yan also argues that the de-stigmatization of sex and "liberalization" of love is also an effect of the opening up reforms. In the context of LGBT and *xinghun*, this is relevant from the perspective of the slowly improving visibility of the LGBT community and what LGBT is.

Another article from Yunxiang Yan focuses on the processes of individualization which had led to the relative decentralization of the family unit and the rise of the importance for self-realization and success.[80] Moreover, Yan takes an in-depth analysis of the changing moral landscape of Chinese society. The author focuses on the ways the economic liberalization and development reforms started by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1980s had triggered a slow but inexorable "decentralization" of the family unit as the main concern of the individual and the rise of more "self-centered" forces in individuals.[81]

Finally, detraditionalization theory introduced by Anthony Giddens[82] is useful to analyze the changing role-play between young and old generation. Detraditionalization theory asserts to a process of gradual abandonment and subsequent reconfiguration of socio-cultural traditions previously established.[83] This theory was applied on a study about attitudes towards sex outside marriage in China and has shown several relevant aspects for this research. Socio-economic push forces brought by the abandonment of

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77 YAN, *ivi,* p.490
78 YAN, *ivi,* p.502
79 YAN, *ivi,* p.504
80 YAN, Yunxiang; "The Chinese Path to Individualization"; *The British Journal of Sociology*; Vol. 61, Issue 3; 2010; pp. 489 - 512
81 YAN, Yunxiang; "The Changing Moral Lanscape" in; KLEINMAN et al.; *Deep China: The Moral Life of a Person: What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell Us about China*; University of California Press; Berkeley, London; 2011
82 GIDDENS, Anthony, *The Consequences Of Modernity*, Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1990
83 ZHENG, Weijun, et al.; "Detraditionalisation and Attitudes Towards Sex outside Marriage in China"; *Culture, Health & Sexuality*; Vol.13, n.5; Routledge; p.498

Maoist socialism, market liberalization and rising globalizing trend have somehow dismantled some of those conceptions regarded as traditional. By analyzing four sexual behavior (Sex work, pre-marital sex, extra-conjugal sex and homosexuality) which were labeled as "immoral" and condemned during the Mao era, Zheng's research shows that most of those "immoral" sexual behavior are now not perceived as such. Besides, although the attitude is generally accepting towards former three, homosexuality is still regarded as something "abnormal" and yet not understandable.[84]

Detraditionalization theory also applies to explain the ongoing changes in inter-generational relationship between the post 80s generation and the previous one. Several studies regarding rural population testifies that the traditional practice of living with parents after marriage and taking care of them is shifting to a more individualistic lifestyle of the younger generations. The axis of the family unit, which before could be said gravitated around inter-generational bonds in a vertical way across different age groups, is nowadays shifting in a more vertical fashion, being the conjugal tie the strongest bond.[85] This phenomenon is said to have started in the second half of the twentieth century and is widespread in East Asian society. In the Chinese context, migration from rural to urban areas for job opportunities and greater inner mobilization had hastened the process in such a manner that the stigma that was perceived by living apart from married offspring has now disappeared in the majority of the elderly rural population.[86]

Also one of the central concepts of Confucianism-influenced Chinese moral rules such as filial piety has been reconsidered and rewritten to adapt to the new societal scenario of inter-generational independence. The notion of filial piety is what regulated inter-generational relationship in China and although its interpretation has changed during the last decades of economic liberalization, it still plays a major key role in Chinese society.[87] If before the concept of filial piety was of materially taking care of one's parents once old and retired by living with them in the traditional larger familial unit, now this has transformed and first academic and then economic success are proof of devotion and dedication towards parenthood. This individualization trend has also resulted in individualistic perception of

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84 ZHENG et al. *ibidem*
85 YAN, Yunxiang; 'Introduction: Understanding the Rise of the Individual in China', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol.1; Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, 2008, p.2
86 YAN, Yunxiang, *ibidem*
87 YAN, Yunxiang; *ivi*, p.3

responsibility, meaning that Chinese youth is more sensible and vulnerable than the previous ones to physical and psychological health issues.[88] Since a very young ages, the post 80s generation was put under pressure by parents to succeed in academic achievements (seen as instrumental to the subsequent economic one), and parents themselves burden their offspring of the responsibility to attain what they could not.[89]

The ongoing individualization process in Chinese society

Individualization has been defined as "disintegration of previously existing social forms; for example, the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, neighborhood etc".[90] This process has generated in the Western European states and was triggered by the development of extensive welfare system which somehow prioritized the individual and neglected the traditional importance and value of the family unit by replacing it as provider of social and economic security.[91] In the Chinese context, the situation is far more complicated and multifaceted. The peculiar conditions of Chinese society has been defined as pre-modern, modern and post-modern at the same time.[92] Pre-modern as Chinese society does not possess an internalized democracy, and by internalized democracy is intended a system of social conditions such as relationship equality, dialogue as mean of agreement, which characterize individualization.[93] Modern as Chinese society still has to achieve the goals of first modernity in Western Europe in an extensive way, such as secure employment, welfare system and citizenry civil engagement with the public political sphere. Post-modern as its inclination towards a culture of intimacy and self-expression, based on the emphasis on individuality, self-reliance and internalization of what before was considered as collective responsibility.[94] These three labels exemplify very well the current status of Chinese individualization process.

A peculiar aspect of the rise of individuality and the assertion of its importance in Chinese younger

88 YAN, Yunxiang; 'Little Emperors or Frail Pragmatists? China's '80ers Generation', *Current History*, 105, 692, pp. 255-262, Humanities International Complete, 2006; p. 259
89 YAN, Yunxiang; *ivi*; p.256
90 BECK, Ulrich, BECK-GERNSHEIM, Elisabeth; *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism And Its Social And Political Consequences*, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif. : SAGE, 2002; p.2
91 BECK, Ulrich, BECK-GERNSHEIM, Elisabeth; *ivi*; p.8
92 YAN, Yunxiang; 'Introduction: Understanding the Rise of the Individual in China', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol.1; Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, 2008, p.9
93 BECK, Ulrich, BECK-GERNSHEIM, Elisabeth; *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism And Its Social And Political Consequences*, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif. : SAGE, 2002; p.205
94 YAN, Yunxiang; 'Introduction: Understanding the Rise of the Individual in China', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol.1; Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, 2008, p.9

social strata is something that connects, paradoxically, with a very traditional concept, that is, the perception of private and public sphere. It has been noted that as far as Chinese youngsters are individualistic, materialistic, rebellious and "Westernized", they know into which extent they can dare to go and experiment, somehow justified by their youthful desire of freedom, and they apply self-censorship to avoid recoil from outside.[95] As private sphere is also considered the inner family circle, the young Chinese may extent their will of individuality and self-expression also in a familial context, but the social and moral responsibilities of the outside world are theirs and on their parents' shoulder. This prevents great individualism and self-affirmation behavior which could endanger the quintessential of Chinese society and culture, the face, *mianzi*. This concept is decisive to interpret *xinghun* as a compromising move of adult LGBT children to avoid parental dissatisfaction and prevent heavy social pressure from peers to be exerted on parents.

Analysis

This chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of the formality marriage *xinghun* between gay men and lesbian women. As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, the primary data collected for this research consists of face to face semi-structured interviews with three young gay men (two bachelor student and an insurance company worker) between the age of 20 and 30 years old.[96] Assessments regarding lesbian women experience and condition here reported are outcomes from the interviewees' words or related academic literature. The analysis will proceed as following: first, the importance of marriage in contemporary Chinese society will be discussed from the interviewees perspective. Further, the specific case of *xinghun* will be disclosed and the gaining popularity of this trend and its reasons will be noted. Moreover, it will be discussed the ways how two *xinghun* seekers look for a suitable partner and which are the popular criteria for a good partner. Finally, the concept of detraditionalization and changing moral scenario of Chinese society will be argued in relation with the perception, reception of LGBT related issues.

About marriage

As said before, marriage in Chinese society is considered a necessary milestone that is seen as a duty of adulthood. As marriage has changed substantially from the arranged form of union which was before the coming of power of the Communist party to the more loose and choice-based practice that it is today, this does not weaken its social and cultural significance. Moreover, since the only form of recognized marriage in China is that between a man and a woman, this aspect brings several issues for those who do not fall inside the strict gender identity social conceptions of male and female. Gay men

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95 YAN, Yunxiang; 'Little Emperors or Frail Pragmatists? China's '80ers Generation', *Current History*, 105, 692, pp. 255-262, Humanities International Complete, 2006; p. 257
96 See: Table 1, p.20

and lesbian women face not indifferent psychological pressure from their parents once they meet certain conditions. But why marriage is considered something that must be done? David, a 26 years old man who works in an insurance company replies as follows:

"It's just tradition and traditional way of human life. One step at the time. Like at a certain stage you do certain things."[97]

According to David, marriage is a stage of life which is just something to be done. Therefore, marriage seems something that is dictated by tradition, something that is part of the adulthood. Moreover, this interpretation of marriage is not challenged or discussed at all, but just taken as an unavoidable stage of life. When asked what makes marriage is so important, Alejandro, a 20 years old student from Tianjin University, answers:

"I don't think there's a particular reason why marriage is important. The thing is at a certain point your parents realize that all their friends start talking about grandchildren and so they want some too and start to ask you about girlfriends and stuff"

These words show clearly how the pressure on youngsters to marry is exerted, that is, from older/parental generation expressed expectations. Parents exert on their offspring a kind of pressure derived from the societal/generational structure system. Furthermore, it can be asserted that parents themselves receive and endure such social pressure, by the surrounding environment constituted by colleagues and larger family relatives. This community pressure has a peculiar double effect for the LGBT individual faces pressure from parents which themselves face pressure from their peers as they feel responsible for their son or daughter social performance in front of the community.[98] In addition, it seems that this eagerness of parents for their adult children to conform does not come from a personal desire, but is expressed by means of desire of conformation to established social norms, or more specifically, fear of social embarrassment and stigma. This is exemplified by Alejandro's words about the source of social pressure perceived by parents:

"...The pressure from parents force their kids to get married is also personal stuff. And that pressure comes from the public, from their peers [...] They constantly ask you "Ah, how is your boy?". [...]

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97 Face to face interview assessed in April 2017
98 CHOI, Susanne, LUO, Ming; "Parental Influence over Adult Homosexual's Nominal Marriage in China", *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCO*host*. 2014; p.810

sometimes your parents don't want to push you but...When their kids are still single and they're in their thirties, parents tend to feel "mei you mianzi" (don't have face) among their friends."

Regarding marriage, it appears that there is a certain difference between gender and how the pressure is exerted on male sons and female daughters. Whereas men face pressure to pass by the family name and continue the family line by generating offspring, women receive pressure according to their age.[99] This particular feature is explained by two aspects of Chinese tradition. First, the family name is carried from father to son, for women enter their husband's family unit once married and they are considered as "lost" by their natal family, at least according to tradition. Although previously the influence exerted by this traditional view of gender differentiation and fixed assets of social gender roles has been challenged by the Cultural Revolution and it has been argued that gender equality has been achieved for the only-child policy generation,[100] still certain degree perceived social inequality deriving from gender is felt. This perceived social disparity pushes women to succeed in academic achievements as main instrument of self-empowerment[101] and focus on their consequent carrier. Secondly, whereas men have their family name to carry and pass to the next generation, women have their social pressure exerted by age. In other words, women are hastened to find a partner and marry before a certain age, which according to the respondents, varies:

"It's curious because there's a saying in China that means that after 40 years old a man is still a flower, that means you can still flirt with girls, you're still charming. [...] Girls are supposed to have a boyfriend at my age (20 years old). [...] At my age they get three or four years to get to know each other, then they prepare wedding for one year, now that's five years, and then they get married for one year, so 26, and then wait one or two and then have a child when a girl is 27 or 28. That's the best age to have a child, that's decided to be the best age to have a child for a girl"[102]

Concluding, the degree of social pressure to marry has no difference between gender, as both men and women have their own dose of pressure to deal with, but indeed there are differences given by gender on how such pressure is exerted and the motives differ also. Yet, it must be reminded that the interviewees are men themselves, and thus these statements regarding women condition are reflection of what men perceive and therefore it may differ from the actual experience of women.

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99 JI, Yingchun; "Between Tradition and Modernity: 'Leftover' Women in Shanghai"; *Journal Of Marriage & Family*, Vo.77, n.5, 2015; p.1065
100   ZHENG, Jiaran; "Social Transformation and Gender Roles in Contemporary China: An Introduction to My Current PhD Project"; *The International Journal of Humanities*; Vol.7, N.1; Common Ground Publishing; 2009: p.32
101   ZHENG, Jiaran; *ivi*; p.33
102   Alejandro, interview assessed in April 2017

About xinghun

Having exposed the social meaning of marriage for Chinese society, one can start to understand the implications that hetero-normative marriage as an institution has for LGBT individuals. It has been argued that 80% of Chinese gay men are closeted and do not live their sexual orientation in a open way.[103] This resulted, in the past, in a copious number of heterosexual women married with closeted gay men, unaware of their husbands' sexual orientation. Almost half of the closeted gay men were either married to or divorced from women, and felt extremely guilty towards their spouses for not being sincere and for living in two different worlds at the same time, as many of them had simultaneously illicit relations with men.[104] *Xinghun* is regarded as one of the best solution available until social recognition of LGBT identity will be achieved. Formality marriage between a lesbian woman and a gay man, as on a side it does not differ from any other marriage between men and women, has the advantage of clarity and sincerity among partners. Once the two know about each other being LGBT, the dissimulation of their homosexual identity is easier as they can behave freely in their own private sphere.

> *"I don't see good or bad, I just think that [Xinghun] is an efficient way and harmless way to solve some issues that were brought by Chinese traditions and traditional mindset. [...] Throughout thousands of years, people didn't conceive homosexuality as an (alternative) stage...homosexuality marriage or partnership isn't considered, you know, it's just not part of system. Only men and women can make a couple, that's just tradition."[105]*

Thus, *xinghun* is considered an efficient and harmless way of complying to hetero-normative marriage. By marrying one another, a gay man and a lesbian woman acknowledge and are aware of each others' sexual orientation and thus are free to pursue their personal relationships while maintaining a façade of heterosexuality with parents and the society in general. What might stand out is how the practice of coming out is not even considered, neither coming out to one's parents neither to the society as whole. As in other social environments, homosexuality in Chinese society is morally condemned. But, also American society at the end of the 1960s when the Stonewall riots started was a highly white hegemony, paternalistic and hetero-oriented society, not much different from the Chinese current condition. All minorities (ethnic, sexual, women) were expected to uniform this white-man-hegemonic social order. However, as nowadays Chinese society could somehow recall Western societies in the first half of the 19th century, in China there are very few individuals who are aware of what it has been regarded as "gay politics" and the social and political relevance of coming out. In the words about coming out of Italian LGBT activist Imma Battaglia:

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103   https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/chinas-tongqi-the-millions-of-straight-women-married-to-closeted-gay-men [Accessed 30/04/2017]

104   RUAN, Fangfu, TSAI, Yungmei; "Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Mainland China"; *Archives of Sexual Behavior*; Vol.17, n.2; MEDLINE, EBSCOhost; 1988; p.193

105   David, interview assessed in April 2017

"The first step of homosexual politics is really that of visibility. And thus coming out is a political act of stating that there are no differences between me, an homosexual, and the other."[106]

Chinese LGBT perceive coming out in a totally different nuance. Coming out is mainly avoided because is seen as a intrisically selfish act towards one's parents as it will bring grief and shame and disrupt social harmony.[107] Yet, how is the practice of coming out seen as disruptive and a pure act guided by self-interest?

"...and Chinese parents some of them just get desperate, they threaten to kill themselves if you don't get married or something. And in this culture, Chinese culture, when you grow old, when you grow older, no, actually when your parents are old, you're suppose to do whatever they say. Xiaoshun (filial piety). [...] When my parents get older, as I get older, just be, just take what your parents say, just do what they say. Yeah, you're suppose to do that. And, 'cuz, apparently they're wiser, they're older. [...] That's the culture, that's basically one of the key points of formality marriage, is family pressure and why is that matter because in China we have to follow that rule. Rule of obeying your parents.[...] (Filial piety is) make them happy BY doing what they say."[108]

Thus, coming out, as statement of membership in the LGBT community and as statement of a certain social condition, is considered disruptive and against *filial piety*. Filial piety is simply described as "making parents happy by doing what they say". This interpretation fits to the modern interpretation of filial piety, which is making parents happy by meeting their expectations.[109] By these means, *xinghun* fits perfectly in the filial piety framework as in it is an effort of being respectful of one's parents' will of conforming to the heterosexual-oriented majority.

In some cases, people have came out to their parents, once they where asked about having a girlfriend and consider marriage. Surprisingly, coming out as gay or lesbian does not consist as a good reason to be single, nor to be open with one's sexual orientation. In some cases, are parents themselves that, once their son or daughter speaks up and declare him/herself as gay/lesbian, still push adult children to marry. George, one of the key informants in Xiamen, has an age between 30 to 40 years old and has

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106   Italian LGBT activist Imma Battaglia in an interview in; LATINI, Massimo, 2015; *TUTTI FUORI! 40 anni di coming out in Italia*, 25 min' documentary film; [online] Available at <https://vimeo.com/149308333> [Accessed 20/04/2017]

107   ROFEL, Lisa; "Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China"; in *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*; EBSCO Publishing; 1997, p. 461

108   David, interview assessed April 2017

109   CHOI, Susanne, LUO, Ming; "Parental Influence over Adult Homosexual's Nominal Marriage in China", *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCO*host*. 2014; p.820

revealed that:

> *"My mom knows that I'm gay. I came out to her to make her stop asking about getting married and proposing me eligible potential wives. She didn't told my dad, and also told me that this thing (being gay) should stay between me and her. [...] She told me it doesn't matter I'm gay, I should marry anyways and have kids, because she doesn't know what to say anymore to her colleagues about me being single at this age. She even said she would have rather prefer me to have a mediocre job and have a wife and kids than having the job and the salary I have now and being gay".*

The key informant, George, is a university lecturer and also has his own enterprise. He has PhD level education and has traveled in Europe and in Asia. His life would be regarded as successful for anyone, but the fact that he is not married and that he is gay diminishes his success in his mother's eyes. Here again, it shows how parents pressure their offspring because they receive themselves pressure from their peers. This pressure is exerted by what in Chinese is called *mianzi,* namely "face". *Mianzi* is one of the staples of Chinese social norms and mores and it represents the social layer of every actor in the Chinese social scenario. *Mianzi* has a variable nature, and it entails not only the individual, but it also affects his/her closer kinship, in this case parents. Thus, maintaining the face is one's personal duty but it affects everyone in the family unit. For instance, if a child does not behave, is not only his fault, by also of his parents for not educating him properly. Therefore, coming out is perceived differently because, whereas in Western societies there is a mechanism of underlying dichotomy between secrecy and truth, in China LGBT individuals conceive it as an selfish act of taking away their family's *mianzi,*[110] and thus labeled as something against the social harmony of the family.

In conclusion, from the words of the respondents it can be argued that *xinghun* represents a good compromise between being filial by complying to hetero-normative marriage and at the same time keeping a degree of independence and self-centered pursue of one personal desire of establishing the kind of relationship one wants.

About finding a good xinghun partner

Taking for granted that marrying is not an option, but something that everyone has to comply to once they have reached the appropriate age, the issue of finding the right partner arises. For *xinghun* seekers, the issues are slightly different from their heterosexual counterparts. Among others, one of the most wanted features appears to be fitting in gender conceptions which

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110   ROFEL, Lisa; "Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China"; in *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*; EBSCO Publishing; 1997, p. 464

characterize and differentiate men and women in Chinese culture. This feature has been noticed before in Choi and Luo research on *xinghun* seekers' advertisements in Chinese website Tianya.[111]

> *"In China, like lesbians, you know, they have some tom boys, and very girlie girls. But tom boys are more under pressure than the girls. Because their parents want them to act like girls, but they would act like boys. But for the normal, let's say, "normal" lesbians, they are free. Kind of free because they can fall in love with lesbians and they can get marry with a man easily (rather) than tom boys"[112]*

Here again appears this stress put upon conforming to those gender norms and perception which differentiate the kind of pressure felt by gay men and lesbian women. Tom boys, namely lesbian women who have a boyish appearance, face more pressure from their parents as they do not conform to the collective imagination of woman. Boyish looking lesbian women are forced to put on a mask of femininity through make up and dresses to conform to the general image of what a woman is, costing in psychological distress and self-esteem decrease.[113]

> *"(talking about xinghun)I think it's a luck, a chance. If you could have imagined you with a super sweet girlfriend, that you guys have to pretend to be...it's not too hard for you guys to pretend you're a couple in front of your parents. Once a month maybe, twice a month. And you both get them happy and you want them to be happy. And that's a way of doing it. [...]You know, everybody have their reasons. If you want something so bad, you have to give up other things, you can't have it all. It's a durable option for someone, they must have a durable goal on something, and good for them."[114]*

It seems that the best criteria for *xinghun* seeking partners, apart from gender role appearance conformation, is empathy and sharing the same objectives by undergoing to *xinghun.* As the ideal *xinghun* relationship would be having the maximum autonomy to freely live their lives regarding romantic relationships and at the same time meeting the minimum marriage expectations of parents,[115] it appears that prenuptial arrangements are necessary, since there are gender differences between what is expected from men and women.

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111   LIU, Min; "Two Gay Men seeking Two Lesbian: An Analysis of *Xinghun* (Formality Marriage) Ads on China's Tianya.cn"; in *Sexuality and Culture*; n. 17, Springer Science+Business Media; New York, 2013, pp. 494-511

112   Felix, interview assessed in April 2017

113   DIAZ, Gil, FRETER, Kelly; "MARRIAGE (under cover)", *Vanguard (LA Gay & Lesbian Center)*; LGBT Life with Full Text, 2014, p.14

114   David, interview assessed in April 2017

115   CHOI, Susanne, LUO, Ming; "Parental Influence over Adult Homosexual's Nominal Marriage in China", *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCO*host*. 2014 p.822

About the societal moral system change

It has been argued that the economic reforms that started in the 1980s have brought major changes in Chinese society, some of them challenging the very core of it, that is, nuclear family.[116] Moreover, the post 80s generation is the first in the country which has not experienced Maoist socialism and is product of Chinese well-known fertility control policy, the one-child policy.[117] Certainly, the introduction of market-driven economy and private property influenced the lifestyle of the population as a whole but utterly made different the lives of the younger generation from those of the previous ones. However, tradition and moral values change in a slower pace than the economic system. Detraditionalization process is slower for it challenges pre-established conceptions and thus older generation will perceive somehow a "moral decline" by witnessing at the new unconventional practices of the younger ones.[118] As challenging the traditional interpretation of family and hetero-normative practices of Chinese culture, homosexuality and LGBT discourse can be used to inquiry the social perception of it and pinpoint the pace of change of the moral scenario of Chinese society.

> *"In China, most straight people think of gay people as flamboyant. And, feminine. Sissy. Too fabulous. They are easy to get a certain kind of disease, they...yeah, it's hard for me to tell. [...]I've come across with so many people that, some are really friendly, some are just...because you can hear those brutal comments all the time when they don't know you're gay. Like, from work. They think they're ridiculous, they're troublesome, like they have troubles. They're abnormal. Those are the comments I've heard. They are disgusting, unhealthy, a lot of things. But that those are the negative ones. [...] (About gay men) They are handsome, they're well-dressed, well mannered, good taste and...easy to be with, I would say. See, but that's so cliche"[119]*

The social perception of homosexuality is still very much influenced by the fact that it was considered as a mental disease until the late 1990s and this still affects the shared image of what homosexuality is and how homosexuals are. "Troublesome" as used by the respondent, bears a specific meaning of mental health issues. In addition, the limited visibility of the LGBT community contributes to keep this images alive. On the other hand, it can be observed that the positive perception of gay men is molded upon the stereotypical images of gay diffuse in the world. International pop culture has contributed to

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116   CHOI; Susanne, LUO, Ming; *ivi*; p.830
117   YAN, Yunxiang; 'Little Emperors or Frail Pragmatists? China's '80ers Generation', *Current History*, 105, 692, pp. 255-262, Humanities International Complete, 2006; p. 256
118   YAN, Yunxiang; "The Changing Moral Lanscape" in; KLEINMAN et al.; *Deep China: The Moral Life of a Person: What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell Us about China*; University of California Press; Berkeley, London; 2011
119   David, interview assessed in April 2017

spread the image of gay men as fond to fashion, posed and conscious of their behavior and easy to relate with. This shows how, in absence of a national positive imagination of LGBT, individuals draw from the internationalized culture their perception of the phenomenon through transnational linkage. A noticeable aspect is that LGBT, or homosexuality as is exemplified in David's words, is closely related to a "certain kind of disease", that is, HIV/AIDS. This should not surprise as the majority of LGBT related organizations deal with HIV/AIDS awareness and control and the official discourse of LGBT is strongly connected to HIV/AIDS.[120]

> *"My generation's parents, some got well-educated. But those gays and lesbians older than me, their parents probably didn't get well-educated. So, their mind is like stuck in tradition. […] I have a friend, he came out to his mother like in high school. And his mother accepted, but his mother cried a lot. They cried the whole night and the next day she said "Anyway, all I want is you to be happy". His mother is so nice and I want a mother like that."[121]*

> *"In smaller towns, the tradition is still very strong, still in a dominant place. It's also because of poverty, I guess. […] Things are changing in China right now. For example, my generation, when my generation, when we get old, when a president will be elected from my generation, I think China will be totally different. Among young people, among friends you can speak freely. It's changing."[122]*

Higher education level seems to be pivotal for the change of LGBT perception towards a more positive interpretation of it. Yet, one particular feature is striking, that is, a fundamental difference between the post 80s generation and the previous ones perceived by the young generation. In Alejandro's words, China and its society will dramatically and inevitably change when the political elite will be from the post 80 generation. It is interesting here to note that this contrasts with another view of the post 80s generation, which has been accused of being intrinsically apolitical and indifferent to both the official ideology and political reforms.[123] One can also argue what has political engagement to do with the changing moral set? A change in the political system does not result automatically in a moral shift, and if it does, it does not imply that such shift would be beneficial for the LGBT community and its public image. But, arguably enough, if the younger generation is more detached from the traditional values system and rather weights more pragmatism, expectation is optimistically favorable for a change in

120   HILDEBRANDT, Timothy; "Development and Division: the Effects of Transnational Linkage and Local Politics on LGBT Activism in China"; in *The Journal of Contemporary China*; Vol.21, Issue 77; Routledge, September 2012; p. 852
121   Felix, interview assessed in April 2017
122   Alejandro, interview assessed in April 2017
123   YAN, Yunxiang; 'Little Emperors or Frail Pragmatists? China's '80ers Generation', *Current History*, 105, 692, pp. 255-262, Humanities International Complete, 2006; p. 258

better.

Conclusion

The major economic reforms which drove China to a market-driven economy has brought dramatic changes to society, in terms of intergenerational relationship and common set of moral values. Also, traditional social perception of moral is shifting together with the conception of family. The physical range of what is considered family is shrinking and previous well-established practices such as the patrilocal residence have been somehow forced out by the new socio-economic mechanism which have pushed the younger generation to experience a new phenomenon: individualism. Yet, traditional values still have a great impact on people's perception of others, especially for those who are challenging particularly important social institutions such as family. The LGBT experience in the Chinese context is very much influenced and hindered in its development for official recognition by the traditional moral asset.

In this scenario, *xinghun* formality marriage places in a delicate and sensitive position, and it can be interpreted as a touchstone to assess an analysis of the societal moral changes. As a practice to conform to hetero-normative marriage, *xinghun* very much represents the new and the old of Chinese society, and the fundamental difference between the post 80s generation and the previous ones. From academic studies and the primary data gathered for this research, one can observe that gay men and lesbian women are lead to undergo *xinghun* by social pressure exerted on them by parents, which as well endure pressure from their peers about their single adult children. Moreover, the traditional concept of filial piety has a pivotal role in adult children decision-making process to meet their parents expectations. However, *xinghun* also embodies the individualistic will of LGBT offspring to pursue their own expectations of happiness. As exemplified by Choi and Luo, *xinghun* is expected to bring the maximum degree of freedom and autonomy meeting the minimum expectations from the family about marriage.

The degree in which *xinghun* represents a durable and acceptable compromise for gay men, lesbian women and their respective family may differ. As expectation from son and daughter diverge according to gender roles derived from traditional conceptions, men and women have to negotiate and clarify the boundaries of expectation from one another. Having a child epitomize the major source of discord between the couple, as men are expected to carry out the family name by having offspring, whereas women do not have the same pressure to perform accordingly. Pre-marriage phase resembles in some fashion those between heterosexual couples, especially those criteria for finding the right partner. Conformity to traditional gender roles is requested and particular emphasis is put on concepts such as femininity and masculinity.

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Most importantly, *xinghun* reflects the attitude, especially of the post 80s generation, of carving out a personal space of agency in the traditional and strict moral conduct system of Chinese society. Ancient concepts such as filial piety and importance of continuing the family have been renegotiated with new desires leaning what can be called an individualistic vision of life and expectancy about it. On the other side, parents as well have also reconsidered and re-balanced their expectations and adapted to certain lifestyle and way of conduct of the young generation. Although still very much affected by traditional perception of challenging issues as LGBT could be, the extensiveness of higher education seems to have a crucial role in the detraditionalization process, an example is the reception of homosexuality from the old generation.

The interviews assessed for this research have been crucial to have a representation of what means to be a post 80s generation LGBT in China. The manner in which the interviews were conducted allowed the respondents to be able to speak their minds in a relatively free way. Having their experience shared with someone who is part of the LGBT community himself but belongs to a different social context enabled them to assess a self-reflexive analysis of their own experience and explain mechanisms of reasoning which might be misunderstood or misinterpreted from an outsider's perspective. Furthermore, the interviews allowed to have an insight of a section of the population (Chinese gay men in their 20s) opinion which so far has not been inquired in academia. Thus, the results of the research may differ from the findings of the previous researches.

As the scope of this research is very limited in its representativeness of the Chinese post 80s generation, not having included respondents from different socio-cultural backgrounds or women voices, further future research could explore the scope of the validity of previous researches' findings about formality marriage in different socio-cultural conditions, such as rural areas or the not indifferent migrant population of Chinese urban areas. Also, since the development of LGBT related issues such as official recognition, improvement of the current social condition and the stigma derived from deceptive Aristotelian syllogism which connects homosexuality to HIV/AIDS, the study of Chinese LGBT is a flourishing field with unpredictable evolution which deserves academic attention, social visibility and consideration. Perhaps, academia could serve as a catalyst for the greater public to rise awareness about the social issues arising from the lack of recognition of sexual minorities.

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